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# 2012

## The Last Will and Testament of The Gods

by Mike Cooper

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## Chapter 1

'Promise me ....'

His voice was croaky and hard to hear. To look at him was a test of Penny's young strength. She was frightened because she hardly knew him. She struggled to comprehend his extreme palor. To grasp the meaning of the deep, livid lesions in his skin. She was horribly appalled at his loss of hair. Her child's mind only knew it was so difficult. She tried gazing half and half at him, but felt bad about not making real contact. She forced herself to glance at him. Yes; it was still him, even though it did not seem like him any more. She was wracked by her childish helplessness. She was however, alert enough to know she would never be able to forget that there was nothing she could do.

A cough racked out from him, a sound she had come to hate.

'Promise...me,' he rasped, scratchy like an old record.

'I promise Daddy.'

'Ssh dear, he doesn't know what he is saying. He isn't talking to you,' whispered her mother from behind her. But it was too late, she had heard him and she had promised.

'You must fight it...' the voice faltered and then rallied into a gravelly half shout. 'You...have to see it...to know...what it really is.' He said this over and over again. 'You have to see it...to know...'

A bright white nurse held her arm and turned her from the bed to the arms of her mother whose tears wet her hair.

'Let him rest now my dear,' said her mother. His rest was eternal. She never spoke to him again. Penny pledged an innocent's vow to fight until it was beaten. All she knew then was that it could kill millions. She couldn't imagine why anyone would want to do that. The death of her own father was devastating enough, her mind was unable to grasp the killing of millions at one go. Why would you even think of it? H bomb Mike (such a friendly name) was a true wonder of modern science. His mushroom cloud soared twenty seven miles up, his canopy spread a hundred miles. His radio-active mud rained eighty million tons of vapourised coral and earth. The word 'mega' arrived in the language. Mouths gaped in nameless fear and awed disbelief at what they had done.

They said it was lung cancer from heavy smoking, but Penny at ten years old, felt the lie as a body blow which shook her belief in the world, perhaps more than his death. It simply stood to reason that what killed him was the irradiated white stuff which had rained down horribly as, for the Army, he observed the event from as far as thirty miles away.

So she and his widow marched. Wrote about the bomb. Petitioned governments. Demonstrated. Peacefully at first.

Penny learned all she could about the bomb. At university Her politics and sociology course taught her to place its existence in a political and social context. She believed the threat of atomic catastrophe was basic to modern society and its defensive structures. In her essays she agreed with Marcuse that the needs of post-war society had become identical with individual needs and aspirations, the satisfaction of which promoted big business and thus a consumerist sense of well-being which needed an ultimate defence. She argued in seminars that this was seen by society as the embodiment of reason even while it terrified her and many others. West and East looked over the same brink and both despoiled the Earth. She agreed with her father it had to be stopped. The writings of Herbert Marcuse became her bible and in 1968 when things were really on

the move, Invited by friends, she headed for Paris to join in the revolution for the future, to be there and join in, to make a difference.

She and her fellow mortals were not alone in their fear of the bomb and the consequences for the people of the Earth. While Penny Conway was enrolling in the Sorbonne wondering which demo's to go on, another champion of change was starting a parallel revolution.

Zeus, Chief of the Olympians, completed the slender scroll of his last will and testament and rose stiffly. He had experienced the latest thermonuclear test while in a mind meld with his grandmother Gaia. He too was aghast. It was enough. It was time to act. It wasn't just the bomb, it was everything else. They swarmed like locusts. They were too many and they destroyed what they could not make. This last was an idiocy too far.

Just larger than life, his whole body felt stiff as if age gripped him at last. He shook his leonine head and sank it onto his hands, his elbows on the desk. He contemplated the fragment of papyrus before him and smiled wryly to himself. This statement of very few words contained a metaphysical bomb to make H bomb Mike seem like a damp squib. This abominable last race of people would know past any doubt, that he was not yet done in this world.

He sighed heavily, in truth, his time was past. He hadn't paid attention. It was as simple as that really. He'd been too idle, too complacent.

He cast his eye again over the document on his desk. As he re-read it for errors he decided to take out the punctuation marks, like lawyers do, just in case anyone misinterpreted.

Thus engaged, the door of his magnificent office opened and his wife Hera entered, the gold of the open door highlighting the colour of her cheeks. She walked the vast length of the polished marble floor and sat in her queenly fashion on the ornamental chaise-long kept exclusively for her own use and fixed him with her eye.

'My Lord you called.'

Zeus lifted his eyes from the acreage his vast desk. Saw her mood. 'Aye wife. I want you to see this. I will post it on the Chronosphere.' He finished his work, stood and handed the scroll to her.

'What is it my one alone?' she asked. 'It is very little.'

'Not so little as it seems.' Read it to me my consort. I would hear how it resonates.'

Hera, was expecting something big from him. While he was normally playful he was not to be taken lightly. He didn't ever summon her unless he had a reason.

She unrolled the short scroll and holding it up to the light of the long window which spanned one entire wall of the office, her eyes were not what they once were, she read in her clear bell like voice. He loved her voice. He loved all of her all the time. He had only given her the scroll to read to hear her voice. To have an excuse to call her. She wasn't much with him these days. He missed her. Not enough to do really. She was bored too. It made her touchy. Well this will get more than her going, he thought.

She read aloud the document which was to cause so much stir throughout the Chronosphere.

I Zeus being of sound mind do hereby bequeath Mother Earth hereinafter known as Gaia to the fifth race of Earthly people hereinafter known as Mortals on the proviso that the harm they do her be forthwith reversed this being achieved I leave Gaia in their hands for ever the beneficence of whom is theirs and their descendants for as long as there are mortals if at midnight on the last day of December 2012 there remains

complaint from the aforesaid Gaia in any whit whatsoever with respect to her welfare well-being or other deficiency whatsoever she shall speak of to me she shall have leave to destroy Mortals by whatever means will bring her relief from hurt this to be enacted notwithstanding the efforts of any member of my family other gods or non-mortal interested parties whatsoever

Signed: Zeus: Chief Executive and Major Shareholder - Olympus Holdings.

Hera rolled up the scroll and passed it back to her husband. Outwardly calm she withheld her mounting anger with practised will power.

'Well wife? What do you say?'

'I say my Lord? I say do you mean this?'

'I do my cuckoo, I do. They think we old gods are dead. They will find out how far they are wrong. Afterwards we can go elsewhere. Start again. Why not? The Firmament is large. This is showdown time my sweet bird.'

He thought grimly, he could go elsewhere, finally. He would have gone on indefinitely, eyeball to eyeball with Yahweh; had not these frustratingly eye-catching mortals of Prometheus, forced his hand by their mistreatment of Gaia, with this latest and most dangerous toy. Gaia, the basis of their lives, of all life. Born after the beginning, when Chaos bore Erebus the night, and before Eros bore Love; She who with Aether, first gave birth to Uranus the mountains and Pontus the sea. She was not to be destroyed by her imperfect creation.

Zeus walked over to his wife and indicated imperiously he would sit with her. She moved over and he drew her into his arms. She nestled into him. He was her Lord after all. He had the right. He had the need. Thus in charge, he contemplated the future with some satisfaction.

'At last,' he breathed, his mouth close to her finely chiselled ear. 'I have found the means to disengage both myself and the unreachable Yhawhe from the fate of humankind and leave them to themselves forever. I will commit this document to the Chronosphere and by this throw my last bolt.' He laughed. 'I will give the scroll to Prometheus to broadcast. It is fitting.'

Hera, involuntarily stiffened. Zeus held her tightly. There was latent antagonism between them. She wanted to shake him, take the scroll and hurl it from the window. 'Aye my Lord, she ground out between barely gritted teeth. 'It is poetic justice. But be aware Lord, That even in this the mortals can rely on my help and I will not be alone,' Hera continued, defiant.

'I never interfered with Prometheus' mortals,' muttered Zeus tightening his grip. 'Unless I was forced. But you may not, my cuckoo, may not,' his breath hissed in her ear. 'Think to undermine my desire in this final action.' He thrust her from him and walked to the window. His back to her he contemplated the dark clouds brewing on the horizon over the Hudson river. 'Help them if you will, but remember it is my will and I will not allow you to think for them. In that I will not relent even though we may all thereby at be at an end. The Defining Moment is upon us!' His final and worrying thought, was that Gaia, much as he revered her, was always mistrustful of him, as she was of any who claimed all power and in consequence maintained her links with his brother Hades in Erebus, thus keeping her options open.

She spoke bitterly to his broad back. 'You can be certain, my Lord, I will assist.' He did not turn to face her, infuriated by this silent arrogance she dispensed with her usual hurried curtsy and left his presence, an ugly grimace on her noble face. He thought he heard her stifle a shout and stamp her well shod feet on the marble of the hallway and smiled indulgently. He'd been sure he could rely on her. What a wife!

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Hera left New York in a turmoil and made haste for Ios. The insignificant dot of dry land in the Aegean Cyclades was her current refuge from the commercial hubbub of Zeus' New York offices. Here was peace and real people making a living. People who still believed in her and hers. People close to the earth and their origins. She mistrusted her husband and with reason. She could do nothing about his decision but she could manage the means. If she knew him at all, she knew he would leave it up to everyone else to realise his desires. It did not matter what she thought about him and Yhawhe disengaging themselves from the fate of humankind. For it to happen one thing had to occur. The past had to be reconciled with the future. Since the halls of Hades, who ruled over the past, were forbidden to all of the Pantheon except the handful who came and went on the strictest terms, only a mortal could enter Hades. She reasoned there was no mortal currently alive who truly understood the proper connection between Hades and Zeus and theirs with Yhawhe, and who knowing, was capable of such a thing.

Stepping lightly off a timeline at her villa in Psathi on the Eastern side of Ios - her gleaming isle, she met Elithia who was spinning peacefully in the pretty courtyard in the shade of a vast fig tree. 'Welcome back my Lady,' she said. 'How is the great world out there today? How is my Lord? I do hope he is well.'

Hera was still out of sorts but the journey along the timelines fast as it was, had given her some time to think.

'Ah Elithia, fetch Themis and Mnemosyne, I need both now. Hurry, we have much work to do.'

Elithia gazed quizzically at her mother, who's expression allowed no space for query or explanation. She had the patience to wait until Hera was ready to explain. She called to Themis and Mnemosyne immediately on the Chronosphere. In the distance, Zeus felt the call and knew he had been right. Almost immediately, Themis stepped off a timeline from only she knew where, into the courtyard.

'Good day children,' she said to Hera and Elithia. as her foot touched ground. As a Titan she used the prerogative of age and seniority to address this later generation in her own terms. 'I know,' she said, suddenly grave. 'You don't have to explain, Prometheus has posted the scroll on the 'sphere. Everybody knows. I was on my way here already when Elithia called. 'You couldn't manage some sustenance by the way, I've come a long way and I'm famished.'

Elithia clapped her hands. A pretty young woman appeared and was given orders. Themis, Elithia and Hera arranged themselves comfortably on the terrace. As they ate the food of the gods, Mnemosyne arrived on her timeline.

'Greetings girls, I see you've heard the news.'

'A warm welcome sister' said Themis.

'Eat aunt,' said Hera. 'I'm about to tell you the whole story.'

'So he really means to do this?' said Elithia when Hera had finished speaking.

'There's no doubt,' said Themis. 'He's thrown down the gauntlet. After you'd left Hera, I went straight into his office. Prometheus was already there. He must have been timelining in as you got into the elevator. He'd given him the scroll and they were arguing. Zeus did his I'm in charge and I dare you to make something of it routine and wouldn't brook any discussion. He wasn't angry but he had that I've decided look he gets now and then. So Prometheus and I stold him we would help mortals all we could and he seemed indifferent. He thought there wasn't enough time and that Gaia would take her own steps. Whether we helped them or not was a matter of supreme unconcern. He was more bbothered with the aftermath, something about a new Trinity.'

Him, Hades and Yhawhe. I didn't get it. It seems that that's going to be his preoccupation from now on and mortals are on their own or down to us, or whatever.'

'You don't think it's worth trying to change his mind,' Mnemosyne asked. 'I mean about ultimately leaving mortals alone without us.'

'No, I don't see it,' replied Themis. 'Though we can help them all we like it seems, but he's clear that Gaia will decide and anyway he means to leave them to it.' A thoughtful silence followed this comment.

'So what are we going to do about helping our mortals?' said Hera.

'Well,' replied Themis. 'It seems to me that there are two things we can do. One is to help mortals change things in time for Gaia to recover. Personally I have no idea how to do that. It's going to be difficult to...'

'I'll manage that with Hephaestos,' Hera interrupted impatiently. 'What's the second thing?'

'I think you've guessed it, so don't take it out on me, I'm doing my best. Zeus wasn't my choice for top gun as you well know.'

'Alright. Just get on with it,' muttered Hera.

'For the quick to enter the realms of the dead and stay sane enough to achieve change in that realm would need an immortal, able to manage the two realms with understanding.'

'And that can only mean one thing,' Mnemosyne offered. 'Sorry Hera.'

'Yes, yes okay. But I'm afraid it is so,' muttered Hera. 'It's just a question of finding out whom he chooses and controlling things from there.'

'I can do that, leave it to me,' Elithia volunteered.

'And then what?' Mnemosyne asked.

'I think she should be brought here to us,' replied Hera.

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Penny Conway, travelling alone, leaned her rucksack against a bench on the sun bleached deck of the aged Aegean ferry, lowered her young body, rested her back and gratefully stretched her long limbs. She was glad of the shade from the awning flapping in the warm sea breeze above her. Her fine, dark hair was cut ear length and flicked forward. Despite her advanced pregnancy, it was her height, long waist, and elegance of posture that invariably produced a second, more appraising, glance. Her face did not immediately add up to beauty, but she had large dark eyes and good bones. Her poise and bearing denoted a strong core of assurance rarely found in one so young. Exhausted by the interminable, jolting train journey through Yugoslavia and Northern Greece, by the heat and her condition; her fatigue was dispelled by excitement tinged with trepidation. The clarity of the light made her strangely buoyant. This was her first time in Greece but it felt more like a homecoming. Yesterday, through the train window she had watched the sun rise over Mount Olympus and was strangely moved. She had been deeply thrilled by Athens, the disorderly sprawling life of the ancient city, its foundations rooted in time. She was especially stirred by the Acropolis shimmering in the heat haze.

She squinted against the brightness of the sea. This dazzling land was driving her onward. Everything would work out right on her journey, pregnant and alone, towards the islands of the Cyclades. The life within her

was coming home to its own land.

The child in her belly had kicked her awake. She had slept a long time on the hard deck. The low sun pinked the white buildings on the hills of Naxos as they came to harbour. She rose stiffly, arched herself backwards to gain balance and walked to the rail for a better view. She watched the boat inch cleverly to a stop. A handful of passengers disembarked, to be immediately swallowed on the quay by a clamour of people. The ship cast off again in the hot evening air. The next island was already visible in the distance, another bead in the string of jewels set in the 'wine dark' bevel of the sea. Trees and rocks outlined the hills against the darkening skyline, hard edged, near enough to touch.

Wrapped in the landscape, she was close to tears. She was drawn into the island, into the sea and the sky by a strong sense of belonging. She grasped the rail as if to prevent herself being physically drawn into the water as she had been drawn into the totality of Alexis.

He had filled her mind, had filled all the corners of her being. He had shifted the axis of her life. Transfixed by him, she could hardly remember anything other than his presence. It had been simple possession. She had given herself utterly. He had coloured the days and when he was not beside her she was empty. As summer turned into winter she knew his child was in her. When he went away she had begged to go with him but he had refused, it was better he went alone. The friend calling from Germany simply said he was dead, shot by German riot police in a chaotic demonstration. The friend was desperately sorry but it was a kind of war. Alexis had told him to tell her if anything happened. He had been particular about that. He had made him carry her number to call.

The papers had been full of 'The Mysterious Red Greek.' The body was flown to an unknown destination in Greece, she could not even attend his funeral. She deliberately refused to read the papers - dead was for other people. Her other world fell away. She stopped writing to her mother, stopped meeting her friends and spent her time finding out as much as she could about him. There was little to discover. He had appeared suddenly in Paris, carried a Greek passport, and led 'La Flamme Rouge.' He was a tireless worker, had many influential contacts, was prepared to hazard risks beyond the ordinary and undertook dangerous tasks requiring travel across Europe and America. He was calm in a crisis, a born leader and totally dedicated to the cause.

In his room, almost blinded by her tears she went through his few possessions. Her most significant find was a single air-mail letter in Greek from an address in Ios, Cyclades. An atlas informed her the Cyclades were a group of islands in the Aegean between the Greek mainland and Crete. Ios was an insignificant lozenge of land, the name in such small print she needed a magnifying glass to make it out. A student of Greek, a friend, translated the letter for her. He said it was written in ancient Greek, probably as a sort of code between scholars. Translated, the letter was from someone who appeared to be an older sister, she called him 'my one alone' - a strange endearment, probably an effect of the translation.

It read:

Ios,

Cyclades

My one alone,

Please do not think I do not understand, even though I fail fully to appreciate your motives. Being far from me diminishes not a whit my sense of the danger of what you do. I have known you and loved you long enough to understand well the needs which drive you. I know my attempts to prevent or deflect you from these perilous actions may lead to misadventure. So be it. You will no doubt expect me to handle the consequences in my own way and I am, as you might expect, already setting the scene for what I will do to cope adequately with



conceivable difficulties in the future.

I beg you to come home and put an end to taking risks for the betterment of humankind. Remember I am your equal in sisterhood.

I wait hopefully for your return but prepare for what is to come.

It was signed 'Lucina.'

Penny read and re-read the translation. Pleased at the allusion to sisterhood, for this meant here was someone else who knew Alexis. This Lucina seemed to know him better than she. She would find out the truth of his life from her.

Beyond what she already knew, no one else seemed to have any real idea about him. So she had written to 'Lucina' Ios, Cyclades. Greece; without expectation of reply. The address seemed far fetched and inadequate, as if the island were too insignificant to receive letters. She used the opportunity to pour out her feelings. She had avoided discussing Alexis with her friends after she discovered some of them had considered her 'fling' as just another student romance, born from the incredible events of the summer of '68. The tragedy of his end, which they considered with some awe, had not happened near them. The ensuing drama also had the effect of distancing her from them. Alexis was fast becoming part of the folklore of the time. She refused to engage with them in the media driven excitement of his death. Consequently she told no one of her pregnancy. She kept away from everyone as soon as she began to show, ate her meals in cafes and kept to her room. It was a great relief to find this Lucina, maybe there was a solution to her predicament here, in the only member of his family she had been able to find.

She wrote back:

Dear Lucina,

Forgive this intrusion into your grief for Alexis. I don't know if he ever mentioned me to you, I don't think he was much of a letter writer, so I am probably a total stranger to you. But I feel so strongly we have so much of him in common. I found out about you from a letter you wrote which I found in his room, which I read - I was trying to find out something about him, not prying really, just desperately wanting to stay close to him. You will probably think me stupid and over-romantic but you see for me he is not dead, even though his physical presence is gone, somehow he remains so strongly in my own being I do not mourn, I have no grief. I don't understand these feelings at all. I am usually very good at coping with realities and was prepared to grieve, but find I do not.

I have no religious views really and so no spiritual beliefs. I am practical, a doer rather than a thinker and so I find myself unusually agitated by my feelings. Alexis bowled me over in a way I never experienced or even expected to feel.

You seem to love him too, and so despite my feeling that I'm being unwise, I feel a bond between us already. A bond strengthened by the fact that I am having his child. So I suppose I am now linked to his family. I have withdrawn from my life here in the Sorbonne, here in Paris, pregnancy in public produces too much interest from the people I normally mix with.

But there is no question I must have his child. There is nothing else I desire so much, other, of course, than to see Alexis again, but I am so glad he lives on inside me. However the pregnancy raises the practical problem of where to have the baby. I have arranged with a doctor friend to go south to a clinic near the Spanish border. You may ask why I do not go home to England but my mother who has already sacrificed much for my education would want me to continue with my studies and not have the child, and an abortion is unthinkable!

In terms of my life, the timing of this pregnancy couldn't have been worse! In the middle of my studies to a dead, foreign father, no I cannot go home and face her; it would be too difficult. I will tell my mother when it's all over.

So, Lucina, the sister of my beloved, I tell you this so that you know how things were for me with Alexis. Perhaps one day we will meet?

Yours most sincerely,

Penelope Conway.

She signed and posted it to the improbable address. When she received the Greek air-mail letter, it was written in a bold woman's hand, in English. It was short, remarkable, friendly and held the solution to all her problems, while at the same time sending her into a whirl of confusion.

It ran:

Dear Penelope,

Trust Alexis to find a beauty with a resonant name. For I know you are lovely. Yes, he is without doubt a crazy fellow. I suppose he came to you like a god. He has a way of overpowering and empowering at the same time. I too love him with an enduring affection, but he is proud, reckless and capricious.

Arrangements are now made here for you to come and have our baby. All is taken care of, train tickets are in the post, together with a cheque for your immediate expenses.

Alexis is our common love, his child is a gift to the world, we must take extra special care of you. You will have the best of attention. Do not worry about your mother, I have already written to her explaining you are to be our guest for the summer, at our expense, and I have asked for permission to release you to us. Do not fear she will agree. Make your own way to Ios, you will be met at the quayside.

I yearn to kiss you and bring forth the child

In a common love, affectionately yours,

Lucina Dodona

Penny was stunned. She realised there had been an implied plea for help in her own letter, but she bridled at the simple presumption that she would obey what she could only think of as instructions, however well meant. How did this Lucina know where to find her mother? What audacity to assume she would go! She was angry at the imperious - 'Do not fear she will agree.' Indeed! How did she know! Who does she think she is? Taking over my life. I may be in trouble, but it takes two to tango and I knew what I was doing, and I'm quite prepared to carry my own can. I can also pay my own way - just about!

But Alexis was a common love and she needed to find out as much about him as possible she owed that much to the child and she had to agree that this was a far better way to have the baby in secret than to go to the South of France on flimsy arrangements. The affirmation of a common love, gave the imperious Lucina credibility despite the extraordinary lengths to which she was going to make everything come right. She must be rich, Alexis had been said to have good, if mysterious, connections. But yet, it was more of a journey into the unknown than her own plans for the Pyrenees. But, she thought, there was no sense of menace, there was even a pull towards this island, which she had felt the moment she found the original letter. I have everything to gain and nothing to lose - except perhaps full control over events.

Control was something she prized highly. She had had to argue forcefully with her mother to let her go to Paris at such a precarious time. Lucina's apparent yearning for the child suggested a natural claim to a child of her dead brother, which Penny thought a mite alarming together with the overbearing tone. It could be simply the exuberance of the Greek spirit. In any case, she had no absolute right to think of the child as her exclusive property. With the father dead, it was natural his family would want to make much of him. So why was she denying this to her own mother and potentially granting it to strangers? She could go home and let things find their own level without all this Greek island stuff. But she couldn't shake off the idea that to go to England was likely to be full of difficulties and unwelcome recriminations.

To go to Greece made all the sense in the world especially as it was all set up for her, no questions asked. The most astounding thing about the letter, which jangled her nerves and put electric shocks up and down her spine, was the way Lucina referred to Alexis in the present tense. When the next day the money and tickets came, there was only one choice. The tickets were dated. Lucina had determined the timetable of her journey.

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Forward motion had ceased and they were anchored some way from the shore. Surrounded by the night and the silky wind on her skin, partially asleep, she was lulled by the action of the boat. In her drowsy state the sky with its teeming lights of far worlds felt far beyond anything she knew.

Through the bars of the guardrail the land was pin-holed with yellow lights. In the distance the sky's paler edge broke against the outline of hills. She felt a vigorous energy from a timeless past, full of events and expectant with promise. This was Ios. She had arrived. The boat rocked gently in the swell as she made her way lugging her heavy rucksack to a steep gang plank leading to a squat, moustachioed, boatman, bobbing in the thick blackness below. She was the only voyager to leave the ship. Alone but for the boatman, she stood for a moment trying to comprehend this new world. On the inky cradle of the sea, the boatman rowed to the uneven stone steps of a jetty. Rough, helpful hands guided her uncertain ascent and brought her rucksack ashore. The craft ebbed back into the glossy blackness and she stood, lost, not knowing where she was. She waited. She was calm and still felt unexpectedly sure. She heard her name called.

'Penelope, this is you?' It was spoken in Greek and she heard only her name.

It was a question as if asked by the night itself. She peered into the gloom, lit only by a single paraffin lamp. A tall woman emerged from the blackness and stood full in the lamplight.

'Penelope, this is you?' she repeated. This time in English but with a marked accent. The name retained its Greek intonation.

'Yes, I'm Penny,' she replied. The woman came a pace closer and scanned her face.

'Good, we go!' she motioned into the darkness and a donkey led by a youth, appeared in the narrow arc of light. He inclined his head respectfully, and indicated she was to mount.

'It is not far that we go,' said the woman. 'But it is...up; you ...ride.'

She turned abruptly and walked out of the light. Penny, had never ridden a donkey, but it felt somehow appropriate. Mounting a kind of wooden side-saddle was easier than she expected. She felt secure being led into the soft night by the sure footed beast, its animal smell reassured her while increasing her sense of being outside her normal world. A feeling that had begun with the sight of Mount Olympus and which had grown subtly but powerfully ever since. In the starlight, she could make out the outline of white buildings to either side of a path that became gradually steeper. At first sandy, then stone paved, it rose, requiring her to hold very tightly to counterbalance the swaying donkey. The path gave way to a steeply winding stairway, edged in

white paint. The boy led the animal in silence. The woman almost invisible in the darkness, strode above them. As they ascended the sea fell away. She was suspended between it and the sky. You can feel things without knowing them she thought, I don't know why I've come here, but I feel like I understand this place - no, that's not it, I feel I am understood in this place. It's God knows what time of night, I'm in a strange place, I'm pregnant, I'm hanging onto this lurching animal. I'm going heaven knows where, everything is totally unreal - and I'm calm and content as if in the arms of Alexis. She startled herself out of her reverie.

'That's it! That's it!' she exclaimed aloud, exited at the thought. 'This is his island, his place, his spirit is here, within me his child, outside his land.' Her mind raced, her body hung dizzily between the vast dome of sky and the expanding compass of the sea below. She was now, however, far from calm. So much had happened to change her life. The need to be sensible and practical had pushed her feelings away and out of reach until now. The emotional overload, unbidden, welled tears to her eyes and giddied her mind, the whole fantastic journey through this ancient land, had released the numbness of the crushing loss she had so far refused to acknowledge. More out of body than within, her emotions overwhelmed her. The feeling that had been Alexis and her together she felt was above knowledge. Like now, feeling the pulse of his island. She realised she had not cared about anything since Alexis. Something brittle within her snapped as she was led through the cocoon of the night.

They continued up the winding stairway. Finally they stopped climbing, and passed through narrow streets with doors and windows on either side. She would be able to touch both sides of the street if she were to stretch out her hands. They went through a maze of dark alleys and pathways and finally stopped in a small square before a large open door.

Women's voices chattered quickly in Greek. Gently hissing oil pressure lamps were held close to her face, allowing the holders to see her clearly while they remained in shadow. The donkey was led forward through the door by an unseen hand, into a surprisingly large courtyard. The shadow of a huge tree covered most of it and under it the donkey stopped. There were more chattering female voices and helpful hands helped her down. In her detached state it was difficult to find her land-legs or make any coherent sense of what was happening. She was grateful to be helped into the contrasting bright light of a large room, which gave directly onto the courtyard. Gradually her eyes adjusted to the brightness. The room contained a scrubbed deal table with two simple rush-seated chairs. On the table was bread, feta cheese, black olives and salad. The chattering women left her. The tall woman indicated the food and the chair and invited her to eat. She was too enervated to eat much and toyed with the salad, drank a little wine from a copper coloured metal mug, surprised by the strong resinous taste but she enjoyed the cold tang. The tall woman sat on the other chair, watching. The feeling of 'it being alright' remained with her, but she was becoming more curious and more uncertain of her bearings. There was something however, in the mien of the woman, which constrained her from giving voice to her present situation. Penny put aside her plate.

'Come, follow!' The woman was brusque but not unpleasant. Penny rose and followed her across the courtyard, under the tree and into another room, this time it contained a wooden bed and modern mattress, some simple furniture and a wash stand in a corner.

'Sleep now,' said her companion. 'I come in the morning. Sleep now.' The instruction was not quite an order, but was given as if it permitted no further questions.

Penny succumbed to fatigue and with scant regard to the washbasin in the corner climbed gratefully into the surprisingly comfortable bed.

She awoke with the sun streaming through the open window. She felt the familiar bump of her smooth, stretched belly, and lay back breathing heavily. The remembrance of a dream remained clearly in the forefront of her mind's eye and she lay confused between it and reality. The sun in her eyes forced her to move her head and gradually the reality of the room pierced her waking mind. She got off the bed with some difficulty and

crossing to the window, she was forced to shade her eyes as she glanced out onto a profoundly dark-blue sea. In the distance she clearly made out two, no, three, islands.

The upward journey of the previous night had not prepared her for the astounding vision of the glittering face of the Aegean. She remembered how in the previous night, following the mysterious woman, she had climbed light-headed, higher and higher. She had given no thought to the light of day reality of the place through which she was being led. She was however, utterly unprepared for what the morning brought. Marvelling, she pushed open the double window and stepped down onto a terrace bounded by a blinding white balcony. Standing against the already warm stones of the wall, she saw the room she occupied was an extreme part of a much larger group of similarly whitewashed buildings, a tumble of rectangular, iced cakes, stacked on top and alongside each other. The houses had blue painted doors and windows, with stone terraces between, on which were placed pots of basil and other herbs among a variety of flowering plants, bushes and trees, whose names she did not know.

Her own room was high. She felt wonderfully liberated by the totality of the simple, deeply primary colours; the blue, blue sea, the bright sky. She followed the ribbon of the little road on which the silver bells of a donkey far below, sparkled like the water. Above her a solitary white gull circled over the cliffs, his glittering eye, close enough to touch. She slipped into a reverie occasioned by the magnificence of the vista into which she slid as naturally as putting on a dress.

'Penelope.'

She was startled by a soft voice behind her. Turning quickly there was a woman standing in the window of the terrace. She seemed to fill the whole opening. Penny's reverie was shattered. Beyond the overall impact of this striking apparition she was surprised by the brightness of her face. The light of the morning sun caught it obliquely, lighting her as in a fine Rembrandt, with one side in shadow. Her eyes were dark, almost black, and wide set, almond shaped and large. Her high, white forehead was framed by waves of thick black hair drawn back and simply tied behind by a silver and gold braid, which fell round her high, white neck in a thick shining ringlet. Her fine brows accentuated the darkness of her eyes. Penny felt she would fall into them as into the night sea. Her nose was straight and finely formed, her mouth although full, flickered in an imperceptible smile, aware of the power of the effect of her presence but also warm and welcoming. She stood for all the world like a statue of finest marble, her simple linen caftan falling in a waterfall of cloth to brush her golden sandals. She was a goddess of ancient times made flesh. Penny gasped, humbled in spite of herself.

'I'm so sorry!' the woman softly cried, opening her arms a little in welcome. 'I startled you, it is unforgivable, you were enjoying our little island, were you not?' Her voice was low toned and clear. Penny thought she heard her more in her mind than through her ears.

'I am of course, Lucina, I'm sorry to enter your room without forewarning, but I couldn't wait to see you. I was on tenterhooks all night, I couldn't sleep for thinking about you so I went walking. I saw you come up the hillside with Eilithia, she is my...aide, dry, but very helpful, skilled in many things to do with women, you will grow to appreciate her as I do. She was to bring you to me this morning, but I couldn't wait, I had to see you and I was so right to do it.' She paused as if continuing to make up her mind about what she saw. 'So right.'

She moved towards her and with a sweep of her arm indicated the view.

'It is beautiful, is it not? You have acclimatised? You feel the island, the air, the earth the sea.'

In spite of the pleasantness of the tone, the eyes assessed, stripped the soul, penetrated. Paradoxically, the more she observed Lucina, the more she seemed wholly pleasant, welcoming, a friend in a strange place. The dark eyes called to her. Lucina opened her arms in embrace. Conflicting emotions rose in Penny's breast. She faltered in spite of herself. On the surface she was annoyed by her involuntary deference to this powerful

presence. More deeply, she felt so alone since Alexis had left for Germany, that a savage ache linked her to this person of the same blood of Alexis. Feeling bereft, the tension rose within her unbidden and as the torrent broke, without thinking, she flung herself into Lucina's waiting arms and sobbed uncontrollably.

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They were sitting in a large comfortable room, expensively furnished with a few choice modern pieces - valuable antiques and sculptures, placed with apparent carelessness. The Dodonas were obviously wealthy but without ostentation, rich and simple things were contrasted, giving the objects a sense of timelessness. To judge from her journey of last night and the number of buildings on the hillside, the house was an extensive maze, which appeared to include most of a whole village clamped on the side of the mountain, rising almost directly from the sea.

Opposite Penny were wide French windows flung open to breathtaking views over the island and sea, more sensed than seen in the distance. The day was all facets of light dancing off bright surfaces. The subliminal but persistent feeling of being at one with the landscape stayed with her. She was sitting on a white brocade sofa, wearing a fine linen caftan, similar to that of her hostess.

She had talked non-stop for an hour during which a great wave of grief and fatigue drained from her, as her strong sense of herself gained courage from Lucina who encouraged her to weep out her heart. Gently she had walked her round the terrace and into the room where they now were. She had offered her the simple garment to replace the travel worn jeans and T-shirt in which she had slept. No longer tear-stained and crumpled, Penny felt a great lightness of spirit talking to this stranger whom she seemed to have known for ever.

Finished, she held Lucina's eyes, and was unable to hold the gaze for long without backing off from their depths. They made her lose herself and drew her in as if she would merge into another time and disappear. They gave both a warning and an invitation. Penny's attempts to make sense of her conflicting responses alarmed her. She was in danger of losing her bearings. She wanted to ask Lucina about her letter in which she spoke of Alexis in the present tense. She found she hardly dare ask even though she knew Lucina must have been as devastated as herself.

'He's dead, isn't he?' She felt the question lay awkwardly between them. She thought the merest shadow of impatience flickered across Lucina's imposing brow. Lucina rose and walking over to the window, beckoned her to approach.

'You see this?' She flung her arm wide.

'Alexis, is here, he lives in the glitter of the sun on the water, on the wind in the olive groves and pomegranate, through the warmth of the rocks, in the sheen of the tail of my peacocks.'

She turned a suddenly serious face to Penny who was shocked by the change from captivating warmth to stern warning. 'You must know that Alexis the man, he will never be seen again, while Alexis the idea is all around you especially here in this landscape. That's why I will always refer to him in the present. You see I know what you are thinking. He is also in the past and the future. He is here all the time, in all manner of things.' Her expression softened. 'After all, my dear, this is Greece, land of the Great Zeus, Alexis is part of Greece, therefore part of Zeus, therefore of the god himself. Zeus, the Great Spirit of Greece never dies, he displays himself in everything.'

Penny thought Lucina seemed to be laughing to herself, she gazed abstractedly into the far distance, a million miles and other worlds away.

'You saw the spirit of Greece in him, in Alexis, the young revolutionary who was going to change the world,

but as you say my dear, you were possessed by him. I too have no sway over him except my love for him seems to be some kind of brake on his wilder excesses. I'm very close to him, you know, I don't always approve of his methods but I've learned that his expectations are always right.'

She turned and smiled at Penny, her beautiful face close, a mother's smile, the problem all explained, dealt with. Penny again found herself seduced by this fascinating woman who seemed able to solve all her problems.

'You won't see him again as a man on this earth, in that sense he is dead. Please, please, Penelope, you must understand that. You must grieve for his memory as you knew him. He was indeed something, a somebody in this godless world trying, goodness knows, to put something of the human spirit back among the goods and chattels which are without soul and give no direction. Believe me, darling girl, I know him very well, he will not finish what he started, he never - how do you say in English? - he never follows through, he always just starts off and leaves the difficult details for other people to tidy up. But we will talk later about these things.' Lucina led her back to the sofa and sat beside her.

'But we must now worry about having the child, you are distraught, tired and need to be rested and in a good frame of mind to have Alexis' baby. Elithia will come to you and help you. She knows all about these things, she has brought many children to the world, she knows how to relax you to bring the most perfect child into the world. Trust in her absolutely, whatever she says that you should do you must do it without question, it is necessary. I will go now, stay here and rest, Elithia will come.'

She rested Penny's head on the back of the sofa, stroked her forehead, kissed her lightly on the eyelids and left the room. Penny slept dreamlessly and forgot her past life utterly, never to be revisited.

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Lucina Dodona, wife of Zarian Dodona or Hera wife of Zeus as she was known by the gods, sped through the house, through room after room, across courtyards noisy with people. No one spoke to her, although all were aware of her passing, the wind of her robe brushed them, she was heeded but not delayed. She climbed to the summit of the hill, making for a row of conical windmills marching in line on the edge of the ridge. From the topmost step of the steep path she swept through a little door. The miller, a dark, gnarled, old man, dusted with a talcum of flour and grain husks, grinned toothlessly, and opened a trap in the floor. She passed him without acknowledgement, descended the steps below, penetrating deeply into the rock of the hillside. A minute after her headlong but stately rush through the village, from the dark rocky corridor, she entered a large airy room on the landward side of the mountain, its windows thrown wide-open clearly revealing the central spine of hills which ran the length of the island. Here too the hint of the sea in the distance, could be sensed, the island a ship journeying.

By the window, sat the dark woman who had conducted Penny from the boat. She was deftly pulling wool from a hank under her arm and spinning with a colourful bobbin held vertically by her crooked arm. Hera stopped in front of her, Elithia ceased her work and calmly folded the bobbin in her lap.

'Am I to prevent this birth my Lady?' she offered without expression.

'No, you are to lead her to Psathi. Take Mnemosyne with you. She must embed the timelines and memory. You must also implant the twin I warned you would be necessary. Themis is ready for her task. I have considered preventing the birth, but he would only create another. He is determined this time to make changes, I cannot prevent his large intention, but at least I can deal with the worst consequences if I accept events. I need to be close enough to keep control over the details, he must not know the particulars. Not that he cares much for the involvement of others, it is however best to offer no opportunities for unnecessary conflict. He of course feels guilty about the begetting which gives me some advantage. I suppose

masquerading as a left-wing student is better than a swan or that stupid shower of gold!' She laughed dryly. She stared directly at the woman seated before her.

'Modern times modern appearances,' replied Elithia.

'Hmn! That's as may be, Eilithia, but you had all better remember that any lack of obedience in this will be treated with the direst consequences. He must not know what I do,' she paused. 'I like her, she has spirit and will bear a fine child, we can use her and the child. We will have to groom them both, he thinks it is enough to choose and leave the rest to the Fates. We must see that she and the boy will do fine. Who knows whom else he might have chosen. I can work with her. It is good, it is right. Go now - take Mnemosyne, I will come to Psathi when I hear of the twin births.'

'I hear you and will obey fully, when did I not? But consider My Lady, exactly what of this does Zeus know?'

'He knows what he has done, the girl is with child as was his wish. I am to see to the birth and see the boy is set on his way. As usual he is happy about the inevitability of the outcome, such is his arrogance, it's so dangerous for the world, but he's never cared for that. This time it's different, he makes us all vulnerable and with that I cannot gamble. I will decide who joins us. They are to be carefully selected - Who knows who or what I'm going to need as allies. This is going to be the biggest battle yet and one we may all lose, and that is unthinkable. But go now, she is near her time. Tell Mnemosyne to deal with anything that may be left of her memory of Alexis and her previous life'.

Hera prepared herself mentally for her next meeting with Zeus. A journey she made quickly and alone. Whatever happened, she must not kindle his anger. She inwardly shuddered remembering long ago, when she had deliberately set herself against him. He had proved what she always really known - his power was ultimate, it was dangerous to oppose him when he was serious. Although his sense of fun was enormous as was his sense of the ridiculous, he would play dangerous games with the gusto of someone who knew he was invincible unable to be really hurt. Her mind was working fast. She would appear easy and compliant. She would be all help and concern for the Great Plan he wrought while ensuring her role at the centre of events. She would keep her wits and help him achieve his grand designs. The more he achieved the less notice he would take of her and the doings of her allies. The monumental battles he had fought in the past were ever present in the time-space they inhabited, standing at the threshold of all their experience - casting a long shadow across the timelines and far into the future.



## Chapter 2

The grey-green, chauffeured limousine of Olympic Holdings swept into the frontage of the Olympic Building in New York and slid sedately to a halt. The liveried security man leaped from his post as the driver opened the rear door to allow Lucina Dodona to slip out without being seen. He preceded her into the grand foyer much like a red flag once preceded motor vehicles. The foyer was not busy and Lucina, regal in Versace silk, slipped by without causing untoward attention as was her intention. Her vigilant escort bowed a retreat as soon as she entered the elevator. She placed her thumb on a small mirrored pad next to the buttons and a light indicated the numbers 90 and 91. The elevator left the ground and gathered speed until it slowed at floor 89, which was the last number on the bank of buttons. The machine changed its tone and became totally silent and gently deposited its lone occupant at the next level. Daedalus had done an excellent job disguising the final two floors of the building as part of the roof line. She exited into a large gold and malachite hallway, her heels clacked noisily across the highly polished marble floor. She approached two huge panelled and sculpted golden doors. She waved a hand imperiously at a nymph wearing only a sheer chiton who hurriedly pressed a hidden button in the panel to make the door open.

There Hera as she was known in this realm, found her husband at his ease and inclined to relaxation in the Olympian penthouse suite. The rest of the building below was inhabited entirely by mortals, innocent of the opulence above their heads. Zeus, relaxed on a daybed, in the sumptuous apartment was listening to two pretty nymphs playing the harp. It soothed him. Hera wondered what plans he had for them after she left. The nymphs stopped playing as she entered. They looked from their master to their mistress and at each other and observing Hera's eye they hurriedly absented themselves leaving their instruments behind.

Zeus frowned. A dark cloud appeared over Manhattan in an otherwise clear sky. He smiled. 'Do you come from Ios my cuckoo? How is my little floating paradise? Does the fig ripen?'

'Do not play with me my Lord. I have discovered your trickery as no doubt you know. But I come Sire in a forgiving frame of mind.' She paused, her eye landed on the vacated harps. 'I see you are not lonely here in my absences.'

His frown deepened, clouds darkened, a storm approached. He wondered what revenge she would take and if he would punish her or not. He also believed her to be forgiving if she said so. She would probably do something to get even with him, she would bide her time, for she bore grudges. He relied on the fact of his ultimate power to get through such difficult episodes, but nevertheless preferred them not to happen. In any case, the business with the beautiful English girl was a vital part of his last great work.

Queenly and aristocratic she seated herself regally in a comfortable sofa opposite to him. She maintained her sense of equality as was her right. Her female to his male. Was she not the elder daughter of Chronos and Rhea, older sister as well as wife.

'Oho! My severe and noble beauty,' Zeus smiled. 'What reprisal do you plan for me this time my proud cuckoo?'

Hera stroked the strings on one of the harps, the sound was restful. It calmed them both.

'You know what I think. Someone has to stand for womanly stability and the value of faithfulness in your male world...' Zeus interrupted grumpily.

'And I respect that, wife, I really do. Well, most of the time I do. But you know very well that I must act positively in times like these. Only a mortal child of my making can do the work that must be done. You see that surely? Why otherwise would I stray from the marriage bed I had to play so hard to get?' He stood up and paced about the room. 'And my dear,' his frustration beginning to get the better of him. 'I want you to leave the

mother alone this time and not torment her. Take your anger out on me not on her nor the child if you please.' He stumped off towards the window, his broad back to her.

'Peevishness never did become you my Lord,' Hera replied. She pulled the harp towards her and played a few bars of the air the nymphs were playing when she entered the room.

'Oh alright, my one alone, alright. I hear you.' He walked back to her and grasped her proffered hand. I really am forgiven then?'

Hera sighed. Zeus had heard that sigh many times and felt it as both a warning and a challenge. Knowing she had never had any intention of being his wife the creative lecher in him demanded that he took her, so he tricked her into marriage by becoming a bedraggled cuckoo, which she warmed in her kindly bosom. Thus revived, the all powerful resumed his shape and ravished her. It was a mean trick but as he knew, her sense of honour shamed her into marrying him. She was partially compensated by her change of status. But the continued friction of their relationship was felt throughout the Pantheon and was played out in the lives of countless mortals. Their wedding night lasted 300 years. They had four children together, Eilithia, Hephaestos, Ares and Hebe. Once, long ago, Hera tired of Zeus' arrogance and fearing he was as much the tyrant as their father and grandfather before him; persuaded the Olympians into revolt. Hephaestos, in particular, supported his mother. Zeus in the white heat of his anger, threw him from Olympus, Hephaestos recovered but was only half the god he was before. Still furious, Zeus hung Hera by the wrists from the sky, anvils attached to each ankle. Perhaps he had overdone it on that occasion, but he was sorely provoked. Easy going as he was, his authority had to be seen now and again as absolute.

She rose so as not to be overawed by him and to face him on equivalent terms. The faithful wife, she pressed his hand to her breast and kissed him gently on the mouth. She had learned to love the damp earthy taste of him. She whispered into his ear as she held him closely to her. He was a sucker for the warmth of any female body especially hers.

'Never fear,' she said huskily in his ear, I have paid her due attention. She is safe on Ios with us. You know my soft spot for mortal women and she is a fine specimen.'

She led him gently to the day bed and they lay together. The clouds over New York dissipated as quickly as they had come.

'I will see to the birth and ensure the immortality of the child my Lord.'

'Aha, wife, you will suckle him at your breast like Heracles? And who pray are the we who are seeing to things?' Zeus nuzzled her fine neck with his lips and slid his hand under the delicate silk of her designer robe to encompass the Firm breast, he felt the nipple thicken between his fingers.

'Prom...etheus,' she said thickly. 'And Elithia, also Themis and Mnemosyne.' He nipped her between finger and thumb and it hurt. I...will also use Haephaestos.' He nipped her harder. She twined a long leg around his heavy thigh and felt upwards, and grasped the noble balls. He relaxed his grip.

'So be it. But the English girl will be compensated for the loss of memory and her friends and mother will forget her in their turn?'

'That she will, my Lord, Mnemosyne does it as we speak. I have plans for her in the Firm, she will do well under my care.'

'And the child what of him?'

Her hand moved from the illustrious testes to the royal shaft which already swollen, now hardened.

'Leave the detail to me my Thunderer. You will have your hero with the correct pedigree, properly schooled. Themis has a special mission.'

'And I...I will manage The One. Only I can do that. Ooh! Ahh!....Nice.' He groaned and lay back. Hera slipped off her robe. 'The problem is time,' he exhaled noisily. 'The life span of mortals is too short. Gaia will polish them off before they can reverse anything in time. I had not thought they would make such a mess so soon. I have not paid attention. Now Yahweh and Hades take advantage of me. I blame those grasping, unsubtle Romans. They fell for Yahweh's last gambit with all that Only Son stuff. I had sons enough for everyone. My Greeks would have treated Gaia with infinitely more subtlety.' He gave himself up to the ministrations of his wife who rested her flawless cheek on his thigh. With a mixture of love and revenge she closed her lips upon the erect phallus of her Thunderer. With consummate artistry Hera demanded his considerable attention and for a while his great work was forgotten.

Later he lay, covered by conjugal charm, content in majestic marital bliss. Sated and pleased, he contemplated his task. This time he would manage matters properly. He would kill three birds with one stone. He must get Hades out of the underworld and Chronos if he could. He would deal properly with Yahweh and put an end to the destructive separation of Earth and Spirit. Thirdly and most critically for mortals, they had to be aware that they had to manage Gaia's needs for and by themselves. Hera could do what she liked with them. He would set the challenge. It was time they grew up. The boy would deal with Hades, Hera will manage mortals and he would deal with Yhawhe.

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There was quite a crowd in the great hall on the 91st floor of the Olympic building. The people appeared to be waiting for something to begin. They would have been considered remarkable by any visitor from the streets, or indeed by anyone from any of the busy offices below the three floors of the elegant penthouse, with its hanging gardens cunningly contrived in the roof.

A ringing of a silver bell, was heard in the mind's ear of the assembled company and into the room from high golden doors in solemn majesty, came a group of tall, regal beings, who occupied ten grand seats five, by five on either side of two thrones in the centre of a raised dais set against the open wall of the south side. The evening sunlight shot diamonds of light from the polished surfaces.

A paean of brazen trumpets sounded in the ears of those present, clouds of perfumed mist poured from the Golden doors. Zeus fresh from his bath, emerged taller than the rest by a good head, his wondrously curled beard a little too fluffy, a beam on his face to shame the streaming sun. On his arm Hera, calm, imperial, a satisfied smile, playing her shapely lips. Awe was not part of the Olympian nature but at the noble presence of the Royal Couple, there was a stiffening to attention and even the Ten on their lesser thrones, stopped fidgeting with their finery. Zeus, enjoying the occasion, swept Hera to her place on the dais in a swirl of fabrics, one foot forward, her fine head erect, her marble limbs, enticingly visible through the light chiffon of her robe. Zeus, floated through the mist to take his place, and gestured grandly to the brilliant crowd. The paean was heard again. He prepared himself and spoke.

'Friends' his great voice boomed in the heads of the foregathered, He looked round proudly.

'I have called the Pantheon together for the first time in many generations, to make an announcement of great importance.' He allowed his natural majesty to make an impression. He was feeling good. To be at one with Hera, was a great relief. He also enjoyed putting on a good show. Its reverberations would sing through the Chronosphere and down the timelines. He gazed out over his cohorts, pleased they were still numerous, pleased so many had not forsaken him for other gods, for Hades or for the One. He had lasted despite their

efforts. He continued in the psyche of Europa, she who had conquered the world kept him in her inner mind.

The gathering was amused by this unusual show of pomp. Athena, smiled enigmatically, her aegis gleaming for the occasion. Hermes lounged on his golden rod, fished from out of some ancient attic and polished for today. Hephaestos was dressed to kill, golden from top to toe, a great silver virtual owl, nodding sagely on his shoulder, Hestia, Ares, Apollo, Artemis, Poseidon, Aphrodite and Demeter, were all with some long forgotten item of dress or object from the lockers of time, spruced for the occasion. He was pleased to summon them, gods, goddesses of rank, Titanesses, Muses, Fates, Nymphs, Tree and River gods from his beloved Archean Vales. With some pleasure he spotted Prometheus, despite his air of disinterest. He continued his speech, a little self-importantly, since there was no one to stop him enjoying himself. He had been in the background too long.

'Know you that my son Alexander is almost born and will come among you,' he glanced a smile at Hera. 'He will come among you for the sake of mortals and I would have us aid him in the great endeavour which the Fates have put his way.'

He warmed to his theme as he always did when confronting a captive audience which was soon likely to tire of his rhetorical flights but which was too aware of his power to ignore him. There was always portentous meaning in what he said whatever the means of delivery. Many a god or mortal for that matter had suffered inordinately because they paid too little attention to his meaning.

Thus Zeus made his great announcement.

## Chapter 3

'Good morning Penelope, my child.' Elithia woke Penny gently after Lucina had left for New York. 'Come, we have things to talk about and preparations to make.'

Penny woke slowly from a great sleep. She remembered the fatigue that had come over her. She could still feel the cool touch of Lucina's hand on her brow and her lips on her eyelids. An indistinct feeling of something in her past pressed on her mind but she had difficulty bringing it to consciousness. Elithia spoke in a voice requiring immediate attention.

'Put on this gown and dress yourself, you are all crumpled from your sleep.' The older woman gently raised Penny to her feet, and her thoughts left her mind altogether. She lifted the simple chiton from her and naked, she felt Elithia's eyes examine her with the professional eye of a nurse or doctor.

'You have good bones and will give birth easily,' she mused, speaking not to Penny but to herself. 'He has chosen well - it will make my work easier.' She slipped a new garment over Penny's head. The fine material flowed over her body like water. It was a miracle of woven stuff, and seemed to adjust itself to the exact body temperature for optimum comfort.

'I feel quite naked as if I'm not wearing anything.'

'It is a material woven only here,' Elithia replied. 'It will give you confidence to walk with pride in your body, and give you strength in your own self-belief. Her words made Penny feel again the indistinct feeling she had on waking, a feeling of things unexplained.

'That's amazing, who makes it? What's it actually made from?'

'Do not worry about it, we have other things to think about.' Elithia passed her hand comfortingly over Penny's tight, round belly, and Penny forgot what it was she wanted to say, but the feeling of unexplained mystery remained, never to leave her. She felt she had always been on the Island. There was a vague memory of other times when she had lived elsewhere but it was too difficult to bring them to mind.

From then until the birth Elithia kept her busy with pre-natal exercises, sewing children's garments, and other maternal pursuits. Lucina on her return, visited her often and they walked together along shimmering beaches, while she talked to her of her plans.

'So you see how it is,' Lucina said one brilliant day, the Aegean light making the blue of the sea unreal. They were walking along the beach at Psathi. Penny picked grapes from a bunch in her hand and ate them one at a time enjoying the luxury of it all. Pretty whitecaps from the gentle surf scrolled at their bare feet.

'The olives on Ios are the best in the world. They produce the best pure virgin oil; but we are too lazy here to make anything of it. My women prefer to idle their time spinning in the sun. The men fish and spend their days mending nets and drinking in the tavernas. The olives are mine, I inherited them and up to now I had no interest in them. I need someone to work on my behalf, there is a fortune to be made from the oil and I would like to develop my business interests beyond that, but I need someone who will look out for me. I will of course help out myself from time to time and act as a proper partner.'

Penny contemplated her distended stomach. Although she wanted to have Alexis' child she did not feel cut out for motherhood. She was too young and had no desire to spend all her time caring for babies. Somewhere inside her was driving her to change things. To stop something happening. Her unexpected pregnancy had put all thoughts of the future from her. She knew nothing of olives nor of business but found she had listened with interest to Lucina's desire to develop her enterprise and felt that she would like to work with this fascinating

woman.

'I'd love to do something useful to help but isn't this likely to get in the way?'

'Don't worry too much about that. I've told you that Elithia is an expert with children and births and all that kind of thing. She and Mnemosyne will care for the offspring, while we can get on and enjoy ourselves. What do you say? Lots of children are brought up quite satisfactorily by good carers while mothers do other things.'

Penny regarded her surroundings. While Psathi and the island was beautiful indeed, it was a place for a long holiday not for a real life of doing. Why not have these excellent women of Lucina care for the child while she got into the olive oil business?

'It's a deal!' and they shook hands.

The next morning Penny's waters broke and by lunchtime she was sensing the first contractions. Elithia always on hand, prepared the chamber and the helpers. Lucina was like a cat on hot bricks, fussing about, walking in and out, holding Penny's hand, panting with her between contractions. There was some pain during the contractions but it was not as bad as she had expected. She obeyed all the instructions given to her by Elithia but was distracted more than she liked from the business in hand by Lucina. Expectation was emanating from her. Lucina kept anxiously viewing Elithia in a way which seemed questioning to Penny and more than simple nervousness about the birth itself. Something else was going on, in which she was not involved. Even amid the pangs of childbirth Penny had the feeling of being only partially the focus of attention. A feeling of being used, of being a means to ends known only to Lucina and probably Elithia.

Just as these thoughts were clarifying in her mind she felt the baby come and pushed on Elithia's instructions until her face was puce with the effort.

'A boy!' exclaimed Lucina. 'We will call him Alexander!' She was more jubilant, if that were possible than the exhausted mother. She held the child high as if offering him the to the four corners of the world. At that very moment Penny was amazed to find herself pushing again. She supposed it was the afterbirth coming.

Surprised, Penny was never ever to be sure about what she thought was happening. She was given no part in Lucina's triumphant celebration; and she felt an enormous sense of disappointment. In a moment caught from the edge of her awareness, from the corner of her eye she noticed something she was sure she was not supposed to see. It was almost missed as she went into what seemed like the throes of labour for the second and unexpected time. The arrival of the unexpected daughter, a twin, was so overwhelming that never ever could she be certain that what she saw was real or something she imagined in her exhaustion.

'We will call this one 'Thea!' exclaimed Elithia, this time.

What she thought she saw and was not supposed to see, was Lucina suckling the baby boy at her breast as she turned her back on the struggling Penny. Her memory of the whole episode was however very vague, more dream than substance. But the image persisted. She had no expectation of twins but Elithia, apparently knew and made no attempt to disguise her pleasure, Lucina continued holding the new born aloft exulting and dancing with the first-born child held high.

It seemed thereafter to Penny that her life and that of her son was predicated on an unexplained mystery, like the letter from Greece, the death or non-death of Alexis, the arrival of a twin to Alexander. It only vaguely occurred to her that she had no part in naming either of the children. To none of this had she answers. All attempts at explanations from Lucina, Elithia, Mnemosyne or any of the others she met on Ios produced nothing satisfactory. Always they glossed over any real inquiry. The reward for silence and loyalty to Lucina was unbounded, total and fulfilling. Living with the mystery was more than compensated.

When she was fully recovered from her confinement Mnemosyne, or 'Nemmi' as the baby Alexander called her, became a nanny to the twins, and Penny was soon immersed by Lucina in the olive oil business.

'See, you will need something better to do than change nappies my dear,' Lucina had said a little over a week after the birth of the twins. Mnemosyne will occupy the children, let us now make plans for my little olive oil company.' Penny found the children charming and fascinating at a distance. Even had she wanted to play the doting mother she soon found Elithia and Mnemosyne quite got in the way and managed all the little things necessary for bringing up of babies. To her own relief, and she suspected to that of the others, motherhood was not something that came naturally to her. She did not need much persuasion to leave the daily care of the children to them. The babies thrived and for some reason seemed to adore her when she had the time to play with them. It was a perfect arrangement.

Penny soon discovered she found the idea of offspring more interesting than the practical and daily business of feeding and changing. She was pleased to keep her own space. Thea seemed to need no maternal presence and Alexander received so much from Nemmi that any feelings of inadequacy were more than compensated and so she felt no pressing need to compete on such obviously unequal terms. Besides, the idea of developing a business with the powerful Lucina was more interesting than the daily chores of motherhood.

The company which Lucina called Joint National Oils (JNO) (the Roman form for Hera was Juno and Hera liked the joke) and which Penny always called 'the Firm', grew and grew from the first dozen or so caiques transporting olive oil of the highest quality from Ios to the mainland. Lucina provided the working capital and Penny soon proved an effective managing director. The two women revelled in the world of business. They used the element of surprise and an acute acumen backed by the unscrupulous use of their femininity. Penny soon realised Lucina had access to information about rival Firms and supply systems from unknown sources and although she wondered about this, things were going too well and too fast to worry about how everything happened. There was simply too much to do.

It was not long before, as well as the olive oil business, she found herself running a large shipping company owned by Lucina's husband, Zarian Dodona of New York. Before most of their rivals were aware of this new power behind the company, they had been bought up or otherwise hung out to dry. It was not long before Ios became too distant a centre for control of the growing diversification of the European side of the business and within a couple of years of the birth of the twins Penny had set up an office in the City of London. She began by buying olive groves throughout Europe, diversified into other commodities, wheat, timber and coffee. Linked to Zarian's shipping company, she bought and transported anything that came from the earth. She bought into oil-rigs, refineries and petrol stations. There were few indeed who had any idea of the Firm's beginnings with the pretty caiques loaded with slick, green tins of extra virgin olive oil, which plied between Ios and the mainland. The sheer pace of the growth of this amazingly wonderful network of links kept Penny fully occupied.

Lucina's magical personality rubbed off on everyone, especially Penny who became truly married to the Firm, no man since Alexis could ever give her so much excitement or fulfilment. From time to time she slaked her sexual desires, but never gave an inch of herself. She broke a few hearts and many an ego, but was truly married to the Firm.

## Chapter 4

Alexander Conway was feeling on edge as he waited for his twin sister Thea in the panelled entrance hall of the large house on East Heath road, Hampstead which gave onto the Heath, where they lived with their mother Penny and Nemmi, Alexander's nurse and mentor. While Alexander knew very well that Penny was his natural mother, Nemmi had been so central to his life that if asked who mattered most to him he would immediately have plunged into a dilemma and would probably have plumped for Nemmi.

He loved the house, more so since his sixteenth Birthday when Penny had arranged for JNO to build his own separate bachelor pad over the garage. To give him his freedom, she'd said. He didn't think he needed freedom from anything. Penny said he needed his own space away from Thea and Nemmi from time to time, where he could do his own thing. Have friends round and so on. He couldn't see it himself. With old Nems and Thi, around what use were friends? Nevertheless he felt grown up in the flat and could play his hi-fi as loudly as he liked. Above the garage he was aware of his beloved Triumph 600 below him, now amazingly and unexpectedly joined by the addition of his XK, an early birthday present from Penny.

Tomorrow he and Thea were eighteen and JNO was throwing a party at Markham Hall, the Firm's country house near Oxford. He didn't want a special party. Above all he didn't want to meet Lucina who appeared to have organised it. She always made him feel uncomfortable whenever he encountered her, which was fortunately not often. She kind of just loomed over him expectantly and made him feel utterly inadequate. She didn't seem to have this effect on Thea or Nemmi, but he thought his mother was nervous when her boss was around.

The baby from Ios was now over six feet and growing. Strong and supple he skied in the winter and last summer had begun rock climbing. He had his eye on sky diving but Penny was putting her foot down over that. He'd nagged her silly for the Triumph, and in the end bought it without her permission. The Jaguar, she said, handing him the keys, will get you in a vehicle with at least one wheel on each corner. Use it to get out and about with your friends. He had a problem understanding Penny's need to encourage him to make close friends, didn't he have loads of skiing and climbing companions? What if there was no one person with whom he had a close relationship? He couldn't think why that was such a big deal. Thea and or Nemmi were more important to him than anyone, except Penny herself whom he saw too infrequently. He didn't know she thought him socially unaccomplished nor did he realise she worried that the rich and good looking were too easily befriended.

His thick, fair, curly hair worn long to the shoulder had a tendency to fall across his face like a curtain, which necessitated a good deal of hair flicking with his hand. His stature, the halo of hair, the slow grace of his movements, together with his expensive clothes and the insouciance of the carefree had lately prompted second glances from passing women. He was saved from conceit by a social naivety deliberately developed by Mnemosyne that artlessly prevented him from being aware of his affect on others so that he was not too much contaminated by mortal relationships. She ensured it never crossed his mind that others might think about him at all.

He was pacing the hallway jingling his car keys fractiously from which dangled an enamelled Jaguar badge in red and gold. He wore skin tight driving gloves, and a brand new Harris Tweed cap, which, unsure of the right angle to suit his hair, he kept adjusting. Jeans, tee shirt, an unfastened leather waistcoat and cowboy boots, made up the rest. Under the peak of the cap a pair of very blue eyes and a finely chiselled nose sat below a wide brow. Finely drawn lips were moulded into a strong chin and muscular neck. It was no accident that Michaelangelo's David sprang to mind in many who saw him.

Themis, currently known as Thea, stepped lightly down the staircase, Her jet black pony-tail swinging. Even features, long legs, drawn hair, fine arms and general lightness of bearing made her resemble the perfect prima ballerina, a form of mortal woman she admired.



Spotting Alexander waiting impatiently in the hall, for a moment she thought she saw his father standing there and thought that at least he'd inherited some of the attributes of his illustrious begetter. 'Relax Stirling Moss, you'll get to drive your stupid dream machine to Markham. There's plenty of time....and that hat's ridiculous.' Too often she was exasperated by how weak mortals were. Not just in body but in the paltriness of their brains and her impatience had begun to wear at her accustomed iron control.

Unable to get it to fit correctly Alexander threw the offending hat on the hall table, smoothed his hair back and grinned at her. He lifted his eyes and watched her descend. She'd gone sarky on him again. He was sure it wasn't him but you couldn't win arguments with Thea. Twins they may be but she had an unerring ability to always be right. She saw right through him as if his mind were encased in glass. Lately he thought she'd become a bit distant and sardonic towards him. He took her attention for granted and relied on her a great deal, so that her current attitude foxed and upset him.

She saw the effect on him and knew she was being unsubtle, but she had to wean him off her; both she and Mnemosyne were in danger of overcooking the goose. He was far too dependent on them. He'd soon have to stand alone and work out how to manage in the world with the knowledge he had from her and Mnemosyne. He was no Heracles. She knew his mind and the human self-doubt that lurked there. Add a godly arrogance inherited from his father and here were irreconcilable characteristics only he could manage for himself.

Thea walked past him into the sunlight of the half-moon gravelled drive flanked at each end by tall pillars, capped by stone balls.

How self-assured she was, he thought. I wonder if I'll ever manage to be like her? He ran out after her to the door of the parked white XK150. Grinning, he opened it and doffed his non-existent cap like a chauffeur, his hair obscuring his face. He stood up and flicked it back. She folded herself elegantly into the low leather seat like a butterfly. He loved the way she did that. He felt himself such an oaf beside her. Still grinning, he bowed deeply, indicating the length of the car with a flourish of his arm. He forced a smile from her. Thank the gods for small mercies he thought. He ran round the long bonnet and jumped over the door into the seat with one bound.

'Once an oaf always an oaf,' he muttered loudly so she would hear.

'Shut up idiot and drive,' she said.

'What's with you Thi? You're coming at me all elbows and knees these days. What have I done?'

She supposed she wasn't doing this properly and was out of her depth and she was annoyed with herself. Breaking off from him was proving very difficult, but the truth was she was no good as a person. Handling humans, it turned out wasn't her forte, not even half-humans. Titans were not made for it and she ought to have known better than to try. At the time it had been more a question of whom you could trust rather than who would be the best candidate, so she'd volunteered under duress. If she'd known then what she knew now she could have chosen many deities who would have made a far better mortal than she. It was a good idea when she and Hera had discussed it before the birth, still, she supposed she'd manage well enough.

None of the women of Ios believed the boy would naturally have all the attributes necessary for his task merely by carrying Zeus' own DNA. If Zeus' plan was to have any chance of success he would need as much help as he could get. Hera had construed Themis' idea as an offer and jumped at it. How else could this babe understand how the gods managed in a modern world? She was very persuasive. He had to be inured in the memory of the old myths as well as current realities. He needed to take them for granted without being constantly surprised. Mnemosyne could deal with his education and Themis would ensure his general safety; to underpin him in case he slipped away from them into the purely mortal. To be born in human form and to grow like them would give her new insights into the mortal world and a closeness to Alexander unable to be

achieved any other way. Well, she had managed eighteen years, but she really had no talent for the human. She kept telling herself the time spent was only a speck in the aeons, but by all the gods it was hard. She'd discussed it with Hera many times and at last they had decided she should break it off before she did something she'd regret. Alexander had his grounding, this was as good a time as any to loosen him from the apron strings. Hera would do it officially at a coming of age party. Rites of passage or something like that. All adolescents went through it said Mnemosyne. He'd be officially separated from them both but all three of them would keep a watchful eye on him. They had someone in mind who would lead him on his mission when they finally revealed it to him and then by the gods, he'd need them nearby.

'You've done nothing, honestly, Alexander mou, it's me. I'm a bit....you know.' She patted his thigh in her effort to seem friendly and close. She found physical contact very difficult.

'Well I hope your 'you know' gets better before long. It's very upsetting.'

'Maybe it's this party.'

'Yeah, right, what is that all about?' He turned the ignition and fine white arrows on the black dials quivered into life, ready for ignition. He loved it, the way they jumped to attention with the current and then the roar of the twin exhausts. Beautiful. Awesome. He pressed the little black starter button and touched the accelerator. The white beast throbbed into life and Alexander gunned the engine. Wow! He was Mr. Toad.

Conversation was going to be difficult on this trip, thought Thea. Nevertheless she had to tell him of their impending separation before they arrived and Lucina made her announcement.

On the busy route out of London, Alexander gave most of his attention to getting used to the car, he liked the fact it was in perfect condition. He was disturbed though. He couldn't see the need for the great fuss of a party at Markham. This didn't feel like a celebration of coming of age, more like a coming out. This was to tell the world about him and Thi and he wasn't sure why it was necessary. He couldn't think of any other reason why all these dignitaries he didn't know had been invited.

He drove confidently but too fast and particularly on corners he wasn't sure whether he was in control or the car. It was noisy with the hood down but conversation was possible as the throaty exhaust burbled through the North Western London suburbs.

'Mum's behind this I suppose Thi?' he shouted above the wind noise. 'What's this need to show us off for?' He dropped a gear, pulled out and passed a bus, just. He turned to her. 'How's that for acceleration?'

'I'll talk to you when you've got this thing under control. I hate you in it and more than that, I hate me in it!'

'Scaredy cat. It's perfectly under control.'

'Idiot!' Although she had no need to be scared for herself, she was more worried about him, there was no way he could die now.

'So she's behind it?' he repeated his question.

'I'm not sure, maybe it's got something to do with Lucina?' Thea replied, in clumsy attempt to prepare him.

'So that's it! I thought there was more to it. Lucina's behind everything it seems to me. Interfering battleaxe. She's always there somewhere poking her nose in.'

'You should have more respect.'

'Yes, well...I suppose.'

They were silent for a while. Alexander gunned the car on the those parts of the A40 where it was possible to make hay with the no limit sign. He slipped in and out of lorries and the slower cars, which was all of them. It was a glorious day in early summer and the wind whistled through their hair turning Alexander's into medusa snakes waving around his head. Thea poked her pony tail into the neck of her blouse and held onto it through the fabric.

'Ear'oling, they call it Thi,' he shouted above the din.

'Prat!' she yelled back.

They were doing eighty and accelerating. Alexander decided he'd got the hang of this 'ear'oling' technique.

'Slow down Alexander, I'm not convinced you're used to the speed of this monster, and I want you to get there in one piece if you don't mind.'

Alexander laughed and slowed down to sixty. 'At this speed it feels like we've stopped,' he smiled.

'Good. I want to talk to you and while you're going like a bat out of hell I can't concentrate.' She'd never get used to the modern world of machines. Which were the cause of most of the world's problems. Thank the gods Hephaestos dealt with that department. 'Forty would actually be better.'

Alexander laughed again and slowed once more. 'Okay now?

'Thanks. That's healthier. What I wanted to say was that I won't be going to Cambridge.' Better to spit it out, she wasn't any good at going round the houses.

'What!' Alexander nearly drove onto the verge in his surprise as he negotiated a tricky right-hander. Thea grabbed lamely at the wheel in an attempt to straighten them up. 'I think you'd better stop altogether Alexander.'

'Just say that again. It's alright I'm in control of the car.'

'I said I'm not going to Cambridge.'

'That's what I thought you said,' he was silent for a moment. 'So that's it. That's your little 'you know' is it? What's brought all this on? I was looking forward to going up with you. I'd been making plans for us.' He concentrated on the road for a while and as he came up behind a lorry on a series of 's' bends he was forced into third gear and the slow pace of the vehicle in front. A driver whom Alexander had cut up earlier came up behind them and gave the 'V' sign.

Thea didn't reply immediately. Forced to go slowly they proceeded in a difficult silence. Thea allowed him to think through her bombshell. She knew him as well as she knew herself, probably better as she didn't spent any time on such nonsense. He knew she read his thoughts. She was ahead of him in all aspects of their growing up. She knew things before he did and when he found the going difficult she smoothed the way. She was always near enough to watch out for him. They had never been great talkers as children. They just did things.

'But we've never been apart before,' he said finally. He was deeply shocked. Separation from her was unthinkable. Fear welled up in him, anger quickly followed.

Thea followed his thoughts which at the same time as his feelings were going back and forth through memories. Why to people have to do this sort of thing? It was simply undisciplined. Why can't they just know how things are, like she did and get on with it? Lacking the desire to stop him, she let his mind wander as it would.

He was three. He had decided to race the cars on his tricycle on the main Archway Road, it was she who led him back unscathed, apart from skinned knees, although the tricycle was a twisted wreck and the car driver in a state of shock. Throughout school she sat next to him, refusing to be parted from her twin. While many teachers wanted to separate them on principle, somehow Thea always managed to get her way. People found it hard to argue with Thea. She could out-talk any adult as soon as she had language. She was no match for other children who soon learned to give her the room she needed for herself and her brother. Alexander grew up fully protected from untoward experiences. He did as he pleased but Thea was always one jump ahead of him and saved him from the worst consequences of his actions.

Talking about Lucina made him think of Ios. As a growing child he had almost no memory of Ios save for an image of sunlight on water and a sense of a strong presence which was actually that of Lucina and which stayed with him subliminally, ill-defined; but potent. Maybe it was Lucina, who was behind his strong resistance to being told what to do by figures in authority. Nothing Thea did stopped that unhelpful trait. It got him into a lot of trouble, from which Thea always rescued him. He never talked, even to her, about a feeling he had of strings tugging him towards something and against which he felt a need to resist. To counteract this undertow, he did his utmost to go in the opposite direction. He needed both of them around him to feel right about himself, to keep him on track. They helped him with all his dilemma's, so why didn't he talk to them about this particular feeling? He just felt alone with it somehow. He couldn't explain. Nevertheless, being anywhere without them both alongside him, was unthinkable.

When Thea saw he had finished his thinking she interjected, 'it's time we went our separate ways for a bit. I don't mean for ever, and I'll not be far away from you. But it's time we lived away from each other. You can't have me around all the time.'

'But I'll get into such terrible trouble if I'm left alone,' Alexander interrupted, aghast. 'You know I can't manage on my own.' He pulled into a layby without signalling and really upset the man in the car behind. He stopped the powerful car without noticing him and turned to her in earnest. 'This is ridiculous Thi. You can't just sod off and leave me on my own. I mean what'll I do?'

'You'll do what every other young man at Cambridge does, enjoy yourself and perhaps learn something in the process. You know what gets you into trouble by now, you can't have me running after you any more. Anyway, I'm going to join the Firm. Lucina thinks I'll do better there than going to university.'

'Oh that's it! Oh yea, I get it! You usually think for yourself Thi. Don't you be influenced by her too! Christ Thi, you'll hate the Firm. Stay with me. You've just got to come up with me and that's all there is to it!'

As so much of his mother's time was absorbed in the Firm, she banked on the fact that his antipathy to it, would ensure that he wouldn't give up Cambridge and attempt to follow her. She allowed him another of his mind wanderings since she saw he was on the verge of tears.

They had grown together. Mnemosyne, whom he called Nemmi, gradually took over the task of their upbringing from Elithia who was more wet-nurse and nanny than mentor. From Nemmi they learned speech, the naming of things and the importance of understanding the myths of history. His life with these people had given him his early knowledge and understanding of the basics of how the world worked.

From his mother, he had unconditional love. He adored her. But nevertheless, he felt she did not fully understand Thea and Nemmi as he did, and that concerned him. He wanted them all to get on together. He just

knew he did not want to have to fend for himself. Clearly Lucina was somewhere behind everything making waves and he didn't ever want to face her, without Thea beside him. Twins were different from other children. There was little need for friends. The other children seemed small and weak, with silly interests. Thea fulfilled him. Now she was thrusting him into the midst of ordinary people to fend for himself. How was he going to fit in? He had the feeling his mother also knew about Lucina too, but it was something they never discussed. He was with her for too little time to raise difficult issues. He waited impatiently for the little time they had together. He lit up in her presence and they felt uncommonly close. Absence, made his time with her magical. He cherished babyhood memories of being held close and receiving a warmth not given by Nemmi or Thea. His mother's humanity enfolded him differently from the focussed care he received from the others. He was never able to define the complexities of this feeling. It was a rainbow of many colours. Most of this contact was pure pleasure, but not all. As a baby, Alexander felt the tension behind her attention. The child desperately wanted to share this with her but had no way of expressing that which he did not understand himself. Throughout his childhood and now in late adolescence, he avoided asking awkward questions and she allowed him freedoms which he could not explain, but which much later he knew as the consequence of her guilt for not dealing with the issue with him. She too seemed to know things she could not explain. He would stretch childishly towards her and even as she came to him she withdrew something infinitesimal, but significant. As a child it made him feel bad about himself and he wanted earnestly to bridge the gap, but she was too often absent and he did not know what to do when the opportunity arose. Nowadays this inexplicable dissonance was under strict control for safety. When at times she became angry, he recognised her anger was not directed at shortcomings in himself, he sensed her feeling of inadequacy and his heart went out to her.

His thoughts were interrupted by Thea who determined this had gone on long enough and was leading nowhere. 'Lucina will announce my going into the Firm at the party. Now's a good time. Surely you can see that?'

Alexander did not answer and Thea kept her counsel, not wishing to provoke him any further. He was obviously upset. They sat staring ahead for a long while. Then Alexander restarted the car, and with scarcely a glance over his shoulder accelerated into the traffic and sped away too fast for safety.

This was unbelievable. He thought he knew her. He felt let down and betrayed. He glanced towards her from time to time. She had been a bit aloof these last months. Maybe she'd been preparing him for this? He braked late and hard to stop the car ploughing into the back of a van that was maundering along at fifty on the blind side of a bend. He pulled out and overtook it by flattening his foot in second gear and left tyre tracks on the road. He swore at the hooting of a car he almost forced off the road on the oncoming side. Thea was scared, as immortal she knew she would walk away from an accident, but would he?

'Is this what you want Thi?' He eventually shouted over the noise of the wind and the engine.

'Yes it is! It's not the end of the world you know. Life goes on. Okay? And slow down for the god's sake!'

They finished their journey in an awkward silence justified by the noise of the wind.

Markham nestled in a vale in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds. Alexander approached it through the winding main street of Wotton End, turned left at the fork by the church, narrowly missed a bus shelter near a culvert on the corner below the entrance to Markham House. He gunned the car noisily through the high, ornate iron gates and they rattled over the cattle grid. The drive flanked by ancient plane trees rose steeply and turned at its apex in a tight right hand bend which suddenly revealed the house at the bottom of its low valley, edged by the lake. As stately piles go Markham was unremarkable architecturally but it was elegantly set. Built in the eighteenth century for a local merchant adventurer whose ships actually came in. Modernised by JNO it was in proportion and comfortable. It was not yet the brain centre of JNO's European operations but was used as the place where the background work was done while Penny fronted the London Office. Markham had shooting in season, equestrian facilities and a golf course for the exclusive use of the house. It also boasted a

helipad, a lake and trout stream.

Alexander, spinning gravel from the rear wheels, pulled up outside the main entrance. Thea unfolded herself and stalked off. Alexander handed the car keys to a young man in the grey-green livery of JNO and followed in her wake, feeling quite shaken.

There was no one in the side hall, and unsure which room he'd been allocated, he checked the board in the door keeper's office to see if he was in his usual room at the side of the house.

'Yes sir? Can I help you?' A soft, slightly husky, female voice behind him spoke and he turned to face a young black girl of about his own age, dressed in the familiar JNO olive livery. He'd never seen her before. She was simply stunning. He didn't have time to observe her properly, other than to think she was the most perfect thing he'd ever seen, when Penny bore down on him.

'Ah. Alex you're here then, I thought I saw Thea come in just now. Oh yes this is Marina. She's new here'. I'm training her. Marina smiled and they shook hands. Her grip was Firm and her hand warm and dry. She came up to his shoulder and he felt like picking her up and sweeping her away. Her hair was braided with silver beads and she wore the livery like a second skin. It was a faultless fit revealing a perfectly proportioned body. It was as if other women were merely reasonable attempts at getting the model right but this was the work of a master.

'Your room key sir,' she handed him a small silver key with a JNO fob. He smiled, she didn't. He saw the number, it was his usual room.

Penny grabbed his arm and steered him through into the crush-hall, a smallish, comfortable ante-chamber to the grand main hall where a carved staircase mounted impressively to the upper rooms under a long mullion window with stained glass panels. Under the stairs was a sofa, easy chairs and a table with carved legs. Penny sat down and he sat opposite her on the sofa. He also watched Marina walk past, cross the main hall and go through into the rooms beyond.

'Now then Alex, there's something I need to tell you. Are you listening to me?'

'Sorry mother, I'm a little distracted today.' As Marina left his view he made eye contact with his mother. 'I mean this party for one thing and what Thi's just told me.'

'Ah,' said Penny. 'So you know about her and the Firm. I agree, it's time you branched out alone. I think it's a very good idea.'

'Yes, but mother, how am I going to manage. I've never been alone before without Thi.' Given that Thea had been so adamant he was now getting a bit used to the idea. Maybe it would give him a lot of freedom of action, for what? He hadn't a clue. And he'd still have Nemmi around. He could easily get home for the weekends. That would compensate a bit and he'd see Thea at the weekends too. He could probably cope with that. 'I'll just have to cope with Nems then and see Thi at weekends too,' he said.

'Nemmi? No no, she's going to the New York office. Didn't I tell you? And it looks like Thea is going back to Ios for the time being to be with Lucina.

'What! It's not true! What the hell's going on Ma?' He got up paced about and sat down again heavily. 'No of course you didn't tell me any of this. It's a complete bloody conspiracy! Why can't I just get on with my life like I always did? Why does everyone want to interfere with me? It's not fair ma!'

Penny waited a moment before replying she felt for him but she was pleased he was going to be left alone,

he'd cope fine she had no doubt. 'People have to have their own lives. Thea's grown up like you and twin or no twin she has her own way to make in life. As for Nemmi, she can't spend the rest of hers as nursemaid to you exclusively.'

'She's not a nursemaid, she's a.....I dunno, but she's more than that and I need her. I need them both,' he pouted petulantly. 'It's too much mother it really is. Is this your idea or....' He hesitated.

'It's ours. Mine and Lucina's. Thea and Nemmi of course agree. I've tried to make you see you need to be free of both of them but you persist in them being the only company you need.'

'I need you too.'

'Do you? Do you actually? Most great lumps of your age can't wait to get away from home and sow a few wild oats. This conversation is normally the other way around with mothers trying to restrain their children. Especially nowadays.

'Is that right? Well I'm not other children. I know what I need!' This was dangerous ground for both of them. He flinched from actually saying he wanted them near because he was afraid there was something directing his life and that he needed them to guide him if it ever got hold of him and that he couldn't cope with the degree of vulnerability he felt when alone. However, they never finished the conversation as Penny was called away by Marina.

The party next day was a great affair. Alexander thought it unutterably boring but it was clear the JNO bigwigs, including his mother, thought it was very successful. Although Zarian Dodona was unable to attend, many New York staff flew over for the occasion. There were also representatives from the Far East, Europe and Australasia. There was lots of networking, excellent food, clay pigeon shooting on the lawn, golf if you wanted, boating on the lake with strawberries, Champagne and Pimms and a gallop if that was your thing. There was a jazz band on the lawn and a string quartet in the hall.

Alexander kept a look out for Marina whom he saw at a distance from time to time but never managed to get to her alone as she was always busy with somebody whenever he managed to escape his mother; so that he was unable to interrupt. Penny kept him meeting people and making him engage with them in the various activities. He popped at clay pigeons with a big man from Brazil who clapped him on the shoulder a lot, played tennis with a gorgeous Japanese lady who treated him as if he were her pet Pekinese. There were several others. They asked him if he was enjoying himself and what he was going to study and what career plans he had. His stock response was that beyond studying classics he had no idea what job he wanted. He wasn't even sure he wanted any kind of job. Penny gave him a good allowance which he assumed would be enhanced as he got older. He told a tall kindly Chinese man who persisted, that he'd thought a bit about journalism and was immediately introduced to a senior member of the McManus press organisation. So it went on all afternoon. Alexander met scores of senior JNO personnel and others while Thea was meeting even more. In the evening there was a dinner followed by a ball. During the dinner a telegram from Lucina Dodona arrived which was read out by the MC. There was much murmuring in the hall at this as many of the guests had come expecting her to appear. It wasn't that Penny had invited them on false pretences, even she had thought Lucina would arrive. After all it had been her idea. The telegram said that she regretted she was unable to come in person but that the CEO Europe Division, Penny Conway had an announcement to make on her behalf. She had intended to come but was prevented by circumstances beyond her control. Penny stood up from her chair where she was flanked by her children aware there was a sense of disappointment in the room.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I hope this little party has been enjoyable and I too regret the inability of the Dodona's to be with us to share our delight in the coming of age of Alexander and Thea. Most of us know how close Zarian and Lucina feel to these children who so much represent the future of our society. It is to the children of their generation that we will eventually deliver the fruits of our work in our various endeavours. The

announcement I have to make is that from next Monday Thea Conway will be joining JNO at its subsidiary base on Ios. So you will be seeing and hearing from her from time to time. Alexander is to go up to Cambridge to study and we hope to see him in the Firm in due course. I know you will wish them both well and I ask you to drink a toast with me to the health and welfare of them both on this occasion.'

Glasses were raised and there was a chorus of 'For they are jolly good fellows.' Alexander rose to thank everybody for making his and Thea's day so special and his mother for putting up with them for so long and that he hoped they had all had a good time and that he hoped to meet them all again one day if, and only if he joined the Firm. He sat down feeling immeasurably stupid. Thea spoke after him. Any sense of disappointment in the room vanished with Thea's precocity. She hoped she offered the company her gift for seeing issues and a way of solving problems. She spoke of the massive task facing JNO and expressed a depth of wisdom for one so young beyond education or erudition. She spoke eloquently of her one desire to come into the Firm as soon as she finished high school, insisting the experience would be better than university, and that she felt old enough to play a full part, with their help and how she expected to have a thoroughly interesting and productive time.

There was a poise and authority about Thea that entranced her audience and they all secretly agreed she was right and just and that having her in the company was exactly the right thing to happen. Alexander was totally eclipsed from their minds and they all forgot everything except how right they were to do what they did for JNO

The following day Penny nevertheless felt bad about the non-appearance of Lucina and felt let down and demeaned by both her and Thea. She felt something beyond her control had occurred but had no proof anything was happening and no way of retaliating. So she let it ride while feeling foiled. The truth was that ever since she opened the letter from Lucina in Paris, she knew something was going on and that Lucina made her too busy for it to matter. She knew it concerned Thea and Alexander but no one would tell her why or how. Whenever she considered the question a veil was drawn. There were too many things to do, advantages to exploit, situations to handle. Determined to sustain herself without answers from sources which would not divulge their secrets she was forced to use her considerable intellectual powers to pattern the world in ways which made sense to her. She truly believed in the way the Firm achieved its ends. She was no feminist in the anti-men, bra-burning sense, but deplored the machismo territorialism of the men she met, and would not see the world exploited. She had long suspected her children were born for a reason. She knew in the part of her which had given up asking questions that it had something to do with the Firm and that Lucina was to play a leading role, she suspected Zarian was in it too and there were plans for Alexander and Thea. Even so she still felt used by these people and helpless in their presence.

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On the highest unseen floor of the Olympic Building in New York Zeus and Hera were lounging comfortably after another delicious session of love-making. Zeus was pleased Hera continued to care so well for his needs. He considered it his due, naturally, but after the birth of the boy to the English girl, he had wondered if she would make things difficult. Relieved of his guilt, which in truth was really pleasure at apparently being allowed to get away with his infidelity, Zeus was even more inclined to let Hera manage the affair of Gaia's recovery than become involved himself. He saw how JNO was developing and was happy about how Hera used the material resources the Family had accumulated over the centuries. He saw she meant to carry out his design and involve the boy without Penny knowing anything. He smiled at the participation of Themis masquerading as the twin. He had thought of asking what a Titaness and the queen of order and common sense in all Olympia, felt like to be re-born as a mortal with all their defects, but did not want Hera to find out that he knew about the implantation. He was glad the boy had such mentors as Themis and Mnemosyne, the guarantor of remembrance. Besides he had no idea how effective the child would be in carrying out his necessary part in the great plan.



'I see the boy is well educated my cuckoo.' Zeus crooned in his wife's ear, not wishing to set any reverberations going about his begetting but wanting to show Hera how much he approved of her work on his behalf. Hera, never quite sure how much he knew, and suspecting he knew everything, but relying on him to allow her to continue without interference, stroked his inner thigh. As he lay back enjoying her attention she whispered.

'All goes well my Lord, the boy is of age and I will now set him loose on his task.'

Zeus, now seemingly taking more interest in his risen phallus than of the conversation asked casually,

'And who is to lead him to Hades for me?'

'Pan will communicate with him and Pan has access to the Underworld. You also need to know I have sent Haephestos as Hep Mulciber, technology expert, to Penny to help her in her work.'

'There are no problems then at your end, my love, to complicate our project?'

'None that cannot be handled, my Lord,' Hera caressed the Thunderer's now quivering manhood and he groaned with pleasure. 'There's the usual little difficulty of course.'

'Whaaa'ts thaaa't. Ooooh! Aah,' she increased the pressure of her fingers while gently squeezing the immortal scrotum.

'Like all mortals they sense their connection with us but cannot understand it. It makes their behaviour unpredictable, I see it is counteracted wherever possible, but their free will is always a risk as you well know.'

Zeus was too pre-occupied to speak and Hera knew he had not been listening for the last several moments. She did not want him to be too aware of problems as this would tempt him to interfere. Diverted, he could not say he was not told of any difficulties, but she hoped he would take no notice. Hera was not too worried about the human tendency to self-hood despite the efforts of the gods, She would handle Penny through Haephestos and Thea and Mnemosyne would manage the boy. Pan would be sent to lead him on his journey and she herself would supervise the whole thing. Whatever false turns mortals made she could probably put them right. It was Zeus' bigger plan that really concerned her. What would happen once Yhawhe, he and Hades were present in the same timespace? What would become of them after the confrontation he was inevitably setting up? If time allowed Gaia would be rescued, she would see to that. But what next? Zeus was playing with the fires of creation and she felt acutely uneasy.

## Chapter 5

Three years later on the official dot of five o'clock, on a sunny spring day, Alexander Conway left his office, eschewed the lift and walked down the seven flights of stairs to the vast, green, marble foyer of JNO's new London HQ. His eyes searched for his mother who was not immediately visible in the throng of office workers hurrying home. He waited for her by the bank of lifts, jostled by the crowd. He wore a dark pin-striped suit, his hair was cut and combed and he resembled many other of his fellow workers. Any casual observers, would have seen a relaxed, debonair and striking young man and they might have found it hard to believe he thought his suave manner was really built on no more than a fine suit of clothes and good grooming. He wasn't sure he belonged there. Maybe he did in the end, but it didn't feel like it. JNO he was constantly being told, was terribly interesting. Nevertheless he found its sheer size and the scope of its influence more than he really wanted to grasp. Here among the working crowd, he wondered if its fascinating delights, were for him. He'd worked for an entire month against the nap of his desire and was surprised to find there were aspects of the work that were enjoyable. So, was it cowardice or weakness of will or something more positive that made it all right to be standing there?

Certainly he felt coerced by Penny, ably aided and abetted by Thea. After the years of self-indulgence at Penny's expense, she told him straight that JNO was his birthright and had simply demanded he did a trial month to make up for her previous good will and expenditure. He had not long returned from a particularly wild and somewhat drunken trip to the Andes with a gang of college friends, where he had broken his leg in a skiing accident. When he could walk properly, Penny had said enough.

She had ordered, rather than invited him to lunch in a modish wine bar in Convent Garden, to, she said, celebrate his new first steps by joining the Firm. He read this as more of the 'taking in hand' process he'd been threatened with on his return. He'd found lying around with his leg in plaster made him unusually vulnerable to the strictures of both mother and sister. He supposed it was time to buckle down. Get on with the rest of his life, start now, no more gallivanting. This time, there seemed no escape from doing the sensible thing without outright rebellion which he thought about but knew he couldn't sustain in reality. It would mean cutting himself off deliberately from Nemmi, Thea and his mother. Impossible. Thea as usual had been particularly clear. Join the Firm, she had said when she met him at Heathrow to help him with his leg in a pot. It's really interesting. 'There's more adventure in JNO really Alex,' she'd said. 'Than all the flying around the world getting into scrapes. Better to fly around for JNO doing something useful. You'll find it fascinating....really! Anyway JNO is ours for the future, Lucina says so and Ma wants us both there, it's for everybody's future.'

Thea accompanied him by taxi to convent Garden where they met Penny. They spoke amiably about this and that as family members will, wondering who was going to get to the point first, which happened when the waiter brought the coffee. Then Penny fixed him with her serious eye - and implicated Thea by a glance in her direction.

'I'm so glad you're coming in Alexander. You will have an excellent career, at last you can make something of yourself. You will start in shipping and can go on from there, it's where I began.'

Penny unable to stop herself deliberately rode over his usual opposition to things to do with the Firm, ignoring his objections and the unspoken dissonance between them, so was more brusque than she liked. It was always like this with him and it was always unsatisfactory.

He had hesitated, not having much of a leg to stand on. 'It's not really for me Ma. I don't want to join the Firm. I mean like....you know.....I don't have any feel for it, not like Thea has. I mean aren't the two of you enough for it; for JNO I mean? There you both are giving it all the hours there are, why do you need me too?' This response was prompted by the old resistance which now came over him again.

'What else are you going to do Alexander?' Penny asked in her 'not to be gainsaid' voice. 'You've been playing around for a long time now. You don't have anything to do'.

His voyaging had shown him some of the extent of the ravages of commercial enterprise in the more remote as well as the more populated parts of the Earth. The Firm at least was doing its best to repair the damage and find alternatives, he could be part of that; he had no problem at all with that view. Just because he felt this pull against the Firm didn't mean he had to oppose it on principle. He recognised that parts of it were okay.

'There's no future in your current behaviour - and you know it, said Thea softly. 'You know it too, I know you do.'

'You should try to be more like your sister,' said Penny,

He had often tried to be more like Thea. To accept at once her powerful grasp of the best thing to do in any given circumstances. He knew the pair of them were right and it would be good to use their practicality to clarify his own confused response to an incoherent world. Why not gratefully accept their stability, their certainty and learn from them? He argued with himself up hill and down dale and couldn't find any good reason other than his ill defined need for resistance.

So there he was in JNO at the end of his month's trial, unable any longer to deny the emptiness of the playboy life which was rapidly becoming his trademark. So he'd played at being a trainee buyer of precious metals and minerals on the first rung of the ladder, trying to master the mysteries of the shipping office; bills of lading, insurance and freight rates. Nothing in his previously unfocussed life had prepared him for the minutiae of the shipping office; neither had it prepared him for being rudely awakened in the morning by alarm at an hour he had only dimly heard of, to strap-hang in the Underground and clamourously disappear into its black hole.

The cosseted rich boy regarded the people scurrying through the foyer to join the flow in the street beyond, as so many ants on the floor of the city jungle, foraging for a living. None of them seemed to be enjoying it. Nobody acknowledged anybody else, they didn't appear to have any communal purpose, each wrapped up in themselves, focussing on the middle distance, avoiding eye or body contact. He watched their movements, amazed how so many people could be crowded so closely without communication. Now he was part of all this, another worker-ant in the giant heap of making a living.

The building surrounding him was equal to the vastness of JNO. An ant-hill of glass, chrome and concrete, warrens and corridors, a honeycomb of boxes, designed to squeeze excess value from each inhabitant in the great economic machine that tick-tocks the world. And, he was one of the lucky ones, an heir of the queen ant herself. His destiny among the glass and chrome was assured, given certain minimum provisos of application. The future was bright with promises of deals, the excitement of the chase to swell the already immense profits of the pervasive JNO conglomerate.

So what if he was seduced by this promise and was delivering himself up to the inevitable without a fight? Did it matter if he was trapped somewhere between the jungle of his inner mind and this promissory ant-heap of the outer world? What if he wasn't really able to come to terms with any of it? Did anyone?

He had run out of alternatives and had submitted to the daily Tube-ride, the expensive suit and even the haircut, though this only after much protest. Thea and Penny had immense satisfaction toting him round like a mobile coat-hanger in men's outfitters from Bond Street to Knightsbridge via chromium unisex hairdressers, populated by vacuous nymphs, all thighs and conditioner. He was surprised to find he liked being pampered, and felt good well turned-out.

He learned quickly that the right image, was an important mystery ingredient in the sum of the components which added up to the correct gravitas expected in the JNO universe if he was to be thought of seriously.

Ironically, the uniform gave him more of a readiness to travel the Tube and he discovered it also gave him an added standing among the denizens of the shipping office. Of course the name Conway might have helped. He was clearly on his way to being a somebody. Why was it that he couldn't quite take it seriously?

I need to come to grips with myself, he thought. To get my ducks in a row before committing myself. The problem was his particular ducks seemed to like their personal freedom. It would help if I knew what my ducks were exactly, perhaps then I could make them line-up. Certainly both his mother and Thea had lots of them well trained to march in unerringly straight lines all the time - or else paté!

I should be more like Thea and have more certainty about what matters, be a go-getter. She had 'gone off' and 'got' before she could walk, no questions asked and no quarter given. 'Never complain, never explain', she would say, tossing her glossy, black mane, and sweeping from rooms. He thought his mother also went in some awe of her. Thea was outside her control, her powerful predisposition for action outside the patterning of Penny's own. He was far less pragmatic or determined than his mother, but they shared a sense of doubt and an awareness of the intangibles of the world and gave them value despite their lack of price in the market place. Perhaps she indulged him as a way of handling her problem with Thea?

He watched the numbers on the floor indicator diminish as the penthouse lift finally came to rest uncharacteristically at the ground floor. Usually it swept imperiously down to the sub-basement to allow the illustrious to unobtrusively exit directly into their limousines. His mother emerged from its shiny walnut interior accompanied, to his surprise, by the statuesque Lucina Dodona, and there was a third passenger Alexander could not quite make out.

Lucina Dodona, the President of JNO commanded an authority which demanded automatic respect. All the old feelings from Ios rose up in him. His only memory of her was from Ios and once when he had been introduced while escorting his mother to a formal diplomatic dinner. He of course heard about her all the time. The same overwhelming awe he had always felt in her presence, was rekindled now.

Her age was difficult to pin-point, around forty but with the bloom of a woman in her best years. 'People' magazine always described her as the 'Ageless Goddess'.

The crowd instinctively hushed and perceptibly gave ground to Lucina and her companions as she stepped from the lift. All Alexander consciously knew of her was that she and her husband Zarian, owned Olympic Holdings of which JNO was a significant subsidiary. Zarian Dodona ran the American mother company and was reputed to be the world's richest man. The Dodona's were universal figures. However they never gave interviews nor put themselves in the limelight. Nevertheless, all the right people made sure they were seen with them when they could, presidents, prime-ministers, luminaries of the stage and screen, royalty, major and minor, all offered them house-room and more.

He knew from the glossy pages of 'People Magazine' that the family name was ancient, once well known in Europe and then a long time forgotten. In Greece it had been current for ages, but it was relatively new on the international stage. In ten years JNO had become a giant, involving almost anything derived from the productive earth and fifteen years further on, had budgets envied by governments many of which they indirectly and discretely may well have controlled. His mother of course, had been Lucina's assistant from the beginning.

The third person in the lift, emerged from the background. He kept himself slightly aloof from the two women and simply materialised from the polished woodwork.

Try as he might, Alexander could not overcome the feeling that this person was the most bizarre as well as the ugliest little man he had ever seen. He stood around five feet, wonderfully dapper in spats, striped trousers and a morning coat. These archaic trappings made him amusing, but strangely, seemed to fit with him without

incongruity, although they did nothing to conceal that he was all angles, knees, elbows, pointed ears and very hairy. Long russet locks jutted over his collar and stuck straight up from his crown. The hair on his head mingled with his hairy face and pointed goatee beard, and a wicked grin played around his large shaggy lips stretching into a half-smile, to disclose little tombstone teeth. He bent slightly from the waist as if in constant back-pain.

Penny quickly spotted Alexander, smiled thinly in recognition and came over to him. Behind her, unrolling like a flag, he heard the commanding tones of Lucina.

'Ah - Alexander my boy,' her voice resonated with a quiver of excitement. She beamed at him. 'My dear child, you remember me do you not?' Penny stood aside to allow Lucina to get a full view of her son.

Of course he remembered her, how could anyone forget? He was however, surprised, and at the same time shocked to his core, that so illustrious a person remembered him. All the old feelings surged in him and he knew without a doubt they came from her. He also noticed the way his mother allowed the older woman bustle into her space, but had no time to reflect as Lucina's unexpected frontal assault bore down on him unsettling his confidence and leaving him quite unsure exactly how to address this imposing figure.

'Hello...er... Mrs...er...Dodona,' Alexander stammered, his composure fully deserting him.

'Please, call me Lucina, everyone does you know.' The 'please' was warmth personified and accompanied by such an intensity of heartfelt regard that Alexander loved her instantly. This unexpected emotional twist did nothing for the debility of will-power which again assailed him in her presence, merely adding to the weakness he already felt in his knees.

'We expect great things from you at JNO, don't we Penelope? He has been well educated for his work, do you not think so?'

Alexander was not sure if the 'We' was royal or not, nor if he was supposed to reply. Before he could open his mouth Lucina continued,

'What a beauty he is Penny, didn't we do well with him. You'll pay attention eh Pannie? Keep an eye open, Ne?'

She addressed the goat-like man who had sidled up close to Alexander, adding to his discomfiture. Pannie's grin broadened as he examined Alexander up and down like a beast in an auction. He then somehow re-insinuated himself beside Lucina. Alexander thought of a mischievous Siamese cat, using his owner as a shield for excessive effrontery.

'Allow me to introduce Pannie Ljeschi, he is my right-hand man. He is in all our little secrets, my Alexiki, he will be useful to you.'

Alexander felt more than heard, the use of the diminutive and gave a sudden frisson of mixed pleasure and alarm. Her sincere familiarity folded him into the warmth of her presence, an involuntarily sense of closeness and affection gathered him under her protecting mantle of dignity and offered him the merest touch of her power. She seemed to explain all his anxieties. Before the moment had quite passed altogether, he decided he was over-reacting and she was probably just interested in the welfare of the son of a colleague as might any friendly employer, but he was not convinced. Nevertheless, he felt somewhere in the region of his stomach that she had begun to control him.

He watched Pannie who was grinning broadly in his direction while seeming to nod. He felt subtly overpowered - these people exuded strength and authority in spite of their extreme amiability and they also

seemed to know all about him.

'Pannie knows a lot about JNO's business,' Lucina continued, radiating her smile. 'And will guide you in and out of its little mysteries, you will find him invaluable, I do - I commend him to you. But you must have your little tete-a-tete with Penelope, this is your first month with us, no? Please, Penelope, you may remove him from us now, but do not keep him shut away, such beauty will have its place - how you say - more central in things. Endaxi. Come Pannie, we must go.'

She turned imperiously; the throng in the foyer parted like the Red Sea, and she and her strange companion swept through the crowds on the pavement to be swallowed by a large grey Mercedes parked on double yellow lines; which immediately made an impossibly fast 'U' turn in the dense traffic and disappeared.

Alexander was left exhilarated, weak-kneed and breathless.

Had he been less discomfited, he would have seen Penny on the other hand struggling to control her fury. Grim faced she gripped him by the arm and led him through the revolving doors, onto the street and into a nearby pub. She caught the barman's eye who recognised her and motioned her to a small empty booth.

Alexander was now caught up in her unease. A cloud had descended on both of them with the executive lift. Penny was highly agitated. He felt the coming of awkward questions. Through his own inadequacy he felt for her. Clearly things were different now he was in the Firm. There was a businesslike air between them which was new. This was the real world. He wasn't sure he could bear too much of it.

He watched her order and receive a gin and tonic which she sipped while she struggled to regain her composure, he paid attention to his own glass of bitter. He was both relieved and disappointed that she did not allow the moment to risk frankness.

'I'm sorry if you were startled by her, Lucina doesn't usually come down in the lift like that, you know, publicly, but she so wanted to meet you and she can be so indiscreet when she's impatient. I think she surprised a lot of people by speaking to you in a public place like that. It's rare she appears so openly, you may find you are treated more respectfully by your colleagues after that encounter, word travels fast in JNO'

He didn't know what to say so he played with his beer mat, looked around at the bijou city pub filling up with executives delaying the journey home, and drank his ale. At last all he could think of saying was, 'she's quite a character! I think I'm in a state of shock..... and who's the little bloke with her? What's his name, Panic? He's scary, did you see how he looked me over?'

'That's Pannie, Pannie Ljeschi, he's of Russian origin, I think, speaks eleven languages fluently, but all in the lowest possible vernacular. He's quite cunning and protects Lucina in public, I don't know what their private relationship is, but he's often with her.'

'What, like a kind of bodyguard?'

'No not really, not in that sense, although he is capable of some surprising acrobatics. I've seen him stop determined journalists from getting near her by simply getting in their way and confusing their efforts to bother her, they sort of trip up over him and each other. I first thought it was stupidity, but it's not. The rat-pack who know, give him a wide birth. It's partly because of him that Lucina is one of the few really famous people who's hardly ever bothered by the media.' She paused and changed the subject abruptly. 'How has your first month been?'

Normally Alexander would have been glad of the deliberate change of subject, to avoid the areas where it was dangerous to venture and risky to explore. Where dragons lay in uncharted depths and which they normally

tacitly agreed to let lie. He was however truly shaken by the encounter at the lift. A real live dragon had risen from the deep, or rather descended from the heights, and breathed fire on him. He couldn't get out of his mind the image of its companion demon, the grinning Pannie Ljeschi. Hadn't Lucina thrust him forward as his potential companion?

'She said some amazing things I don't understand - and I can't get that weird little Pannie creature out of my mind.'

Penny smiled mirthlessly. Trust Lucina, she thought, to jump the gun through impatience before she could break him in gently herself. Damn-it! Lucina had no idea of the power of her presence, or more probably, she didn't care. Blast her! It was as if Lucina was deliberately making it difficult for her, something quite possible where Lucina was concerned. Lucina loved running high risks and got away with them; which meant that others got caught in her wake. Penny acted quickly to handle this new situation and she relied on Alexander's easy going nature to help her to break Lucina's spell.

'You're being far too serious about this. She was just being pleasant. She's always expansive like that with people she takes to, and she's taken to you, she's got an eye for a pretty face and you're very handsome, now we've taken you in hand. She's Greek remember, you mustn't pay too much notice of her 'enthusiasm', it's just....a mannerism, it doesn't mean anything, really darling, don't take her seriously....I mean, yes she's a serious person and powerful like you say, but she and I have been friends and colleagues for years and she naturally has an interest in my family. She sees Thea from time to time, and gushes over her in exactly the same way. Thea doesn't get all flustered by her, and neither should you, just assume it as her natural curiosity.'

'That's Thea though, she wouldn't would she?' he replied. 'But did you see those eyes, you could get lost in those eyes.' He was still mesmerised.

'Yes she's a real character,' she forced a little laugh. 'You're right about the eyes, I often get lost in them myself. She has this wonderful way of making you seem the most important person in the universe when she's talking to you, she gives you her full attention, drawing you into her orbit. I admit to being captivated by her, even though she exasperates me to distraction, but she's like that with everyone, the whole of JNO why do you think the Dodona's are so popular? Everyone who is in contact with her feels the same.'

'Some mannerism! She ought to carry a health warning!' They were silent for a moment. 'Anyhow,' continued Alexander 'what am I do about little Mr. Pannie 'whatsisname', and what do you think she meant about me being more central to things?'

Penny was concerned because she was convinced Lucina had plans for him, which she'd never fully divulged beyond making it clear that she would always be on the alert for him as the child of Alexis. Ever since those first days Penny had never had real answers from Lucina and what she said about being mesmerised was the truth. There were times when Lucina exasperated her beyond belief. All attempts at explanation met with the same sidetracking responses. Mostly she ignored it, but occasionally it got to her and she thought about leaving the Firm. She didn't think Lucina would stand directly in her way, but she was afraid - of what she wasn't sure. She had skills and knowledge for which many of JNO's rivals would pay dearly. Some had already gone to extraordinary lengths to head-hunt her. But she hadn't been able to abandon Lucina and all she owed her. Above all the remaining central mystery of Alexis held her to Lucina.

Most of the time all this was in the background. Together they schemed and plotted take-overs, union deals, undercutting here, share deals there, globe trotting, mixing with the who's who of the world while the Firm grew inexorably. It was clear Lucina cherished their varied relationship, now, as an older sister, sometimes as a mother, as well as confidant, mentor and colleague. But the purpose, the real point which Penny was certain went beyond the business, was never clarified.

All this piling up of influence and power must have an outcome, but what? The Dodona's simply grew and grew and why had she never met Zarian? He always arrived just after she left, or left just before she arrived. They always missed by inches. She had never even so much as seen a decent photograph of him.

Now, was crunch time - Lucina had raised in Alexander a need to investigate the dissonance Lucina created between them. He needed answers to the same questions she had allowed to lie dormant. She was clear that although she had made her trade-off with Lucina she could not ask that he accept the same terms. It was her responsibility to stop the child of Alexis, the key-stone of her adult life, from being enmeshed in the same net which ensnared her and which she had unthinkingly set for him.

If only she had left the Dodona's and avoided all contact with Lucina and the Firm and prevented this moment of his first real contact with the central enigma of Lucina which she knew too well once encountered could be neither answered nor ignored. He was spellbound by her as she had been on Ios. He may even remember her from that time despite the unaccountable fuzziness of her own recollections. Notwithstanding her cleverness, logical mind, status and power in the Firm; the only thing she knew for certain was the mystery of Lucina, the mystery of Zarian and above all the mystery of the Firm.

To ackle Lucina was not within her power but she thought with foreboding that Alexander might try. He always had resisted what she wished for him. She had never pressed the point, hoping that common sense and the excitement of the Firm would prove enough of a distraction until he bedded down. She believed she had read him correctly. In contrast, the lack of explanation for Thea often made her blood run cold. The fact of her birth had never made sense to her and had meant she could never really accept Thea as her begotten daughter. This was another central mystery which she tried to ignore.

She searched the face opposite. Maybe the answers were somehow in him, in his life. As always she shrugged off the feeling as beyond her control. But she couldn't shrug off the feeling of being a phoney. She who controlled so much else in her life, was sitting before her son knowing her grip on the real things were based on the will of others. It would be a relief to blurt it all out to break the tension once and for all - to share it with Alexander. Something nevertheless constrained her; why burden him with her problems? If she were a vehicle for the will of others and if he was an instrument of a destiny beyond her power, what use was it to tell him, he'd only ask futile questions of her and torment both of them. It was best left as it was. Those with the control would no doubt exercise it. She would protect him as best she could whatever happened. Lucina had never done anything to hurt either her or hers, quite the opposite in fact. What could there be to worry about? A little relieved by this logic she continued in her attempt to divert him but without believing she could succeed.

There's nothing to worry about Alexander. Believe me I've had more experience of Lucina than most, that's her - really - normal for her....forget it.' She heard herself speak a fraction more earnestly than she intended, but as convincingly as she was able.

He felt her demons were on the move, felt them symbiotically and was distressed by her discomfiture and uncharacteristic lack of certainty. His world stood squarely upon hers, she was the turtle upon which it sat, if she wobbled he would fall off.

Changing the subject again. Penny said, 'tell me about the shipping office, what's it like? I'll bet it's changed a lot since I began there.'

If he ignored the wobble, he thought, perhaps it wasn't really happening, an illusion, like the meeting with Lucina, only a chance encounter like the others. Not anything significant, not really - ignore it. That's the thing to do. Nothing had happened.

'I'll bet it hasn't, he replied colluding with her. 'I think you'd still recognise the types. The main difference is



that the place was probably awash with paper when you were there, well there's quite a bit of it still, but what with everyone having a PC we can contact anyone anywhere about anything - no paper. I'm on the network. Got my own password. Actually it's quite interesting. Only an hour or two ago I was in touch with an agent in Honduras about iron ore shipments. Now that's quite a long way from olive-oil. I'm immensely impressed, JNO has tentacles everywhere, I'm overwhelmed by the sheer scale of it. How on earth do you keep track of everything?' He hesitated and went on thoughtfully. 'I mean it's all very fascinating all this stuff bought here, sent there, insured by this one, shipped by that one, sold on via Durban, reappearing in Cairo and so on ad infinitum. I know it's business and all that, but I can't seem to take it seriously. I mean I know it's got to go on - Iron ore is useful stuff of course, and everyone in the chain needs their cut or what's the point? But it does seem all one way traffic. Produce from the third world and the big money in the first. When I mentioned this to the head of shipping, he stared at me funny and said what did I think it was about and was I some kind of eco-nut or something. Don't get me wrong, I'm really quite interested in how it all happens, the wheels within wheels. There's a kind of patterning to it, a shape, a tangible world of things happening, people doing, transporting, shifting money, like a sort of business orchestra. Part of me wants to know what it's for, what's my role, where are the Dodona's, where do you, and Thea, all of you fit in? But part of me also wants to ignore it, but I can't think of anything else to do with myself'.

The pub was getting quite busy now and people were crowding around them laughing and smoking. It was becoming harder to talk.

Penny bent her head towards him and set out to reinforce his fascination and lead him away from difficult questions.

'JNO,' she responded. 'Is more than just money or the making of it, it keeps thousands in jobs all over the world, millions actually. If it closed down tomorrow it would be catastrophic for them, especially in the third world. JNO spends billions in Africa, Asia, South America, every continent benefits massively. That's its great achievement, I'm proud to have contributed to wealth creation in so many places. Our annual shipping budget alone is more than the exchequers of some whole countries: if we stopped, the economy of a quarter of the world would be devastated. It was a long time before I appreciated the value of the Firm not only to me, but to the world. The Dodona's are remarkable people. Yes they make profits from dealing in raw materials. Yes, they own indirectly through the Firm vast tracts of land above and below ground, even below the sea, and mountains of raw materials which are constantly on the move, and yes, they wield power and influence over governments and markets. What you don't know, and what only a few really privileged people know is the quality of their stewardship. The reason why JNO grows the way it does is directly related to the way they go about their work and I'm very proud to have been and still be part of it. I like to think I've had some influence on policy and organisational direction in the last twenty or so years and intend to continue.'

No one but Lucina, Thea and Mnemosyne, and she supposed, the absent Zarian, knew her real task in the Firm. But because she thought Alexander saw it as a monster out of control, eating the world and spewing out money it was difficult to communicate to him the excitement and sheer pace of life of the birth and growth of this amazingly wonderful network of links. Day to day there were so many things to do, advantages to exploit, situations to handle. Her main concern was her care for the human and ecological scale of things. Let Lucina play games of her own, as long as she was not prevented she would throw herself fully into her work and take a lead. She would control the future. Neither Lucina nor Thea, gave as much attention to these things as they should. They were gearing up for some other task which concerned them and Zarian. Penny knew it must be something enormous, simply because she could not conceive of anything more important than her own work. She was pleased to have their tacit support but did not understand why the day to day control of JNO was increasingly left to her and her own staff. The only direct help she got from them was that Hep Mulciber from the New York office was seconded by Lucina to help her.

Her huge capital investments in plant and machinery were designed to make working conditions as favourable as possible and appropriate to local situations. Producers, of raw materials were made to meet her strict

requirements for working conditions. Every aspect of production was controlled for the maximum benefit of employees and the local environment. Contrary to some people's view of the received wisdom of capitalism, this high level of investment in people and out of the way places produced huge profits. JNO invested sometimes overtly, but more often clandestinely and Penny had evidence that they had prevented famine, pollution, over production of agricultural land and on more than one occasion, war. Each success kept her going, each failure sent her raging to Hep for better systems. He did his amazing best, but their systems were not tyrant nor greed proof - what could you do with people who were hell bent on the destruction of things for short term gain?

Grant Aid Developments (GRADE) invented by Hep and the rest of her team made sure the results of their productivity were as effectively distributed as possible. JNO World Aid was its best kept secret. The British economy itself would have collapsed without North Sea oil, undiscovered until JNO Exploration Co. made their strike using their long held knowledge of the geology of the North Sea.

Gradually through the years Penny came to recognise that a profound change in productive behaviour was needed to transform the effect of human life on the planet. Her self-appointed task was no less than to work unceasingly to this end. 1968 had been a beginning. The death of her father had taught her to care, he had died caring. Alexis nurtured this in her and he had also died caring. She owed this work to the two men in her life and the world needed their big idea.

Lucina had given her the means and she worked night and day to reverse what she considered the idiocies of the world. She was approaching a position of control through the Firm's massive commercial power base. The actual point of control would soon be reached. Alexander of course had to be part of it. She would show him this was the only honourable role for the child of Alexis.

The means were at hand. The millions the Firm spent developing the World Wide Web was completed. She began with a complex paper system and converted to electronics as the technology developed. Her people worked furiously at the leading edge of technological development but she ensured the world did not know the extent of JNO's controlling interests or places on the boards of the large computer giants. Over time she deeply infiltrated the market with operational control over most of the best software houses in the world, had invested untold millions in hardware and R&D through secret grants via GRADE. No one alive knew JNO funds had secretly matched the Apollo programme dollar for dollar to squeeze new knowledge from that endeavour into JNO. The network was ultimately her baby and she was happy to share it with the world.

However within the W.W.W. the Geo Accounting International and National Enterprises Technology project - GAIANET - was their secret. Thousands of people world-wide contributed to GAIANET without knowing. It was the system linking all text, data, sound, graphics and video on all the world's computers. Hep Mulciber's 'reader' had already digitalised the literature of the world, intercepted and stored almost every satellite communication and he was now working on an automatic translator. A single inter-linked hypermedia web. Nothing digitalised was beyond GAIANET's scope. Every letter, fax, telephone call, computer file entered it's ever open maw.

That in itself was not the most significant thing, the secret heart of the system was HIGO. The Hyperdigital Gopher Protocol System, miraculously invented by Hep, was used by GAIANET to interpret and pattern the vast acres of raw data at its disposal.

But here facing Alexander she felt as bereft as the day she lost Alexis despite the enormous compensation of her influence and contribution to the Firm. There was too much for her to explain to Alexander so soon into his baptism into the Firm. She had always known that he would one day be called to play his part, it was a tacit understanding with Lucina but she would never force him, she had planned to allow him to find his own way with a little cajoling here and there, but Lucina's outburst had changed everything.

She had given him all the freedom he wanted. Paid for his travelling, his winter sports in the right places to be seen, his climbing expeditions, his four-track adventures across deserts, his white-water rafting - whatever he wanted. She would know when he was bored with playing, and wanted something more substantial to do. To achieve something tangible. He'd watched him seeing his friends seeking ever more daring thrills with less and less real interest. She felt he'd been close to despair, with the drugs, the booze, the parties. There was more to life than this endless self-indulgence. But he had to get this out of his system for himself.

So then she had taken him in hand. He complained he was more inclined to spend than earn money. He couldn't cut a deal if his life depended on it. He didn't want power, wasn't scientific, couldn't manage the technology. He wouldn't know the right end of a screwdriver or computer bite if it jumped out of the petrol cap of a Porsche. Now struck by his new seriousness after a month in the shipping office she had an idea.

'Alexander, you've never been to Markham other than as a casual visitor have you? There's a lot there you haven't seen. We've made a lot of changes recently. Come with me? I have to spend a few days there next week, I'll be driving down with Hep tomorrow morning, come with us.'

'Yes okay but what about the shipping office on Monday?'

'I'll fix it, I don't think it was a good idea of mine to start you in shipping, you'll learn faster being closer to me and Hep. But I warn you, we deal in secrets, we play for high stakes. I want you with me, Thea is into something big with Lucina, I can't follow her, but you, I want you close in there with me.'

She suddenly became deadly serious, he felt she was offering something dangerous and final after which, there was no going back. He too felt something close off in his mind, a barrier shutting behind him stopping him from going back compelling him onwards, into the unknown. He had been considering making a commitment, but wasn't sure he was as deadly serious as his mother. Life as a junior executive was one thing, a game, playing at responsibility. You didn't have to pay out anything for it other than a bit of application, your soul wasn't involved. He didn't like his mother's tone.

His life had suddenly shifted its axis.

The Firm wasn't a playground, its amusing outer shell, had split to reveal chasms within. Like a roller coaster ride in the dark, he might zoom into the black vortex, unable to get off. His hitherto tenuous grip on reality seemed to leave him altogether, his overworked mind brimmed with the overwhelming image of Lucina coming out of a lift and filling the world.

## Chapter 6

Alexander's journey home was a whirl of thoughts slotting in and out of his mind like photographic slides in a manic carousel. Before he could grasp one thought properly it flashed into another and mixed up with his earliest memories.

He saw a bright world of women in white, coming and going low voiced, abruptly replaced by a vision of Lucina bearing down on him from the lift, her image made emerald by the surrounding green plate glass set in chrome. Dozens of other half-grasped pictures filled his head. Dominant, was a memory of Nemmi curled round him as soft as smoke. 'The Namer' who gave the world substance before he could read and write of it for himself. Nemmi made real, what he did not properly know. She gave substance to shadows. She told him of gods of ancient times in a country whose treasures are hidden under the debris of passing centuries, locked in the hills, in ancient timelines, in the customs of the people, the names of places. Memories of a simpler past resonating just below the surface of the collective mind....it was still vital, she taught, he must delve a little to find it.

She spoke as one who had been there with Achilles and Patroclus, with Alexander the Great in the raging snows and scorching deserts. She had travelled with Odysseus, tied to the mast-head, ears stopp'd. Folded in the couch of her lap he dreamed with her across the aeons, in worlds without past or future. Timelessly, they harmonised with great deeds and vast tragedies, when the Fates worked on gods and men and women. She spoke of wonders, of ageless visions, Titans, heroes, and monsters. Of great battles and wild adventures that the world has long forgotten or made into mere fairytales for children.

She told of the Chronosphere and its timelines, of its swirling web, linking past and future, along which gods travelled hidden from humankind in the ever moving warp and weft of culture, part of the very fabric of time itself. Together they roamed the caves and dark forests with Theseus, toiled with Heracles and battled against Agamemnon for the stolen beauty of the Achaeans and drank deeply from the golden cup of forgotten ages.

Alexander absorbed with a hungry mind, the mysterious and wonderfully real journeys they made in worlds of sunlight, shining seas, powerful and deadly thunderbolts, many headed and fantastic monsters. Towering, terrifying, breath-taking battles for power and revenge, the healing of forgiveness and above all the lightness and sufficiency of the teeming and eternal life of Gaia's generous world. Wrapped in Nemmi's physical and mental embrace, Alexander the child viewed immortality.

They began their journeying whenever they had time together. First in the little nursery at Psathi, a babe in her arms he absorbed her sweet songs of the aeons. Later in London, they would curl in the big rocking-chair by the hearth in winter and the wide-open garden-window in summer.

She would begin with the song of the Nereids, softly in her own language. He would snuggle down at her breast, sensuously aware of her calming warmth through the cloth of her robe. He was to be much older and wiser before he regained such feelings of unity. Together, they disappeared like mountain mist and reappeared with the great sky-god of the thunderbolt the creator of the gods of joy, eloquence, wisdom, knowledge, poetry, music, dancing and drama. With his small child's eye he saw them all. Was there with them. He too feared the jars of the great Zeus, was alarmed at the anger of Hera, watched with equal concern the pregnant Leto's frantic search for a place of escape from the scorned goddess to give royal birth.

He played at the forge of Hephaestos and hid from the Lernaean Hydra until Heracles finally set his rock upon it. He had not the words, as yet was unable to name this place without time, between past and future where meaning grew.

When the time came to go away to school he felt wrenched away from her. There he read story books about the ancient people and places Nemmi and he had visited and he shed tears when he learned their

everlastingness was made into fairy stories of little substance. As he became older and wiser he understood the treasure given to him by Nemmi was lost to everyone around him. Nemmi alone kept immortality alive in an ever practical world of finite things. He learned that his shining immortals were now seen by the world as mere stepping stones to what had become a 'better' One God, The One, vastly more mysterious and all embracing than those easy going, but, treacherous, humanly vulnerable, but importantly earthbound, Olympians.

Without being aware of it she had taught him to value the truth of myth which rooted him in the rich earth of the Mother Gaia, progenitor and sustainer of life. He saw how science was tied and bound into myth. How this importance became lost, how when rediscovered centuries later, the true quality of the Olympian Treasure went unrecognised; overlain by a vastly more sophisticated science which explained and exploited Gaia's gifts without the need for apparently childlike gods to keep mortal feet in her basic clay.

He learned that this new science, now unencumbered by mythology, had failed to satisfy mortal minds. How they had substituted the earthy realities of the ancient gods with a new and indistinct 'grown up' One God who lived not in or on the Earth, but 'out there' in his Heaven. This God of the capital letter, revealed in His Given Tomes had too, in the end, failed to redeem the world and was even now in His turn, relegated to the same realm where dwelt the uneasy fairy tales of the old gods. Pure invention reigned supreme, and Gaia was hugely and unthinkingly despoiled.

Nemmi had warned that the present lack of mythical complication in the lives of mortals was a serious error of awareness, a mistaken denial of the subtly pervasive knowledge of the immortals. Gaia was suffering at an increasing rate, while the treasure of the ancients was trampled in the dust, valued by only a few of the wise. She taught that the Olympians were not simple in the least. Their deeds, their secrets long forgotten could be unlocked for the benefit of people now and to come. Not for nothing had the ancient philosopher-scientists followed Homer and made myth central to the happiness and fulfilment of the lives of mortals. Now though hardly seen, the myths remained as invisible webs spanning past and future waiting, ready to go forth once more to gird the hopes of humankind and save them from themselves.

Nemmi taught that timelines were pathways of the gods. Outside time they travel even the most delicate of them at the speed of thought. They move freely through time zones. They feel disdain and sorrow for mortals for whom time is linear and finite. So bound are they within the short allotted length of their lives, they see little more than the immediate before or the just possible after. They don't see The ALL. This doesn't mean it isn't there, only those who study and see the timelines for what they are, can make sense of past and future, seeing clearly what 'was' 'is' and 'can be'. Mortals are rooted in a present as on a moving pavement, aware mostly of where they are, than from where they came or to where they go. They are too alone. Too afraid of loneliness to share all they really know, fearlessly. So they live their truncated lives. If they could only truly share the all they have, then....they would see the gods truly as they were and learn to live fully with Gaia and prosper.

The idea of immortality as rooted in the earth was natural to him. Nemmi radiated her remembrances in telling, in naming, joining myth to life, an earthly continuity from which came understanding.

Nemmi's teaching made him acutely aware how the mass of people with whom he travelled daily on the Tube, linked each to the other in the present and each to the past and future through their ancestral links and through the history of the species and the world they inhabit. Their very thought patterns made part of the of the timelines themselves. Values, ideas, logic, behaviours based on the past, shared in the present, creating society....mother-culture. timelines running along the long thread of human experience,

For this race of mortals, Nemmi had taught, the timelines of the Chronosphere are the link between past and future. 'You, Alexander are destined to journey there, so be warned of all you meet, there, at the critical fulcrum, the place between past and future. For that is where the gods watch over the world of mortals'.

This train of thought led him back to the emergence of Lucina from the lift. A shock, like a bolt of lightening lit up his mind. That was it! It was she. How could he have been so stupid. The appearance of Lucina was a visitation in the now by Hera along a timeline. Of course it was! He was supposed to get it at once. What must she think of him and all his learning? This, his first significant contact with her since early childhood and he'd missed its significance. What an idiot! At this realisation he thought he felt the goddess's presence in his inner-mind and that of her companion Pan.

He felt an obstruction lift in his mind like a shift in his psyche. It revealed the thing that had continually seemed to draw him on and that he had always resisted. It was Hera's call to him! She had been waiting in the wings of his consciousness since his birth. He now felt her authority almost as a physical blow. It had history in it, had future in it. She had transfixed him like an insect on a pin and his present turmoil came from a sudden understanding that she was to make known to him the place where the past met the future and he had things to do.

There were other things about the confrontation that startled and confused him. He knew his mother worked closely with Lucina, had felt her awe, but this was the first time he had seen the dominant nature of the relationship for himself. Was it that obvious for other people? What was going on? What did Hera have in mind for both of them?

All his life he had felt marked out. No one else had anyone like Nemmi as a companion, or a mother as single minded about her work as Penny, or a sister so strangely self-sufficient as Thea. No one else he met gave him even the slightest touch of the splendour he received from five minutes with 'Nemmi.

Now, since the coming of Hera, there was the beginning of a transition. Powers other than his own were acting on him. He was being drawn closer to Nemmi's understanding of things and this time he knew he was to be an actor not a mere observer, he felt deeply unprotected, and exposed.

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He walked swiftly up the sweeping curve of the drive of the Hampstead house. The mansion was a convenient base for small numbers of important visitors in more homely comfort than a hotel and a reasonably short taxi ride from the City office.

In his shaken state of mind he wanted to be with Nemmi. She would sense his mood and calm and sustain him. He went directly to his study. It gave views over the Heath and on a clear day he could make out the tower at Canary Wharf in the distance.

He snapped on his PC and mailed to:

Nemmi@olym.com

While he typed he worked out it was about 10.00 am on the West Coast.

He desperately wanted her to be available. He typed:-

Hi Nemmi, need you badly, something's going on here, I don't understand, help! Reply now.

He waited - 'Be in' - he earnestly wished under his breath.

'Thank God!'

He watched the screen, relieved, thinking how he was to explain what was going through his mind when he

couldn't properly marshal one thought after another.

Alexiki - how goes it? what's the flap? You want me now?

He typed in the words 'Yes. Now!'

The image of Nemmi was visible in a window on the screen above the text. Having now got her he couldn't now think how to articulate his needs. While he considered what to say Nemmi's voice came over the speakers.

'Alexiki-mou, you have me and you have other significant advantages not available to any other person. You know I am given to you to remember. Other people have to work things out for themselves without me. Also you are protected by Thea.....and not the least of things, you are financially privileged....and what's more you are indulged by Penny. So you have gifts beyond the ordinary, do not take them for granted - you have been given them for a purpose. You soon will be called on to use them in a great enterprise. Do not judge other people because they have not had your advantages. They are bound up in their very real needs to earn a living, to survive in their various ways. Unlike you they must engage in the real world, get up in the morning to make something out of the manipulations people must make to get a living from their fellow men. What do you know of such grappling? You have me to smooth your brow, my friends to lull you to a blithe sleep, to keep you in touch along timelines to gods of old. What do you know of fuel bills, hospital visits, queuing for bread, waking in a cold damp houses? Human life is precarious at best and the prognosis is not good. Uncertainty breeds anxiety, fear-cynicism, greed-bigotry and anxiety-cruelty. People have so much to strive for, the more they struggle the more they have to lose. Fear of loss is the greatest of goads to action of all kinds. Only when they have nothing to fear from loss will people be free from fear of the elements and each other. Only then will they find what they seek. Do not be too proud to engage with the little people who think they have no choice. You will help them to make their choices, you and Penny and JNO have no other purpose. It is Zeus' will. What do you fear my little Alexiki?'

'Everyone seems to know what's best for me....I can't bear it...and I don't know.....What am I supposed to do? '

He knew he sounded unconvincing. He continued suddenly changing tack. 'Why don't other people call you for remembrance like me?'

She replied sadly. 'They can, but few do, only those who are able to cope with loss'

'What happens when they call?'

'I go to them and help their remembering. I help them through the Chronosphere and to follow the timelines, I help them with what they seek. Sadly people are short on remembering and long on striving. Each generation thinks itself anew, using little or nothing contained in the timelines which they leave in the dust, unnoticed and useless. This pure gold is buried beneath their dignity while they search for certainties in the now and wish for a better future. They use the past as justification for or against their little plays. Few have true remembrance, merely a patchy memory for what they have lost or regained and a fear of what they might lose in the future. Remembrance is made of different stuff which brings the light of meaning. Those without remembrance tear the earth apart seeking for what is in all of them if only they would see inwardly and remember. I too am sad for them, they try so hard. But what is it Alexander that upsets you now? Have you finally woken up to the fact that our lessons were real? You know Zeus is real. Perhaps it's that Zeus announced that you had joined the Firm? He's pleased you're one of us. He has plans for you, you know. You are expected to do well in the Firm.'

'That's just it, you're doing it too!'

'Me? No I don't have any plans for you, my dear boy, my job is remembrance not planning.' 'Nemmi gave a short laugh and continued, 'It's the others who do the planning. JNO doesn't just grow by itself, it needs thought and action. To tell you the truth I'm not surprised you called me, something is afoot in the Firm, Zeus is edgy and Hera's been here several times in the last month and...' Alexander cut her off, it seemed everyone suddenly had expectations of him. Nemmi's lessons were real. From the pit of his stomach fear rose in wave, draining the blood from his face. Fear too found his tongue.

'That's why I called you, I too met Lucina today and she shook me rigid I can tell you! She really did Nemmi! Yes you're right; what got to me was that she wasn't playing Lucina, Nemmi. She was actually being Hera! In public! Just like that! Stark or what? She gave Mother a real start too! She had that special possessive authority of hers; simply radiated it! When she looked at me she just absorbed me! She said something about getting to the centre of things and about my education. She scared me Nemmi! They all scare me; they always did in the flesh. Zeus scares me - they want something from me and mother doesn't know what's going on but she's suspicious and as jumpy as hell. Let me tell you...Hera had someone who was awfully like Pan with her....and he scares me as much as she does. Thea's in on it too isn't she? What's it all about Nemmi? Help me I can't cope! What is this job everyone keeps hinting I'm supposed to do? I'm feeling really got at, I didn't want to join the Firm you know that. Mother did it for me and then I thought I was only to learn the business in the shipping office and now I've got the biggest of the 'Named' after my hide to do something serious, and I've only been there five minutes. What's going on Nemmi? Tell me what's going on!'

Nemmi's reply, he thought, sounded too calm, too matter of fact given his own fragmenting state of mind, as if this was all expected and unsurprising.

'Don't be so alarmed Alex, really....you can be quite tiresome sometimes. You know perfectly well you've been being prepared for ages. You knew all that silly gadding about was just preparation. You know perfectly well if you think about it. And stop panicking. Only Zeus and the Named knows anything about what he wants from you. As usual he doesn't know that most of the Named pick up all the gossip on the 'sphere sooner or later, or if he does he doesn't care in that lackadaisical way he....' The expression on Alexander's face made her stop in mid-sentence. 'What is it my boy, are you going to faint? Listen, the gods shouldn't scare you, remember, you know them, remember, always remember. But be respectful, they know things, you know so little, they will teach you to know.'

She focussed intently at him across the vast distance, their eyes seemed to fuse, their minds merged across time itself, suddenly the screen appeared to melt in front of him and he was travelling the line as in his childhood dreams. They met physically in Psathi. Nemmi, fully Mnemosyne, goddess of remembrance was sitting across from him gazing out to sea over rows of vines bordering the strand. Radiant, flawless, her robe ruffled by the blood-warm breeze betrayed the mould of her body. Knowledge seeped into his frantic brain from deep inside him. His conscious mind drew up images from somewhere out of sight but known in another sense, another time. He felt her weigh complex thoughts, discard some re-introduce others.

'So you see....as the son of Zeus by Penelope. It's not surprising he's got a job for you! '

He was aware of the blood draining from his cheeks, the back of his head seemed to float away from the rest of him and Mnemosyne's face lost focus.



## Chapter 7

He came to in the darkness of his study. The sound of a telephone was ringing loudly in his head still full of the image of Mnemosyne. The computer screen, bright in the gloom, held a message which gradually came into focus.

Alexiki? Don't worry, Thea has it in hand. Bye for now.

He groped for the 'phone without removing his eyes from the glow of the screen.

'Hello,' he croaked hoarsely, collapsing into an armchair.

'Hello!' It was Thea. 'You okay Alex?....It's me, I'm home....I've been ringing you for ages, are you alright? I would have come up sooner but I've just got out of the shower. What are you doing for a meal, Ma's out with some folk at the opera, I thought we could go somewhere together, it'd make a change. What do you say?'

For a long moment he felt caught between the question on the screen and the 'phone. With an effort he pulled himself together.

'Er...hang on a bit Thi...I'll come down in a couple of minutes.'

He hung up, it was not often these days that Thea was at home wanting his company. Then he remembered what had just happened. He felt trapped between two worlds. His and Nemmi's. I'm going mad, he thought. His mind slipped like the faulty clutch in a car, unable to find a gear or make traction. He was losing his grip on what was real and felt a growing powerlessness and a fear of external control. Like a pendulum he was swinging between what he knew of the world of the Chronosphere and the real world and he felt he was losing touch with the latter.

All through his babyhood he had swapped one for the other without difficulty. He had co-existed happily, moving between them naturally. As he got older the outer world had become more palpable. Travel, friends, adventure had reduced to a remnant his conscious remembrance of the world he shared with Nemmi. It was dreamlike and far away, set in his mind like a geological layer in the prehistory of his childhood, there, ineradicable, influential - but far away. So he just concentrated on getting on with his life - things ought to sort themselves out. Wouldn't they?

He had rationalised the feeling he had from Lucina in the foyer of JNO as no more than an escape of fantasy, a leak of ancient informational gas, seeping through from far down in his mind. Maybe he was not going mad, perhaps he was just growing up. He had to get these things into a proper perspective; pull himself together, put his mind to real things and stop this silly dreaming. He sat in the gathering darkness, his thoughts gradually coming to rest in the here and now. Reality burst in with Thea who banged open the door and snapped on the light while speaking,

'Alex, whatever are you doing sitting here in the dark! Come on, I thought we were going to eat somewhere. I fancy Italian!'

Brother and sister made a remarkable couple. Alone, each was liable to turn heads, together, they had a rare natural and innocent grace unknowingly burnished each by the other, handsome without the need for art. He did not have the slightest idea of the effect they had on others, although Thea knew. He was not enough together with her of late to notice any such effect, and he was too unselfconscious of his physical self for such awareness.

They were put at a central table in a small, but expensive, Italian restaurant by a manager who subliminally recognised their value to attract trade by their mere presence. Neither he nor they recognised the meaning of his broad smile and the assiduity with which they were waited upon. Neither was aware that the other diners spent most of their time taking pleasure in them, their presence giving everyone a sense of well-being that this was truly a brave new world that held such people.

As they ate, Thea exercised a great calming influence on Alexander. For him as for everyone, she radiated order and sense. Thea ate in a comfortable silence, and Alexander was too absorbed by the happenings of the last few hours for speech.

Over glasses of sweet Amaretto, relaxed, Thea released her shining hair from the pins which had been threatening to come out on their own for some time. (Watched by the manager who had observed her throughout their meal and who now caught his breath as gleaming, jet tresses fell over perfect shoulders; he would go home a happy man that night and be especially tender to his wife.

'Alexander. I need to talk to you. I know you've had a difficult day and I want you to talk to me about it. I can help, It's what I'm good at - giving advice.' She smiled as he grinned back at her. 'I know, I know,' she continued. 'When was I ever wrong about anything? But it's true, it's my nature to know, to be calm to judge, weigh up the evidence. I want to hear in your own words what happened today. What were you emailing Nemmi about?' Alexander studied her for a long minute before replying.

'You know why I go to Nemmi so much, she pays me special attention, she understands the real me, all of it. You know what I mean. She doesn't ever want me to become anything or do anything particular, being.....well....me...is enough for her. Not like you two, taking me in hand, getting me to do well...things. Like getting my hair cut, wearing the right clothes, going to the right schools, you know... joining the Firm. I feel like I've been forced into...well you know ...all that. I know I was getting bored but you made it all happen so fast and so completely. I think it's that that's upsetting me most. I feel I've been rushed into something I'm not quite ready for, even though....you know....though I might be later,' he trailed off.

'But you look fabulous, everyone has noticed you, you stand out in the crowd - you will do well in the Firm, it's already having an effect. Even Lucina noticed and we all know you didn't have anything better to do than join up. We, Ma and me, were getting worried about you. Lucina herself kept asking us about what you were doing with yourself. Hanging around with that crowd of rich kids going nowhere dangerously, it was such a waste of talent. You've got such a lot to offer, you will be a real asset to the Firm.'

'There you go too! You're all at it! Lucina, Lucina! She's everywhere today! She's up to something, Nemmi said so, and now you're going on about her too!' His exasperation was noticed by other diners as he became less composed, though the completeness of Thea's smile calmed him and charmed them.

'Everyone's been telling me I'll go far, do well - they all seem to have expectations about things I'm going to do, when I have no expectations about anything. Who's in control of my life, me or everyone else? '

'Be more precise Alex, who exactly has expectations about you?' asked Thea who paid particular attention to his response.

'Well, Ma who just expects things, like you do, and Lucina talking about me being more at the centre of things. But that's not what frightened me most about her Thea. She was being Hera! Actually! In public openly.....I can't explain it properly.'

He paused, deep in thought, Thea nodded at him to go on.

'Then I emailed Nemmi to talk about it. I had to talk to someone who would understand; but the weirdest thing

happened. I blacked out. That's when you called me. I've never done that before. Listen Thi, I know you don't have time for navel gazing, all that kind of stuff runs off you and Ma, but I'm scared of something and it comes from inside and I don't know properly what it is. It's got to do with the fact, slowly dawning on me that loads of people seem to know what I'm supposed to do, including Nemmi, even Lucina and Zarian. I mean Mnemosyne, Hera and Zeus.'

'What about Zeus?' interjected Thea quickly.

'Well that's when I blacked out. I had this kind of waking dream when I logged on, Nemmi wasn't there but it seems I thought she was. I put her on the videolink and then...well...then...I don't know what happened. I just flipped Thi, I thought I was back in Psathi, but not then, when we were kids, but now....with Nemmi, no Mnemosyne...the real one. It was real Thi, really real, I could smell the sea and there were vines, I saw the details Thi. That's what made it real. But it wasn't just that that made me faint. It was something she said, something that made sense of what's been happening to me today, but no sense in reality.' He tailed off, confused.

'About Zarian?' questioned Thea quietly.

'Yes...no not Zarian like he is now....but him....you know, as Zeus! Mnemosyne said he had a job for me! I feel light headed when I think about it. I know it's ridiculous, but it was so real. I keep saying it's just in my imagination, but it doesn't help, doesn't stop it being real and ....'

Thea frowned at her twin, interrupting him.

'What you need is some real work Alex. Ma says you're going to Markham over the weekend, I think you'll find what she has to show you there will get you into the land of the real fast enough.'

Alexander felt the dissonance with Thea once more click into place. She was holding out on him, humouring him in some way. It was time to confront her as he had the vision of Nemmi at Psathi. Thea too reinforced the feeling that something was going on, as much as the feelings he was registering within himself.

'Listen Thea, I don't know what's going on but my external world, is out of my control. I can't do anything, speak to anyone who is not holding out on me. First Lucina, then Ma, then that vision of Nemmi, now you.'

He drank a large gulp of Amaretto, letting its strong sweetness fortify himself for what was to come. Thea remained silent, attentive.

'There's something else....about you....Nemmi's vision at least told me something about it but it's so fantastic, it can't be true....' he seemed to change his mind about what he wanted to say. '...All I was going to do was get a job in the Firm, like you and....well....get a view of the working world for a bit, and if I liked it I would settle down. Like you all say, I didn't have anything better to do. But I can't seem to be allowed to get my own grip on things. I've always had the feeling of being marked out. I suppose that's why I got so wild, it's like a constant pressure, the sense of expectation, unspoken, kind of assumed by all of you.' He hesitated a moment, before going back to what he really wanted to say. 'I didn't say what Nemmi said in my waking dream, you cut me off before I could say.'

'About Zarian being Zeus?'

'Absolutely! And....this is hard for me Thea....Nemmi says you are....you are....really Themis....and therefore her sister, not mine, and you are here to keep an eye on me....and I'm going slowly mad with it all....and Nemmi in Psathi also said...'

He was gabbling now, he lowered his voice but spoke with sufficient animation to make the whole restaurant strain to hear him, except nobody could.

'...I'm the son of Zeus and Ma and that he has a job for me; and that's when I fainted and you rang and Nemmi wasn't there in person any more, just the e-mail screen.'

He stopped and sat back in his chair, challenging her. They remained like that, for a long moment. He felt the same growing tension he had had all day with the key people in his life.

'Well?' he said at length. 'Am I going mad? '

Suddenly his will to fight left him, there was too much to explain and he felt tired deep in his bones. Never the strongest when actively challenged, he felt used up, like a computer on low batteries he could muster enough power to seem switched on, but could no longer do much.

'I think we should pay the bill and leave this excellent establishment,' said Thea calmly.

She rose, the hovering manager smiling all the while, helped her into her coat.

Alexander had no more resources to continue the argument and submitted to being ushered out of the restaurant, he waited by the door as his sister paid the bill, and he allowed her to hail a taxi and bundle him in. Thea gave directions and they sat side by side in silence, neither seemed to want to speak first. Alexander hunched into the corner, arms folded, struck dumb at the foolishness of his outburst, unable to tell what Thea was thinking, or what she was going to say next.

The ball was in her court. He had nothing to say.

Greek gods were myths, their reality was a pleasurable fiction of infancy made real in the way children who play alone invent playmates for their amusement. He was happy to keep them inwardly and thanked Nemmi for her remembrances despite everything. His world was made infinitely richer by them. They had more substance than the footballers and cricketers made heroes by his friends and the seeming pointlessness of his schooling was made bearable by having them near. In pre-adolescence, he reached a stage when he could summons them to his mind and in quiet moments, alone, he talked to them and travelled their Chronosphere along timelines, as Nemmi would say, at the speed of thought. As a young adult, they had diminished in intensity, he knew they were there below the surface, giving meaning.

He had assumed they were going home but as the cab turned towards the City, surprised, he broke the silence.

'Where are we going?'

'To JNO'

'What, at this time of night! What for? I've seen enough of that place for one day thank you, I'm tired and I want to go home and think.'

He didn't care if Thea was going to say any more. As for feeling close, he supposed that he did, they had been brought up as siblings after all, sharing the same mother. At this thought his mind began to race again. Weary of it, he allowed thoughts to tumble like clothes in a washer and tried as best he could to ignore them.

He and Thea remained silent, he waited for the next thing to happen. Thea as usual had the game plan and he was taking time-out.

## Chapter 8

The taxi stopped outside the JNO building. Its plate glass glowed eerily green in the dimmed, internal, night-lights. They got down, Thea beckoned the security guard from his desk and flashing her pass, bade him open the small side-door. At the lift she pressed the button for the eighteenth floor penthouse suite. The lift-motor sounded too loudly in the silent building, sinister and empty in the night. They both felt it, Alexander held her hand as he had done when as children, they had hidden from the adults under the tablecloth at Sunday lunch. He wanted to feel close, and realised how little physical contact they had had as children. Time now lost, with no way of retrieving the magical hiding feeling, separated, while present, in the world of adults. Thea's matter of factness had prevented her from too much play.

The lift stopped and getting out Thea made for a corner door, marked 'PRIVATE.' Removing a key from her shoulder bag, she opened the door, entered, gestured him to follow. It was pitch black within. He heard her punch her finger several times at what he thought was a numbered key pad on the wall and a ceiling light illuminated the room. It was another lift. Now his wits began to work.

'But we're on the top floor Thi, there's nowhere to go!' He said, not understanding.

She flashed him her finest smile and gave his hand a friendly squeeze. The mechanism whirled gently.

'Open the door, Alex, that's it, press 'O', nothing simpler' she said. Alexander pressed the illuminated button on the panel by the door and it slid open. Before him, a step down, was the same view of the beach at Psathi he had experienced not two hours ago. He felt the warm sea air on his face and smelt the salt of the sea, lapping gently in the tideless Mediterranean.

Stepping first from the lift, Thea turned to him, extended her hand and led him along the warm sand to a cave entrance in the sheer volcanic rock face of a cliff. The move from bright sunlight to semi-darkness distracted him from his amazement at the unexpected surroundings as he had to concentrate to climb the steep rough floor. There was no opportunity to think as Thea led him through a labyrinth of twists and turns, passing many other passageways until they emerged into blinding sunlight onto a fine terrace. They were on a plateau placed high over the inland valleys and craggy hills of central Ios. He recognised at once the playground of his boyhood, and smiled in recognition at some of the women who busied themselves around the central figure of Lucina. Seeing the siblings appear from the cave, she rose from her divan, gestured away everyone except Nemmi who remained smiling at them from a sun-lounger. Alexander stood transfixed. He wanted to turn to Thea for support, but he felt her stroke his arm in a gesture of farewell and she returned to the darkness of the caves.

It was clear to him there was a plan, and they were all in it. His mind excluded Penny from the plot, feeling she was as much a victim of all this strangeness as he. If it was another waking dream he had no control over the very tangible reality around him. He was certainly where he was, all his senses told him so. This was a real person in the shape of Lucina walking towards him, arms outstretched in greeting. This was Nemmi, beaming at him. This was the unexpected summer sun warm, on his face, the sound of sea birds and the undertone of the breeze in the pomegranate and lemon trees. But this time he was not confused. Through the cave, if he could again find his way, was the lift door to the penthouse suite, the logic of his movements were clear within him and he kept his sense of what had happened. Thea had gone, improbably back to Hampstead, which must logically be somewhere below him, a taxi ride away. He hung onto this thought as firmly as possible, though forced to put it to the back of his mind to cope with Lucina confronting him for the second time that day with arms outstretched.

She embraced him warmly, stroked his hair back from his forehead and kissed him on both cheeks as a mother or older female relative to a loved but often absent son or nephew and drew his head into the fragrance of her shoulder. At this moment though awed he was shocked to feel something from deep in her pass to him;

something given.

Hitherto, his experience of profound affection had been limited to Nemmi and his mother and sister. Having no other family, of which he knew, he had experienced love as a mutual exchange, given as much by him as received from others, equal in measure and accepted with ease. He did not count the rather more lustful encounters with several young women of his acquaintance.

He was however, now being embraced by Lucina neither asking nor wanting reciprocation, a free bequest not requiring a response. Waking dream or no, the strength of feeling was unmistakable. Lucina was giving him affection as a gift, sincerely granted which he felt as mutually binding. Illusion or reality, she seemed to hold him until his mind settled and she released him only when she deemed she was understood. Then, like a fond mother seeing her only son after many years, she held him from her at arm's length feasting her eyes. At length she spoke, not to him but to Nemmi.

'He is so fine, Mnemosyne, you have done well, you, Elithia and Themis. It is well for us do you not think that I can love him so?' She did not remove her gaze as she spoke.

'Alexiki mou,' she spoke very softly, devouring him with her eyes. He thought heard her more in his mind. 'Welcome, we are so glad you are here, there is only so much time and we must begin soon. Everyone will help, at least most of us will, there are always those whom even we do not control, who will do their own will as fated in their natures. Welcome! Of course you have been here before as a child so you will know us at least a little. Mnemosyne has told you of the timelines and the way the Chronosphere works, again at least a little. You will need to learn more and soon. But first some explanations are needed for you must understand absolutely if you are to achieve the task for which you were born. Please come and sit with us here on the terrace. Everything will be explained.' Noting his hesitance, she led him gently forward and sat him next to her. Food and drink were brought soundlessly at the hands of bright young women, coming and going. Not until he was as comfortable as he could be in the circumstances, did Lucina speak again. 'Few are invited here, Alexiki mou, and only on particular business, most could not cope with the experience.' She paused to allow him to digest the meaning of her words, when she was sure of him she continued. 'We are the offspring of Gaia, her children. We, serve The Mother and care for her as well as we can. We safeguard her. But time is running on too fast.' Noting his perplexity, she stopped and interjected. 'But you are bewildered, as your mother before you and I must allow you to find yourself. Please ask of us what you want and we will answer.'

This yet more powerful encounter with Lucina as Hera, in the presence of Mnemosyne on Ios where he was born, on the terrace where he had played as a child, left his mind dismembered, hanging. Nothing tangible remained in his head about time, place, before or after. All his thoughts seemed spread, displaced into their components like the exploded drawings of engine parts in a repair manual jumbling into an irrecoverable heap. He would never reassemble them into something which worked. Hera's invitation to question, reduced him like someone expected to deliver a keynote speech at a conference of important people, and who had utterly forgotten his subject.

He had never had a strong grip on reality, inner or outer. His uncertainties tugged at his sleeve all the time in the 'real' world. In short, neither world made sense. And now, paralysed, he was expected to do some task by people who had brought him up for the purpose; whose reality was in doubt and who were the cause of the little grip he had on himself. He also had no doubt who they were nor of the power they wielded.

Paradoxically in a corner of his mind he also recognised them as the beings who had germinated the only substantial thoughts he had ever had. The mirages he had felt since the first encounter in the lift, were more real than the 'real' world of tube trains and bills of lading. If the real world was as vague as he now felt it to be, the unreal world of his mind may indeed be the real one, and these figures from the far past were his mind made tangible. He was in a back-to-front reality, in which his mind reified beings who, being there always and for everyone, were an embedded mythology built into the structure of thought itself. Perhaps only through

them could he find a true grip on his inner and outer worlds.

As all this raced through his head, the two women sat calmly, observing. Alexander, bringing his mind to focus on them for a moment, was supported by their calm silence. By some unknown means, they knew his thoughts and had joined with him.

The barriers between inside and outside were so breached he did not know where he ended and they began. He no longer was so sure of his place in relation to the taxi ride home. Was he in Psathi or his mind? Did it matter? He felt a monstrous meltdown of his brain and a release of tension which left him transfixed in a nowhere place of sheer being which was enough, which was everything. He was pure mind, focussing inwards, operating with the building blocks of thought. He heard Mnemosyne's voice in his mind. Saw the whole scene, Hera, the glorious sunlit terrace, Psathi, the greenish light that was JNO it was neither dream nor reality. A suspension of space and time and a sense of travelling high, a condor gliding on the breath of the High Andes lifted and embraced by an absolute, crystalline sky. There was neither past nor future, nor even now, thus suspended, Mnemosyne's thoughts grew out of the sound of the wind to fill his mind.

'Chronos who is hidden from the world, holds yet the skein of Time. Banished by Zeus, his power undone, he is forced by Zeus, to weave timelines through the world to make the Chronosphere. I showed you as a child, and as a child you felt, but could not know. I watched you flounder in the waking dream and waited for the time foretold when you would be ready. Here we exist in the Chronosphere in pure thought. Few mortals join us here. For aeons we have brought only the chosen to this place of being, men and women strong in spirit. We strengthened them and sent them back. Know then that Zeus, vanquisher of Chronos gave mortals time to use, through which to learn, leaving them no better gift. Know you how Prometheus, the everlasting friend of humankind, gave them fire and was hard punished, more so for the gift of it than the thing itself. But at last Zeus has lost faith in those mortals who set their faces against Gaia, who scorn the gift of time and used fire against Her. But for us, Hera, Prometheus, Haephestos, and other filial gods, humankind would be no more. Other races would be in their stead, for Zeus loves them not. Know then, to help mortals stop the suffering of our Mother, he has begotten you. The die is cast and you will be well prepared for you cannot escape your fate, know then you are loved of the gods though you will be sorely tried.'

His mind flipped like a computer screen on the click of a mouse. The scene before him seemed to turn inside-out. His head filled with another voice, male, and full, reverberating inside his skull filling all the corners of his brain. As the sound coalesced into its component words, he needed time to fully register the light of the halls of the 89th floor of the Olympic building in New York. Not that he knew where he was, nor that he was privy to Zeus'great announcement. Although Alexander was beginning to accept that his external world could change without his control, he was overawed by the sheer style of his new surroundings and the beings populating it. None of his mythic meandering with Nemmi had prepared him for the massive splendour of this contemporary manifestation of Olympus on Earth.

Before he could even start coming to terms with what was happening his shoulders were grasped by huge muscular hands lifting and turning him at the same time. He stared into the face of a giant, at least half as big again as an average man. He sat him on a table and placing his fingers on his massive lips, pointed with the other enormous arm to a misty figure on a dais who addressed the hall. The voice in his brain was coming from this source.

'Through the millennia I tried in vain to keep down their ambition.' The voice had a basic resonant vigour but sounded wearied by cares too heavy to bear, it was the voice of endings, carrying a sense of termination, detachment, disengagement from the world as an unnecessary appendage it wished now to do without. The tone plucked at his conscience forcing his attention while the voice continued to fill his head.

'...I kept them pre-occupied with the air, earth, and water. I awed them with electricity and chemistry. I left them to their own devices to war and plunder, to find their own selves. I set them riddles of discovery for their

delight. But I liked them not, for they would use my gifts to destroy what they cannot create and that for their pleasure. They use them to make life easy for some by making it hard for others. But some of you were entranced by them. Their likeness to gods, their vulnerable inner selves spoke poetry to you and you wished them Time to seek their true selves. Against my will you gave them gifts...' He raised a mighty arm and pointed his outstretched hand, the quivering fore-finger a rod of lightning pointed straight at Alexander, who was seized with a new terror, its intensity greater than anything he had ever known before. A crackle of electricity spun a blue flame past his ear to explode against the chest of the giant standing behind him, showering him with sparks. '...Prometheus, you gave them fire and they never looked back.' A deep growl emanated from behind Alexander like a small earth tremor, pent rage enveloped him, and subsided as the giant relaxed only with an obvious effort of will.

'Their godlike qualities entranced you, aye, and I caught it from you when unguarded, for I have aesthetic qualities too. You may well snigger Pan my bent friend, but I am at times delighted by pretty things. (He ignored the polite laughter and deliberately avoided making eye contact with Hera) 'Yes they are resourceful and used your help do achieve some fine things. The sheer nobility of their best and their energy for both good and evil is truly breathtaking. I confess to being amused and played games with them, with and against some of you. But games only were they, for I never liked them altogether. I allowed some of their best to become gods, immortal in the myths they wove of us, I allowed them to worship us even encouraged the practices they patterned into ritual, for by this they gave respect, for us and for Gaia our mother. Gave we her to their charge to use and endow, to make and remake. To love and cherish. For she is strong and generous. But they had nothing but their pride to goad them onwards. Unable to live with her they must conquer Her, own Her, have mastery over Her. So I gave them more Time. I encouraged Mnemosyne to go among them with remembrance to know what they were and what they may be together with Her. Themis, went she among them to give order and justice. All here gave what they were and offered thus knowledge and wisdom so they would honour us and through us, Gaia our Mother. And the greatest among them were conducted here and given the secret of the Chronosphere and told of timelines through which comes great wisdom. And we made of them educators to teach of the bounty from which they sprang and to which they returned and to which they sprang forth again and again for generations upon generations. Each piling their knowledge up on what had gone before. They had all they wished and more and could make rich return to Gaia, to become the gods they dreamed themselves to be. And so I gave them Time.'

Zeus stopped to check out his audience, spotted Alexander overshadowed by Prometheus, and continued. 'We, the gods have no use for Time, for thus did we bury Chronos far below in Tartarus. We are light, and travel timelessly. Only those who observe see us temporally. Heroes we gave them to follow and observe, to remember when their pride lead them into evils and to suffering. And yet I gave more Time, even to those whom I most distrusted. Now I would have them gone from the world. Gaia herself is wearied of them. And still I give Time and insight into the world to discover those things that will bring them close to us, the Timeless Ones.'

He paused again to see if he still had the attention of his audience. Some of the lesser gods were teasing each other like children bored in a classroom. Even the greater were a little glazed. They knew it all, had seen it all but waited politely for the inevitable punch-line. Prometheus' impatience was palpable. Athena had laid down her aegis, and was working on some kind of drawing with Hephaestus. Poseidon absent mindedly pared his nails with his trident. Over the aeons the gods had largely given up on mankind and concentrated on their own affairs out of sight of those who no longer saw a need for them. They watched in pity as scholars dug around in the broken pieces of their history, occasionally giving inspiration to the better of them spurred by Mnemosyne and some of the busier gods. Some had joined up with the One who now had the most hegemony over mortal's minds than any other, despite too being on the wane. Others linked up in Africa and other parts where simpler more earthbound gods had remembrance still, and lent a hand. Some went to the East and became part of 'The Way'. Others simply gave up humankind and set off to find other worlds, other mortals. Most merely continued their bent in secrecy, janitors for Gaia the Mother. Poseidon maintained the motion of the sea, Demeter kept up with the harvest and Hades secretly maintained the past intact, from below,



completely out of mortal sight .

Zeus contemplating the remnant of his band, knew he was all but finished as a real force in the affairs of mortals, his cohorts just folk-memories, objects of curiosity. He was weary of it all, of that there was no doubt. He would go, and leave this duplicitous race to their fate. But first he would set them a task to show his force yet within them. Unlike the One, inactive and fatigued as he himself, he would Act and the One needs must react or be finally overwhelmed. He was the positive Earthshaker. He alone had animated Europa, who's children had so much ravaged the Earth, and he would require them to suffer the ultimate test. His irritation rose and he sent a couple of thunderbolts ringing round the hall to ensure all were awake. Prometheus grasped a terrified Alexander again by the shoulders and boomed gently into his ear.

'Do not fear, he is showing off, he dislikes to be taken for granted and likes to shake a little for attention.' The noise startled the assembled company into mindfulness and the Earthshaker, mollified, continued his discourse.

'And what have they done with these gifts? What? Tell me that! They cheat on their birthright! They have too much pride and belief in their own godlike qualities and mistake me not - I blame you for this! All of you!'

He glared round at the now attentive audience, sweeping his great arm round the room, setting off a couple of smaller thunderbolts to keep up the interest - he was getting nicely into his stride.

'You led them to believe in their own sense of self-importance, played with them, pandered to their conceit. You sided with them in their war games, and so puffed them up they thought to dispense with you and turned you into bedtime stories to amuse their children. Mnemosyne struggled hard to keep us alive as folk memories though they lost the Chronosphere and with them the timelines. This weak-headed race you loved so, behaved as if they owned the All. They are now convinced it is in their grasp. They believe they own Gaia herself and subvert her to their own interests. So they ravage her and design on Uranus and chase the soul of Eurynome herself to enjoy the innermost secrets of the universe. Yes they may know much, but they cannot own anything! They would conquer All and reach beyond what they control and destroy what sustains them. Even as Chronos wanted Time for himself so this race of men wants the All for their little use. With the illicit gift of fire...' The rumble behind Alexander, never quite silent throughout the oration, became noticeably louder. '...they put Gaia to the torch.' Working himself up now, he elevated his grandiloquent style a notch by striking an oratorical pose he had from Plato and went on even more theatrically than before.

'This base race put themselves from Her and like a milch-cow use Her as their possession. How can they forget that without Her there is nothing? She made them and will discard them. Still I gave them Time, hoping they would learn from all of you. I gave them you as mentors, and gave I tutors of their own kind, story tellers to train them in the use of timelines to ripen their inner knowledge so they may endow Her bounty with creations of their own in which they would live as gods. But no! They would rather plunder Her and then discard what they make and pile up their waste wherever there is space. Still I gave them Time and yet they fear to give back their wealth to Gaia for fear of what they may lose. They grasp what they can and purloin what is there in case it passes them by. And I gave them generations and more tutors so they would learn and still Mnemosyne went among them to confer remembrance, but they did not want it lest it held them back. Words and deeds set in timelines through the power of thoughts set down, guarded by the Muses offered I them thus inner lives to contemplate. But they lost the treasure of remembrance and it fell into the dust of their minds, buried. So over-laden with questing are they, they forgot their birthright and gave to their children greater desire to have yet more.' He paused for effect, raised his hands in mock pleading and with a massive sigh, weary unto death, he continued.

'Yet I gave them Time. All the Chronosphere had they in their vision, this web of delight to make them one with Gaia and with us to live in pleasure and fulfilment. Where like us they would be weightless and careless of the time of their generations in worship of Her as She is nurtured by my beloved Hera. Thus they would

fear Hades no longer, and have their own management of time. In their eagerness for the new, they ignored the inner life of the Chronosphere to place it outside themselves in some far of heaven of Yhawhe who can never be known like they once knew us. They gave Him our gift! With His consent they dug Gaia's body and traded her gifts as if they were their own. They blessed their great God for His beneficence and they forgot their Gaia. Mesmerised by their cleverness they elevate themselves above all creation. They put themselves above Gaia!"

He paused again, the passion in his eyes flashing fire. Checking round the hall for signs of inattention, he noticed some of the younger or more flighty gods were showing symptoms of mild delinquency. He had the feeling this was not news to them and may even be over the heads of many. Time to drop the bombshell, to get them all properly in awe and behind his plan to ensure his latest mortal offspring got all the help he needed to pull off the great task. Loosing off a long rumble to discourage flagging, he continued, in a voice especially thunderous for the occasion.

'Know then. Gaia has given all she has to give. She has breathed to me of the speed they work, they outstrip their ability to control their own evils and still they go on. The speed of change they wreak on themselves leaves them bereft of Time. They go too fast to stop and will die from the very momentum. So rapid is their mindless spiral of change they have used up the Time I gave and I will give no more. No more Time! They ravage Gaia to the point of no return and there is now no time to alter the effects. So I give them one chance only, and that slim indeed. It is the only one. They must change their very natures!"

Now he had them, all eyes were on him, he knew all their thoughts. Mortals change their nature? Why it wouldn't be humankind without them being what they were. Proud, clever, vengeful, violent, exploitative, loving and forgiving. It was unheard of! Use their inner knowledge as a public beneficence? To be soft and forgiving, when there was glory to be had, fame, discovery public acclaim, making and doing. People wanted refrigerators and cars not poetry and beauty. What's he on about this time? He's really been around too long, He waited a little until the noise subsided - Now for the bomb he thought, this will get them buzzing.

'I herewith end their timeline!"

A vibration shimmered through the hall. Heads turned on each another. A hubbub rose. Can he do it? Probably! What about us? This was going too far. End this race of mortals? They knew he had never liked this race of men but had indulged their better qualities in the hope they would turn out well in the end. Many of those present found them attractive and fun, others were too preoccupied with keeping the separate functions of Gaia going. Although it was getting harder they had not considered ending the time-line, there must still be time to work something out. Now Zeus had their full attention and the sounds ceased. Noting with satisfaction the pregnant silence of the hall, he visibly grew another couple of feet, allowed his robe, beard and hair to wave impressively in a wind he directed at himself, threw his arms aloft and as the Master, he spoke.

'At Midnight, 31st December in the year of Mortals 2012 their timeline will end! None of you will prevent it! There will be no big bang, no fireworks, no great natural disaster. Simply, Gaia will not sustain them and they will perish by degrees. It is too late for warnings. They must change now, to be ready for then. Unless they stop their mad spiral Gaia will give no more of Herself. Her rains will be acid, food chains will breakdown, crops will fail, icecaps will melt, seas will rise and they will perish by inches all! This is my last will and testament. I now, at this very moment, bequeath Gaia and the Chronosphere to mortals to use as they will. If they do not use Her well from the year 2012 they will begin to perish rather than shall Gaia. There it is! - I will do nothing more!"

He gestured to Prometheus who lifted Alexander on his shoulders for them all to see.

'See where Prometheus shows off this lad of my loins. Through him do I offer a last chance to bring about the saving of our Great Mother!"

Pleased with the effect, Zeus, with an imperious flourish, sat again on his throne among swirling clouds and waited for the reaction. There was a low murmuring as the glorious crowd turned to see who Prometheus was carrying. The giant paraded the swaying youth round the hall and placed him upright before the Old Thunderer.

He smelled unmistakably of wet earth, of rain before the storm. Strong arms embraced him while a cry of delight rose from behind. The Thunderer released him from his embrace, and he felt the light weight of a fine garment placed round his shoulders. A brilliant coat of a fine metallic mesh fell full length to the floor. It flashed with stars and clouds, hills and valleys were wrought wonderfully into the weave. He felt he was made of pure air and could travel anywhere within this garment, through time, space and back again. He found it difficult to glance directly at Zeus, the strength of his beaming smile blinded him, for the king of gods made no concessions to his mortal frailties. Instead Alexander met the gaze of Hera next to her husband, itself hard to bear but supportable by comparison.

Until this announcement, only Hera and her close companions had known what Zeus was up to and they had used the time wisely and had gained some concessions by the formation of JNO. From the time he privately told Hera of his great intention she had worked unceasingly. He had at first been adamant. Mortals would perish. The Pantheon was no longer sufficiently interested in them to assist. They had trashed it all and they had to go. The gods would decide if another race were to inhabit the Earth once Gaia had recovered. There was no time for this fifth race, they were at the end of their thread. He had taken pity on their vulnerability, their weaknesses, their pathos the essential tragedy of their short and brutal lives.

Had he not the right? After all he had given them? They wanted to own what they saw and would not heed their inner voice which begged a sharing and a nurturing. Timelines had been laid deep in their psyches to share the Chronosphere so they could all use their histories, their inner knowledge for the good of each other and the world. But they produced their poisons faster than they could invent the antidotes. They use up Gaia's resources faster than they could be replenished. Gaia will die of her many hurts before they can invent the cure. They will have to change or go! 2012 is a good enough year. It happened to be the time the Mayans ceased their counting of the centuries, perhaps they already knew? But now they were all long gone and any useful message was gone with them.

Hera, wife and nurturer, asked for time for herself and those gods who still cared to try and make a change by 2012 now their time was finite. She begged to begin new work with mortals. He struck a bargain with her for he owed her much for her undeserved fidelity to him and in truth he held a grudging affection for the race. He had wished them better many times. But Gaia gave him no choice. Well, he conceded, maybe not exactly dead on 2012: perhaps later if things improved for Gaia. But definitely thereabouts. Exactitude was never his weakness.

He would, however not have it said he was a wrathful god. There had been enough of that. Hera could expect nought from him but he would allow her freedom to do what she could with whomsoever of her allies would help. If they could pull Gaia from the brink he would not stand in their way. He would do one thing. He had been a little reticent about it, even coy, he fancied one more experience with one of their beautiful women. When Hera fired her eyes at him, he shrugged and acknowledged his weakness, but promised there would be value for her plan if she were to turn a blind eye on this occasion. He would provide a son who would bridge the underworld with that of mortals and so provide a full understanding of the past and give Hera the opportunity to save humankind. Yhawhe, and the future, he would deal with himself.

After he would go elsewhere than Earth and lead whoever of his tribe would go out into the starry Firmament and seek other worlds to play in. If she succeeded she may stay with his son and his heirs.

So Zeus came to Penny as Alexis the adventurer and revolutionary. In truth he had hopes of the revolution of that time, that he would spark a change in the mortal inner mind and give a new generation hope before things

sped totally out of their control. He thought he had come close, but once again they failed to seize their chance.

Hera had set about her task at once. To ensure that Penny would find her, she wrote to Zeus, an earthly letter. He had opened it with a smile and left it where Penny would find it. He had found her charming and intelligent. She had the inner beauty that he sought, while her physical attractions were pleasant enough she was chosen for her spirit. In his love making he saw to it no man would ever give such heights of exquisite pleasure and no man would ever match his peerless nobility or sense of purpose. She, the new woman of the future was to have no need of gods, despite her doubts she would change what needed to change from her own inner strength.

On the 89th floor of the Olympic building in New York, Hera hitched herself, Alexander and Mnemosyne to a time-line and returned to the sunlit terrace of their Psathi home.

Startled once more by this new change of scene, Alexander jerked out of his chair in utter disbelief. The women waited patiently as he gradually found his bearings and resumed his seat, unable to separate the images raging through his shocked brain. They really did know what was going on in his mind, he thought. This new shift of place had been less gentle than the others. He had come back to Psathi with a bump. He had somehow maintained his grip on the metallic coat, the gift of Zeus, which he held in wonderment, a tangible reminder of the sensations he had experienced. He was glad to be with these women, relaxed, calm, watchful and solicitous.

They seemed to help him. He breathed more easily and the mass of images receded from his seething mind until again he could hear clearly the wind sifting the leaves and smell the lemon trees on the air of his childish summers. His mind ratcheted up the recent taxi journey and he seemed to have woken from a deep dream. Sensing his renewing calm, Hera spoke,

'It is common for Zeus to give gifts to those he has chosen. The coat is yours. Wear it, it will be useful.' There was in her voice, a matronly warmth, like water in a parched land. Irresistibly, he knew it was meant and with it he knew the worry mothers have for the trials that will come to children when they are called into the world. Alexander's gaze flitted from the garment he held to the faces of the women.

'He knows us Mnemosyne', Hera spoke gently to her companion. 'Thank all the gods my husband spoke truly.'

'I was his teacher, he learned with pleasure.'

'But can he act as well as know?' Hera continued, 'Oh My husband, how good it is to have again one who knows us truly. We will reveal ourselves, unlayer our gifts and have him use them as before, pray we are not too late. I had not hoped to have these thoughts again and would have had the race perish for their lack'.

She turned to Mnemosyne. 'I thank you daughter of Gaia, for your work with this youth. Go now and work harder yet 'til this task is done'.

They embraced, Mnemosyne approached Alexander, took from him the mantle of Zeus, folded the ultra fine material into a small square and popped it into a pocket of his coat as if it were a handkerchief. He saw triumph in her eyes and she stroked his cheek tenderly, and left.

For the first time in his life Alexander was alone with Hera. Each encounter drew him inexplicably and increasingly into the field of her force.

Face to face, she was at her ease. He felt her fall in step with his thoughts and carry him with her through labyrinths of the mind touching parts of his knowledge yet scarcely understood. Like early morning dreams of

great intensity, full of moment and doing, they flew down vistas of history, built edifices of time, swam oceans of memory. They climbed arduously towards the midday sun, she led him upwards so the earth was a blue and white jewel set in black satin on the breast of Gaia enthroned on stars. Gaia's smile embraced them both and her outstretched arm gathered them to her feet. The vault of her halls stretched limitlessly above while the marble of her floor emptied into an immeasurable void, bending his senses. He was amazed at the immense sadness he felt as they merged together in a vast fugue. Waves of pain flashed through the miles of his every nerve, searing his feelings until the magnitude of their grief matched and rent his soul again and again. His body lost importance, his pure thought moved and merged with theirs as the beginnings of the universe billowed and melded, expanded and combined.

All three united in a single stem of thought containing a power that could crack his single brain like a walnut. Bound by the strength of two great goddesses, his thoughts wove with theirs until he knew the beginnings of the universe, understood the origin of life on his brilliant and cooling planet. Races of men came and went, life wove and re-wove in pretty spirals of DNA subtly changing, renewing Gaia's hold on them. Numbers imprinted into his brain, calculations, equations, quantities, divisions, projections, potentialities, probabilities, possibilities. Vast crowds of people in movement, fleeing, regrouping, great halls of state, great clouds of pure thought rising to envelop the world, a force field for change, at first garbled, then delineating into strands, knitting into filaments, growing into ropes strong enough to hold the huge weights of the collected thought of all humankind, distilled and full of power.

## Chapter 9

On the sunlit terrace on the island of Ios, Hera held her mind-link with the last son of Zeus. Both felt the anguish and grief of Gaia. The greater will of the one wrapped round the fledgling understanding of the other who was beginning to learn what it was to be related to a god.

Sustained by the strength of combined thought, his new flame of understanding sought kindling in the strands and sinews of the larger and finding hold, dared to burn brighter. As it grew tentatively in intensity, a gust of doubt all but extinguished its yet weak flickering. Responding, the greater moved to protect the new flame so it would stay caught, but in a renewed and stronger gust, it expired. Hera sighed audibly and let it go and the mind-link was lost. She had registered the strength of the doubt and was anxious.

The spell broken, Alexander, exhausted, slumped in his chair, his mind blank. When at last he pulled together the strength to lift his head, Hera was gone and Themis sat in her place. For a long time Alexander and his twin sat silently. Neither spoke audibly. Alexander found her accompanying his thoughts as she worked on his doubts. Both concluded there was no way back, he was committed to action by his fate. Time did not pass, rather it was absent. When they were ready Themis spoke, her voice was steady, and her message decisive.

'You know all there is to know, now you must act'. She stood, shook her hair, ran her hands along the sides of her head and deftly tied the black tresses catching them up in a neat chignon.

'Come on, Let's go back', she said. She tossed her head and set off. Alexander stood silently and allowed himself to be led through the caves, into the lift and down to the waiting taxi. They travelled in silence.

As the vehicle turned the entrance to Regent's Park, Themis slipped the dividing glass to the cab and asked the driver to pull over. Still silent, Alexander got down while she motioned the now curious driver to continue. Alexander walked as far as the lake, where he sat on a bench self-absorbed. He had no idea of actual time, but sensed subliminally the queer absence of activity which in the dead of night creates inexplicable whispers and rustlings, ill explained movements, footsteps and the occasional real sound of a car. He sensed a city almost but not quite asleep.

His mind returning to him, was charged with new thoughts, which existed hitherto only vaguely known, sometimes glimpsed obscurely. Now they were easily accessible as if he were riffling through a well organised filing cabinet. He found he could take a thought, express it perfectly in his head, link it to any other, rework it and plot the development of the concept as it had grown through the history of human thought. He had total knowledge, unyoked to time, separate from, but incorporating his own personal experience. Beyond this, he sensed a host of other categories of human experience belonging outside himself, harder to join with but potentially equally accessible if he were to make the effort. He tried to catch onto a group of them by physically turning his head, without result. He found that by, as it were, turning his mind to face in a particular direction he could bring them into focus.

The mere knowledge of this drew from him a powerful resistance in his dominant personal psyche which drove him to his feet and set him running. Anywhere to escape the awful portent of his recent encounters. He needed desperately to shake them off, like a dog from the water, to rid himself by running so far he would leave them behind. But the sound of his foot falls seemed to overtake him in the night and the rasping breath in his throat echoed in the trees and bushes, spurring him onwards.

The further he ran, the more wildly he went, until at last he stopped with a loud wail of despair. Panting hard, he leaned heavily against a lamp-post his arm crooked to keep him from falling.

It's no use, he thought, once there is knowledge, there's no going back, like Adam, I know what I know and cannot unknow it. Panic shot through him as he realised that whatever he did; the knowledge would still be

there. But I can refuse to go along with it. I have my will, despite whatever I know, I don't have to take any action.

Even as he formulated thoughts of refusal, he knew he would not be able to maintain his will in the face of what he knew....of what was crowding into his brain. Arguments for action ranged themselves with stark accuracy, making refusal the act of a coward. Act he must. To know what must be done and not to act is self-betrayal. Henceforward, he would have to live with that realisation or his life would be as phoney as an eleven pound note.

'Why me?' he railed aloud. He muttered incoherently to himself. 'I can't do it, I don't know where to begin! And there's no time! They said so.' He laughed aloud hollowly. 'No time for immortals, that's a laugh!' He beat his fist at the lamp-post as if that proud bearer of the city's illumination were personally responsible for his problems.

'H'allow me to h'assist young man. 'Praps yer a bit pissed eh, boychik? or suicidal is it?'

The speaker was a small ugly little man of around five feet, dressed in an amusing archaic mixture of spats, striped trousers and morning coat. Knees and elbows stuck prominently from his gabardine, his ears were pointed, and he was very hairy. A coarse thatch overhung his collar and grew vertically from the top of his bare head. A wicked grin showed little tombstone teeth glinting whitely in the gloom. As he spoke he straightened so he could waggle his goatee directly at Alexander.

'Yea! Yea! You know 'oo I am,' he giggled. His whinnying tone grated on Alexander's ear. 'Yer woke me up my lad with all this rushin' about inna trees and bushes,' He thrust his scruffy chin into Alexander's face, searching him minutely. 'But I'm fast an' run wiv the wind, over rocks 'n canyons, wake me up matey 'n I c'n catch you. Catch! Catch! Hee! Hee! Catch's catch can, I c'n catch yer!'

With this the little manikin hopped all around Alexander, waving his broolly like a matador and he finally ended up cross-legged on a park bench. He rummaged somewhere deep in his pocket for a curiously shaped pipe, filled it assiduously with tobacco, searched for matches and lit it. He looked up the while at Alexander and, then back at the pipe and said through a cloud of smoke, a toothy grin splitting his dark visage.

'Apollo's got my tunin' pipe, Hermes nicked it and sold it 'im, I used to be able to tell the future but 'e nicked that along 'a the pipe. But you know, don't yer, of course y'do.' He paused gazing quizzically at Alexander. 'You're pretty too, like 'im. What'll you nick from poor Pannie then?' He bounced from the bench, with the same amazing rapidity by which he had attained it.

As he came close, Alexander thought his animal smell seemed quite appropriate.

'E said 'e made it hisself, but it's lie, it were mine, all mine. That's why 'Era keeps me near by 'er, she knows, and you know 'cos yer know and Pannie knows y'know. It's all lies. They say I'm in league with...shush, you know 'oo...but it's lies, 'cos there aint no you know 'oo...it's in their minds, 'cos they gotta blame somebody so they puts it all onter me. But 'Era knows what's what and she keeps me near by 'er.'

Suddenly he delved into the front of his striped trousers and pulled his huge erect phallus from the hairy depths. Waving it triumphantly at the lamp-post, as if in direct competition, he cavorted round Alexander and it, singing. 'It's lies, all lies, I am maker, conceiver, I am song, dance and merriment!'

After several tours, he stowed his remarkable instrument back in its hirsute darkness and stood grinning for all he was worth.

In spite of his cares, Alexander could not help laughing. The little man encouraged him by flapping his hands,

palms up, and whinnying like a demented donkey. The effect was to make the youth laugh until tears streamed down his face and his ribs hurt.

'See, merriment...that's it my lad, none o' this 'ang-dog stuff. Trouble with 'Era and all 'er crowd is they take 'emselfes too serious, and that's funny don'cher fink?'

He turned his head around in mock anxiety and whispered, 'don't tell 'er I said that.' Mimicking her voice wonderfully, he went on playfully. 'I am not amused Pannie my boy.' That's what she'd say, but she is when I get goin', I h'amuse 'em all. Wiv'out me they'd never larff, not properly, only at the misfortunes of each other.

They're a jealous lot, forever gettin' one-up off each other. Not me, I just take the piss. Gotta laugh or gotta cry. Hey was you cryin'? Thought I heard you cry just then. He sat again, cross-legged on the bench and beckoned Alexander to join him.

'So, talk ter me, boychik. What's our proud 'Era bin an done to you then? As if I can't guess.'

Unexpected encounters seemed to be the order of the day. Alexander wondered if only he could see Pannie. If so were they both in another dimension or was the little man in his?

'That depends' said Pannie.

So thoughts are no longer my own, thought Alexander.

'You gottit boychik' voiced Pannie out loud.

'Whose are they then? And can anyone listen in?' he thought, without speaking.

'Only us,' thought Pannie

'What - all of you all the time!'

'Well, if we wanted to I 'spose we could, never tried it meself makes the brain 'urt, but I could...Yea, I could. That's what makes Zeus special. 'E c'n do it easy, don't be fooled by 'im 'e's got loads of concentration 'e 'as.

'You said just now it depends, depends on what?' Thought Alexander, anxious that Zeus might be tuned in to this interchange and being powerless to do anything about it, decided it had to go on even if he was.

'Depends on what you want,' Pannie's mind was now fully engaged with his, and the conversation became an entwining of thoughts. Vast quantities of communication were absorbed one into the other in no time at all.

'I don't understand' Alexander's apparent lack of knowledge was interpreted by Pannie's mind as more than mere ignorance, rather a lack of practical experience of the knowledge Alexander had had from Mnemosyne, Hera and Thea. All the gods had this knowledge, not all of them used it, simply because of the energy it used when there were more pleasurable or exciting things to do with it than crack your brain to initiate new action. Pannie knew this better than most. Running after nymphs, hiding in bushes to jump out and 'get' them, took its toll. Being a laugh and keeping the curious of mankind at arm's length from his mistress, was as much as he could do; and that was more than enough. But he could of course, if he wanted, he just didn't want to.

'Neither do I want to act. Ill considered action could lead to anything. You can't always control what can happen. It's too serious,' thought Alexander. Pannie's linked mind agreed.

'S'right ole cock. Yer can't live like that all the time, it'd drive yer bananas, bein' serious all the time. Can't be



doing with all that obeissancing and sak'rificin' and fartarsin' around with bloody entrails an' all that. Farcical if you asks me! Mind you, the gods, they used 't lap it up, made 'em feel wanted like.'

Alexander's mind conjured armies of objections, hosts of detailed impossibilities, mountains of resistance. The clouds of doubt almost choked Pannie's bright and darting mind, which despite his nimbleness, nearly eclipsed his thought processes. No wonder Hera had broken off her encounter and sent him to soften up the lad. Pannie's mind made a skip, and lodged itself outside Alexander's. Without breaking off, it rested just out of range of the destructive doubt which clogged up the localised Chronosphere. It registered a flash of dissatisfaction with his mistress for this stupid task and he received a small shock in response. Shit! He thought, Hera was on auto-think.

Pannie's mind knew about doubt, disbelief, refusal, call it what you will. This was how mortals rendered gods useless; stopped their fun. Working up mortals was fun and since they died so soon, there was an unending supply of new recruits. But once doubt was widespread the stream dried up. Now Gaia was complaining and on the point of giving up and even Pannie's fun loving brain could see the importance of that. No Gaia, no people, no fun, not even the prospect of any and only this doubting stripling between him and that!

Out of reach of Alexander's mind Pannie waited until Alexander got over his attack of the collywobblers. When the cloud of doubt and refusal lost intensity Pannie's mind put out a thought feeler. Alexander's mind was running out of energy, it had had a hard time in the last few hours and needed to sort itself out, unravel and take things easy for a bit.

Pannie's own lazy mind was well aware of the effort needed to keep going in the Chronosphere all the time, the fancy gods did it a lot, that's what made them powerful, they just knew everything so acted quickly and that way got a lot of control.

Pannie's mind followed the feeler and engaged again. Ignoring the thinning banks of doubt with expressions of disgust, Pannie brought Alexander down to earth. 'See 'ere mate, It'd be easier on all 'on us if we stick t' level one boychik'

'Level one?' thought Alexander,

'Yea, don'cher know nuffin' about the 'sphere and 'ow it works 'n all that?

'Well I know a bit about timelines, lifts and getting about on the Chronosphere.'

'H'i know ha'bit about timelines h'and lifts,' mimicked the uncouth little man. 'Yer don't know nuffin' you! 'Ow long yer been attit then boychik?'

Alexander was surprised that he had been 'attit' for longer than he realised....all his life he thought.

'About twenty four years, and stop calling me boychik!'

The manikin began to laugh, and then he was all laughter rippling along the night paths, skimming the lapping water of the streetlit lake. 'Twenny four yers, 'an 'e finks 'e knows sumfink about it!'

Stopping his skipping, he thrust his thoughts right at him.

'You know 'ow long I've bin attit, eh? D'you know? Yer don't do yer? More'n five thousand years, an' that's only what you mortals fink, 'cause we was muckin' abaht onner 'sphere a lot longern'at. So done'cher give me no lip abaht no twenny four years, boychik, you've gotta long way t'go you 'ave, boychik! You listen t'me matey, an gettit good. Level one, that's like beginners, like what we does wiv nymphs and tree gods an' all

them little gods. Them biguns, the Named, like 'Era n Prometheus an' them sort, they don't 'ave nuffin t'do wiv them little 'uns, that's fer me t'do, I gottem all to 'andle, I 'ave, an' lemme tell yer they needs 'andlin'. So that's level one Boychik - like it's like talkin', but it ain't talkin' it's finkin' like, it's faster'n talkin' 'cos yer don't 'ave ter take it in like, it's there an' you can 'ave lots'a people attit at the same time, see. Like you n' me now. But I'm doin' it slower'n usual 'cos yer green as grass.'

Alexander realised that the little man had not opened his mouth for some time, and was sitting calmly smoking his curious pipe, smiling his little animal smile, stroking his ragged goatee and occasionally rearranging the bulge in the front of his trousers. He also realised he had taken in what Pannie was thinking and was also replying at the same time instantaneously.

'You gottit, boychick, that's level one. Nah-then, level two's a different box 'a tricks all t' gevver.'

The narrative style of communication seemed to melt and what came from him hovered suspended before him and met the thought patterns coming from Pannie, they merged and he again found himself in a powerful mind-whirl of exchanges which left him at the extreme edge of concentration.

'That's level two, stronger innit? Like what you got wiv 'Era n Themis jus' now. You can get a lotta info that way, but it's knackerin' 'cept fer them big 'uns what works 'arder'n me attit.'

Even while Alexander was linked into the thought patterns of the little man, he felt at the edges of the join, other movements, hoverings.

'That's them, the big'uns, see, we're all on the 'sphere all the time. That's level three, an' that's the 'ardist of 'em all. I can only do it fer a bit, til I'm proper wore out wiv it.' He cocked his head quizzically. 'See what I mean boychik? An' sometimes they goes on auto-think, that's like when they wants t' keep an eye on yer, so's yer doin' what yer told even though they're up t' summink' else miles away or inna nuvver timeline.'

Working on level one, Alexander found he could maintain the connection without the strain of level two and realised that level three was a good way beyond him. He was glad to be away from the Names if they usually operated on the higher levels all the time and found it a relief to be linked to Pannie, despite his initial revulsion to him.

'You'll get over that 'ole son, You'll get ter find me irresistible before yer done. Till then I can take it. Your lot 'ave been givin' it me fer yers, and I allus get the last larf, I do. Any'ow what yer pickin' up on the edge is 'Era n' Zeus arguin' about you, me 'ole cock-sparrer. 'Cause they're worryin' you ain't got what it takes to do what's gotta be done. You can listen in if yer want, if you can 'old on to it, but I wouldn't do it meself, 'cos it sounds like they're loads 'a timelines away an' right on the other side of the 'sphere like.'

Alexander knew he did not have the energy to range on the Chronosphere as Pannie seemed able to do, he reckoned he was doing pretty well to handle level one after a mere 'twenny four years' and the grin from Pannie confirmed it.

Alexander wondered if there was a fourth level, without being able to conceptualise how this might manifest itself, since he was having trouble making sense of how to get in tune with the shadowy edge he could vaguely feel at the farthest penumbra of his mind, without having the slightest inkling how he would make contact with it.

'Yea' boychick, 'course there's more but it's beyond me. S'only 'appened once as far as I know. When we was all fightin' them Titans. We was losin' 'n some 'ow we sort' a' got all outer our minds togevvver an' like sent a whoosh of thought force at 'em. Zeus called it 'is special, an' it did the trick, we aint 'ad no more trouble from them Titans since then like, but I were all wore out fer ages, 'n so was loads of us. Mind you, not as wore out

as them Titans,' and he laughed again all over the park.

'Isn't Mnemosyne a Titan though?' Alexander conveyed a lifetime of learning with her into the thought mix between them.

'Yea, s'true. But Zeus spared the wimmin Titans so's they knows their place now, an' co-operates 'cause they know what'd 'appen if they got all cocky-like again,' and Pannie communicated the whole battle of the Titans with details from his viewpoint, quite differently from the way Alexander had had it from Mnemosyne.

He was now fully distracted from his earlier thoughts of Zeus and was nicely weaving a fascinating thought pattern with this strangely likeable little man, filling in many of the gaps in his understanding. At the same time allowing him to feel more and more comfortable on level one of this thought-sharing process. But he did not have time to go further for Pannie in a moment of immense disappointment for Alexander, disengaged, and Alexander learned that thought-sharing on level one was a two way process, which each partner controlled individually and as Pannie now articulated verbally,

'It takes two to tango, boychik!'

Pannie got up from the bench, and set off in the general direction of the Post Office Tower, Alexander understood he was expected to follow. When they were in sight of Baker Street tube station, he was already breathless at the unexpected pace set by the strange manikin, who had so alarmed him earlier that day and whom Hera had recommended to him as a mentor.

A glance at his watch told him it was four am on Saturday and he knew the station was closed.

'Where are you going?' Alexander shouted ahead of him in an attempt to re-engage the scuttling figure in the middle distance. He tried communicating on level one by concentrating his thoughts on the fast moving figure, to his chagrin the world was filled with cracked laughter. It struck him he could either follow or let him go.

Without the mental energy required to follow, Alexander stopped hurrying and allowed the little bent figure to disappear into the dark entrance of the tube station. The laughter faded into a distant echo and he was alone with the night again.

His main instinct was to continue to run as before, to escape the revelation of Zeus, but where to go? The sensation of being watched was not just physically but mentally strong upon him. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide from any of the untold others that were on the timelines of the Chronosphere. He felt as if thrust onto a vast stage, where the numberless audience was in darkness, betrayed only by a slight hum of voices. Were he to move a muscle all of them would become aware of his presence and as one concentrate on what he was to do next. Transfixed, he could neither go back into his recent past nor forward into a future that was all confusion.

'You'll 'ave t' come wiv me boychick, there's nuffink else for it ole' son' He sensed a strong call from underground, beneath his feet and knew Pannie was close.

'Where are you?'

'Dahn 'ere boychik, inn'a Tube.You comin'? 'Cos yer ain't goin' nowhere else, I can tell yer. Nah then mate...' The communication was sharp and exasperated. '...Yer can't go back now, 'cos you left all that be'ind, so you gotta go on, innit? 'An' my job's to 'elp yer on, So yer gotta go wiv me, see, simple, eh?' Adding under his breath. 'Cor blimey! Whatta prat!'

'How do I get to where you are?' The mere fact of someone else, anyone, offering options broke the impasse for now. Alexander decided to follow the little man wherever he went, since between the two of them he alone appeared to be in control of the situation.

'Ain't yer got that cloak what'sit, Zeus giv ya? Great, put it on an' yer'll be 'ere toot sweet.'

Alexander remembered the mesh mantle given by Zeus, which was neatly folded in his pocket. Finer than silk, it had a lightness and texture like nothing else he had known. Swinging it like a cloak round his shoulders, he began to feel dizzy and in a haze landed with a bump on the deserted platform of the Bakerloo Line.

'Blimey, squire, you didn't 'arf give me a start!' expostulated the little man as Alexander landed on top of him in a flurry of arms and legs. 'Why didn't yer tell me you was comin' throo like bloody Superman?'

'What do you mean?' said Alexander brushing himself off. 'I thought you knew what was going to happen when you said to put on Zeus' coat.'

'Well...' Pannie grinned ruefully. 'The fings Zeus gives fer pressies usually's pretty special, and can do fings like, y'know, make yer invisible or stop arrers 'n bullets, fings like that, but I didn't know 'zactly what it'd do, like.' He felt the material between hairy thumb and stubby finger. 'Yea, thought as much, s'made outta Haephestos' net. Cor, I wondered what 'appened to it, seems like Zeus, crafty bugger, got 'old of it 'n made a coat out of it. I wonder where 'e kept it all this time?' You should h'a bin there when owd 'Ep frew it over Ares 'n Aphrodite', they was both bollock naked, well, not in 'er case, if yer sees what I means!'

Again laughter flooded the whole cavern of the underground platform and could be heard all the way out to Waterloo Station. It was not exactly how Alexander had heard the story, but he let it go, and Pannie laughed even more as he comprehended how seriously Alexander had believed in the infidelity of Aphrodite and Ares and their links to human sexuality. A kind of mind sparring went on, at the edge of level two that got neither of them anywhere. Alexander decided to move things on.

'Now that I've got here, what happens next?' Alexander asked on level one.

'Search me 'ole cock, I'm just 'ere t' keep a beady eye on yer, see y' don't come to no 'arm, but if yer like, there's some people I want yer to meet'

'Who?'

'That's fer me ter know and you ter find out!'

'You said just now it was your job to help me on.'

'Yea, s'right, but you gotta make the decisions, know what I mean?'

'No, I don't know what you mean!' Alexander was getting exasperated. Everything about the man suddenly grated on his nerves. The silly accent for one thing; this was a god, not a very dignified one maybe, but not some East End barrow-boy either. He was of Russian origin, of Greek descent, he might be an earthy character, but all this Pearly King stuff, was too much. The toothy grin, the bad breath, the waggling goatee and the crudity, while a little amusing he conceded, was a poor act really. If this was Hera's 'mentor' well, he was sure she could have chosen better than this. Why not continue with Mnemosyne? There was enough of them to choose from goodness knows. He had rather liked what he saw of Prometheus, big and gentle, someone who knew about suffering and how to handle it. An increasing gale of laughter, rushed around the station, blowing dustily and dampishly around him, as if a train was about to emerge from the tunnel. The rushing laughter really did turn from Pannie's voice in his head to the rattling entrance of a train into the

station. It was a through train to Stanmore, probably the first of the day. He decided to get off at Finchley Road and get a cab home. Pannie scampered to the head of the train and alighted in the first carriage nearest the driver. Alexander, to put some distance between them, got on the last one with the guard. The train was virtually empty, just a few early morning working people, half asleep and wrapped in themselves, travelling cocoons, impenetrable, gestating.

'Mind the doors!' bellowed the guard, an unusually huge man who stepped one foot onto the platform to check no one was trapped.

Alexander was surprised at the jobsworth attitude of the man, when there was no one but himself and Pannie on the platform and they were already on board. Pannie's maniacal laughter continued to ring in his mind, and he realised they were still mentally engaged. Pannie was filling him up with his hooting sarcasm and mischievously not prepared to have a sensible dialogue.

Briefly, Alexander's mind skipped to Hera and her avowal that this misshapen creature knew a lot about JNO and would be useful to him. Like a hole in the head, he thought. There was more laughter. He sat down on the cross bench near the doors facing the guard. At Swiss Cottage, he observed the enormous guard was staring at him. He could hardly see the man clearly for he had slashed the peak of his cap, sergeant-major style, so it flattened against his forehead, obscuring his eyes. A large, hard man, who was serious about his job. Ran a tight train, brooked no nonsense. Alexander's mind filled with foreboding. The laughter in his head ceased, there was something about the guard's size and demeanour making him uneasy and to cap it all he felt Pannie's mind was now interested, as if he knew something. It was not so much the guard's sheer size, nor his trappings of petty authority which affected him, so much as the man's obvious delight with his uniform, his bulk and his sense of power rather than service. The man was a bully and would use his size and authority with pleasure.

Alexander was reminded of some of his school teachers, for whom the exercise of their adult power was more important than what happened to pupils and who had pleasure browbeating the smaller and weaker children. The foreboding rose to an impotent fear, as powerful as when he confronted Hera, or Zeus. He noted with interest that Prometheus had not frightened him, despite his bulk, with him he had felt his vulnerability had been recognised.

He despised himself for this weakness in the face of authority. He had always felt it. Beginning with the women on Ios, so big, so powerful, Mnemosyne's great knowledge which he would never master, Hera's awesome presence, Penny's grit-hard determination, Thea's righteousness.

The larger the authority of the person, the greater his uncontrollable feeling of inferiority. It did not seem to matter how much he tried to deny these feelings as irrational. He learned to be forthright by an effort of will, and would often challenge people who produced this irrational fear in him. Still it remained deeply rooted. He believed he was the equal of any one. A fellow human, sharing the same failings, so that it was unfair of anyone to intimidate him. He was angry when his own vulnerability went unrecognised by others who saw vulnerability as weakness to be exploited. The unfairness of it was the mainspring of his need to resist. It was only just occurring to him that they themselves may be being intimidated by something in their turn. That they were frightened and frightened others to deflect the feeling.

He had never confronted this analysis as thoroughly as he did now under the unwavering gaze of the headmasterish guard. Whether it was the link with Pannie or the thought sharing with Thea and Hera earlier, he didn't know, but he had had one of those mind-changing flashes of insight, after which one is never quite the same again.

There was a sudden clarity of belief in the strength of his vulnerability. What a delightful paradox he thought. In the contradiction lay self-discovery. To be vulnerable is actually to be strong, but only if you could share it with others, and, you could share it with anyone! Simply because everyone was vulnerable in the same basic

ways, it was only in their reactions that they were different and so only seemed strong. The trick of it was to check out their areas of vulnerability, and share it. Their power would immediately diminish to equalise with your own, even if they can still do you harm! You may not be able to stop them harming you, but you can stop being intimidated by them.

Thus power is always equal even with gods, because you could only be what you were as a human being. Because their superior powers were outside your control, the best you can do is to be as human as you can and confront them with your own powers. As gods they must have compassion or they had to be false gods, mere tyrants, and tyrants have to be fought!

The train stopped at St. John's Wood. The guard punched at the bank of buttons to open the doors, no one got on or off. This did not prevent him from lowering the little green hinged seat from the wall and waiting. He sat bolt upright, the toe-caps of his huge boots glinting, and he stared fixedly at Alexander, who despite his sudden revelation about vulnerability, felt very uncomfortably vulnerable.

Alexander waited with growing impatience and unease for the train to resume. The guard remained motionless. The doors stayed open. The silence was tangible. Something was wrong. Panic surged through him which he only just controlled with an effort of will, his whole body shouted at him to run.

The other half-dozen passengers following the gaze of the guard fixed upon Alexander. He realised with a sense of inordinate shock that he had no ticket and that the guard knew. It was Pannie! That little devil! Pannie had put the idea in the guard's head. Alexander struggled with his feelings, determined to handle the inevitable with dignity.

The guard rose slowly, purposefully and with an audible sigh, came towards him, arms crossed on his chest, blocking the aisle.

'Tickets please!' He barked. It was an order. He made instinctively for his wallet. A wave of guilt flowed through him starting somewhere in the pit of his stomach and washed simultaneously up to his temples and down to the soles of his feet. There was nothing he could do to prevent this minor tyrant from exposing him in front of the now alert and interested passengers. He felt this minor lapse was all that was needed for the guard to set about him and that his fellow passengers would condone whatever happened. As he reached inside his jacket he knew all the time he was utterly unable to explain how he got into the station and why he had no ticket. Pannie's laughter in his head was little short of maniacal.

'I must have lost it', his voice sounded lame to him as he made a phoney show of searching in vain through his wallet.

'Name!' The guard spoke sharply and clearly and the whole carriage heard. Alexander mumbled in a whisper something about paying on the way out, being in a rush.

'Speak up! I cant hear you...Sir' The guard came too close, invaded his remaining space, pushed up against his leg and leaned over, his face filling his field of vision so Alexander got a strong whiff of tobacco laden breath, heavily laced with garlic. He felt smaller than he had for ages, smaller even than when he met Hera. He just wanted to disappear. At the same time he raged in himself about the injustice of it all. He wanted to tell the man he had never in his life boarded a train without a ticket and would never dream of it. He hadn't intended to get on a train the way he had. He would pay at the other end, it was all a ghastly chapter of errors that were not his fault....not his fault, the words repeated themselves over and over in his mind, until they came out in a breathless whisper sounding entirely stupid. But truly, it wasn't his fault.

'Gerr'of my train, gerr'off!' It was the uncomprehending voice of authority, righteous, correct and wrong, wrong, wrong. The other passengers clapped a slow hand-clap until angry and shamed in equal measure

Alexander got up, being forced to slide past the guard, under his bent body, and out onto the platform followed by the judgemental eyes of the passengers, one stop short of his destination.

Pannie was leaning against the exit tunnel, still giggling. The train pulled off, leaving them alone under the inadequate strip lights.

'What now, boychik?'

'Did you do that?' exclaimed Alexander, angrily brushing past him and on down the platform.

'Oooh Hoo, what's gottinter you? I didn't do nuffin'. I just laughed. No Mate, you done it yerself.' It was Pannie's turn to skip after him down the grubby platform.

'Why didn't you argue wiv 'im, you was only wivout a ticket, people does it all the time, no need t' get so upset about it.'

'He wouldn't have listen to me. I know the type!' Alexander expostulated, striding quickly, angry with himself. After all his revelations, when it came to act, even in a small way he had done nothing. He deliberately disengaged his mind from Pannie, finding in his anger and frustration that he could manage it quite easily when he wanted. He followed the exit signs towards the barrier. Everybody wants me to act, as if I knew what it was I was supposed to do. I suppose I was to challenge that brute and shout him down. Feeling dissatisfied with himself his mind fell back to the thoughts which had plagued him in the park. What about this task from Zeus? How am I supposed to change people's natures if I can't stand up to a bossy guard? Nobody asked me if I wanted to act. They're all asking me to do what they want. What about what I want? But I don't know what I want. Do I want what they want? I don't know. I wish they'd all leave me alone. What is it to me if the world gives up on people, it'll have to give up on me too. So what? I don't have any specially bright ideas about what to do if Gaia is having a hard time. There's loads of other people doing things, what's so special about me? In his self-preoccupation he forgot he could be overheard on the 'sphere and that Pannie was right, Zarian and Hera were tuned in.

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They were lying in each other's arms in the green room of the penthouse suite of the Olympic building. Zarian had been rediscovering some of the forgotten charms in the arms of Lucina and was basking in the aftermath of some of some particularly sweet lovemaking. His little cuckoo turned out to be more loving than his numerous conquests, for she loved him for himself, and he had nothing to prove to her. With her he could be himself and relax.

Absolute relaxation was impossible. He needed constant vigilance and he had his 'sphere watchers hard at it twenty four hours a day, for if it were known that his control was less than total, there were enough forces from around and especially below, to creep about and plot without his knowledge.

It occurred to him Lucina was being nice to him to lull him into unthinking so she could carry out the plans she was hatching. Except that he had been quite honest about this Alexander and they did have a deal. It also occurred to him he had been too suspicious of his wife, although he never forgot it was she who led the last conspiracy against him. Enjoying the pleasure of her warm body against his, he nestled into her and their thoughts melded at a high enough level to exclude listeners although the vigilant would know they were communicating. In the wink of an eye they were in a high level meld.

'So you see my sweet' he murmured after, on the less tiring first level. 'I'm worried about Alexander.'

He nuzzled her white shoulder, and his loins stirred against the delicious cleavage of her buttocks. 'By the

way, you're not up to anything I should know about are you? The deal is the deal, isn't it?

'Of course, leave it to me, it's all in hand, my Lord, but everyone has to help when asked, or it won't work. I've got Pannie on it at the moment and he's got the Morae sisters involved. Maybe Alexander will not resist them as he did me. In any event they have naturally written him in, even if he does.' With this she opened herself again to him and there was a sudden and long silence on the 'sphere from the direction of the penthouse suite.



## Chapter 10

Alexander found himself at the exit barrier. Without a ticket to push through the machine, he addressed an underground employee sanding by the narrow exit. Outside, his glimpse of the dawn showed the promise of sunshine.

'Excuse me....I'm sorry, I was unable to buy a ticket, can I pay you?' He held out a handful of mixed change towards the man. 'How much from Baker Street?' The man looked him up and down.

'No ticket?'

'No....sorry....didn't have time to get one.'

'No ticket, no ride,' the man commented simply.

'Yes, yes. I know. I just want to buy a ticket from Baker Street where I got on and to go on my way.'

'How do I know you got on at Baker Street, maybe you got on at Morden or else Hounslow. You might'a done it at Cannon Street or even Tooting Bec?'

'Please just take my word for it, I got on at Baker Street and came one stop to here.'

'Hmm. S'more than my job's worth to do that son. Can't just go around taking people's word now can I?'

'Well I can't prove I got on anywhere without a ticket, can I?' said Alexander, his anger beginning to get the better of him.

'Exactly my point,' observed the man, calm as a cucumber, smiling winningly. 'You should have a ticket. It's an offence to travel without a ticket. With a ticket is how we know where you got on. Maybe you've got a season or a travel card or something?' He added hopefully.

'No I've nothing like that. Look I didn't expect to get a Tube, I was going by taxi and....well something happened and I got a Tube.'

'Ah yes indeed, but you didn't get a ticket now did you?'

'No! I just said so!'

'No ticket, no ride.'

'I know. But I've already ridden from Baker Street.'

'How do I know that you haven't come from Tooting Bec?' The man was all sweetness and light.

'Look, how much even if I did come from as far away as you can get?' This was really ridiculous.

'Where would that be then?'

'I don't know, say Hounslow.' Alexander was not quite sure where that was, but it seemed far.

'Did you get on at Hounslow then?'

'No, I told you I got on at Baker Street!'

'What time was that then?'

'What's the time got to do with anything?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'The time you got on.'

Alexander was getting really annoyed, but to leave the station he had to get past the barrier and the man. He considered leaping the barrier and making a run for it into the sunny morning, but wasn't sure he could make it successfully.

'It must have been about four o'clock in the morning. I didn't know you ran trains then, so I was surprised the catch the train to here.'

'We don't.' The man stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'So from Baker Street to here is one stop, say five minutes? So that makes four-O-ten now, allowing you to get here and all that,' he pulled a large chromium watch from a chain attached to his striped waistcoat. 'That's right, you couldn't have a ticket 'cos we ain't open yet. So we has to ask ourself what are you doing here? In any case you'll have to wait until we open in a couple of hours. You can't get out in any case, as that there's a padlocked gate and the doors are still locked. Tatta!'

He lifted a bucket and mop and vanished whistling, down some service stairs.

In exasperation Alexander turned back along the tunnel to the platform. He would simply wait for the first train to home. He supposed the train he had been thrown off was an early tube- worker's train of some kind.

On the platform a woman in Underground overalls was at a trestle table, cutting lengths of what seemed like flexible plastic into strips of various lengths. He sat in the middle of a bank of five plastic seats attached to the wall.

Another woman similarly attired emerged from the tunnel to his left. She held some sort of long rod in her hands. A third came down the stairs from which he had emerged carrying a sizeable container.

'When you've cut up that lot Antro,' said the woman with the container. 'I've made up some more here, there's one good thing, though, we'll be able to stop doing this soon. 'Though I expect the gaffer'll find us something else to do.'

Alexander wondered what bizarre activity London Transport expected of these employees.

'Hello, hello! What have we here?' said the woman with the large container as she approached Alexander. 'It's not often we get people looking us up down here.'

'Too right Clotho,' replied the woman at the table. 'They usually only want to know us at first not later on.' This latter remark was clearly for Alexander's benefit.

'Have you come to be measured up?' asked the third woman, leaping nimbly onto the platform using her rod as a vaulting pole.

'Seems like it, Laki,' said the first woman, eyeing Alexander up and down.

'How long do you think this one should be?' asked the one called Clotho. 'Don't I recall him from Ios? Elithia was personally involved as I remember.'

'He's got the same as the others Antro my dear.'

'So I should snip him about here,' said Antro, and drawing a length of material from Clotho's drum, she offered it to Laki, who measured off so many lengths with her rod and held it up for Antro to snip it off with her shears.

'That's exactly it my dear. Okay by you my lad?'

Laki turned to Alexander. He observed a strong family likeness in the three. They appeared to be sisters - the noses a dead give-away. He wondered if they might be triplets, even close to, he found them hard to distinguish. He was still struggling to comprehend what they were doing, and why they were asking his advice. Their ages were hard to determine, they seemed ageless, around middle years, but the half-light of the underground made that kind of comparison difficult.

'Is what okay by me?' he enquired.

'This length, about long enough is it? Takes you up to 2012, like all the others. You can have it shorter if you want, but I'm sorry the Gaffer won't let us make them any longer any more.'

'Make what shorter?'

'Your life span,' said Laki. 'Should I make it shorter?'

He thought somewhere in his mind he knew them, what they were but he was too pre-occupied however, to dwell on it.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about, I'm waiting for the trains to get going, you'll have to excuse me I've got a lot on my mind, so you just get on with your work and I'll sit here quietly until the trains start.'

'He expects the trains to start,' observed Clotho, with an infectious chuckle which made the others smile indulgently at him. 'Nothing will start until we know what you want us to do with this.' She grabbed the strip of material from her sister and held it up so he could get a better view.

'What do you want from me?' Alexander was aware of more expectations arriving from unexpected sources and spoke through the aggression he felt.

'Hoity-toity eh? No, no, my lad,' called the one named Antro from her place at the table. 'It's for you to tell us what to do, up to a point, that is, things don't have to be exactly what we say. This can be as long as you can make it, provided you know what you're doing. Of course we won't tell you exactly how long, at least we wouldn't have before now, but 2012 is it, eh girls? Orders from the Gaffer, see?'

'I think he said about 2012, Antro,' mused Laki, there's a bit of leeway up to when Gaia gives them up, could be another thirty, as much as fifty, years p'raps more, or so I'm told. I thought he said nothing would happen straight away, he's never usually exact, not that he was ever bothered about the details, more of a broad-sweep sort of chap in my experience.'

'Yes,' said, Clotho. 'Not like us, we've always had to be so exact ourselves....you see dearie.....,' she explained

turning to Alexander. '...or else people would complain of us getting it wrong and they wouldn't go quietly when the time came. There was some who complained right up to the end, and there was one or two who got things changed even after it was all over, and Antro had snipped them off.'

'They were a minority,' interrupted Antro. 'I don't suppose you'll be one of them. He's not one of them, Laki is he? You usually know the ones when you see them. You see dear, Laki's the one you have to arrange things with. Clotho and me, well we mainly does the necessary, which doesn't mean it's easy, no way, all that making is hard work and knowing exactly the right moment to cut it off, for everybody. Takes a lot of careful working out, it's quite mathematical you see. But I suppose the negotiation stuff is probably the hardest, and Laki does that, don't you dear?'

'I don't think he's quite got it yet, Antro,' Clotho interjected, we ought to introduce ourselves, then he will be able to work it out if he's half the man I think he is. I'm Clotho, that's my full name, Clotho Horae at your service I make this material, it's called DNA strip nowadays. Her over there with the measuring rod is sister Lachesis, Laki for short, the rod's old fashioned, more a kind of symbolic thing now. Actually it's all digitalised and computerised nowadays. But we like to do it the old way from time to time just for the fun of it. Well, you don't know if these new fangled things will always work so we keeps up the manual version just in case. This here at the table, is sister Antropos, she snips it off, exactly at the last second. Like I say it's all automated, so we only have a bit of material here, to show you, some of yours and some people you know. The rest is at the works.'

Now it clicked for him. The Morae sisters, the Fates, spun, measured and cut to length, the lives of mortals. This was his life they held and played with in their hands as if it were a mere length of material. Piles of cut lengths lay around the platform. Lives lying about on the dusty concrete.

'See!' said Clotho triumphantly, he's got it now. 'We put it all together, not here usually, like I said, at the works. We're only here for your benefit actually. We nearly went back when you didn't come, but seeing as you made it we're at your service.'

'What do you want from me?' Alexander repeated weakly, shocked again by this latest manifestation of Zeus' followers. It seemed everyone wanted something from him today. 'I'm exhausted with all this. If I knew what I wanted I'd do something about it. As it is Hera wants something from me, Thea is making demands, and Zeus has given me an impossible job and you want me to take part in determining my fate. I thought you were supposed to do all that when I was born, and I had no way of doing anything about it.'

'That's a common fallacy,' observed Laki, measuring him up with her eye squinting at him along her rod. 'There's such a thing as luck, you know, chance, and you can make a lot of your own luck, especially by avoiding wrong decisions and being adventurous. Why Apollo got us all legless once so that Admetus could avoid his fate, it was a bad piece of work for his wife, but it turned out all right in the end, though it put a lot of people to a lot of trouble. Still, it goes to show things are not always inevitable if you know your way around.'

'What are you trying to tell me? That I can change the fate Zeus has in store for me?'

'Well,' chipped in Laki. 'You know Zeus doesn't control us. We have the last say even over him. But it's true you can't exactly change it so you can get out of it, if that's what you're driving at. It's more like you can be in some charge of the details and the outcomes, if you are careful about what you get up to. I can show you what I mean if you like, but it'll be hard for you to make it all out. We don't usually give previews, that can be dangerous for us, and it can be very upsetting when you know the truth. It needs a brave man to see into his future and go boldly on after. It's very costly on the psyche if you're not ready for it. What do you think?'

'What do I think?' he exclaimed. 'Why is it I have to do all the thinking round here, I thought you were all to

help me, that's what I heard Hera say. Come to think of it, that's what Pannie said, his job's to 'help me on'. Talking about him....where's he got to?

'Oh, don't you worry about him, he'll turn up when he's ready,' said Clotho. 'More to the point, are you going to take up Laki's offer? 'Cos it's time we got back to the works, Gaffer's given us a big job reviewing all our clients. We only came down here to give you a hand like Hera said, but it's your decision not ours. We tell it like it is and you decide.' She bent down and began to wind the cut DNA strips back into her drum including his own.

Then as if she had second thoughts she re-examined a few of them before picking one out, which she threw to Laki who caught it cleverly in mid air and allowed it to wind itself neatly onto her measuring rod.

'That's yours, Sonny Jim,' said Atro, waving her shears. 'See you in due course. Got to get back now.' Atro and Clotho, tidied up and set off arm in arm through the exit, leaving Alexander with Laki. Alexander glanced at his watch, four-fifteen, real-time had not budged, at this rate he'd never get out of the tube system.

'You'll not get out until you've decided,' said Laki. 'Time will start again only when you've decided. I can give you a preview if you want or not, you know, no sweat as far as I'm concerned, no big deal. I know it's not an easy decision. I'll quite understand if you say no and wait for a train out of here. Though where you'll go, and what you'll do will be more of a problem than if you knew. Knowledge like yours in a mortal is pretty powerful stuff. I've seen stronger minds than yours crumple, but then they didn't have your parental advantages, so I expect it's even steeper on that score. Still, like the girls said, time to go.'

'Hold on!' exclaimed Alexander. Laki turned. 'I'll look! What do I have to do?' Laki stopped and unwound the Life-strip from her measuring rod and fed it into a machine she carried in her London Transport shoulder bag.

'Right, this is like a video recorder, this...' and she threw him a small oblong device '...is the remote. It's just like the one you use at home for the telly. See there, at the entrance to the tunnel, it'll act like a screen. There's one thing though, ever since Hep got into electricity, he's been nuts over virtual reality, so you can get into the picture like, if you want. You just put on this headset, remote too, like the controller, no wires to get in the way. Want it?' Alexander fingered the remote and reached for the headset.

'I'll have to stay with you, 'cos we're not allowed to show too much, so I'll have to give you edited highlights. Personally I don't care how much you get, but company policy is not to give previews unless we have to and then only extracts, or else the Erinyes girls, the Furies, get upset and it's no joke if they get after you. Anyway I daresay you'll get to meet them in due course, but I'm running on too much already.'

Alexander viewed the instruments with trepidation. Laki, had sat down on the seat next to him to better balance the video machine and feed in the Life-strip. She got it all rigged up and signalled him to push the 'Play' button.

'Wait...wait a minute, this is going too fast for me!' exclaimed Alexander, do you mean to tell me that if I push this button the tunnel entrance will turn into a TV screen and show me my life to come?'

'What do you want to know? How the technology works or if what you will see is a 'This will be your Life' programme?' She laughed gaily.

Alexander for the umpteenth time that night was losing his bearings. Until now, the logic of events happening in sequence had kept him going. He knew more or less how he had got where he was and what seemed to be happening, but the content of the happenings was all dream stuff, built from scraps from his mind so that he thought he would soon wake up. As in a nightmare, he struggled to wake up, wanting it to be over. It was possible in the dream that his future would be available to him, but in real time this was impossible unless...

'You gottit, boychick'. Pannie appeared cross legged, balancing on a rail at the tunnel entrance. 'No dream matey, it's for real, 'cept that real time's on hold 'til yer makes up yer mind what yer gonna do. 'S'like the 'ole world's waitin' on yer t' make up yer mind.'

'Who asked you to chip in? You smelly old goat,' interjected Laki shortly. 'We're busy, so shut your trap while I explain a few things to this young chap. Seriously, do you want to know about how it works, or what it's going to do?'

'Neither, What I want to know is what is happening to me. Why me? What do Zeus and the Firm want? What have I got that singles me out from all the rest to change the very nature of humankind?'

'Oh that, that's all written in the life-strip. That's my job, it's been there all the time, your job's to try your best. What's in there's...well, you can see for yourself if you like. Once we used to tell oracles and that, but nowadays we're into technology, it's supposed to make it more believable, personally I prefer oracles, more mysterious, more fun. Still got to move with the aeons, fact of life; if you'll excuse the pun.'

Alexander felt he was not communicating what he meant. He tried a new tack, if he pushed his almost exhausted mind by an effort of will, perhaps he could get on level two with both of them and explain. There were too many one-off things happening, there was no pattern, no framework to explain anything that was happening to him. All he had to go on was stories of mythology got from Nemmi, which were peopled with the characters he was now meeting. It seemed that any one of the thousands of characters in the ancient Pantheon could suddenly pop along a timeline, from anywhere or anywhen on the Chronosphere and confront him with themselves as real characters. Two questions revolved around his mind like the twin helix of DNA itself. Were the ancient gods more than symbolic? Were they real, having tangible existence in their different time zone from mortals? Did they exist there separately but with the power to influence? Or were they notions and concepts embedded in the human collective unconscious? If it were the first then he was truly and magically transported into another dimension. If the second, then the more he delved into the machinations of his own mind the more he would experience the archetypal mind which he shared with everyone else, based on a species commonality in which this symbolism had a life directing force. That might be innovative enough to change the nature of people. If it could be done. But how would it? He was surprised at what came back to him on the 'sphere. In his effort to reach level two he had quite forgotten the open quality of the network. In his ignorance of the way the system functioned he seemed to have failed to get Pannie and Laki in a direct line and his thoughts were spread far and wide. There was a cacophony of incoming thought patterns, all broken up like busy short wave radio, only snatches were intelligible at any one time. As his head filled with this noise he broke off contact by another effort of will.

'Wow! you ain't 'arf stirred 'em up!' remarked Pannie, from his front seat position on the railway line. 'You can't just make it work like that, boychik, you gotta be clearer'n that, less aggressive like. See, when yer sends an open message wivout no 'andle, any ole'bugger can reply, 'n 'cos they ain't got much else to do, lots of 'em just cruises around lookin' fer a bit of a giggle. Well you just give 'em an easy question what they've all got their own opinions on like an' they all came back at yer all at once and blasted yer 'ead. It can drive yer daft if yer does that too much. Some of you mortals what got on it by accident 'cos they was susceptible an' that, well, they was stark, starin' whatsit, they was, in no time 'Who was it you was after? Pr'aps I can 'elp yer technique a bit eh?'

'Well I was aiming my thoughts at you and Laki here, I thought you could give me some answers.'

'I'm sorry', said Laki. 'I don't keep answers to that sort of question, they're for the Names really, we just do our jobs, eh Pannie? Like they're management, that's why you couldn't aim your questions at us.'

'Yeah, boychik, she's right, mind you, it don't stop some of them other silly buggers from 'avin' a go, and nearly deafenin' yer, but they don't know nuffin' really.'

'Look, Sonny, I'll have to go soon - really I do, do you want to see your Life-strip or not? I can't stay here all day waiting for you to decide.' Laki stood arms akimbo.

'I don't know!' exclaimed Alexander grossly perturbed. 'I want to know what's going on, I mean properly, I don't just want to know things, I want to know what it's about. Will your Life-strip highlights tell me that or does it just show events without explanations?'

'It's not my Life-strip, Sonny Boy, it's yours!' with which retort she disengaged the strip from the machine on her knee, stood, snatched up her rod and set off the way her sisters had gone.

'Hey!' exclaimed Alexander. 'What about my Life-strip!'

'You're not ready!' she shouted over her shoulder without turning back. 'I don't ever give previews to people who can't make decisions - too risky!' She concluded with something else which Alexander could not hear for she was turning into the exit tunnel as she spoke.

'You made a right hash of that, boychik' Pannie had leaped alongside him 'You should of seen the pi'tcher, then you'd've knowed. Save a lotta muckin' about later,' he sighed knowingly.

'Knowed what!' Alexander yelled in utter exasperation into the grin dancing about in front of him.

'What wus in the pi'tcher! Blimey O'Reilly - thick as short planks or what!'

'Don't...don't...you dare start that again, I've had enough!.

'Well yer don't listen does yer? There was them Fates gonna do yer a favour what most people 'ud give their eye-teeth for and you 'don't know'. But yer do know boychik, yer jus' don't want ter do nuffin' about it. An' that's why you wouldn't look. Yer not a scaredy cat, like I thought at first, you're a lazy 'ound, that's what. I've been watchin' yer. Yer like all this gods and goddesses stuff, you ain't scared on 'em like most mortals I seen 'oo goes bananas when they sees 'em, you likes 'em an' appreciates 'em. An' they likes you, they does, an' they wants yer to 'elp 'em save Gaia from you mortals an' you're too blinkin' idle t' gerr'off yer bum 'n do sumfink'. You ain't got long yer knows that don'cha! It ain't no joke, 2012, old Zeus he don't mess about when he's made up 'is mind he don't.'

'That's just the point,' Alexander paced up and down the platform, agitated. 'What can I do? Me! I can't decide if this gods stuff is real or in my head. If it's real, everyone'll think I'm a nut case and they'll put me away. If it's not real I really do deserve to be put away. I don't have too strong a reputation for sanity at the moment anyway. I'm a nobody in JNO and I've only got the good will of my mum to thank for that. How can I do anything?'

At this the little man started running all over the platform, up the walls and down the other side over the tracks and back onto the platform. He was throwing his arms about and shrieking.

'By all the bleedin' gods, Zeus an' all on yer, is this bloke fer real? Stupid or what? 'Ow come yer chose this idle twat?'

He grabbed Alexander by the arms and using considerable force, sat him down on the edge of the platform so that his legs dangled over the tracks. Jumping down so his head was on a level with Alexander's knees, he gritted his misshapen goat-like teeth and forced his brain onto level two all the while holding for dear life onto Alexander's wrists with a painful vice-like grip. Together their minds soared, Alexander felt Pannie absorb his thoughts entirely into his own and wrap them as if for safekeeping while he probed the Chronosphere with his own. He was searching for other thought patterns on the 'sphere which gave way to the urgency of his thrust

until he met another mind bank with which he engaged. Alexander's mind felt Pannie release it into the safekeeping of the new, while maintaining a hold on one corner so it would maintain contact. The new mind bank had a familiar sensation. It had to belong to Hera.

Although this time doubt was present, it was less strong. Pannie was right. Doubt was giving way to curiosity, idleness to a strong interest in possibility. As the communication deepened, layer upon layer of possibilities built up strongly, supple yet forceful. In the bowels of London directly under the green turf of Lords Cricket Ground where a bright dawn washed gold over the perfect sward, a small, hairy goat-like little man in a scruffy morning coat and spats, lay with his feet dangling in the dust and sweet wrappers, out to the world, his head resting in the lap of a youth. Alexander had to act fast to yank the inert body up onto the platform, before the first train of the day rocked its noisy way into the station.



## Chapter 11

Alexander, rose the next morning as if coming home from far away. He woke in a fog of impressions which gradually cleared into a growing awareness that today's world into which he was entering had irrecoverably changed since yesterday morning when he had got up to go to work at JNO. It was a little while before he realised the voice in his head came from outside himself and was that of his mother, Penny.

'We're off in half an hour!' she was shouting up the stairs which led to his flat. 'If you want to come to Markham with me and Hep, you'll have to get a move on!'

Around him were the familiar objects of his bedroom. The poster of the chromium plated Harley on the wall, his skis propped up in the corner. His ice-pick hanging on the wall. As his mind falteringly grasped the real world, his mind struggled with what had happened to him in the last twelve hours. He had seemed to have existed in an equally tangible world, but on a different plane. He wondered if he'd been dreaming. But the experience was too real, too vividly remembered for that to be an adequate explanation. The structure of the world he lived in had expanded to include the world of Lucina which now ran alongside his old world. His connection with that had split at the point when he met Lucina at the lift at JNO and was now aware his life was separated into parallel lines. At this thought he half expected Pannie to appear and confirm this as reality. But he didn't.

He wondered how it was possible that Penny could treat the new day as if nothing had happened. Penny's matter of factness about getting up and going out, he realised with a jolt, confirmed her absence from this other reality. He wanted to tell her what had happened, but he knew already he couldn't begin to explain so as to make any sense of it. And if he could, he'd only raise unanswerable questions to add to the perplexities that already existed between them. Wow! In Lucina's world he was on his own with 'Them'.

Penny had no insight into the 'sphere. He also amazed himself at his use of the term as if it was quite normal. It was with a sense of uncertainty and disbelief he recalled bundling himself and a dishevelled Pannie Ljeschi first into the Tube and eventually getting into a taxi. Pannie had nipped out at a set of lights muttering something about feeling better now and Alexander got home and to bed like the wrecked partygoer the driver had thought he was.

He threw on his clothes, wearing the same jacket he wore the evening before, and noticed the neatly folded mesh of the mantle of Zeus still in his pocket. He did a double take, as the crowding reality of the coming day and the voice of his mother, urging him to get up again, made it increasingly difficult to believe in this object from this other, parallel world.

Unfolding the garment, he threw it across his shoulders and observed himself in the full length mirror of the wardrobe door. It was so fine as to be virtually invisible. It seemed to change into the colour and texture of his clothes. The moment he had it on, he sensed the vibrations of the Chronosphere, and felt he could easily thrust a thought feeler into it if he was so minded. What stopped him was a need to get downstairs and join his mother's day.

'Alexander, hurry up, get a move on, coffee's made, we haven't got all day!' The insistent tone drew him downstairs.

'There's time for coffee and there are bagels warm in the oven,' said Penny as he blundered sleepily into the kitchen. 'Hep'll be here soon, we want to get off before the traffic builds up.'

Thank the gods, he thought, for warm bagels and cream cheese at least. He grinned at Penny and set onto his breakfast ravenously. Suddenly he felt better than he had for years, cosy and warm in his family kitchen with his mother rushing about with papers and brief-case as she had all through his childhood, ready for the big

world, into which he now had a place of his own. He was acutely aware of the invisible mantle giving him access to the 'sphere, and found to his surprise that he missed the presence of Pannie, but sensed a comforting presence at the back of his mind along with other intangible thought-feelings that might be from Thea. His mood was bright and high, as when he had woken from sleeping on Nemmi's lap as a child. He slit the bagels and piled cream cheese high. Every time Penny came into his field of vision he grinned cheesily at her and at the brilliant day streaming through the picture-window of the kitchen.

'You're pretty cheerful considering the time you got in this morning. I didn't think you'd be coming. Thea was home ages before you when I got back...said you wouldn't be long, said something about you wanting to think some things out. I was... thought...you might have...you know, got in with some of your old colleagues, especially when you weren't home after I'd gone to bed.'

'I'm fine,' he muttered through a mouthful of bagel and cheese. Washing it down with a great gulp of coffee he continued breathless with excitement.

'Great day, eh? Ma, I'm really looking forward to Markham and meeting Hep. I feel I really want to get into JNO and do something. I feel like I've wasted loads of time worrying about things that don't matter.' He was quite boyish.

'Well I was worried,' Penny observed. 'After our talk yesterday, and the way Lucina seemed to get to you, and...well...the way you seemed when I left you, and what Thea said about you getting out of the taxi and well...I supposed I was a bit edgy too, Lucina meeting you like that and everything.'

She seemed ready to say more, but his bright cheerfulness made her stop, there was no point going into those things now, no doubt they would crop up again. Hep was due any minute and she needed to get all her things together. They both heard the front door open and Alexander felt the mesh round his shoulders quiver with minute but tangible vibrations. It was as if the material itself became excited. It transmitted itself to his own mounting sense of high expectations, made even more stimulating by the shining day outside.

When Hep Mulciber entered the room, he filled the space in which he stood as if it were made to measure by some divine tailoring of cosmic materials. The very molecules of the air recognised his presence and rearranged themselves to accommodate him. Other people took up space, shouldered it away to make room. Hep Mulciber commanded the space around him. It seemed to accommodate itself to his presence and mould to his person, as if he had ultimate power over all material things. He assimilated the molecular arrangement of everything and imposed his will upon it. All this came to Alexander through the net around his shoulders which seemed to greet Hep with quivering delight. Alexander knew through the connection that Hep recognised the mantle of Zeus and was surprised at the reverence he received as the wearer.

'Hi Hep,' said Penny. 'Bang on time. I don't think you've met Alexander, Thea's twin. I thought we would bring him with us, show him a thing or two about what's going on in our bit of JNO I was going to do it later when he'd got to know more about the basics of the Firm, but Lucina seems to think he's ready now, and in any case we can use all the help we can get. I hope that's okay with you, I know how touchy you can be about revealing what we're up to at Markham but this is different so I didn't.....'

'Is your boy!' Hep boomed, casting a friendly glance at Alexander. Almost as square as he was tall, Alexander's first impression of him, chest up, was of an international prop-forward, massively shouldered with forearms powerful enough to squeeze the life from an above average bear. He must weigh twenty-five stone, he thought, but without an ounce of superfluous flesh. His large head was topped by black scrubby hair cropped short making his large ears prominent. His face was a craggy mountain weathered by centuries of winter tempests, overtopped by the thickets of his eyebrows. The eyes bright and searching, wanted to know everything going on around him, their glint checked everything in the room. The hand he proffered was as large as a garden spade hard, calloused and scarred, the finger ends splayed as from much toil. From the waist

down it was another story altogether. He was made in two halves. The top part powerful enough to put a bull to shame, the lower, weak and feeble, the legs supported by a strange gold coloured contraption of irons which gave him his only support. He was thus only half as tall as you might expect.

Despite his physical disabilities, he had come into the kitchen from the front door as silently as a cat. With unexpected agility he approached Alexander to envelop his hand in his great, powerful paw. The expression on Alexander's face made him laugh to a brazen echo which made the Venetian blinds rattle. His voice on Level One matched his physique, large and enveloping. He was not given much to talking and seemed slightly uncomfortable communicating.

'Don't be surprised by me, son of Penelope, I was there when you were displayed by Zeus. There is much to learn about things you do not know. Watch, learn, keep control of your surprises. We go forward, with much to do, always making new from what is already.'

Through the web covering his shoulders he felt the big presence communicate itself to him. 'I see you wear my net as his symbol, so I will be your friend. But I would like to know how he got it, since it has been lost these many aeons. But we will talk again other times - now we go.'

Penny, who was not privy to this thought-meeting, gathered her things and walked out to the waiting car. Hep gave Alexander an unmistakable wink, and was out to the car fast enough to open the door open for his mother, whose hands were too full to do it for herself. She smiled her thanks, Hep was nothing if not the perfect gentleman. She was a little in love with him, as many women were. There was something irresistibly fascinating about him. Alexander followed and was about to get in the back of the Firm's grey-liveried Mercedes, when Hep motioned him into the front seat. 'Your mother works and spreads herself out. You will be comfortable here.'

Hep put the limousine into drive and they set off into the London traffic. It was some eighty miles to Markham. Alexander calculated it would take about two and a half hours, given the heavy traffic. No sooner were they out on to the North Circular than they were straight into a log jam made worse by the all too evident road-widening scheme that had had North West London snarled up for the last three months. Hep snorted to himself as they ground to what promised to be a long halt.

Then he did something which set Alexander's mind boggling. Penny was absorbed in the back tapping an email into her lap-top. Hep turned to him.

'Regard, son of Penelope.'

He grinned and touched a button on the steering wheel, which Alexander had thought was the cruise control. For a while nothing happened, Alexander watched Hep who continued grinning. For all his size and craggy visage his eyes held all the delight of a small boy with a new toy.

'You observe, son of Penelope....it works.'

Alexander peered through the windscreen at the line of traffic ahead which suddenly seemed to give way to the thrusting nose of the limousine. Soon the car was gathering speed and the stalled traffic ahead appeared to move over to the left like water displaced by an invisible bow-wave. A new, clear lane appeared before them and the large car slid past the other traffic.

'Refraction, kind of,' said Hep simply and with triumph, still grinning broadly. 'Been working on it long time, light waves and atoms, they bend.'

Alexander's exhilaration was enhanced by this new marvel. He had just about got used to the impossible

happening in the Chronosphere, and was unprepared for miracles in ordinary life.

'Applied physics my boy - good eh?' said Hep his grin still splitting his face. 'Many thousand years to get right. It needs a lot of energy, the car's electric's can't do it for more than ten miles, too weak, burns out. But is great for jams, I work on it. Is only stop gap, can't be marketed, of course many people would want it. Real solution is different means of physical transport and communication; reduce need for many journeys by car. This is a good introduction to kind of work we do at Markham. Top secret. Hera knows we do things, but not what. Only Penny, me and Ric, know details - now you will learn. Our staff knows parts of it but not the big picture. Of course Zeus knows but he leaves it to us...no energy himself...he trust me but he don't like me very much.'

'What are you doing at Markham?' said Alexander thinking on level one. Hep's reply surprised him.

'I don't operate on L.1 while on project,' he said out loud. 'You, neither. That's whole point.'

Alexander was confused again and his mood shifted down a gear, more mystery, he thought.

Hep ignored the thought pattern though Alexander was sure he had picked it up on the 'sphere, attested to by the quivering of the net round his shoulders.

'Listen, son of Penelope, you must not wear net from Zeus at Markham. Too dangerous, might fry you alive. Take off now and put it away.' His tone left no room for argument and he slipped out of the net, folding it neatly into his pocket.

'Take care of it, you will soon have need of it, but not now. Listen, son of Penelope, Markham is off the 'sphere altogether. I have invented blocking device which even Old Man Himself can't get through without an effort that put him to sleep for a month. Remember, whole idea of Markham is your mother's before Zeus made his announcement. You surprised eh? She is remarkable woman, Hera take to her very much, is first mortal woman she really take to so much. I suppose is because this time she make deal with Zeus. Penny she know nothing of this. Penny is ahead of game without knowing. She persuaded Hera to back up her plan. You know she's not able to use 'sphere for communication, so Zeus agrees for me to work on a mortal network that will mimic Chronosphere. I better tell you now, son of Penelope, we work close together she and I. I work for her alone, you understand, not Hera, what I do is for Penny's vision of future for mortals. I promise Prometheus to help mortals all I could when Zeus made me fix Prometheus' chain to the rock so he could punish him for giving away fire.'

Alexander turned his head to Penny, who was preoccupied on her mobile 'phone and had raised the glass dividing screen to give her privacy. By now the traffic had thinned enough for Hep to have switched off the refraction device and they were soon bowling along the middle lane of the M40 at exactly the speed limit.

'She cannot hear us,' said Hep. 'Or I would not talk. She is suspicious of me, you too because of Thea and Lucina. Zeus say 'No' very seriously to putting her on the 'sphere, though Hera shout at him. Big row, lot of making up and more row, also big row about you being connected to it. Zeus dead against it, he say you not up to it, not the stuff of heroes - sorry, he say it, not me. Me I don't care, Penny and me can do what's needed without it, but Zeus change goalpost, he's cut mortal time-line and now it very tough for us. Once he give Lucina long time, open ended, to make good for Gaia, but he decide to speed things up, for devilment. I think generation or two more not have hurt too much, but he like idea of Mayan Indians who stop calculating at 2012, was far enough for him. Prometheus is in a big rage and Athena very unhappy. Hera nearly start new rebellion but she change her mind. She don't think either that what happen to mortals important enough for enormous battle again like last time. I am relieved. That was very bad time for us. Zeus has other reasons, I know him, he never do anything for nothing even when he is as raging bull. He too upset about Gaia, all of us upset, she is our Mother, we owe her everything, even more than you, so she must not be weakened too much.'

Shortening time-line without warning makes it difficult for us now. Chronos, he stirs. We thought we had many generations to do the work, now we have only one or two. This where you come in son of Penelope. Hera forced Zeus to put you on 'sphere, because he change goal-posts so sudden. She has more faith in you than he has. She believes that you will manage Hades and Chronos and so give us a fighting chance by deadline.' Hep stopped as a new thought surfaced in his mind. 'You know what?' He continued, slightly puzzled. 'All the usual oracles say nothing - that is strange. I think Old Thunderer has put block on them, the Fates, the Horae sisters tell me nothing. Not even he can make them silent, so they got to be in league. There is big buzz in halls of Zeus. People take sides. I think Zeus will hold off a new insurrection of gods. But Hades and his father Chronos, have different agenda and like last time, long time ago, they feel again their strength. I don't know for Prometheus or Athena, but I have belly-full last time and will not fight again. I draw line, but will give all help through Penny. Hephaestos keeps his promise to Prometheus.' He nodded assent to himself.

'I'm not altogether following you. I'd get it on L2,' said Alexander. 'If you'd get on with me, wait while I put on the net.'

'Outside work of JNO you can use net how you like - but not while we work on project. That point of it, we work on alternative. It no use if everyone all on 'sphere, they'd all have to be immortal and that's no good, they'd not be human; is contradiction, we need another way.'

Hep stopped speaking, he had said enough, he was not usually so talkative, for him action was more important than reflection. He was however, very worried about the lad. From what he had already heard on the 'sphere, Hera and Zeus had not resolved their argument about him. The weather though seemed to indicate a truce for the time being. Knowing the Old Thunderer's ability to be forgiving only until the next time, he thought it was as well to take advantage of the peace and take an interest in the boy, to use the time to teach him something before he was required to act. After all, his lineage was good and any child of Penny had to have something going for this fifth and definitely last race of mortals. Zeus's son had a potential edge on others, but not all his sons had turned out useful in the past where humans were concerned. He was aware the race could use some heroics at this crucial time, he had hoped Penny was to be the one, but she was too behind the scenes and he was sure these days heroes were not enough, it had to be a team effort. Also Hep was not certain there were enough Olympians ready for the task of saving the human race. Alliances might well have changed too much since the last challenge. Tempers were up now, Zeus had shortened the timeline. The old Thunderer was also tired - anything might happen.

As they drove through the Oxfordshire countryside Alexander couldn't help thinking this bit of Gaia didn't seem too bad in the spring sunshine. The rolling hills and vales of North Oxford, were well cared for by the occupants of the nestling villages they were passing as they left the highroad and plunged into the lanes leading to Markham. Maybe there was more time than he was being led to believe. He knew most if not all of the pretty cottages were really part of Oxford's commuter belt. The rolling slopes of yellow rape and spring corn masked an agribusiness that squeezed family farmers from debt to heart attack and suicide and so was another form of pressure on Gaia. Still, on the surface, the land was as neatly turned out as Demeter herself might have wished.

Markham introduced itself to the visitor by a quaint gate-house. An automated ironwork gate, wrought with infinite detail, swept itself majestically open as they approached. They rattled noisily over the cattle grid, for there were sheep grazing on the slopes which curved away pleasantly from the metal track which wound restfully round the contours of the park. They passed the arched folly, crossed thunder bridge spanning the artificial lake, until making the sharp right turn to the main approach they skirted the slender mock-Egyptian obelisk and cruised down the slope to the main house.

Its frontage was embellished by a tall railing of more fantastic ironwork which enclosed a large gravelled courtyard, where the car slid to a halt alongside at least twenty other grey JNO liveried cars of different

makes, none of them cheap. Alexander always liked this entrance. The house was not particularly special architecturally, but it was set beautifully and was perfectly hidden from prying eyes.

'Seems a few of us had the same idea this weekend,' said Penny, getting down first. 'You two seem to have been getting on pretty well. That's nice, I thought you would.'

Contemplating them together in these surroundings, she was so full of pride in Alexander that the dread Hep carried permanently and silently for her almost forced itself into speech, he so much did not want her to be let down by events.

Hep returned a hollow smile. For a start he wasn't so sure the lad was going to match up to the promise she held for him. He liked this son of his grandfather and protégé of his mother; he deserved his chance to prove himself. For Penny's sake he made a silent vow to give him all the help he could and persuade any other of the Olympians to assist from the background if that was the only way. His greatest fear, apart from Alexander not matching up, were the non-aligned forces. He could no longer gauge if they had thought the pronouncement of Zeus' last will and testament was a weakness brought on by years of neglect, to launch a new offensive and thereby unleash a new war of the gods. There was also the new phenomenon of Yahweh to put into the balance. All of which might lead to catastrophe for the Olympians - whatever it might do to humans.

In the overthrow of Chronos, Gaia had entrusted her well being to The Olympian brothers by lot. This time should Zeus' ultimate victory prove to be premature through humankind's failure of her proper guardianship; there would be unleashed such a fury in Tartarus that he feared Chronos would take his terrible and final revenge. Gaia would naturally want any of her other offspring, including Hades, to deliver her from such a failure of Zeus', despite him being her favourite. In his opinion and that of many others, Zeus was running a monumental risk from his last will and testament. Hephaestos carried no torch for this race apart from his debt to Prometheus and his respect for Hera, but the gauntlet was down and he would have no choice but to side with the Twelve major gods, against all comers despite his reservations.

Alexander noted Hep's concern as his connection with the 'sphere seemed to have given him an increased sensitivity. Thinking to enhance the feeling and learn more, obscured from view by the car, he slipped on the golden net in an attempt to contact Hep's thoughts. Finding no response he cursed himself for forgetting Hep's warning and he quickly slipped it off again before Hep could notice this act of misbehaviour. Hep's abilities seemed even greater as he supposed it needed real power to blank off the 'sphere, and, real courage too as it was probably against the will of Zeus.

He was glad Hep seemed prepared to be his friend and was shaken deeply that he was with someone who both could and did contradict the Old Thunderer himself and so he followed his mother and the swift and silent Hep.

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Hep was right. Zeus' last will and testament had not only set Olympus in turmoil. Old wounds from elsewhere, physical and psychological, although long healed were never forgotten and still ached. Gaia herself, less blameless than she would have it bruited, shrewdly let her own doubt be known and thereby assisted the commotion, after all she did not know who would win and needed to stimulate all the alternatives to ensure her survival.

Slowly with an infinitesimal stir, rumour, questions, old plots, old hurts were added to the rumble of excitement, and the murmur grew inexorably into a hubbub. It rippled insidiously along the timelines, and slid through the Chronosphere. No one on the network failed to register the subtle shift of mood.

Few showed much notice at first which said a good deal about the neglect of the system in recent aeons. But

many great events, have insignificant beginnings. Things have their proper occasion, as Lachesis would say, they are woven in the strands of time not to be plucked out. The timelines of the future vibrate with potential, ready, for action and counter action to bring them to fruition. The potential of experience is laid down in the ebb and flow of time-past and causes will have their effects as the present travels onwards.

Memories, long buried, but not forgotten, stirred in the breasts of sleeping giants and monsters of the deep. Scaly tails of great beasts thrashed as they dreamed of revenge in age long slumbers in dark, far places. Hydra heads twisted in their sleep. Single eyes roved beneath leathern lids.

The Chronosphere reaches through the realms of the Olympians, but it scarcely penetrates the divide of Earth and Tartarus, in the Underworld, where time does not pass but accumulates. Hades, the absent brother of Zeus has only twice visited the upper air. He holds tight to his own world, Emperor of the spirits of the massive throngs of the endless past. Centred at the eye of the Id, holding thought from the beginnings of consciousness, he harboured dreams of ultimate power and he knew well how even the strongest power would in the long run show weakness which could unravel all their accomplishments. Waiting was no problem for him. He had no need of journeying on the Chronosphere, no use for time, for all creatures eventually came his way. Time-past was his realm and he grew larger, inevitably. Persephone, his wife, alone, on her bi-annual wandering above, carried news of the world back to the halls of Hades, deep in the underworld. Now she had brought doubt and doubt was a chink in the wall between his Tartarus and the realm of Zeus. Doubt was weakness, uncertainty was like a virus in the psyche of a god. In the realms of Hades there was no such thing as doubt. The past was always certain, giving it the advantage when wavering occurs.

Hades was not yet ready for action. Zeus had surprised everyone. Despite the breach of doubt, Hades still needed allies, had systems to set up. Even Gaia herself was a potential ally. So many souls had humankind condemned to Tartarus, especially in recent centuries, so many were the souls that had flowed into the pools of Lethe and walked the paths and orchards of the cities of Erebus and Elysium that even Chronos, released from his chains by Hades and holding court in defeat and malcontent, felt anew possibilities he had never thought would come again.

## Chapter 12

When Penny and Lucina moved the JNO operation from Ios to England and they opened Markham as a hidden base, they had their only real row. Walking around the grounds and pointing things out to each other they were discussing alterations that needed to be made and Lucina was full of queenly zeal. She stalked around the perimeter pointing out the changes she saw happening. 'See there, Penelope. Here will be a new communications block, here, you see it, what views it will have over the lake! Now just look at the conservatory. Ugh! What a mess they have allowed it to become!' she strode down a low bank which led to a dilapidated rose garden beyond which the orangery had fallen into ruin. With a sweep of her arm she exclaimed, 'we'll clear all that. Ne? I see a new swimming pool there, for relaxation from all the hard work. Isn't it so Penelope? Oh yes, it's not Hellas, but this is a beautiful land too. I tell Zarian, he doesn't believe in this land having beauty you know. Well I tell him it is so different.' She turned abruptly and stalked on imperiously as only she could towards the lake. 'Here, it's such a good lake. Beautiful. Ahh! Smell the air, so relaxing. We'll stock it with fish, and there you see, in middle we'll make an island with a pretty bower. Good work needs good surroundings, isn't it so? Yes Penelope?'

Penny felt like a head girl following her headmistress around. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

'Ah, yes, there you see will be the golf. People like golf, yes? More deals done in golf game than anywhere, is so? Ne? And there, will be the centre for horses. Close to nature and the animal world, horses. People take on right perspectives with horses and riding, we'll make riding tracks through the woods over there.'

Breathlessly, she strode off towards the area where she had indicated the communications block was to go. 'Now here Penelope, we'll build the communications block. Two floors I think. Bottom floor for the technical stuff and top floor for the office I think. But Hep will decide that. Ne? I think so. Communications we agree is key to Markham centre. We agree this? Yes? I think is so. Good. Now then over there...'

'Who is Hep?' Penny asked, her ears pricking up.

'What did you say dear?' said Lucina in full flow.

'I said who is Hep?'

'Don't you worry about Hep he'll take care of communication business, he brilliant at all that sort of thing. Now then, you will need to organise a good security system.'

As Lucina went on ever more animatedly, Penny sat on a low, lichen spotted balustrade, fronting onto the distant woods which were reflected perfectly in the mirror of the lake. She felt her attention drifting away and was falling into the beauty of the place. She was having another of her out of body experiences she often had with Lucina, feeling distracted and out of things while being present. She pulled herself together with a jolt. Enough was enough.

'Lucina, please answer me. I asked you who Hep was?'

'And I said to you. He's going to be the communications engineer. There's no one better believe me. He's my boy. Brilliant. I'm sending him from New York.'

'No, Lucina, I don't care who he is, or how brilliant he is. You're not sending him from New York. This is my operation. We agreed. So if I want Hep, whoever, I send to New York for him. Is that clear.'

'Yes yes, I send Hep it's agreed. Now then what I propose for.....' She hesitated and turned to Penny. 'What did you say? You don't want Hep to come? Of course you do, he the best. Silly girl!'



'Lucina you know I respect you. I couldn't have come this far without you, but we agreed it's to be my operation. I choose who. If that's not the case please say so now and I'll forget it. And I'm not being a silly girl. Please treat me with the same respect as I treat you. I can't run this operation if you're going to be interfering all the time.'

'Me interfere! You're very stupid if you think me interfering. Who do you think I am, ne? I Lucina always keeps her promises. I promise you this young lady, don't you dare think I interfere! Who do you think you're dealing with? I am Lucina Dodona, not some person from the street!'

Lucina tossed her fine head and made to stalk off towards the house. Penny did not move but was beside herself with anger. They were both angry. She shouted after Lucina, 'I resign, okay! Have it your own way Mrs. The Great Dodona! Do it your way, but you do it without me! I quit!' she waited a second or two and then added. 'I get sole charge without being nursemaided by New York or that's it!'

Lucina turned back to face her, her eyes smiling, a wry expression on her face. 'I'm sorry I make you angry my cuckoo, but you make me angry to doubt me.' Suddenly she was all sweetness and light. 'I only want the best for JNO the same as you. See here, I'll make deal. You take Hep on my recommendation. Believe me I know. You need him. Without Hep you'll fail. In all else you shall have full control of anything you want, my dear,' she said winningly. 'But you must have Hep. Without him you will fail my sweet. Hep will truly be a great help. You will like him and he you. Take Hep and I will never...hmm... interfere. Is it a deal?'

She'd agreed. What else could she do? As it turned out Hep was happy to be a kind of general consultant to the enterprise as a whole. She grew to adore him, and like everyone else was in awe of his manipulation of matter, his grasp of physics and mathematics. But still at the root of her, she was wary. In the same way as she had acquiesced to the upbringing of Alexander through Mnemosyne, Penny had been content to accept what she knew would be invaluable assistance. She never however, gave herself up completely to any of the people she met who were connected directly to Lucina.

To have inexplicably left her mother, her friends and her previous life for Lucina, after giving herself so utterly to Alexis all those years ago, had been enough giving of herself. It had left her with a fierce need for independence and an absolute fear of dependency. Her contact with Lucina had reinforced the wisdom of this attitude. She hoped Alexander's independent spirit would make him react the same way.

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As she left the JNO limousine and made her way to the main entrance at Markham, she was sure 'they' had already been talking to him - beginning with yesterday's visitation by Lucina.

Of course they had brought him up for their own reasons. She had not forgotten Lucina holding the new born infant to her breast. She was afraid they would involve him in their activities for reasons that were beyond her understanding. Paradoxically this knowledge only reinforced her resolve. If they had Alexander under their authority, she would work even harder than before to accomplish her work by her own efforts. Having Alexander meant they had everything of hers. They couldn't ask any more of her. She couldn't stop them. But she could distance herself from them.

She had reached a point in her work now, albeit with Hep's help, that even if Lucina was to explain everything, she was sure she would refuse to be involved. It was essential that she kept herself and her work within herself, in bounds which she could control. She had no desire nor any actual need to think beyond this. Knowing nothing of the Chronosphere, she found it best to keep these potent people at a respectful distance.

She gave them the respect due to their influence which she was unable to deny but that was all. JNO's projects were supervised on a day to day basis by Ric Trefoil her Project Manager. Hep had invented the electronic

system which backed them up, but it was Penny and Ric who made it all work, who met the people, ironed out the day to day problems and developed the Firm.

Only she, Hep and Ric, knew to what extent GAIANET scooped into its vast electronic maw the endless swathes of raw data, tirelessly swirling round the globe. In many ways that had been the easier part. The biggest problem had been sifting the huge mass of material and making useful sense of it by distilling out coherent information about the ways people affected the environment. The really important breakthrough was Hep's creation of HIGO. This interpreted and then predicted the effects of this knowledge.

When the world went digital, Penny had seen to it that as much information as possible, made its way through all the pathways that could be tapped and funnelled into to her information base to test the interpretation skills of HIGO. And if she were HIGO's queen, Ric was its king. Not even Hep, its inventor, had the same level of skill in it's use as they had.

Unaware of the Chronosphere, they did not know that he already had all the access he needed of his own on this parallel, vastly superior, primordial, system.

So amid the beginning of a growing buzz on the 'sphere, and the building up of knowledge through HIGO, a wary Penny and a preoccupied Hep, crossed the courtyard to the entrance door of Markham, followed by a wondering Alexander. The entrance door led into the same dark panelled lobby where Alexander had sought the keys to his room on his coming of age party. Now a reception counter prevented further entry. Uninvited visitors could go no further but were received with courtesy by well trained receptionists who made sure the surveillance system had them tagged all the time they were in or near Markham. The tagging system invented by Hep for security, discrete and unseen, logged onto anybody or anything, which entered a five mile perimeter. It checked everything about the intruding presence that it could and was capable of rendering any life form helpless, at a simple voice command.

The receptionist passed them through into an ante-room off the main hall of the house. Hidden GAIANET scanners probed them for recognition, noted the genetic patterns linking Alexander to Penny and to Hep, and set up some pertinent questions on the monitor of the Chief of Security, who met the trio in the crush-hall.

Penny re-introduced Alexander to Marina as chief of security. Now a young woman, she was as less like a chief of security as it was possible to be. Hep nodded his hello while again Alexander was unable to take his eyes off her.

The rest of his world simply ceased to exist, there was only this woman filling his mind and its horizons. If he never saw her again, he thought, he would remember her always. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his mind he recalled the human race emanated from Africa. He felt now he might be in the presence of the first woman herself. Although she was not tall, about five feet-six inches, she was perfectly proportioned, radiating a lithe muscular power which he found groin-rendingly sensual. A clinging red and gold, two-piece suit accentuated her tuned, well contoured body. Her confident posture gave her an irresistible presence and her large candid eyes and the broad planes of her face, invited one to honesty, as if to lie would invite a disapproval hardly to be endured. Alexander was totally mesmerised by her. She seemed to fill all the space of his gaze. He was acutely aware of her restrained but intense sexuality, while her personal authority said look all you like, but don't touch. He sensed she was aware of the effect she had on him, and he wondered if it was just him or whether she did this to all men.

'I shall have to vet Alexander,' she observed, matter of factly, gazing directly at Penny, as if expecting her to object in some way. 'You know the rules.' Alexander couldn't wait to be vetted alone with her whatever it was she had to do.

'Okay,' said Penny. 'We'll go on ahead to meet Ric at the HIGO centre, bring him along after you've done.'

Alexander followed Marina into to a small room behind the reception area, made him sit on a chair, placed a light plastic helmet on his head and shone two laser beams at each of his temples. She installed herself behind a bank of monitors. Alexander expected to feel something from helmet clamped to his head, but the whole process was entirely without sensation. He was disappointed. What went on in his head had changed since his awareness of the Chronosphere. He at first thought this Marina was one of 'Them' but she wasn't. He somehow knew that. But he now expected her to tune him into new experiences by her manipulation of his thoughts by this machinery. The electrodes however seemed merely to scan his brain activity to check, what precisely? He had no idea. He was glad however, without quite knowing why, that this wonderful woman was clearly not one of 'Them.'

Had he seen what Marina could see, he would have been more satisfied with the potency of the machinery. While it was immediately apparent to her that he was security clear in that he shared DNA patterns with his mother, his reading was quite unlike hers. The only other patterns she had ever seen which remotely resembled Alexander's were Hep's and Thea's and all three were unlike that of any other of the hundreds of people she had scanned. The only logical conclusion was that Alexander shared common ancestry with Hep and Thea and she wondered if Penny knew. She had been surprised about Thea's, which was different in inexplicable ways from the others and which had resembled nothing of Penny and which was also allied to Alexander and Hep. Her detective's brain logged this knowledge and when she gave Alexander clearance on the data base she noted this remarkable information and secretly marked the file by a code she alone knew, to indicate something unusual to be followed up if necessary.

'Okay. That's it. You're clear. If you would be so good as to follow me, we'll catch up with your mother and Hep over in the HIGO wing.'

They crossed a the main hall which was empty of activity and mounted a wide wooden staircase to a long gallery leading towards the main bedrooms. As he followed Marina, he was captivated by the movement of her figure and followed the flexing of the muscles of her buttocks and hips, conscious of the stirring in his loins.

Marina, made sure he came up alongside her at the top of the stairs, regarded him up and down, smiled, so that his belly turned to water and walked him down the long gallery to a door at the end on which she knocked. She entered, announced him cleared by security and left briskly, her smile lingering in his after vision. A few moments passed before he could refocus his attention.

The room he entered was pleasantly light and airy, tall windows gave a clear view of the rolling parkland beyond. Under one of the windows a bank of computer screens flickered round a console at which sat a man of middle years. Rangy and sinewy, he had long sensitive hands, straggling but greying fair hair, which fell still thickly over his eyes.

He swung his revolving chair round when Marina knocked and pierced Alexander with china-blue eyes. Standing with him were Penny and Hep, the three of them had evidently been staring intently at something on the screen. Penny motioned Alexander over to them, pointed him to a chair and ignoring him totally, continued with Hep and the other man to pore over the screen.

'There it is again,' said the tall, bony man, evidently Ric. 'I've asked the senior staff to come in today specially to set up a trace. It will take hours, maybe days and even then we may never get any more than a smell of it'.

'I can't see anything,' Penny frowned.

'You have to know what you're searching for,' said Ric. 'There, see how the cursor flashes out of sync for a brief beat. Watch, I'll bring up today's shipping movements.'

He hit the keyboard a few times and the pattern changed. Figures scrolled in one corner, while lines moved about on a map of the world.

'See there, that's the coffee shipment figures and main traffic directions at this moment. We'll see when changes of information trigger a response. Note how the security pattern hologram at the bottom of the screen revolves, see there, it hesitated a nano-second, it could be my eyesight playing tricks but I don't think so. Hep do you see it?' Hep was staring out of the window, he seemed not to be paying attention.

'I see it,' he spoke gruffly,

'What do you see?' asked Penny. 'You seem sure, more sure than Ric.'

'I see, I am sure' he replied. 'I do not know what I see exactly, but like Ric...I see.'

'Does Marina know?' asked Penny.

'No, not about this', said Ric. 'But I've asked her to double check the security around the building and grounds.'

'What does it mean?' Penny an anxious edge to his voice.

'I don't know exactly,' said Ric, turning to her. 'In general it probably means someone knows we are monitoring world trade movements and is curious. That in itself is not out of the way, we get the usual hackers as you know. If anyone gets into a system the anti-bug locks on immediately, feeds it enough innocuous information to keep it busy until we can identify and deal with it. Then we can turn it....and if they have stuff we can use we give them something to keep them happy and we check them out. It's fascinating, you'd be surprised who's hacking, everybody from gung-ho teenagers with a gift for it, to whole offices in IBC and other multi-nationals. But this has a different feel about it. Whoever it is, is not actually getting in. They're not even trying to get in, it's kind of licking at us....sniffing, like a dog to check us out. A hacker is always trying to get in, kind of burrowing, or dancing round, seeking an opening, like a burglar sussing out the security weak points. This is different, it's just sniffing around all our systems at once. Kind of sizing it up, getting a sense of what's there, and ....I guess....what isn't.'

Alexander felt a quiver from the net in his pocket. Without thinking he said 'Perhaps it doesn't want to get in.' He then glanced fleetingly at Hep, to check that he wasn't speaking out of place. The three of them turned to him as one, surprised at the voice of a fourth person they had forgotten in their preoccupation.

'Ric, I haven't introduced Alexander to you. Alexander this is Ric Trefoil, he's in charge of GAIANET and HIGO, that's the part of the system which takes raw data and makes it intelligible to the likes of you and me. Alexander has been given clearance from Lucina to get involved at the highest levels, so you can take it he is here with me and this is his part of his induction to the Firm.'

Ric nodded, security was not his business, if Penny said the lad was okay, he was okay.

'Why do you think it doesn't want to get in?' Penny surprised, asked Alexander.

'Well I only thought that instead of searching for motives which may not be there, what if we took Mr. Trefoil's analysis at face value, it might offer better explanations than looking up a gum tree for a hacker, which he's pretty clear this isn't.'

'The lad's right', observed Ric over his half glasses, impressed. 'Call me Ric, son, everyone does. This is like no hacker I ever saw. It's more like a presence all round the system. We've already fully scanned the whole

system and its not just poking around at random, it's detectable everywhere. Like Alexander just said, I really don't think it's trying to get in, it's surrounded us and seems to want to know what we are, rather than what we've actually got. My money is on another Firm just checking out how big we are. Though who it could be is beyond me. I don't know anyone except us big enough to have the computing power or a framework well enough designed to do this. After all we have covered our tracks as a conglomerate, nobody knows we are a single entity, except us in this room and Thea, Lucina and Zarian. Someone else seems to be trying to find out though....I'm worried.'

Penny felt a falling sensation in the pit of her stomach, this was news she had dreaded from day one. She had spent millions to pre-empt anyone getting close to them. Even the possibility, however remote, that another Firm was trying to find out that she had any kind of operation going at all threatened her plans. She was so close to having enough control of the information highway to turn the economic tide towards sustaining rather than polluting the Earth, that a rival was quite out of the question and in any case she had no time to handle such a diversion. That such a thing could actually exist was unthinkable.

'They not find out what they want. They puzzled,' growled Hep, he continued to gaze out of the window as if all the answers were to be found in the trees on the far horizon.

'What do you mean?' Penny's voice was sharp. She was aware that not since those early, confused days on Ios, was she so close to losing her cool, unless she counted her confrontation with Lucina over Hep. But now her vision was blurring and she thought she might faint. She gripped onto the back of Ric's swivel chair for support. Hep, apparently lost in his own thoughts simply repeated himself with his usual heavy deliberation. She was conscious of the presence of Ric, who knew nothing of her vulnerability in this area though he picked up that something was affecting her composure.

'Ric, do you think this might be detectable over at the GAIANET wing, maybe it would be clearer there? Do me a favour, get over there and check on their procedures, Hep and I'll monitor things here and if there's anything we can cross check. I'd be happier if you'd go in person, things are too worrying to allow anyone outside this room to get any inkling. You can put a simple gloss on it over there if they've spotted anything.'

When he had gone Penny turned pale and angrily to Hep.

'Hep, I'm not a mind reader!' she hissed between clenched teeth. 'What do you mean. 'They're puzzled' Who in the name of all that's holy are 'They'! I'm more than puzzled I'm bloody scared and I need some explanations, and I need them now! Do you read me?'

Alexander felt struck physically at the unexpected vehemence of his mother. She who was the epitome of clarity and self-possession seemed to be falling apart before his eyes. He was also surprised at the lack of regard she showed for Hep's grandeur and dignity. Hep on the other hand broken out of his reverie by her unaccustomed aggression, softly, grasped her by the shoulders and supporting her gently sat her on a sofa, rested himself against the edge of the console and spoke tenderly but deliberately. 'There's no danger...yet. But there is danger out there. But I think not for you Penny, nor for your part of JNO. Danger is for like me and him.'

He pointed to Alexander who felt himself blanch at this spoken link between him and this Ancient. He felt on the brink of great events to come, and then he thought of Marina, she wouldn't leave his thoughts. What a morning this was turning out to be.

Hep continued. 'What out there is not rival from outside, It come from inside, you have not got a rival, it what you call 'games' of Lucina and Zarian and,' he hesitated. 'Others'.

'What 'others?' ' demanded Penny.

'Listen Penelope, mother of Alexander, you know for long time Lucina and senior company people leave you to get on with reconstruction of earth force and make things good for people. I help you, yes? You know they have other business, not more important but...different. All is related but for now separate. This is to do with their business, that's all, they will go away soon and leave you to get on.'

'But why are they sniffing around my operation if they are in the Firm? And who are 'They' anyway? Why do I feel you are holding something back from me Hep, you know I trust you all the way, tell me what's going on, and what's it to do with my son?'

She felt that same unease she always had with Lucina and Thea. She disliked the connections Hep was making with Alexander, putting him with 'Them'. Never before this had 'they' interfered with her operation. Quite the reverse, Lucina, Thea, Hep, had made it all possible, they would never jeopardise their own project....it didn't make sense.

Hep held both her hands and searched her eyes, she slipped into sleep. Alexander was astonished.

'She tired, when she wakes up danger over. Come we leave her.'

'But...' Alexander was too startled to get words out.

'Come!'

Hep steered him by the arm and propelled him from the room, out to the car park, and into the car before he could gather breath to speak. Beyond the boundaries of the Markham estate, Hep stopped the big car by the leafy entrance to an ancient and crumbling barn. He turned to Alexander,

'We are beyond my exclusion zone, we talk on L2. Put on net, make it easier for you, it help with energy'

Alexander put on the invisible net and felt the tingle again round his shoulders, friendly and expectant. He felt the mind-meld begin like the ones he had experienced with Lucina, Thea and to a lesser extent with Pannie. This time the meld had a different quality.

Through the gathering fusion he held on to enough of himself to recognise that each mind-meld absorbed the colouring of the being with whom he was in contact and that he was at the same time able to stay fully in touch with himself. He thought the power of the net clarified what was happening inside his head and assisted his control of the process. He was able to enter deeply into the exchange and maintain his own being at the margin without the experience being totally overwhelming.

He also thought Hep's approach to the mind-meld was kinder than any of the others so far. This, seemed to him a good test of sincerity or at least an awareness of the frailty of the mortal mind. This new revelation raised questions of Lucina and Thea's sensitivity to mortals, Pannie was another thing altogether. He felt Hep's irritation with his meanderings and thus admonished for his lack of concentration, focussed his attention.

Between them, Nemmi, Lucina and Thea, had given him knowledge, Hep offered a new dimension. He was a doer who made things happen. He grasped what there was and re-framed it, re-made it in the image of his creative mind. For him the building blocks of the universe were malleable, all things transmutable, all fears possibilities, all tangible materials, workable. Everything divided into everything else. The world Hep led him into was lucid and clear far beyond mere cause and effect, he could create, re-create, do and undo.

'I give possibility,' said Hep, reverting to L1 communication. 'So can you, even when you have doubt. Small doubt is good, like fear, is good in small degree to give you alertness, but too much is to stop you, to deny the possible, is bad. Your job is to make new mythology. Without that is no hope. Pandora, who I help to make,

left hope for mortals it was designed so. All hope is kept true by useful mythology. If Gaia will be saved you must search and find way to regenerate new, more effective mythology to guide behaviour of mortals away from the exploitation of things of the earth. Need a different mythology from Yahweh, different even from Zeus. Zeus passed this to you and he then leave Gaia for ever taking all old myths with him. This is the meaning of his bequest. He leaves Gaia to mortals alone without old myths. Old myths are killing her. This is a dangerous strategy, for without new mythology they will kill her in the end....or kill themselves. You are born to help with new myth, so Gaia and humankind can stand together without old myths of impotent gods. Mortals must contain their own gods....inside themselves. Through the bequest of the Last Will and Testament of Zeus, they must restore Gaia by themselves. For this they need knowledge and methods known only to gods. The new deal is to pass on our powers to humankind and leave Gaia to them. So We the Twelve help Penelope in JNO to find the Way before 2012 deadline. For all to begin you must first bring Hades from underworld to join with to Zeus to give him strength to bargain with Yahweh. To enliven the past to add to the present and then re-make a different future, Afterwards we will have other business among ourselves where there are no mortals.'

Through the mind-meld, Alexander began to understand. Hep, Lucina and the others were in their different ways explaining the task set for him by Zeus. His relationship with his mother and hers with the Firm were part of an interconnected web of destiny which was somehow already settled by Zeus. That Zeus was his father was a revelation resonating less within him than the knowledge that his destiny was decided. Knowing he had the active support of Hep and was part of the whole empire of old gods, gave him new courage to ease the fear from which he had tried to flee. To have a destiny was to have a purpose. These gods had lost their purpose until now, it had been lying dormant, waiting for him. With their help he had some chance of managing the task. He was not alone, had actually never been alone.

Possibilities from the past, he now thought, lived in the deeds of those long gone, not just as fairy stories but examples of what can be done. He would find them and bring them into the present. All the past was contained in the realm of Hades. All knowledge was there. Zeus knew what he had to do, The Morae Sisters knew and he had let go his chance to find out more.

Perhaps it was as well, he would have to act, that was certain. Only in action was the future contained. To know and not to act is impossible. Action, he realised with a shock, depended on hope, on risk based on expectation. Hep, Lucina and Thea had expectations, Zeus had defined it for them all.

'What happens now, Hep?' asked Alexander, aware Hep was intently following his thought processes.

'You find this 'hacker'.'

Alexander did a double-take in his mind which was noted by Hep. To contemplate action in a theoretical sense was fine, to find he was expected to start immediately was something else. Panic set in.

'Will you help me?' he gulped down his fear.

'I help, but in background. I not want hacker to know me, know my connections. I have fear of connections.'

'I don't understand....I can't believe you have fear of anything'

'I'm not afraid of things, I have fear of who and what they may do. I have fear of the accumulated power of the past. I have fear of what does not change. Of what gathers in all and holds down tightly.'

In the deep recesses of his knowledge, Alexander dimly began to understand Heps' communication. While he was afraid of the risks of action he had come to understand the equal risks of inaction.

'You on right track, son of Penelope, recognise and accept. We act now. Hacker will send his information to his master soon. He is still sniffing round, who knows how long it will be before he sends back his message.'

'Where to, where will it get back to?'

'Think - you know this too, Alexander, you fear it. If Hades and Chronos find out what Penny is doing, they may unleash terrors which have slept for aeons to gain Gaia from Mortals, especially if they think Zeus is weak. Ambition subdues with age and Zeus is old and tired, but I think not weak. He leaves his will to you, you must deprive Hades of his hoped for prize of determining the present only by the past and wholly determining the future. It would be the death of free will, of creativity. But Gaia must be saved by mortals alone. You must bring him to Zeus so past and present can be reconciled and the future made between them in brotherhood and passed on to mortals so they know what they have to do. Hades will not come by himself, there is too much between them for him to make a move and Zeus is too proud to do it himself. Hades is safe with Chronos, he has the advantage that all souls are his in the end and so he waits below to gather them all up. He is happy to see the end of Mortals since by their deaths he will take them all into his realm and will therefore have Gaia to himself when Zeus is defeated. Only a mortal beloved of the gods can stop him....and bring him to us. You must start with our friend the hacker. He is the clue. I bring you out from Markham outside the zone I create to stop the 'sphere. I cloak it so Penny can work in secret with no prying eyes. Someone probing for gap I make in 'sphere. Our hacker is on the 'sphere not on GAIANET, he is worked by forces against the future, he is from, or is an ally of the Underworld. We must identify and stop him, and at the same time he can lead you to his master.'

'What have I got to do?'

'There's no time to explain, trust me, I'll tell you later, now we act.'

Hep, got down from the car in that smooth motion through space which for such a large personage, continued to amaze Alexander. He made for the barn, bending his huge frame round the ramshackle door hanging half off its hinges. In the inner darkness Alexander made out a small figure lounging against a pile of old, mouldy straw.

'Watcher, me ole' cock sparrer. 'Ow yer doin' then?' Pannie's goatee waggled, a comma, punctuating the gloom. 'Hi Heppie, you want me ter take care of this boychick again. I got the message onner 'sphere, ter be 'ere pronto like.' The three of them linked briefly on L2 and then Hep and Alexander set off back to Markham.



## Chapter 13

Hep and Alexander left Pannie in the barn and drove back to Markham. They returned to the room where they found Penny still unconscious. Haephestos was sympathetic towards the sleeping figure wishing he could shoulder burden she carried. Zeus' prohibition preventing any member of the Pantheon from carrying responsibility lay heavily upon him. But if any mortal was going to make a difference it was she. He would give her all the help of which he was capable.

Alexander had the feeling that time itself had been suspended like a video recorder held on 'pause'. As Hep restored her to the exact point of consciousness as before; holding her hands in his great paws. She woke still angry and exasperated.

'Stop humouring me Hep,' she said, extricating herself from his grasp. 'Just who is nosing around? I can't believe this is happening! I can't believe you know and won't tell me! I have to trust you, you and Lucina and...I can't work with you without trust. So Hep...what's...what's it all about? What the hell is going on?'

Hep sensed the danger. He knew well that Penny was too intelligent to be fooled. He smiled to himself. If Hera had been treated as she treated Penny she would wreak a dreadful revenge. He had never accepted Hera's dismissive approach to Penny's need for explanations. But then Hera never had his feeling for people. She liked the idea of mortals in principle, but her imperious nature made her assume she could control any mortal by manipulating any of their thoughts she found irksome. She paid no heed to the confusion she caused, mortal feelings did not touch her. There were many gods who saw mortals as their own playthings, and Hep despaired of this need for control, this Olympian disdain - especially now in their time of almost total decline. He was not surprised that Zeus wanted to throw in the towel once his great aim was fulfilled.

He had left Markham to enable him to sense what was happening on the Chronosphere. His exclusion zone around Markham was working too well. Not even he could communicate while inside without first dismantling the blocking system. The zone had the desired effect of preventing those on the 'sphere from interfering with Penny's work and that had worked fine before Zeus' spectacular announcement. Now the 'sphere was buzzing, properly woken up for the first time in centuries and he needed to be in constant touch with it. It was only a matter of time before someone discovered his artificial gap in the 'sphere where gods were unable to enter. Firstly it would be taken as some kind of glitch, not taken much notice of, but in the current climate there would be greater curiosity and then suspicion. The snooper already knew he was onto something interesting, he had to ensure he was distracted before he learned too much. He was surprised at the speed at which he had arrived. He thought it would have taken longer. Hep did not know who the snooper was but he was pretty sure who had sent him. He hoped the Old Thunderer and his often vindictive consort knew what they were doing.

He gazed down at Alexander, the one chosen to cross this first threshold of his destiny. Alexander needed help, that had been the reason for the meld in the barn. Pan was the guide, Alexander the envoy. This was hard enough, thought Hep, for both of them. But was Alexander up to it? Lucina, for her own unfathomable reasons had opted out of direct involvement. Zeus had his own fish to fry, though both were keen listeners on the 'sphere, so the two of them would be available to help Alexander if they wanted. Of all the gods Pan was one of the very few who had access to the underworld and he would not take long for him to be out of his league down there if things went out of control. The power of the past was an unknown quantity. Hades had been accumulating many forgotten things for a long time without restraint from Zeus or anyone else in the living world. Hep was sensing a new readiness for action in Hades which others on the 'sphere also recognised as a problem for the living. His active mind found all this speculation tiring and he turned his attention to the immediate problem of keeping Penny on an even keel.

'There is danger in this hacker. Like I say...but not for you personally. You want to know what it is about. Well I can tell you but you will worry. I have respect for you and of course you must trust me, but it will mean

a deep anxiety for you, more than you need at this time when your work is so close to results. So you must choose. This knowledge is not necessary for your work, not for dreams not for hopes. It concern Thea, Lucina, Zarian and me. And I think is better if you do not ask for explanation.'

Penny was calming down at the even tones of her friend but was nevertheless shaken. For years she had given up in the face of the blank wall when she had asked basic questions. She knew there were momentous things 'They' knew in which she was uninvolved. She admitted it was a relief to focus on her own work and thus overcome the confusion 'They' set up in her. But Alexander was now involved. She needed to know.

'This concerns Alexander too?' she asked. Throwing him a glance.

'Yes.'

'Then tell me what I need to know so that I can help him. You know I trust you no matter what,' she said, but she was unable to lift the defeat in her soul and felt horribly alone.

Alexander understood. The meld in the barn made clear the distinction between his two worlds. He was readied for his work, and trusted Hep. The feelings for his mother mirrored those he had for the whole of humankind. Hera and Gaia had shown him the size of the task before them.

'Then know, mother of Alexander,' said Hep. 'That he faces his destiny. You can do nothing for him directly. Continue with your work. Is the most important thing. Use GAIANET to re-invigorate the planet, provide the relief it needs and change the way of things. We work together so you will have the means. But there is other, related business, which does not concern you directly. Alexander, he work for us now. Know there is another branch of the 'Firm' not known to you. He alone can have access to it. He is the one instrument we both need for success. For this you gave him life and....'

She was gripped by a strong desire not to know any more. 'If you tell me things about the 'Firm' I don't know..,' Penny interrupted, '....will it help me? Will I feel less alone? Especially now you have taken Alexander from me. Will I Hep?'

'No, Penelope, it will not help you. It will confuse and distract you. I already help you all I can, you know this. I have no control for what concerns your son. He may tell you all when himself he knows it.'

Alexander held his mother's hand and was about to speak. Penny's head too buzzed with questions but before either could gather their thoughts, the door burst open and Ric rushed in.

At the same time Hep fleetingly melded with Pan - What kept you? Thought Hep with relief on Level 2. Come on you little goat....get on with it!

'Quick!' shouted Ric. 'The monitor....check the monitor!' In his rush he thrust Penny and Hep to one side and began hitting the keyboard frenziedly.

'See! There's definitely something. I've given him some commodities data to chew on , but he's not interested. The boy is right, whoever it is doesn't want our information! I don't know what to do now. Our usual methods won't work 'cos I can't get at it from this side. I've tried all the diversion tricks in the book and he's not interested. It's like he's sitting on the outside and just observing us. The only thing I can think of is it's like another kind of parallel network to our own and that's impossible!' Ric was almost shouting, he stared helplessly at Hep.

Hep gazed at Alexander, who had said nothing since their return and had observed Hep's interchange with his mother not knowing how to react. Hep gave a nod of assent and he was pleased to do something practical now

the tension between Hep and his mother had been diverted by Ric's sudden entry.

'May I?' said Alexander to Ric.

'What? May you what?'

'May I look?' Ric turned his head towards Penny.

'It's okay, Ric let him do it,' she said. Alexander exchanged places at the keyboard with Ric.

On Hep's instructions he had kept Zeus' gift round his shoulders. On Level 2 he heard Pannie swearing to himself as he wrestled with the timelines re-linking Markham to the 'sphere. Alexander felt movement in the timelines with the re-integration of Hep's gap, Markham was now open to the 'sphere. The intruding presence, like thief in the dark caught by the snapping on of a light, fled to avoid detection.

The screen Alexander faced changed from its usual configuration to a mass of colour and speeding patterns. His mind slid into the developing vortex, whirling at ever increasing speeds. Aided by the power of the golden net he seemed to enter the screen. All sense of real time left him and he was truly travelling the 'sphere. Unlike his previous experience of it, this was not a sudden transplantation of space like in Psathi. This time he had a definite sensation of movement. While his body remained in his seat, his mind was absorbed by the whirling screen. All around were other minds, synapses flashing, like fireflies in a dark summer night. One was brighter than the others for being nearest, just ahead of him and accelerating away from him. Escaping! He felt its anxiety as if fearful of being sensed by him. It was moving fast, too fast for him to be able to communicate with it. His mind sent out feelers and he encountered Hep's slow vibrations and Pannie's more jerky pulses. He slowed, or rather became less frantic, feeling for their company and support. His lack of experience of the 'sphere was made up by Hep and Pannie taking over control of his direction and he knew wherever he went, on whatever timeline, they would be close by. So he maintained his pursuit of the bright light which he understood as the retreating thought pattern of the intruder.

From then on he 'knew' he was to be stretched to the limit of his intellectual and emotional abilities. If he was on trial he was truly tested. He entered a mind-world containing images from his own separate mind. As he journeyed deeply within the Chronosphere he was aware of thought feelers from what he thought were other travellers. Hep and Pannie he recognised as friendly and he sensed Thea and Hera from afar. With an effort, he felt a resonance which must have been Zeus keeping a faint seminal hum, like a spider's web vibrating in the air. There were other sounds and movements, bat-like flittings, all too fast to comprehend. Through all of this noise on the 'sphere, he kept his attention glued to the bright flash he was following. He tried to get onto a L2 communication with Hep or Pannie, but the whirl of speed set up by his chase prevented him from making deliberate connections. His quarry spun off in different directions and following absorbed every ounce of his concentration.

He was aware somewhere behind him his body had lost consciousness, shut down to allow the sheer density of concentration needed to stay in contact. He knew too, that to prolong this energy level would leave his body short of the essential reflex actions needed for life and that his physical self would eventually die. He had no idea how long he had. Not too long, like a snorkler, he could only hold his psychic breath for so long. His mind was in free-fall without any sense of a floor of any kind beneath him. He was in full flight, plunging at immense speeds through space and time. His prey knew how to journey on the 'sphere and he gave everything he had to keep it in view.

Swathes of existence flashed by him, taking him back to the beginnings of the world and then through a hundred and eighty degrees to far futures as unrecognisable as the far past. Suddenly the flash disappeared at the cusp of a tight turn near what he acknowledged to be an edge, the meeting place of time past and time present. He followed his quarry until they came to a place coloured by a shimmering purple light leading to a

blue-black whirlpool which seemed to beckon him into limitless oblivion beyond which he felt once entered he would never again leave. His quarry shot directly and at speed into this spiralling black-hole which he knew he must avoid at all costs. However his task was to follow and he gathered the last remnants of his mind, determined to follow into the vortex. Around him he was suddenly aware of many other travellers entering at lesser speeds into the deep purple of the core. He felt a resistance against which he had to exert all the straining sinews of his tiring mind to overcome. The nearer he came to the edge of the darkness at the centre of the vortex the force repelling him redoubled. Through the black beyond, he glimpsed dimly cheerless grey-green fields, thronged with drab, ashen wraiths. White cypresses shaded a lifeless, flat pool. Three white, wide, paths tapered off into the distance. Utter will-power alone kept him at the dread farthest rim of the purple light. Everything that was in him demanded immediate flight. He felt Pannie's mind tugging at his to get him away. But he had to see where the intruder had gone. Feeling his brain would fuse with the effort, he watched with the last remnant of his will, the dimming flash he had been chasing, dipped along the central road and vanish over a horizon where it was now impossible for him to follow. As Pannie's tugging and his own tired mind drew him back from the brink, he was surprised to see the slower lights, now gathering in quantity around him, enter without difficulty and slip in among the wraiths at the water's edge. His initial sense of disappointment at losing his quarry was overtaken by the relief from the tension of fighting his own need to escape, he gratefully allowed the repelling force and Pannie's frantic tugging to take him where it would. He left the dreadful purple light behind and once more in the darkness of the 'sphere, the chase over, he felt a strong sense of relief and felt he was falling back into himself.

He was rudely brought back to reality by Hep taking his mind and almost forcibly re-uniting it with his body. He knew he had achieved something important. He had identified the source of the intruder and now his work could begin. He rested, unconscious, in the office chair before the burned out computer screen. Acrid black smoke wreathed the ceiling from the smouldering plastic. Penny and Ric, highly alarmed, lifted the inert body onto a sofa.

'Hep! What Happened!' Penny lifted her eyes from the pale, strained face of her son. 'What's going on? What the hell.....?'

'He will be well, have no fear.' While he thought to himself, the boy did well to go to the brink and know it for what it is. 'It is what I said ....our business. Not yours'. He was silent for a while, as if communicating privately with someone. We are safe from snoopers for a while, this place is no longer of interest to them, but your son is. I need to find somewhere for him to rest and recover.

'What happened?' asked Ric. 'I thought he'd died the way he just slumped in front of the screen like that. And just see what happened to the monitor, what could do that?'

'It a parallel network. You are right Ricardo my friend,' he replied. 'There is parallel network; what you might call the spirit of the nature of things and by definition not accessible to natural science'. Hep searched for a plausible explanation and struggled to find one. 'It's more...more ....metaphysical.'

'I don't understand.' Ric was puzzled and Hep realised he had made a mistake. His concern for these mortals was drawing him into impossible explanations and with regret he used the Olympian last resort and put his own explanation directly into their minds. What he placed there simply, was the idea that another 'Firm' had discovered what was done at Markham and Alexander had electronically diverted its messenger and left them free to continue their work without more interference. The fire was due to a simple malfunction of the machine and Alexander's faint was simply a matter of his mind being overwhelmed by all the new information he had taken in, in such a short time. As with all such imposed information, it sat awkwardly in their minds as insufficient, but they had no other explanations. The incident left its mark like a written-over erasure. Penny and Ric now had something else in common.

'Your work,' Hep said as if nothing had happened. 'Is safe from this other Firm for now. But you need to

redouble your efforts, time is no longer on our side. (The present is at risk of being swallowed by the past, he thought, Chronos awakes). I will take care of Alexander, he needs training which I can give with Thea. I need place to hide where I instruct him, discrete and reliable.'

'Use Marina for your security,' said Penny, past asking questions for which there were no answers. 'No one better. She would welcome the chance to know my children better, she finds them quite unusual. Are you sure he will be alright? He looks so dreadful.'

'Yes, he's okay, tired and needs rest, I will take him from here. Here is where they might search for him and cause unnecessary problems...too distracting, you need all the time you can get to concentrate on work with GAIANET. I ask Marina to find safe-house. How long when you will have all GAIANET systems in place and ready?'

'They're basically there now, Ric has some more work do with HIGO, it still has some minor problems...another week or two at this rate and we'll have it working right.'

'Marina, she good at her job? She won't crack if things get hard?' asked Hep. He was concerned about too many mortals being involved in the next round of events while knowing Alexander might well need a mortal around to keep his bearings in an unreal world. Although he trusted Penny's judgement, he had himself no part in the appointment of her mortal staff and did not know them.

'You can rely on her to do her job. She will defend what's mine against all comers - to the death if need be, I wouldn't be at all surprised. She's a tigress and let's say she owes me, and will do anything I ask.'

'Good, tell her to meet us at the car. I'll email and keep you informed.'

Hep effortlessly slung the still lifeless body of her son over his massive shoulder, Penny considered Alexander with new eyes. What had he experienced for her sake? What was it he was going into for all their sakes in the shadowy world of the inner reaches of the Firm, where she knew she would never enter. But he would go - is going - and it was precisely because he was going that she would reach her own goals. How she knew this she did not know exactly but it was so. Her own fears had gone, transferred to him and she experienced the fact that fear for a loved one is worse than fear for oneself. Your own fear can be a positive thing. It makes you search for change, helps you tackle things, the control of suffering can give you strength. Fear for another whom you love, when you cannot follow, means watching, helplessly standing by.

Penny was ultimately self-sufficient. She worked from within herself from her strengths. When unsure she bided her time waiting for certainty or the best level of risk. She never made serious mistakes for she never did anything outside the parameters of the broadly predictable. If things started to become unstuck she changed tack and so far had been able to head-off and re-frame problems. She never had actual disasters. Her most successful approach was to always to do her best to be ahead of the game. She had no illusions about what she was up against. The death of her father showed how far things had gone and demonstrated how difficult was the way through, unable to go back, there had to be a way forward.

The success of JNO stemmed largely from her acumen and foresight. She chose her people well, subtly counselled-out those who did not fit. She tried to see no rancour was left behind to catch up with her when she was not paying attention. Her trust of those she appointed was calculated to pay her back tenfold. She gave in to them in all the small things which did not affect the large strategy, about which she would not budge an inch. She gained the affection of the majority for whom small things mattered more than the large and the serious respect from the discerning few who saw the courage in her larger purposes and who trusted her instincts if not always her every action. She had the affection of most of her people, the love of some and the respect of all. They followed her lead, it was their gift to her - unforced. JNO's ultimate success would come from such mutually supported work. JNO would free the world from ultimate despoliation. Each individual

made free from their own exploitation and thus freed to end the exploitation of the world. The best of the human spirit would be the touchstone for collective activity, each individual freely weaving him or herself into the whole as it felt right for each one.

It was only now she was forced to recognise what she had really always known - it was not in the end, up to her, and despite her central role in the JNO empire, it never had been. Till now she had pushed the shadowy doings of the senior members of the Firm from her. Unable to grasp their full purpose, she had ignored them - Lucina, Nemmi, Zarian, Hep. When the time came she had wanted Alexander for herself. She wanted him with her, in her part of the Firm, unconnected to 'Them.' This explained her fury when Lucina in her imperiousness descended from the lift in her ostentatious way and grasped him to her bosom. She who was so retiring in the popular eye, publicly giving such a show of favouritism. God alone knows what the word around the office would be. Nepotism was not her way. Her plan was for him to work his passage so the rest of the workforce would have no reproach. Now he was publicly the tool of Lucina. To cap it all she had no form of redress. He was as lost to her as Thea. And, as always, before 'Them', she was helpless.

She watched Haephestos bear away the unconscious body of her son. Despite her busy life and the influence of Nemmi as his special mentor, he was the only living person to whom she felt close, with whom she could share herself. An unexpected wave of deep disappointment washed through her, and she let forth a long wail of grief which came from her torn and suppressed feelings without warning and was out into the air without her knowledge or control. For a long second she wondered where the sound came from. She had frightened herself and wondered about her sanity. She quickly fought to regain control, surprised to find she had allowed the startled Ric to hold her closely as he would a child, scared to the depths.

'Oh Ric....I....haven't....I can't....I've never....Ric what's happening? I feel....robbed of....of my....life somehow...I suppose....'

Her voice choked against his shoulder and tailed off as she fell into uncontrolled sobbing. Ric saw his chief was deeply wounded, more so than the mere events he had observed. Having no explanation he simply responded by holding her firmly, caring for someone in need. They stood thus for some time until she was quiet and he felt her strength returning. It came as a surprise, until this moment, as he held her warm in his arms, that he loved her more than he knew. With infinite gentleness, coming strangely from such an angular man, he disengaged and said, 'I think you need a rest Penny, go home, I'll hang on here in case anything happens. I'll run checks to see if the....thing has finally stopped snooping. Go home. Take my car, I'll get a lift.'

Penny, sheepish and tearful, feeling wholly vulnerable, gathered up her belongings, took the proffered keys from Ric, kissed him on the cheek with gratitude, smiled wanly and left in Hep's wake. Being a few minutes only behind him and Alexander, she lingered in the reception area to give them a head start. She had no wish to get further involved in what she could not control. She could not bear to drive with the thought she might overtake them on the road.

On the way back to London, she did something she had set her face against years ago, and allowed the full rein of her feelings to well forth. They reached up in her like the slow movement of a symphony, unbidden from unknown depths. Perhaps it was Lucina and those eyes which had made her bury her feelings so deeply in order to concentrate so utterly on her work. The importance of the work for the future of the world had been so exciting that her own life had been totally sublimated in it. So utterly had her emotion for physical love been taken by Alexis that she realised with a long slow moan, that her current ability to feel had been totally cut off. She stopped the car in a lay-by, too overcome to drive. Alexander's life, the gift from Alexis came at a high price. She could only observe alone, and worry. For the first time since Alexis she thought of loving another and she thought of Ric. Far off, and unknown to her, her pain was sensed and noted with relief.

## Chapter 14

For some weeks, Penny's only communication with Hep was through GAIANET. He reported that Alexander was none the worse for his extraordinary experience. He was in a safe place and Hep would tell her if there was anything she needed to know and she was above all to trust him. Marina was watching their backs, and had found a well equipped safe-house for Alexander's R & R and his training. Penny still balked at the idea of him being trained by one of 'Them', but her sense of loss had reduced as the weeks drew on. After all, he was not dead or missing like Alexis, he was with Hep, watched over by Marina, and all the security paraphernalia of JNO at her command.

She could trust Hep, he had been as frank with her as he could she was sure. Unlike Lucina he was not duplicitous or aloof. She knew with certainty she did not want to get mixed up with their affairs, she did not want Alexander to either, but that, like much else was out of her hands. Hep was right, she was better off not knowing.

She had spent most of the next three weeks or so working round the clock with Ric and his team at Markham. The work had been so exhilarating she had managed, most of the time to drive everything else from her mind. They concentrated on the culmination of twenty years work and then they celebrated. Nothing fancy, a private party of the secret cabal of Markham boffins. Their success made her spirits soar and at the same time gave her the biggest dose of collywobbles of her life.

They cracked a few bottles of champagne, ate a pot-luck meal and got mildly drunk. They had achieved the key to a transformation which could change the world, provided they used it satisfactorily. Ric and his team had provided JNO with the means, it was up to the rest of the JNO staff to deliver. The principle was simple, the technology prodigious and the operational consequences mind-blowing. There was not much room for error and total secrecy was the main ingredient. While the objective was clear and the machinery was under control; people, the most unpredictable element in any operation, would be the problem.

The staff selection programme in JNO was rigorous. But Penny was enough of a realist to know not everyone in such a large operation could be totally reliable all the time. The only way to limit leaks was to develop a cellular, cut-off system of communication with everyone knowing only as much as they needed. All tangible information that might be filched by unauthorised personnel was digitally coded and had randomised passwords to minimise access. The precautions meant that Ric's special team, including Penny herself, were the most vulnerable, since they would be the best target. So far, she was sure no one knew of their existence. Marina and her large staff, were employed to warn and protect them.

GAIANET - was complete. Tested and in operation. 'HIGO' had worked impeccably for three weeks continuously and seemed now to be bug-free. The Firm was now able to monitor the world's financial and trading activities on a moment to moment basis, to make out patterns, suggest interventions, carry them out, monitor the minutest effects and adjust their interventions accordingly. JNO was potentially in a position to fine tune the economy of the world in secret. Penny had nothing less than the levers of world economic activity at her fingertips. In so far as the activity of almost everyone on the planet was ultimately geared to economic ends, she had control of the effects on social relations, scientific enquiry, ecology, conservation, politics, even peace and war.

She had worked for this moment for as long as she could remember and the moment of achievement left her elated at the task completed and also terrified of the responsibility it implied. She knew with absolute clarity why most people seemed to prefer the uncertainty of events. Why they reacted to happenings rather than sought control. She knew why those that obsessively sought control were often mad, tyrannical, or both. Was she therefore a tyrant? Was she mad? The idea of GAIANET and HIGO had been the most exciting thing in the world. To achieve it she had sacrificed the love of men, the upbringing of her children, submitted to the enigma of Lucina and Zarian, given all her time and considerable energy to the Firm. Now at the pinnacle of

her achievement she met head on, an unexpected fear of what they had done and a horror of herself.

At the beginning in Psathi with Lucina, when they had planned the relief of the planet, the goal was already decided and Penny was thrilled and flattered at being chosen to help. It was a necessary task. Unlike some 'Green movements', JNO never harked back to previously and doubtful 'simpler' times and technologies, but adopted a great going forward, fully embracing new technology through control and redirection with a continual forward movement into new possibilities in partnership with natural forces. Through the years she had used Lucina's strength as a guide. Even latterly when Lucina had given her head, while she saw it as her due for effort, she never really thought about the power success would give her personally. She was a cog in a wheel, okay a big cog, in a big wheel. The Firm knew what it was doing. It would take control, everyone else would be powerless, except they would not know it. At the start she got real pleasure from having the potential for hidden control. To be able to manipulate systems until enough of the change was made, until the critical point was reached. Eventually, the Firm would invite the laggards to become partners in the new deal and thereby change the very nature of production in the natural world.

Since their agreement Lucina had kept her distance. Penny couldn't help feeling isolated, wondering if Lucina still shared the same ideals. Now she was afraid to be left alone with the full knowledge of what they were doing and its monumental power. Only Hep had given her any time and now he too was elsewhere with her son. Alexander was to have provided her with the companionship she missed, but now he too was absent. The pleasure of success was severely tempered by an overwhelming fear of being alone with more power than was right for one person. Assailed by doubts of the propriety of the thing now wrought she sat with Ric, alone in her private suite of rooms in the converted attics at Markham, after the party.

'You're quiet - a bit flat?' he asked softly, feeling a need to break the silence.

She did not speak, unsure how to react. Perhaps the size of the task they had been working on alarmed him as well. But the ultimate responsibility was not his, he was still able to pass the buck.

'Speak to me Penny, what is it?'

'You feel it too?'

She turned sharply towards him. She owed him much, he had been undyingly loyal through all the difficulties of the last ten years. She had hired him as perhaps the best software programmer in the world. His 'Biteasy' programmes were sold and pirated world-wide. He was a multi-billionaire through the ownership of the rights to the working software of eighty five percent of PC's in the world, and yet had agreed to work with her in JNO. Lucina had introduced them at a software convention in Los Angeles and she had been overwhelmed with his vision of the possibilities of computer development and communications. It would not be true to say she had hired him. He already had more money than it was possible to spend in several dozen lifetimes and she soon discovered he was bored. Penny had told him about the potential of JNO and he saw its aims as the epitome of his own ambitions for the power of computing. At heart he was a simple computer scientist, dedicated to making computers as powerful a means of communication as money and technology could manage. Penny's drive and her dedication to the huge task JNO had adopted was the perfect vehicle for his abilities. JNO's ideals were self-evidently sensible and necessary but in the end he was more concerned with the technology than its application.

'Always remember Penny you gave me direction when my life seemed impossible. Your certainty alone made all this happen, but you know that already....don't you?'

Unable to hold his eye, she felt an utter fraud. The certainty he was talking of drew its strength from Lucina's matter of fact acceptance of the inevitability of what they did and from Thea's sense of its simple rightness. Alone she could never have taken on such work, no one could. It was the work of a crazed megalomaniac to



attempt, god-like, to control the economic activity of the whole world. Whatever the potential 'good' of a positive redirection of the exploitation of nature, who was she to think she could handle such an insane enterprise? In short, it came not at all from her but from 'Them.'

In her own opinion, until now, she was merely an 'operative'. A helper in Lucina's enterprise. Was Ric aware that at this moment of achievement, this moment when the means were delivered she felt she had no real grasp on anything, particularly the next stage?

She realised how dependent on the Firm she really was. Lucina and Thea would have no doubts about what to do now and Alexander was being trained by them at this moment. Should she tell Ric that deep within she knew she had been used? She was a pawn in a wider game and had never found the inner strength to effectively question what was happening. Partly from her own unchallenged assumption that she would manage to maintain her integrity despite 'Them' and partly because the game was hugely and sufficiently exciting and fulfilling of itself. Now the 'game' was over and the real work was about to begin. 'They' were in control as they always had been. She was having to ask herself if she had the strength of character to take the responsibility they deliberately left with her. Her first thought was to have it out once and for all with Lucina, but she knew nothing would come of that. She was really and truly on her own....would have to make her own way.... alone. But there was still Ric....she must risk him further now or be entirely alone with the fear of going totally off her trolley.

'I'm scared, Ric, now at this moment...I...,' she tailed off.

He too was anxious. He knew the scope of what they were doing, but he wanted to know exactly where she was coming from before feeling confident of making the right responses. For all his concentration on the technical task, anyone who had developed a business as large as 'Biteasy' was in touch with the motivations driving those closest to him. He needed to know she was going to the same place with him before declaring himself involved up to the hilt.

Penny spoke, in an attempt to draw him into her own mood.

'We've done it...got it to work....GAIANET and HIGO....and I'm frightened by it. The worst thing is not the rightness of the idea....that goes without saying. It's the...massive enormity of the responsibility, and God knows that's bad enough on its own, objectively speaking. But what's....what's really frightening the life out of me is the actual taking of responsibility. Making the choice to act. And then doing it. What if....what if...it...doesn't work, or it's simply wrong to do such things? Think what a desperately worse mess we could make. It doesn't bear thinking about! Nothing gives us the right to take on the world in this way. I feel like some kind of despot, playing God. I wanted all people to share freely in what we do, of their own will. But we have here...in our command...ours remember...powers to do...well, almost anything we like...I'm desperately afraid of losing...I don't know...trust...trust in myself.'

'You mean...power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely...to coin a phrase.'

'Yes, that's precisely what I mean.'

'I'm glad of your doubt. That's good, I would be more worried about you if you were certain and elated about the future. Even if we can do anything we want - and I'm not so sure about that; isn't it how we use the means that counts? I mean more than the power itself. That's just a tool.'

'You mean you have to ask why power corrupts?'

'Exactly. Having power is one thing, using it to maintain a tyranny over those without it is the problem.'

'But Ric, how can that be avoided?' Penny walked about the room, talking more to herself than to Ric. 'Just having superior information and to be able to manipulate people and events is exercising huge power. You know as well as I do, good intentions don't work. Lots of...well...awful tyrants have started out that way, even egged on by their followers in the spirit of ultimate good. They all succumb to arrogance, all of them, there are no exceptions. Only the truly humble overcome. It's as if their very vulnerability gives them ultimate power without it actually touching them. They just keep going, true to themselves not to their hold over anything.'

'You mean ultimate humility, like Jesus on the cross?'

'Yes - I suppose so.'

'But he knew he was the Son of God,' Ric smiled. '....Seems to me he had some pretty powerful connections.'

Penny smiled too. 'Yes, but he didn't use them to get people to do what he wanted, he just behaved...like he was the son of His Father and got their attention from just being.'

'What's to stop you acting like a child of the world? As you are, as we all are.'

'Nothing, I suppose...that's helpful actually, that means I don't have to act out power, I just ply my own furrow, with the confidence of knowledge. It's a fine line though, don't you think?'

'What's the alternative?' asked Ric. He was taking pains to bring her back to herself. Like her he had serious misgivings, but of a different kind. He was more worried about the parallel communications net Alexander had stumbled across.

'You have to act on what you know, you can't help it,' he continued. 'You know the current economic system is destroying the world, you know the different interests of the main protagonists are probably irreconcilable, at least not in time to prevent a catastrophe. You know people will act only when the inevitable is proven incontrovertibly and even then the key vested interests will always deny it until they are overtaken in the end. The human race seems doomed by its very nature. The only action worth taking now is to change this nature. It's a shift in the archetype of the species that's needed. There's no time left for evolution, we have a generation at the most, maybe two to make a fundamental change. We must do it Penny, we must, if only because we can, if for no other reason. The Firm must, because well....there's just no one else who can do it. Think of the panic as the crops fail, as the rich nations begin to experience the famines of the poor. Think of how the powerful nations will scramble and fight with whatever weapons they have to ensure their own survival. You only have to see what they do to the Third World, to ensure their life-styles. Not to mention the unthinking extinction of animals and plant life. All this and they're not yet even threatened by anything more alarming than not being able to get a beef burger on demand, or having to think twice about jumping in a car to go to the shops half-a-mile away.'

Penny felt an unconscious irritation within herself as she listened.

'I know all that Ric. I'm sorry - it's not you, it's me. I know we're right and that we've got a job to do. What bothers me is my...no...our, yours and mine, the team's, JNO's, Alexander's'...all of our relationships with what I can only call 'Them'. Lucina and her crew - you see I know we are not in control...' She hesitated, unsure whether to go on, but it was too late she had to speak. '...They' are!'

There! It was out! She had said it! Her vulnerability was henceforth entrusted to him. Ric felt privileged to be the recipient and hoped she felt relieved. He carried on to absorb her anxiety about his response, as if she had said nothing significant, he hoped by this, he would convey his understanding of the confession she had made.

'You mean it's not your power which corrupts but 'Theirs'? So you feel able to be trusted but you're not sure about 'Them'.'

'Exactly. Right! Except that because I've got doubts about my own ability to make this thing work, I'd hate to find myself relying slavishly on them. I'm not sure if my ideas and theirs ever properly coincided. I don't know if what we are doing is being done for us or for them. That's what I can't get out of my head and....it's....fundamental. I know what we're trying to do and scared as I am of our sheer ability to hold it together; I can't help wondering what's theirs?'

Ric passed his hand over his head, in a futile gesture to clear the wispy hair from his face,

'I wondered when you would raise that? It's bothering me too. Though not, I think in the way it's affecting you. You have a different relationship with them from me. I mean your family is involved, you're part of the beginning of all this with them. I worry about you and them too, but in a way that's not been my problem till now. The cause is right, the timing is right and I've got the technology in place. It doesn't really matter to me who is in control while ever we're trying to get this human paradigm shift we're talking about. I believe in it and there's no time to worry about the finer points, I'll leave that to history, if there's going to be any. Listen Penny,' He came close to her holding her tightly by the arms and their eyes locked. 'I don't know either, that it's possible for sure, but from where I stand there's nothing to lose. Sure a few rich people will lose out, and we're bound to make serious mistakes and some powerful enemies, but that'll be the worst of it....and for my money that's a small price to pay if we keep our heads. Maybe we'll blow it, and the world will be plunged into more economic tensions and wars. So what's new? No, Penny, we go on, we do it, starting whenever you say the word.' He tightened his grip on her arms so that he hurt her in his excitement. 'What's getting to me isn't who has the power, after all without JNO we wouldn't be here at all. It's this parallel network Alexander has cottoned on to. There is something out there. Hep certainly knows what it is, and if he does so does Lucina and her crew. So we're not in this alone, something outside of us has an interest!'

He let go of her pre-occupied by his own logic.

'Like I told you,' said Penny. 'It's 'Them'...my worry is that their game is not the same as ours.'

'No Penny, that won't do...you see I think Lucina, Hep and Thea and Alexander and the whole of JNO including Zarian in New York, are playing exactly the same game as us. But someone only they know about, someone else has got other fish to fry and that's what's worrying them - and, through them - you. What's more, you, you don't really want to know because the whole thing is bad enough as it is and you are afraid you will have to find out because Alexander is caught up in it. Am I right?'

Penny walked angrily to the window to find herself staring at rolling lawns. The view seemed totally out of place with her mood. There were unwelcome sensations in the pit of her psyche.

'Don't want to know what?' she almost spat out the words, only respect for Ric prevented her from telling him to mind his own business and walking from the room. She spotted her car in the courtyard and wanted again to speed away from everything.

'That there's something else going on from which you have been excluded. Thea is part of it and so now is Alexander. I'm willing to bet they've been involved for a long time and your resentment goes very deep indeed. You see, like you, I don't think the fact that you're excluded matters to the eventual outcome either. What matters to you, my wonderful girl, is that you feel used.'

Penny was surprised at Ric's insight. She had known Ric mainly as a boffin. Even though they had been closeted together for years, their conversations had been exclusively work oriented. Neither had reason to delve into their own personalities and she was in any event not usually concerned with what went on under the

surface provided people did the work. Someone as brilliant as Ric aroused her infinite respect, much like Hep, except Hep was something else, one of 'Them.'

She bridled at being so transparent, especially to Ric. She subsided back into her chair, crossed one long leg over the other, and leaning towards him engaged him firmly with her eye.

'So you keep a close watch on me then?'

'Answer me! Am I right?'

'Yes, goddamn you! You're right, but only partly. It's true, I don't like being excluded, but I can live with exclusion, it isn't not knowing what's going on that's the real bitch, and there is something going on. It's as if 'They' have taken their eye off the ball, to do something else, even though they trust me utterly, have given me all the vast resources of JNO but for the life of me I can't think what could be more important than saving the planet.'

'Neither can I, and if Hep's anxiety is any guide it's got something to do with what he is up to with your lad. So, I've been checking the 'Alexander burn out' and there's no electronic or any other scientific reason why the computer melted down like that. The reason was not physical. Despite the effects, there was no detectable malfunction of the machine. I can only conclude that Hep was right when he talked about Alexander's mind. The whole event was psychic rather than electronic. It doesn't make any scientific sense but I believe the game they are playing has nothing to do with the physical world. What burned out the computer wasn't an electrical overload on the machinery, but an excess of reaction to whatever Alexander was relating to which Hep was so concerned about. I've been pondering it a lot. The only conclusion I can come up with is quite illogical in scientific terms, but makes sense if you think of it in terms of the mind. You see, while we're using the physical, technical reality of cyberspace to connect what people are doing, it's only a change of mind that will matter in the end.' He stopped to gather his thoughts more clearly. 'So - what if it's not what controls the physical world that will cause the breakthrough, but a who or a what that can fathom people's minds and get down to the basic natural mould which shapes us equally as members of one species? Why can't people live as one family, grown from the same earth? Why continually emphasise difference why not emphasise similarity? We share the same physical mind with all the other racial groups, cultures and tribes and therefore the same potentiality. The problem, as I see it, is that none of the current solutions for the survival and development of the human animal in the physical world, have any really useful function with our nuclear arms and exploitative economics. In terms of saving the planet, territorialism, tribalism, nation-states, super-corporations, governments, don't work any more and this lack of coherence is what is contributing to our extinction. We don't any longer have the evolutionary time scales to get things right before we pollute ourselves into oblivion and create untold suffering into the bargain. But, if you make a species wide assumption that the Earth in a kind of way also has a mind. That the Earth is like a person, let's call her the Earth Mother. After all we are all made of her clay. Then it all makes sense. 'They' are still part of Her, but we no longer act as if we are. We used to be part of Her once, long ago and so then we were part of 'Them' and everything was in harmony. It's like the old gods had time for us because we had time for them. The whole world of things, and of thought, flowed through them, to us and back again. Then, more recently we unilaterally became responsible for ourselves, clever monkeys that we are; but it didn't matter until now, because the Earth could cope with us. But now, if we don't take care of it soon, we'll perish so it can survive. Because there's no doubt that without us, It will recover in no time. We have to save the Earth for Herself so as to save ourselves. If we just save Her for ourselves, we'll go on keeping Her at the just acceptable limit of survival and everything then becomes mere survival. It won't do, Penny. That's why the Firm exists. People will only be able to save the world if they are of the world, consciously, publicly, politically, economically. Think about it - the species commonality among animals makes them all predictable within given bounds. All cats behave like cat. All humans behave like men and women. We are all vulnerable, have common needs, and common satisfactions. What will make people safe for the world is not merely treating it differently; but the adoption of a completely different way of thinking about the world. If the mind of the world and the

human mind were seen as the same so we cared about it as if it were one of us, in us not outside us, we would not exploit it...'

'Why not?' Penny interjected. 'We exploit people outrageously who are clearly in our likeness - especially in the Third World. When it comes to preventive action we've nothing to say unless our interests are involved.'

'That's just my point, to care you have to really feel. Each one, separately, from inside, one to one. Empathy means my self-interest equals yours, if we don't agree there's no empathy and nothing can change. We don't have empathy for people of the third world until we feel ourselves in their place, equally, we don't have empathy for the world unless we feel it inside us. The problem is we don't actually live long enough to really feel it properly. By the time we have learned what empathy really means the next generation is re-learning new 'isms' or re-hashing old ones, so the merry-go-round goes on. But we now know we can survive with relative ease, globally there are more than enough resources to go round, and at the same time allow the planet to replenish itself. Culturally we still spend too much time looking over our shoulders in fear that someone is going to take what we have away from us. There's no sense of permanence any more to hold us together in a forward motion. The old religions provided this, even communism had an external potentiality to aim for, a spiritual dimension, if you like, outside of us. But all that's gone now, there are just too many alternatives to believe in, none of which have a claim on ultimate authority. So we are thrown on ourselves in a way unprecedented in history just at the time when we might fail the planet. If things don't change soon, we risk a return to scarcity, and will almost certainly resort to the re-use of worn out, threadbare cultural mechanisms as if they were new. Even now in the absence of any unifying truths we find new fictions to excuse the enslaving of individuals according to some doctrine or other. Or we find 'good' reasons to continue tearing up the Earth. It doesn't actually matter which 'ism' you take up, the point is they are all regressive, backward looking. So we take what we want first, and ask questions later. Most people don't have the luxury of having the choice to exercise their conscience about it. For the Amazonian peasant, not to despoil the rain forest is to die of hunger in the present, he's not in a position to consider the future. The change we need is to feel the Earth's mortality as if it was our own and to make Her our new god through each person alive individually giving the Earth Her due. I've thought very hard about it Penny, and I believe our trump-card is that I cannot think any generation would consciously prepare itself to be the last. Our task is to give people the resources to have the space and time to change enough so that through their empathy with the Earth, they can finally accept their individual mortality and more importantly through it, the immortality of the species when linked to that of the Earth. That's why what 'They' are up to, has got to be what we are up to, but we can't do it in the same way. The Earth is as important to them as to us. If I am right, their continued existence has no importance for us as ours has none for them. We each have the same business to attend to but for quite different motives. So let them have their own family business secrets if they like, as long as we converge on the important things.'

He paused this was a much longer speech than he had intended at the outset, but he felt he was working something out in his own mind and needed to say it all:

'What worries me is we seem to share a common technology, at least their technology parallels ours in some way and Alexander it seems is expected to manage the cross-over. If he is the one chosen by 'Them' it makes sense to leave it to him to show us in what way we can use their system to mesh with ours.'

Penny searched his face. Whether it was the strain, the tensions of the last weeks or just the sheer hard work, she did not know, but she was unable to stem the tears which were flowing silently from her. They clasped hands in a bond which would take them both time to fully appreciate.

'You see.' He went on animatedly, now holding her again. Penny bit her lip and allowed Ric to continue.

'So the problem of the Earth is actually shared, between us and 'Them' in JNO, and with Alexander. We've got the opportunity now to make this a last ditch attempt to save Her.'

'We start now?' she whispered.

'Yes. Now.' They held each other tightly. They held each other for what seemed like a long time and Penny felt a surge of sexual desire not sensed since her first sight of Alexis. This was a man she knew understood her needs and ambitions, her feelings for her son and above all shared her awareness of 'Them' in the same way.

'We've a great deal to do,' she said softly. 'I think we need to sit down and work out our strategy for JNO, sector by sector.'

## Chapter 15

Alexander had no idea of the passage of time since his confrontation with the computer screen. His pursuit of the intruder on the 'sphere had taken all his mental capacities, and he felt his body crumple as if from far away. Moments before Hep pulled him back, he thought about staying in the 'sphere for ever, a mind like the other flashes he had encountered, his body left useless in its chair, with what was the core of him liberated as pure thought. So seductive was this possibility that he resented Hep pulling him back to his body and sought to fight him off. Hep, like rescuing a drowning man struggling against his own saving, had cut him off from the 'sphere and he had fallen back into his unconscious body.

He woke to find himself in a bed, in a pleasant, simple room, with net curtains in a bay window. There was a fifties style wardrobe suite, a self-assembly bedside-table complete with frilly lamp. In the middle of the window was a kidney shaped dressing table with a central heart shaped mirror chamfered at the edge and two half-mirrors on piano-hinges at either side. A stripy dressing gown hung on a brass hook of the painted oak-grained door to the room. A jug of orange juice and a clean glass were on the bedside table. He moved his head to find he was in striped pyjamas, and was immediately aware that his head seemed no longer to be part of his body. He had the mother and father of all headaches and found it least painful to remain as still as possible. His mind fortunately was unexpectedly quite lucid. Bodily things could be separated from it.

This was a new sensation. He found will-power alone enabled him to disconnect his body from his mind. A headache like this one would once have prevented him from thinking of anything else. Now mind and body could be separated into two quite different areas of being. The experience of the 'sphere had enriched his thinking powers. As if a door in his mind was ajar. Access to the 'sphere was simply a matter of desiring to enter. In his mind's eye he saw it literally as a door offering a threshold to the Chronosphere. He could push the door open and cross the sill. His body, contradicting his mind, told him to do no such thing, it had had enough for now and he wasn't to push his luck.

Before he could argue this one out with himself, the door to the room gently opened. He waited until the someone crossed his field of vision, it being unwise to move his head. The dark face taking up the light belonged to Marina and he quickly conjured up his memory of her on the stair at Markham. Her presence filled him with a pleasure which surged involuntarily but wonderfully from his loins. He was certainly pleased to see her and worried she would be aware of his involuntary desire.

'You're awake then.' Marina placed a cool hand on his forehead. 'How do you feel?' The sound of her voice so real and so human, was a surprising contrast to the way his mind felt and which had so disembodied him. The real world of people had felt extremely remote. This separation of body and mind seemed to be something 'either-or'. He could embrace one or the other, but not both at once. This continual jumping from one state of being to another was uncomfortably disruptive, he would have to learn to handle things better if it were not to drive him mad. For now, his sense of reality resided entirely in the pulsing of his rock-like erection, as he luxuriated in Marina's presence. She was all velvet softness, making feel him safe. He could give himself up to her and forget all about the complexities of his upbringing and his confused relationships. With her he felt....uncluttered.

'Don't move your head, Hep said you'd have quite a headache when you woke'

'I'm not,' he whispered. 'Rather I can't - did he say how long it would last?'

'Not long, you'll be okay soon'.

'Stroke my head again, it helps.' But he was more aware of the extreme tension inside his pyjamas than anything else. Marina sat on the bed and stroked his forehead with a cool hand. The curve of her cheek, the way her lashes moved, the blackness of her eyes, the softness of her skin, her touch, made most of the pain in

his head slide away and the ache was now in his rampant penis, his body reacting involuntarily to her touch. She had to be aware of the affect she was having.

She smiled, her face close to his, she leaned forward and kissed him very gently, but fully on the lips. He could not believe it. He tried to kiss her back, but an explosion in his head prevented him from doing anything requiring action on his part. He relaxed and Marina holding his head in both her hands, kissed him again, deeply, soothingly.

'You are full of tension, Hep says I am to relax you, the headache will go and there's only one sure way to relax a man,' she grinned broadly. She stroked his belly under the pyjamas top, and loosening the draw string to his bottoms, exposed him. As he could not move his head to see, he concentrated on the wavy line of the crack in the plaster of the ceiling. If this was supposed to be therapy he could take as much as she wanted to give.

'Let everything go and leave it to me,' she hummed huskily. As she worked on him his mind first went into a tumult and then gradually emptied. The sensations from her hands, lips and tongue sent emollient tides of tranquillity coursing through his nerve ends to the core of his brain. Wonderfully the pain ceased by degrees and other more vigorous emotions began to take over. Marina sensing the change, began expertly to massage his body so he again relaxed and closing his eyes left his body to her and his mind to float above him. He was so far in her hands, that he did as she bade and left everything to her. It was she who controlled the climax to which she eventually brought him, which was enormously prolonged and seemed to come from somewhere deep inside his head and his spinal cord at the same time. As his body responded to her ministrations, the tension was drawn, sucked out with his sperm, like an evil spirit from him - letting go its grip from the top of his head and leaving smoothly through the soles of his feet. He slept like a baby.

When he woke, the headache was gone and he was rested and full of well-being. He was alone. He rose from the bed, went to the window and parted the opaque, heavy, white nets. There were suburban mock-Tudor houses on the opposite side of the tree studded road, lining broad grass verges. The house he was in was of similar design. Expensive cars were in the drives, mostly new. Several had personalised number plates. On this evidence he decided he was in some leafy suburb, probably in North London - Stanmore or Cannon's Park. Somewhere salubrious but totally anonymous. He did not recognise the car parked in the drive to the house. It was not in JNO livery. He opened the wardrobe and finding clothes to fit him, dressed in jeans and shirt, and opened the door. The staircase led to a spacious, dark, oak panelled entrance hall. The whole place was unchanged from the 50's as if owned by elderly people who having made it the epitome of modernity in 1955 had done nothing to it since. He opened the door to the large front lounge and went in. Thea was sitting in a flowery armchair, by the baronial-style fireplace, cool as the sphinx, her hair smoothly raised up on her head in a tight bun.

'Hello Alexi mou, you seem sprightly.' She laughed pleasantly and stood to embrace him. Alexander was still in a state of relaxed empty headedness thanks to Marina's skill. He embraced his twin as if it were quite normal for both of them to be in this house and to find her in the room was quite expected. Gradually a sense of reality filtered through to him and he realised he had no idea where he was nor how long he had been there; nor yet any reason for his being there; or what might happen next. It came to him that nothing had made any rational sense since the meeting with Lucina. Rationality had gone out of the window and normality was the appearance and disappearance of gods, demi-gods and goddesses. An Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass world where what was real was out of reach and what was illusion, all too real. He managed, just, to keep the sensation of Marina as a definite link to reality. Otherwise he had passed through an invisible barrier, and could now go back and forth without warning or reason. Thea said nothing, he sat obliquely to her on the matching print sofa.

'Where's Marina?' His question betrayed the thought uppermost in his mind.



'She's not far away. She's with Hep. They're busy on security matters.' He wanted to know what she meant by 'security matters' but he let it go, rightly assuming from her demeanour that Thea had other things on her mind. Before letting her take the inevitable lead, he asked,

'Where are we. And what are we doing here?'

'We're in one of Marina's safe houses, you don't need to know where. What we are doing will become clear as we go on, I'm sorry to be cryptic, but it's hard to explain simply, just trust me and Hep. Where's Zeus' net?'

'I don't know, Hep must have taken it from me when I passed out. Why?'

'You'll need it. Stay here and I'll get it from him.'

Alone in the room Alexander delved into his mind to see if he could easily find his mental door. Locating it at once he pushed it fully open and was immediately peering into the sunlit terrace of Psathi. He saw Mnemosyne, she smiled up at him, Hera stood at the railing high above the blue Mediterranean. He could choose to enter or not. He chose not and mentally pulled the door to. Then, experimentally he went back to it and opened it once more. He saw Pannie in a clearing in a wood, quite naked and intently stroking his swollen penis, an impatient nymph lay open-legged on the grass at his feet, waiting. He mentally shut the door again. He could control the door but not what he would find on the other side.

'When you've finished playing with your new toy, perhaps we could get down to some important business,'

Thea handed him the fine golden mesh which he threw over his shoulders in a shimmer of colour, as she broke into his thoughts on L1.

'You're getting better at the 'sphere, but it's still difficult for you, the net will help, without it, it would be hard for you if not impossible. It's going to be difficult enough, that's why Zeus didn't want you on the 'sphere and only gave you Hep's net as an aid when he knew there was no alternative in the time available. It simply takes too long to learn how to use the 'sphere and mortals don't live long enough to make it worth their while. Too soon you're a mere spirit on the way to Hades. Still you're all we've got; so the sooner we get you trained the better. By the way, the 'door' image is a good one as a mnemonic. I see you can now summons it any time, but you need to be able to know where and when and above all why you want to be on the other side.'

As Thea communicated with him, like a hammer blow to his psyche he realised this 'other world' simply wasn't ever going to go away. Illusion was reality and reality had...well...slipped away.

'Alexander, I wish you'd pay attention to what I'm trying to get through to you! Yes, yes, you'd better get used to the idea that things have changed. You've crossed the threshold, there's no way back. We have to make the 'sphere work for you despite the steepness of the learning curve. At least Mnemosyne gave you a head start. You have a task to fulfil which only the offspring of a god and mortal can do if it's to work properly. So let's stop all the angst and get on with it. Zeus made you and we are to train you, and I'm here to see it gets done.'

Clouds of doubt again rose to interfere with the thought meld. Unlike Pannie in the same situation, Thea would have none of it. She had shared a womb with this mortal, she knew him.

'Let me begin by explaining how the Chronosphere works.'

They continued to communicate on L2. Anyone entering the room would have seen two people sitting silently. Thea was well into the thought meld, when Alexander soundlessly interjected to separate the bond. His mortal half was in danger of comprehension overload. Though he absorbed the facts, his lack of experience prevented him from understanding more than a fraction of the real meaning. He sensed her

exasperation and, her resignation to his weakness. More worrying was a transmission from her of the notion that in the circumstances, he would probably learn best by doing. She would therefore launch him on his task with the knowledge all of them had so far implanted in his mind and let the rest of his understanding come from confrontation with events. They would all tune in on the 'sphere whatever they were doing and take shifts to be personally available.

Thea was to remain on duty for the time being. Others would assist as circumstances determined - on call. Hera would wait in the wings as befitted her status and Zeus kept his normal aloof overview of everything. All this occurred place on L2 and on balance he considered it best that the finer details of this condensed communication was largely outside the span of his comprehension. It was like listening to a foreign language he got the gist but missed the gradations of meaning.

This part of the mutual thought transmission, over, he felt Thea prompt him towards the door in his mind. She urged him to push it open. Beyond the threshold he was aware of streams of light on a dark background. They were like electric pulses made manifest, parcels of information conducted along cables of light. He tentatively put out his hand to touch, and feeling nothing, ventured further.

Thea's presence urged him onwards, a spur and a strength. She was like a coach with faith in his ability to venture difficult manoeuvres while she willed him on, supportively, at his own pace. With an effort of will, he crossed the threshold. Immediately his mind was struck with a mass of information which streamed through and round him like visible rays. He was buffeted, but unharmed.

This was not the same Chronosphere he had travelled before. It was a poor imitation lacking its breadth and depth. By comparison it was one dimensional. It was merely a large switchboard for transmitting information. No being was detectable and some of the pulses of information material seemed to become lost, then slowed down and were extinguished for lack of directional power. It was a shoddy kind of 'sphere.

Thea's mind propelled him onwards to follow the direction of the mainstream, which thinned as it went, but with a surprising current of force despite the detectable and continuous loss from its overall mass. His mind followed and hovered at a point where the main-stream of information fed into what he understood to be a computer terminal. A faint code number was etched at the entry port which Thea prompted him to memorise.

The mainstream was joined by another branch of electrical activity. He sensed the link to be poorly accomplished. It was attempting to divert the mainstream, but without success. As his mind flicked around the system, the activity, disconnected and shifted to flow round the impulses which held his thought pattern. Amoeba like, it surrounded the electrical thrust of his mind and he sensed it as trying to read him as if he were a message. Unable to shake off the sensation of being surrounded and absorbed he panicked only to discover he could do nothing. The panic subsided a little when he found he was not cut off again from the body he had left on the other side of the door, as he feared from his Markham experience.

Grateful for his continual ability to summons the door icon before him, he could see Thea on the other side of the sill, urging him onwards. The surrounding electrical field as if finding him incomprehensible, swung away and reattached itself to the main-stream. Thea was urging him to follow the direction of the intruding flow. This was less easy as it was much weaker than the mainstream. A faint, but regular pulse, indicated its direction, which was easily lost in a mass of static material which was without any apparent purpose. Thea stayed in touch on L2 and by following her instructions he was able to hold on. Eventually the intruding line strengthened which made it easier to follow. This line also ended in a computer terminal. He noted the code number of this too. Thea was beckoning at the door, he crossed the threshold and came to his body in the lounge, maintaining the L2 link with his twin.

In his absence Hep had arrived and was already linked into L2 with them. An intense mind-meld ensued which Alexander found he could more or less follow and even contribute now and then, mostly with queries.

This triadic communication covered much ground, occasionally hitting level 3 nuances which intrigued Alexander's mind, but it was in too rarefied a range for his full comprehension: it was like they were speaking the language he was learning but at normal pace and with their own much more extensive vocabulary.

Bit by bit he was uncovering more and more of the 'sphere. He noted how Hep and Thea used it smoothly and easily as naturally as breathing. If anything they were more at home in the thought regions of the 'sphere than in the physical reality of the world. It occurred to him that this was their natural plane of existence rather than the physical world and was thereby even more amazed at his ability to link to them at all.

Hep's mind was finely honed, intensely practical and inventive, Thea's ordered, clear and honest. By contrast Alexander felt clumsy and uncouth, an ignorant interloper. Several times he almost disengaged. He had been okay with Pannie, his simpler mind was equally at home on the lower levels of the 'sphere, and Alexander had felt less intimidated. These more august users ignored his feelings of inadequacy, including him fully with their intertwining thoughts as if he were an equal. He was flattered, and kept pace as best he could, lapsing into reverie when they soared and dipped beyond his understanding.

He understood through his limited grasp that the information stream he had observed and followed was not the Chronosphere at all, but the crude internet invented by mortals for their own spaceless communication and the system being used by Penny for her grand plan. It was nothing compared with the 'sphere but little as it was, it was all they had. His visit there had two purposes.

First they agreed that to carry out his task, Alexander needed to know more about the way GAIANET used the Internet to feed into HIGO. It was important for him to know intimately how it worked. To understand how it was to be tied into the 'sphere without anyone, gods or mortals knowing the two were to be linked, apart, of course, from the senior members of the Firm, who would keep the knowledge secure. He needed to be able to mind-travel between the 'sphere and the Internet along the links only they could make.

Secondly he grasped, that Hep was still very worried about the phantom hacker he had spotted at Markham, whom Alexander had followed so arduously. Hep was clear about the origins of the mind behind the mystery hacker and was sure there was a Hadean counterpart to Alexander somewhere. The existence of a second computer attempting to divert the main stream from HIGO, (Alexander had learned from the meld that the entry node numbers tallied with Markham) was positive proof of a Hadean attempt to check out what was going on.

Hades, probably in some kind of alliance with Chronos, had managed to get a messenger from his own netherworld communications through a fissure in the barrier erected by the Olympians so long ago and it had made contact with the human internet. How long until they breached the Olympian Chronosphere itself? Alexander correctly assumed that Hades and Olympus were two systems working in parallel and so ought never to meet. What if Hades was planning his own link? Not only was this unimaginable, it would mean unknowable changes would be put in train to undermine the status quo of aeons between the two realms and the relationship of gods, mortals and the Underworld. Between the past and present. This would be a deliberate act of provocation, the consequences were so unpredictable that they could not be fathomed by even Hep's own powers of prophecy. Again Hep wondered if Zeus knew what he was doing.

Thea, herself struggled to find a pattern to so many different possibilities of action, that for once she was rendered unable to respond, a fact which Alexander found hard to understand and so thought he must have got it wrong.

Heps' first thoughts about a Hadean messenger, were of Core, his sister, called Persephone when she emerged from the underworld; one of the few messengers from Hades allowed to cross both ways. Hep and Thea had spent a good deal of time on L3 checking. Alexander was of the opinion they had discounted her since her movements were prescribed and well known, although Alexander was not sure they had put her entirely above

suspicion. Only Hermes was able to pass as messenger between and he was above suspicion. The only other go-between was Pan whom they knew well. There were no other dwellers of the nether-world able to leave, unless it was Hades himself, who, to the best of their knowledge had only left once for unusually necessary medical attention. Hep concluded things were very serious if his uncle was out and about mixing the past with the present willy-nilly. The effect on the living earth of his underworld powers, and the release of what was locked up there, were unknowable, and he shuddered at the thought. However this was unlikely, for if Hades was really out and about the balloon would have gone up already.

Such a departure from the orderly and rational arrangements about who controlled what, made after Zeus' skin of his teeth victory over the Titans, was truly unimaginable. Both Hep and Thea spoke of this in ways which were far from Alexander's ability to follow anything but his own conjecture. Alexander thought he caught a sense of the inclusion of the mightiness of Zeus himself but could not be sure.

Given the complexity of a situation unfolding on so many levels of unseen activity, it was decided Alexander's actions were to be limited to one major task. It was agreed that Thea would stay on shift with her brother, but would have immediate access to Hep and the others. Total secrecy was necessary, needing subtle use of the 'sphere. Alexander would be well employed to initially follow up the mortal manifestation of the curious interloper. If he could find out what he, she or it was up to they would know more about the state of activity of the opposition and what Alexander was to do next.

Not fully following the details of their multi-faceted communication, it seemed to Alexander that these were early skirmishes in a much larger struggle. The stakes of which held more that the rescue of the earth from delinquency of mortals. It was inconceivably, something even bigger, which his mind was quite unable to grasp, but which was obviously clear enough to Hep and Thea, of central importance to Hera and which began and ended with the supreme Zeus.

Hep left the room, his large frame bent with care. Thea, sat silently pale, suddenly tired, and for the first time in his life Alexander felt vulnerability in her. He suspected his ignorance of the overall situation was a strength, a freedom in innocence which she could never know. It may well lead him into unknown dangers, but he would never feel the weight of knowledge she felt at this moment and he was glad of it. He also knew with certainty that to know what she knew would crush him utterly.

Thea, aware of his thoughts as he was unaware of hers, came to him and they embraced silently. He felt her salt tears on his neck and loved her with all the pride and fierceness of a twin. He felt her struggle to break the embrace and holding him at arm's length resumed her usual deliberate manner but spoke softly.

'Come on, there's no time for this sort of thing.' More softly still, in parenthesis, slipping out unchecked as if from another part of her mind she added, '....as we shared a womb so we will share....the rest.' He saw her eyes were full of pain. 'I will not forsake you however difficult it becomes.....and you will at the end....let me....us all....go. Now, to our work. I must go to with Hep, I leave you with Marina though mortal, you can trust her as one of us. She has skills, some of which you have enjoyed, but she has others, and she knows her job. She does not know that she was chosen by Prometheus to guard you and he saw to her training. Like Penny, she has inklings but no knowledge. Tell her of the hacker and be guided by her intuition. Call me on the 'sphere at any time. Good luck Alexi mou.'

She kissed him lightly on the cheek, and left the room with a backward glance which made him want to run and hold her. She was after all his twin and at the bottom of them, they had shared everything.

Alone, through the vibrations of the net round his shoulders, Alexander felt that neither Hep nor Thea were still on the same time-line as himself. He was alone in the house with Marina. To test himself again he sought the door in his mind and found it already open. Beyond the threshold was an impenetrable swirling mist, it was as Thea had said; without a reason to enter there was nothing to link to, his mind saw nothing. He felt he

was slowly getting the hang of this 'sphere business.

It seemed to him that its reality was not something outside himself but was conjured up from inside. He thought of those trick films, which start with an individual. Then panning upward take in the town, country and continent, then the whole earth. Then it goes beyond the nearer galaxies to finally stop at the outer rim of the universe: only to fall like a stone back to the individual on earth. Now magnifying the epidermis, the cells, the molecules and on into the single atoms and stopping only at the edge of the vastness which is the atomic inner-universe, comparable in complexity to the external cosmos.

The Chronosphere was different. It was not a physical entity. It was fabricated from pure thought. With no equivalent in the external world, it was in its way as large as creation itself. Larger, if that were possible; for it was itself constantly recreating new thoughts at the speed of thought itself. Here was no time, no space, and amazingly it was available, at least in theory, to any sentient being. It occurred to him, that if his thoughts were able to be launched beyond himself, they would be available for ever to any other being who wanted to link with them. Given that most of them were rubbish, he couldn't believe they would all be available, and was embarrassed to consider they might be accessible to Thea or, the gods forbid, Lucina.

Suppose there were a kind of filter. A gate of some kind to prevent the 'sphere from getting clogged up with the inconsequential musings (which seemed to occupy large quantities of his waking life, especially those of sexual reverie) excluding those even longer periods when he was quite unaware he was thinking at all. Perhaps the door image was too simple to work all the time. Maybe the gate he sought was not so literal, it was probably somewhere inside him, that would be consistent with the nature of the 'sphere if he had it rightly.

He would need to search within himself for a more satisfactory entry point. At this the net round his shoulders quivered infinitesimally. Most of the time he ignored Zeus' gift, saw it as a kind of aid, but it seemed now to be more than a simple antenna. It definitely responded to his thoughts. Perhaps it could not only radiate other thoughts and timelines inwards, but it was also a means of broadcasting his own thoughts outwards.

He tried another experiment. He had no idea where his sister now was, but if he was right, she had to be somewhere on the 'sphere. He realised he was concerned at the nature of her departure, feeling an acute sense of abandonment. Also numerous questions for her had risen in his mind. He wanted to understand more, but as usual she had swept him aside to get on with the job in hand. Although he believed this time she was as distressed to leave him as he was to see her go.

Could he at least communicate on L1 wherever she was? If not, how was he to communicate when he was fulfilling his task, how to summons her on her shift watching over him? Was the communication process to be one way only, or could he take the initiative? He realised that up until now she had always appeared to him, not the other way round.

He summonsed the door icon, but all he saw beyond the sill was a vast emptiness, within which he could journey forever. He'd had enough of that for the time being and couldn't be sure Hep would be there to rescue him. He has a sudden idea, he would consult the net. He thought hard - The net gripped his shoulders lightly but firmly. He took it as an affirmative, he went on:

'Thea where are you? I want to talk to you, I want to know more of what you were saying to me just now. Where are you, answer me'

He slipped into L1 mode and through Zeus' net he somehow knew his thought was winging on a correct trajectory. Immediately he entered L1 he melded with Thea. The meld had the same timeless feel as the others he had experienced, but this time without her needing to be present. During the communication Marina came into the room and Alexander was able to acknowledge her without breaking off and found he was even able to

say words of greeting without violation of the mind-meld. Part of his brain registered the fact that the communication with Thea was taking place outside time and was also occurring in parallel with Marina in real-time. The thought realm was indeed just that, another world in which within and without ceased to exist. It was no longer a question of either-or, but both.

While he spoke to Marina, the L1 conversation soared into L2. He recognised Thea's delight at the quickness of his learning and his use of the golden net. The answers to his questions about their relationship were less forthcoming. He felt a change in the way they communicated, a rare beauty in the mode of communication as twins experiencing a sharing of sameness and indivisibility. A combination of powers, exclusive of other people. He also sensed a second sense of an otherness within her, which he did not understand. His thoughts attempted to entwine with hers but although she allowed them to enter within the meld he could not engage with her fully. He felt not so much excluded as unready and somehow satisfied with that, he felt her disengage, but softly, lovingly. This was a new sensation and he felt sustained as he had with Nemmi but never until now in the same way, with Thea.

During the meld he was astonished to find he had been holding a quite different conversation with Marina. She was already working on a plan of action concerning the location of the code number of the entry node of the computer which was flicking its electronic tongue around GAIANET. While engaged in the conversation, Alexander surprised himself by the facility his mind was developing to concentrate on different things at the same time. He put this new facility down to the new use and understanding he had about the value of Zeus' net. Not only could he now communicate on the 'sphere at will, but he could engage with real-time in parallel and he was also holding a third conversation with himself about what was going on with Marina.

He realised that his thoughts were probably no more powerful than before, but that he was more aware of how they worked and was gaining control of them. For a start everything about his experiences of Marina was sharply revealed to him. From the moment he saw her when her sheer physicality had sent a flame of desire through his blood; to the utter disbelief in such perfection and the incomparable pleasure he felt when she entered the room.

Now he was placed in her care by Thea, and they were making plans. As part of his brain engaged with the conversation, another part was trying to make sense of the nature of the developing relationship with this strong woman. He wondered if he was taken only with the proficiency in her movements; the way she held her head, the articulation of her limbs. From her body there flowed more than a simple sexual charge. She was somehow too desirable to have, too potent to touch. As much as he wanted to simply grab her and bury himself in her body, feel her thighs and calves twine in his, her firm, pointed breasts, their long nipples pressed against his chest, her fine tensile fingers grasping him in strong arms. Nevertheless, he felt unable to initiate any movement towards her. She was too much herself. Too completely within herself to be available to the naked lust her mere presence arose in him.

She on her part, seemed to be testing him. He felt she was not so nakedly sensual with others. It was as if she let the electricity of her sexual charge flow fully, without rein, in his presence. He had felt the seemingly limitless depth of her healing capacity as she had soothed his aching head. She had been the one in command and used her body to control his desires while also exciting them to fever pitch. Something had to be done to get into some kind of normal relations if the conversation they were having was not to be totally displaced by his ever rising desire. He wondered if a mind-meld were possible as a way of communicating these thoughts. Normal language seemed impossible. He considered simply jumping on her, since there was no way he could verbally communicate the turmoil she caused in him.

He failed to make a mind-meld. As he launched his thoughts towards her mind he could immediately tell that she had no inkling of the 'sphere and there was no connection possible. She was as impenetrable as any other mortal. What did surprise him was his own awareness of thought waves within her, and the notion that with effort he might be able to develop a crude form of thought-link with her, maybe. Having no way of handling

this idea he did not even allow the thought to gel enough to make it conscious. He decided the only policy was to take the direct route as his concentration about what she was saying was about to fail him utterly. He would have to speak no matter the outcome. Like a guilty adolescent he spluttered,

'Marina, I'm sorry - but I can't continue with this, he struggled for words and blurted out before he had time to think of the meaning he was conveying. 'You'll have to turn something off, or else I'll explode!'

'Turn something off?' her large black eyes were amused. He was acutely embarrassed.

'I - mean - I can't concentrate on what you are saying, you - I - you - I mean...'

'I what?' she smiled, and then, to his utter surprise she firmly held his head between her hands and kissed him hard at first so he could feel the pressure of her teeth, then more softly.

His knees turned to water His hands clasping her back felt the tension of her dorsal muscles under the thinness of her clothing, his hand slid to grasp a firm, buttock as she entwined a powerful leg around his. She reciprocated, slipping her hand into his waistband a strong and knowing finger probing downwards. His already overloaded mind gave up the struggle to hold onto any thoughts as he entered into an explosion of sensuality, matched moment to moment by Marina's well-honed sexual authority.

Hours and hours later, not only had she allowed him to explore all his own fantasies but introduced him to some new ones of which he had not even conceived. They continued until his need for inventiveness waned only through physical and mental exhaustion.

The evening, the night and most of the next day passed in a welter of super-heated passion, cool, detached, caressing; hard, quick, long slow penetrations, slow, impossibly anguished and multiple orgasms of mind and body that stretched all his senses and sent him spinning into space for ever, where he slept floating as if free from gravity, waking to new sensations of warmth and wetness, of skin on velvet-skin, odours and tastes hitherto unsensed and untried.

If anyone had asked him what happened in those several hours, he would have replied in awe that he was pulled inside out by a sensual wonderment which spent every desire and drew from him all cravings, leaving him not only sated but reborn as a man complete. If he never had a woman again, it would be enough.

He had no idea what it did for Marina. Though his pleasure, had seemed to be hers too. She gave herself as a consummate teacher gives a bright pupil knowledge, sufficient an act in itself for the benefit of the other. Later, he lay in the bed watching her walk naked into the bathroom. Wet from the shower she came and straddled him in the bed. He was too spent to do anything with only glimmerings of a rigidity that would not turn into anything useful, and sucking the droplets of water from the tips of the cones of her breasts, he groaned deeply and then explained with a laugh that although the flesh was weak, the spirit was willing.

'Good,' she laughed jumping off him. 'Now you've got that out of your system...' She kissed his limp penis, raising it a little and then letting it drop with a flourish. '....Maybe now we can do some different work!' Covering the curve of her buttocks in one smooth movement of a silk dressing gown while on the move, she swept from the room and soon the fresh smell of coffee drew him downstairs.

'I love you,' his voice had an unintentional catch. She sat opposite him holding a coffee cup between her two hands. 'You reach places in me I didn't know I even had and you fill up all those aching gaps. I can't even remember what the world was like before you. It's like I was incomplete before, always searching for something that wasn't there. When I first saw you at Markham, I couldn't shake off your image, it was as if your presence had locked onto mine and was welded into me so there was as much of you inside me as outside. It was like a physical thing, a bit like the feeling of twinship I have with Thea, but much more

physical.'

He gently unclasped the fingers of her left hand from the coffee cup. 'I have to touch you all the time, feel you there, skin to skin. I can feel desire welling up again.' He laughed, 'At least I can control it now.'

'Listen lover, it's twelve-thirty, that's eighteen hours of my life I've given you. Remember I'm an expert and you need to work with me on important matters and I can't be doing with your prick forever getting in the way. So, let's get this straight. Let's not get into love. It probably won't work with us. You don't love me, you only think you do. You're suitably grateful for what I can do for you and I like that, not everyone is. That's fine, you're welcome, I liked doing it with you. Don't go getting the wrong impression though, I only do sex like that with people I really like, and I like you. As it happens I also like your mother and your sister, not that I do sex with them.' she laughed at the idea,

'I owe them, and by now it's a sure fact that they owe me: so we're even. What I do for you I do of my own free will. You owe me nothing that you've not given me already, so less of the love stuff, take it for what it is. It's pleasure, fun, satisfactions of mind and body, I give satisfaction in all things, I do what I want and I do it very well. Anyway, I'm sure you noticed, I did lay it on a bit thick for you, so I'm not surprised if you fell so hard. Anyway I mean to have more of you'

'I think you've made a man of me,' his voice was low, meaning to protest his love, but he let go of her hand, knowing she was right, and he was not in love with her, not quite, not yet. He liked her - liked her a lot - enjoyed her frankness and lack of sentimentality. He, owed her for the last eighteen hours, would always owe her, whatever she said. And he looked forward to more.

'Enough! To work!' she said gaily. 'While you've been getting your testosterone sorted out my spies have been hard at it.'

'Spies! What spies?'

He had spent enough time being surprised about the happenings in the looking-glass world he was now inhabiting and was now there was even more new knowledge. Part of him knew that this was to be the norm for the foreseeable future. He noted her raised eyebrow at his response, and was glad she let it go. He was tired of expostulating at each new surprise and assumed correctly she would prefer to treat with him as a man of understanding and involvement as an equal.

'Go on,' he said. 'Sorry'.

She smiled knowingly. 'My spies, have been hard at work. They've been checking on the computer numbers Thea got you to find out about. She's afraid there is a hacker working to get into GAIANET and it's my job at security to find him or her and deal with them. She was very particular that it was you who were to make any contact with the person concerned, I was to get you there and after that I'm to keep a weather eye out for you but you're to go in alone. I won't say I'm not curious why she wants a greenhorn (Alexander winced at the term) to be so up-front in what's my security operation, but you're part of the family and it's their Firm. So as the brother of a director and the son of the MD who am I to say anything?'

She laughed and pulled him to her and kissed him hard on the lips.

'We'll make a real man of you yet...God, what a future you've got in front of you. I'm going to eat up as much of you as I can while you're still soft enough to be mine. It won't last long, soon you'll not be available to the likes of me but then I'll be able to say I had you and formed you at least a little.' She let go of him, 'Seriously my lad, I'll be with you for as long as necessary, and I'll have my fill of what I can get. You will be glad of me for a while and I'll be happy for that. I don't know why but I want you to be able to say you never wanted or



needed any other person, male or female, beyond me. Perhaps there's room for love somewhere, later perhaps. We'll see.'

He thought it best to say nothing and was glad there was a possible future with her. Today it was enough he felt that with her he had no need to try and be anything other than what he was and he could rely on her. For the first time since the encounter with Lucina, for the first time in his life, Lucina or no, he did not have to pretend or disguise anything about himself. He could be weak, strong, confused, childish, foolish, clever - anything he needed or wanted to be with her - and would be accepted and understood. If in return she wanted to eat him alive, he would offer himself to her. He could not imagine ever being without her, let alone leave her behind him, used up by him, she could never be just someone passed by in the maelstrom of life to merely be recalled with pleasure or regret.

She told him about her role in the Firm. He had utter trust in her ability to know her job and to make sure that he would be as safe as she could make him. He marvelled at her sureness, her sheer talent for her work, her knowledge of the communications industry and her understanding of people. Her deftness of mind matched her physical strength. She was complete. He marvelled also at the strength of the security organisation she headed. Its intricacies and its connections. Her spies were truly everywhere. Like a spider at the centre of a vast web she had at her disposal a huge network of information about each employee of JNO the Firm was so sensitive about secrecy that no one it touched was without the most thorough screening. Nobody was above suspicion. Even Penny and Ric were under surveillance. Alexander was surprised to learn from her that he too was on her net. He was surprised to hear her say that his DNA pattern was of great interest to her. He wanted to enquire further but her regard made him desist.

In the back bedroom upstairs, Alexander was not surprised to find a series of computer consoles like those at Markham. Marina's search of the data bases containing all the serial numbers of all the computers sold in the last ten years soon established that the source of the computer terminal of the hacker was in a machine owned by the Fourth World Software Company of Tuba City Arizona. She knew nothing of this company, other than it was a small subsidiary of Biteasy, Ric Trefoil's outfit. She thrust a print-out under his nose. - it read:

Fourthworld:

Subsid:Biteasy Corporation

Profits for benefit of Navajo Nation

Gift of Richard Trefoil, President Biteasy.

MD - Dr Manuelito (Manny) Kanuho.

'See, the hacker used a machine purchased by the 'Fourthworld' Company.' He wondered if she was being deliberately sarcastic. Their relationship, if that was what it could now be called, appeared to be characterised by a trace of mockery in her tone. Not that he minded very much. He was too grateful to let a little derision cause any problems.

'So?'

'So, that's the target. We, rather you, have to find out who in Fourthworld is trying to get into GAIANET and why. We also need to know what they got for their pains and we've got to stop them. Actually, it's your job to find this guy and get the facts out of him. It's probably a bloke, there aren't many women that motivated by boys' toys to work as hard as is needed to get into computer hacking.'

Alexander's first internal response was the question he was now unable to get out of his mind. 'Why me?' He

really knew this was not a question Marina was able to answer any better than himself. Not long ago he would have asked the question out loud. Now, since his conversations with Hep and the various mind-melds he had experienced on the 'sphere, his mission now, although still unclear had begun. He would learn on the way. At least he was beginning to like the power he felt through the 'sphere. The son of Zeus had a right to be part of all this. Had he not been trained by Nemmi for this very reason? He had to venture in this new realm without fear and to use its powers to help the Earth, without which there would be no future for his fellow mortals. Distracted by the sheer pleasure of doing anything with Marina he was happy to spend the next few hours planning their journey to Arizona and he anticipated spending the next several days in her company, whatever the nature of his mission might turn out to be.

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## Chapter 1

On the 89th floor of the JNO building in New York Zeus was sitting with his favourites among the Named. There was Hera, being sweetly imperious, Athena was serious, Prometheus, as usual was a bit aloof, Mnemosyne was calm, Themis was at her ease. Hephaestus was a bit on edge and the ubiquitous Pan was in a world of his own. The room, or more truly the 'space', they occupied resembled a sunlit grove of olive trees, their leaves shivered green and silver in the smallest of delightful breezes. Pan basked in the sunlight at some way away from the rest of the company. He lay on his back on a large, smooth stone by the banks of a quickly running stream where his interest was taken up by the activities of several naked nymphs playing in and out of a curtain of drooping willow fronds trailing in the sparkling jewel of a pretty pool.

Zeus, was talking animatedly to his audience. A fact which did not prevent his own interest in Pan's nymphs and he frowned when the demi-god rose to his bandy legs and obscured his line of vision. He indicated enough disapprobation to the little man to make him feel uncomfortable and he moved to give his master a clear view. His flow continued none-the-less.

'...the trouble with His Oneness, is that He gave up on the Great Mother Gaia and led mortals to disregard Her. What He calls 'Transcendence'. I call cutting the apron strings too far. He's too self-contained, He thinks He's started something new by stationing Himself beyond the real world in some kind of Heaven where no one can ever be sure of going. For reasons quite beyond me He reckons heaven to be beyond the beauty of those nymphs there and this glade.'

He gestured widely with his hand. 'Pannie - get out the way, I can't see for your ugly hide!'

Hera smiled ruefully to herself and Athena deliberately turned her back on the view and him.

'Now what can be better than this?' he continued in parenthesis, unabashed. 'Gaia provides all without question. All she asks in return is to be cared for and what gifts she gives!' He paused to beam benevolently at his companions and continued. 'This despoliation is all his fault. This God of Heaven with no Earthly ancestors, no mother nor father anyone can discover. We live on Earth with our mortals. What good is Heaven to them? They really believe in me....er....in us. It's just that they've forgotten us, but we're still there, in their collective unconscious, despite Yahweh and His brilliant Son idea. That was the cleverest trick of the lot. Just when I thought they would see through Him, and leave Him to get forgotten among those desert wanderers in the East, He played His trump card and reincarnated Himself as a human. It was a clever stroke I grant you. He started mortals off on their dangerously wrong track by making His inaccessibility tangibly human to make it seem He was really accessible to them. Stole my thunder so as to speak. I wish I'd thought of it first. Then so much time wouldn't have been lost. Still even I can't think of absolutely everything. Now-a-days the notion of Yahweh's Son is the only myth of any substance they've got left, even if they're still not quite sure what it means any more. They've spent so much time repressing their connections with the Earth, their real Mother, to follow this great Masculine Authoritarian, they've completely forgotten Her. He's taken Her into Himself, as if She belonged inside Him alone. The Great All-In-One! Thou shalt have no other gods before Me! One God fits all!....Bah!'

At this, he rose from his languid reclining position and paced up and down punching his mighty fore-finger into the air. Dark clouds appeared on the horizon, causing consternation in the weather forecasting department. Rain wasn't expected at all for several days.

'Well...the point is not even their highest of high priests through history have been unable to transcend the Earth. Mortals are rooted in the Earth whatever other gloss they like to put on it. They've even made poor old Hades take the blame for their failure to live up to Yahweh's needs. Turned him into a monster, a devil. Well I know better. Secretly, mortals prefer us. They get no prophetic harangues from us, eh? No 'thou shalt nots' from the top of Olympus! No nailing up, no mortifying of the flesh from the Thunderer!'

He lay back and mused more to himself than the others who, though bored, knew better than to interrupt or leave abruptly from this impromptu board meeting.

'I know at times I'm a bit irrational, can get a bit out of hand - not without being provoked mind you!'

He held Hera's gaze for a moment as he spoke, 'I know what He wants though,' he glanced triumphantly at the others. 'Don't you think I don't! He's spent ages trying to get the better of me. You all thought He'd won, eh? Didn't you? Admit it, you did! Even I had my doubts, I might not have said much about it but you all thought I'd given up the battle didn't you? After Hypatia, the last true pagan of Europa, there was no one left who was really on my side. So I laid low. We all did. Well, things have moved on too far now. Things have gone past a simple choice between Him and me. The irony is that mortals think we're both dead. Now we're both gone, both conceptions are irrelevant. Even His Son of God myth has almost faded from them and Gaia is paying the ultimate price without a useful myth to guide them.'

He laughed until the leaves shook on the trees and the wind gathered up again in the Atlantic. He relaxed, and the previously fine weather returned as suddenly as it went. His gales of laughter had turned to gentle chuckles as he enjoyed the joke he was playing on humanity.

'They rejected us because we are too close to Gaia. They preferred His One-Ness so they could ignore Her needs and chase His impossible heavenly dreams; and now look at them. They're destroying Her and have betrayed Him and all of us too. So now they're on their own and they'll just have to sort it out for themselves; and...' he exhaled loudly. 'They need me to make them to do it. That's the best joke of all. I'm the one who has given them this one chance. I, not Him, because He cares about them only when they believe in Him. He thinks I don't understand all this. Transubstantiation - you what! Maybe they've lost both of us, but I've got the last laugh. Gaia listens to me and she's the key to everything. Mind you, Yahweh did some pretty clever things with the Chronosphere, I'm grateful to him for that. I mean He's pretty good at some things, I have to admit that. When I was having trouble getting people to think ahead, instead of just about the cyclical rhythm of the seasons, He came and stretched time to infinity...both ways.'

He stopped, if the others were bored, he was testing his position, and in his quixotic way, he knew they would not tell him to shut up.

Hera reached for his hand and held it gently against her bosom. 'My Lord, I thank you for your great insight into the way of things. You know we here love mortals as we love ourselves. Like you we regret their mortality but know it cannot be otherwise and we thank you for the chance you have given them through this boy and his mother,' she sighed. 'But it goes slowly my love. The boy is being instructed. Mnemosyne has given him remembrance. Themis gives direction and Hephaestos is his strong right arm. He has the woman whom Prometheus taught, at his side. I take care of his mother's fears and surround him with our aid. Our allies wait for him on the 'sphere. He learns of the 'sphere and the mesh of time, slowly, but with interest and with less fear. He knows of his task and starts to believe in himself. Penelope is well ahead with her plan and the human 'sphere is nearly in her control. The boy will seek Hades for us if he is not stopped first. There are rumblings on the Chronosphere, but you know of these, you hear them doubtless as we do.'

'Good, it is good,' and as if suddenly bored with business he shouted across to Pan at the lakeside.

'But what of you Pan, my skittish goat, what do you do in this for me?' He rose from his couch and walked over to where Pan was sitting cross legged on the bank ogling the nymphs, some of who were behaving quite wantonly.

'You like my nymphs Master, Hera will chastise you with jealousy and send flies to bite you.' With this retort he laughed and danced in circles around his Mighty Lord.

'Not for nymphs. And anyway,' he continued a little sheepishly. 'A little chastisement is worth it my dancing boy, making up with Hera is...' and remembering his dignity he stopped being jollied along by the goatish manikin.

'Enough!' The nymphs stopped their cavorting at the voice of the great Lord and became bashfully respectful.

'Off with you!' bellowed His Thunderousness, and laughed uproariously.

'Respectful nymphs are no use to us, eh Pannie? I'll be back later for you all, later when I'm free of business. Get off with you now! - Eh Pannie, you and me - a bit of a frolic later.' He said this latter under his breath. In truth Hera did feel a twinge of jealousy but had long ago taken little notice of these harmless peccadillo's.

Until Penny, Her Lord's philandering had created no dynastic or human consequences and had confined himself in the recent past mainly to smaller lapses, which she disliked but had not the energy to prevent. The conceiving of Alexander was another order of behaviour, in which he had not indulged since around the time of Io. Nothing he did with humans or other gods was without meaning. It always somehow drove things onwards. His purposes were not always clear, but he always made something change and always caused everyone considerable trouble before equilibrium was re-established.

'So Pannie come here and tell us of your part.' Pannie waved off the nymphs and did as he was bid. He sat by Themis and hugged his knees. While he played the fool with all of them, the licence they gave him did not stretch to disrespect.

'My role dear friends, is to play base fiddle to your airy strains. Alexiki is a good lad, a bit grave and too inclined to inaction for my liking, but has his heart in the right place. Themis here is a responsible sister,' he said sarcastically putting his head back and grinning broadly at her. 'Meanwhile Prometheus' trainee, that Marina, has him well grasped and I keep a close eye on them both. I will be near them at all times, I think he likes me and I know he likes her and I like watching them. She's quite a nymph master, this Marina. Quite a nymph!

He was startled as Themis pushed him away from her in disgust and he rolled away from her chuckling to himself.

'Are things ready to begin?' Zeus asked Hera.

'The strings are being drawn in My Devotion.'

'Good, all is under way.' He rose and beckoning Athena to support him, went off with her. Deep in conversation they left the scene.

Elsewhere on the Chronosphere things were buzzing. Chronowatchers who tried really hard and lived on L3 for prolonged periods, could detect unwonted activity in various quarters. But it was tedious work. Most of the activity was humdrum in the extreme. Gods and goddesses of all persuasions had always used the 'sphere, to hob-nob and gossip. Not since the business of Yahweh's own special version of the old story of the virgin birth had there been much happening of any note. The battles of the Titans and the Olympians had been the previous event of greatest moment, but in that epoch of time the 'sphere was unwieldy and not as sophisticated as it now was thanks to its re-invigoration by Yahweh.

Until He, the Chronosphere had existed in the present tense, so to speak. He unravelled past and future from the circle of the present and made time into lines, and like ropes they were twisted into skeins in a hugely complex web. If people were to defer gratification in the now and reach forward to Him, there had to be a clearer definition of future with contrivances to encourage aspiration into the unknown.

Now that Zeus' will and testament was posted on the 'sphere for the Pantheon, it had set hares running everywhere. The glimmerings of change felt by 'sphere watchers inevitably reached the attention of Hades and Yhawhe. Their reactions were very different. Both placed watchers on the alert and Hades sought his banished father Chronos, spent time in Tartarus and Elysium and in parts of the Underworld where previously he had rarely ventured. The jangle on the 'sphere caused by this unwonted movement of great personages, though deliberately kept as faint as possible, was followed closely by Hephaestos who warned the Pantheon to keep an eye open for Alexander.

Yahweh merely stretched out his mighty arm...and waited.

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Penny and Ric spent the next two months setting things up at Markham. They met every morning with Hep, in the panelled library which served as a board room. Whenever Ric entered Penny was there first. Hep usually followed Ric. Fresh coffee and rolls were served on a side table by the long window. Cows were often grazing on the meadow which sloped down to the lake. On fine mornings the windows were opened to greet the early sun. They set an agenda each morning to ensure they maintained continuity. There was a lot to do. After their own meeting heads of departments arrived and the business of the day was run through. Top of the agenda was ensuring GAIANET was as well tuned as possible to counter any further hacking, Ric and Hep were noted against that item. High on the list today was the planning of a secret meeting of the Advisory Group. This was Penny's task. The group was her idea. Her priority was always to ensure the Firm managed their business properly, without exploitation of people or contributing to the mess industry made of the world. The Advisory Group had been set up slowly, its members rigorously selected over several years. At first it was made up of JNO's customers, suppliers, government agents and politicians. Penny called them together regularly to get a feel of the overall impact of the Firm beyond the balance-sheet. They checked how JNO's activities affected the policies of governments, distortions in the market, production processes and pretty well anything to do with the way the earth's resources were managed. The group was highly informal, and the members were continually covertly tested by Marina's department for the consistency of the integrity with which they carried out their own work, their relationships within the other forums in which they were active and their commitment to both people and ecology. As time passed, the membership had changed as various of the original mix of people failed Marina's test and as the group itself became more and more incompatible. Some important representatives of industry did not in practice find it easy or congenial to sit with the implacable opposition of some government representatives, and other delegates from ecological organisations and universities did not fit with either.

Gradually, unsuitable people and organisations counselled themselves out of the group by not responding to invitations. The press at first enthusiastic about JNO's initiative lapsed into incredulity as the membership became more bizarre and the project lapsed. Academics wrote articles in the economic and political press applauding the motives but describing in great detail how there were too many incompatible ideas of the best thing to do for the idea to ever work and in any case it was a United Nations issue. Lucina would have none of the U. N. saying it would never react until it was too late and Penny seemed drop the Advisory Group.

The group ceased to meet officially and the world soon forgot its existence. It continued, however, in secret, the current membership having passed all the tests, developed a new, unstated role of global minders.

Today the meeting of the three heads of JNO took its usual form. Penny was at her lap-top at the mahogany table when Ric arrived and as usual said good morning, received no answer and poured himself coffee. He didn't expect her to turn from her computer as he arrived, once on her machine she was too involved to acknowledge him. It irritated him but he shrugged off the feeling as he knew it was merely application not rudeness on her part. He wished she was less absorbed. As if to prove the point, Penny snapped the lid down, and smiled up at him.

'Pour me one, Ric.' He reached for another cup and poured one from the cafetière. He brought the cup and saucer over to her and placed it on the table by her elbow. He sat beside her and pulled his notebook from the battered old satchel he always carried with him.

'You know what?' she said. 'You're the computer buff and it's me with the machine and you with the pencil and paper.'

'Old fashioned ways are sometimes the best,' he replied. 'Like taking a break now and again. I come in here every morning and you're always here first. It looks like you've been here all night sometimes. If you didn't smell all fresh like you do I'd think you'd never gone to bed.'

Penny touched his arm in acknowledgement of his concern. She was unusually keyed up these days. Ric had become very important to her. That alone had shifted the balance of her internal footing more than she had expected. Especially at this time when she needed her fullest concentration. But he was the only man she had met for a long time who understood the responsibility she felt for what she was doing, and felt it also for her. He gave her a sense of solidity, for which she was grateful. She was despite herself, gradually switching this for the strained pitch of nervous energy which had hitherto kept her going. She did not yet know if this was good or bad and part of her felt that now was not the best time to be experimenting with her emotions. It helped her that he knew her feelings, including those created by his growing importance to her.

Nevertheless she was constrained for she knew that for him, as for many men, responsibility was a kind of mind game, a test of virility implicit in the challenge. The outcome might be important but the game was most of the fun. She and Lucina knew what they were doing and went much further. This was no game, the challenge was not a test of strength; though that they were to be tested she knew well enough. The challenge was to do with global meaning and value. She had no interest in games. Penny suspected the challenge went even further for Lucina.

Hep arrived and stood hugely in his usual place by the window. He felt cooped up indoors and needed to have a long view over the outside world to feel comfortable. He found their need to meet irksome and usually only stayed to tell them about GAIANET and give them any useful snippets of information he'd had from the Chronosphere to help them.

'GAIANET good today,' he began. 'Okay. No hacker. Keep eye on HydroNorte of Brazil. Condamine he know what going on. Things up too with Fourthworld in Arizona, but Marina and your boy get on with that.'

'Thanks Hep,' said Penny. 'I've already spoken to Condamine and Marina says she's got the other matter under control,' she said hastily, not wanting to allude to anything to do with Alexander. 'Talking of Condamine, I think it's time we had a meeting of the Advisory Group. You know I like to keep face to face communications to a minimum. It's getting so hard to get them all here in secret these days they're all so busy. But I think it's important now. Planning in detail is one thing, putting our plan into operation is quite another. I do think though that this meeting's necessary. I know the specific information we need to discuss can be easily sent by any reliable medium and would in all likelihood stay safely confidential. But I need face-to-face communication to assess the overall reaction to the project getting started at last.'

'Okay if you say,' said Hep. 'But make sure no one know of JNO connection between them. Now is bad time to lose advantage of secrecy which support our power to keep invisible hold of international trading system. You think you can do it without Marina here?'

'No problem Hep,' said Ric. She sorted out the whole rigmarole ages ago anticipating the next meeting. Her department has it all under control.'

'Good. I go now you not need me to arrange meeting: ne?'

'Bye Hep, thanks, see you tomorrow morning. Report to me about the HydroNorte thing, I'm interested,' Penny replied. When Hep had left Penny and Ric sat together at the board room table.

'All set then? We go? Time to press the start button?' said Ric.

Both of them were sufficiently wise in the ways of the world to know that no plan ever went according to expectations, however well it was thought through. There were always unexpected events, reactions, and twists of interpretation and consequences which were unable to be envisaged in advance. While the overall direction might be sustainable, the journey, like all active situations, would be the biggest adventure any of the planners had ever embarked upon.

'I feel a bit like the old cartographers,' he continued. 'When they were unsure of what was beyond their knowledge they drew dragons and monsters. We have to accept 'there be dragons' ahead and be prepared to handle them as they appear.'

Penny noted wryly to herself that this was a metaphor often used by her son. 'To anticipate them would be better!' was Penny's rejoinder. 'I need to meet them soon. Hep is right it has to be done in the utmost secrecy. I'm not even sure any more if they'll all come. I wouldn't be surprised if they thought the whole thing has got beyond what's reasonable.'

'They'll come. I'll see that the invitations are sent today. Marina's department has its contact methods and we won't get replies, but they'll all come believe me.'

'A full house would certainly be a good test of our support. Anyone missing would be a big problem though. We'd have to follow it up and it would have its effect on the others. They all must come.'

'They will. Believe in them.'

'I do Ric, I'm just a bit overwrought. Preparation has been hard work but setting the whole thing off, while it's really exciting it's also pretty nerve-wracking at the same time.'

She and Ric had spent many hours of the last weeks considering the Advisory Group members' roles and their aptitudes for them. The careful selection process had recruited people of widely disparate backgrounds whose primary loyalty was now to the objects of JNO rather than their own colleagues, friends, agencies, employers or boards of directors and shareholders. Marina, her staff and agents in the field, had investigated each in the kind of detail used to select the most loyal of undercover agents. None of the members would have been the least bit surprised to know of the secret dossiers Marina held, although some might have raised an eyebrow or two if they saw what was starkly registered in black and white. They might have been surprised to know how many of their own staff and colleagues had been vetted and who else made up the huge matrix held in the JNO data banks separating people who were sound from those who were questionable.

The date was set and the invitations sent. It would be interesting but lengthy to detail how the thirteen members managed their respective journeys to Markham for the meeting, without raising the suspicion of their colleagues or the ever vigilant press. Their arrival had been staggered over three weeks, first to credible destinations in the UK. Then each of them had found a reason to go missing for the morning of the Advisory Group meeting without arousing suspicion. They had three hours at most before resuming their normal lives without anyone suspecting they had been absent. A fleet of non-descript cars was available at Markham to take them back to their different destinations.

Karl Kahn had flown in from Bonn two weeks earlier to an international conference on micro-biology in Oxford. Bill Kanapi from Manila was visiting an ex-cell mate, now living in Glasgow and had taken his life in his hands to leave and then return to the Philippines. No one must know he was in the country. Manyathi



Khumalo had accompanied her President, Nelson Mandela, on an official visit to Great Britain. Jose Condamine in true Latin form, burst into the country from Brasilia, announcing big deals on beef imports and causing a great flurry both on the commodity markets and the World Rainforest Movement simultaneously. If anyone had asked where he was today, he was last seen escorting a famous Greek super-model into a lift at the Dorchester, the rest was speculation.

Chieko Terakoa was in the country from Taiwan playing at the Royal Festival Hall and thereafter on tour, she appeared in Oxford the previous night playing Beethoven's violin concerto to a full house and the nation on television. This morning she was resting in her hotel. Doris Botham Minister for the Environment in Robert Egan's Government was visiting her mother in Swindon, while Lyle Etchart of the World Bank was breaking his journey from the UN via his historical search for the family tree of his British mother's ancestors in Sandford St Martin, not a stone's throw from Markham. Dov Krajowa from Haifa, owner of the biggest chain of hotels in Israel was having a day off from working on a deal with The Hanson Group to meet his only relative, also a survivor of Auschwitz, who now lived in Manchester. Mo Chu was permanent secretary at the Chinese Embassy and was visiting Oxford as a tourist and was on official leave for a fortnight. Piotre Ulybin was in the process of doing a secret deal in London over oil concessions in the Urals, was also sightseeing in Shakespeare country. While Lynne Farrell of the Sydney office of the McManus news empire was visiting Oxford to check on the progress of a bid for the biggest independent TV Network in the UK. Matsuko Morii daughter of the world's largest shipbuilding and steel conglomerate tycoon Sugiura Morii of Tokyo was shopping in London and was in her suite at the Hilton resting with a migraine. Finally there was Johann Pettershonn of Helsinki. A great Olympic distance runner in his youth, now a leader of a world wide youth initiative to overcome unemployment and a Nobel Peace Laureate. He was on a private cycling tour of Oxfordshire on holiday.

As the members of the Advisory Group were wending their various ways to Markham and attending to their alibis, Ric and Penny had shut themselves off from the rest of the world. They had their food sent in, organised the computer room as a place to live and sleep, and worked twenty hour days.

JNO's empire encompassed vast holdings in all the things which were of the earth. In one form or another the Firm influenced the world-market in all the physical commodities and also many of the artefacts that could be derived from them. They were also deeply involved in their transportation and marketing , either directly or indirectly.

GAIANET listed all the other international main companies and governmental holdings of land and material, all the major processing industries and the global wholesale and retail markets. They used HIGO to scan GAIANET's data-banks and got Hep to make the machine present a moving map of the state of global material and its human exploitation. It was no simple matter to pull all this together at a single point in time. What Hep eventually and amazingly achieved was an accessible and always up to the minute, data base, which showed the larger movements of the elements of production and distribution, which could be separately identified. These could be homed in on and expanded into micro units of information by the application of HIGO. The places round the boardroom table was rigged up for each member of the Advisory Group to access this information via a lap-top linked to HIGO and to each other and to a large display screen.

At 8.30 a.m. on the day of the Advisory Group meeting, Penny Conway, impeccably elegant, accompanied by a rather more relaxed Ric, entered the board room at Markham. They checked each of the fifteen portable PC's personally, tested the large screen and sat at either end of the large oval, green leather topped Georgian table.

The marks of many meetings and other events had scored the dark green leather. Penny wondered if any meetings more important than this had taken place around this venerable piece of furniture. It had been bought at auction of surplus Whitehall furniture and it had amused her to think her ambitions found reality, convened round a table which, it was said, had been used by Pitt's Cabinet. At 8.55 the 'phone by Penny's elbow rang and she snatched it up before the first ring ended.

'You're keen 'said the voice on the other end. 'Thirteen for coffee it is.'

'Thank god for that! Bring them up Robin. What a relief!' Ric smiled broadly and wagged a knowing finger at her. The door opened and they rose to greet their guests. They welcomed each person with warmth and sincerity, but there was little time for fancy niceties. There was a lot to talk about in a short time.

At midday the group rose and said their farewells. Bill Kanapi's eyes shone, there were tears in those of Matsuko Morii who hugged Penny tightly. Lyle Etchart seemed solemn. Of the others only Jose Condamine, seemed unmoved, smiled broadly and kissed her hand in a most gentlemanly way. They left with their own thoughts in the cars provided. Each carried their lap-tops in specially designed security briefcases equipped with internal acid baths if anyone stole them. Apart from those in Markham, these were the only other computers in the world equipped with HIGO and the GAIANET programmes which worked only with specially designed scrambler modems.

Penny and Ric lunched in the computer room with Hep who had been observing on a TV monitor in a back room. All three were grim faced and thoughtful. Penny was the first to break the silence.

'We'll go through the feedback logically, in depth and one at a time. I want Ric to start, if that's okay with you Ric, followed by Hep. I will finish.okay? Ric give us your overall impression and then go through them one by one.'

Ric spread a sheaf of notes he carried in his hand on the dining table, clearing some of the lunch debris to make room.

'Overall it went as I'd hoped. You got your 'full house' like I said all along you would. I still think thirteen is too few, but together with their positively vetted staffs we ought to go ahead. If you think of them as individual centres of a large kind of loose network their influence is pretty wide actually. My first thoughts - and remember this is off the top of my head, are that they are all with us, they're all totally reliable; as far as they can be...

'What do you mean - as far as they can be?' interjected Penny.

'Don't interrupt, Ms. Conway, let me speak and then you can comment,' he said with a joking formality. 'I'm having enough trouble marshalling my thoughts without your anxiety getting in the way. I think the realisation of the size of all this is just properly dawning on all of us. As far as they can be, means as far as each one can grasp not only their roles, which are more or less clear, but also the nature of the task and the possible consequences of the thing we have actually embarked on. Like you keep saying, to set off is to take responsibility. Action is commitment. You can and will be judged by passive as well as active people. I know it's not fair that those who shout their mouths off will judge us without taking any risk themselves. But we know that's how it is. We have chosen. That's thought one. Thought two is that these thirteen are only powerful enough on paper to make the kind of difference we hope for. What I mean is even if all of them perform up to and beyond their potential - and there's no real guarantee of that - even acting together, they may not have the international clout we need to shift the balance; to change the direction of the current momentum in the world. We are David against Goliath and our skills with the slingshot are untried. We have to aim well and we probably won't get too many shots. The best we can hope for is that we're not out in the open before we get our aim right. I'm still very worried about the fact there is a hacker and the consequences of that. Hep says Alexander is sent to deal with him. He must tell us soon whether he is a threat or not. It will make a great difference to what we do. In the meantime we must assume the hacker is an active threat...' He continued in this vein and then Hep gave his opinion of each of their guests.

Penny listened, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. When they had finished she spoke calmly and with the clear authority of one who has adopted the mantle of leadership,

'I agree with the analysis. They are the right people and as individuals they will do their best. We will give them all the help we can. I fear though, like you, it won't be quite enough. She seemed to struggle with herself. Her colleagues watched her with care and gave her all the time she needed to express her thoughts.

'Hep, I had hoped we and our colleagues on the Advisory Group could be self-sufficient in this. But I can't see it being possible. There's more than we can do. 'They' must become more involved. I think you know how hard I find this to admit.' she gazed at Hep as she spoke. 'I think Ric has taught me it is okay to own up to a sense of vulnerability. I've been a slow learner in this. There are things which are outside my control for which I lack both understanding and dammit I really don't want to know about. That's the truth. I really don't want to know, so Hep whatever goes on there, with Lucina and the rest, can happen without me. Ric and I will work here and do what we can to the greatest of our abilities, which I believe are not inconsiderable, you must do whatever is necessary with them and with Alexander. I know he is your person more than he is mine so I give him to you.'

'Do not make it hard for yourself' growled Hep. 'You cannot be self-sufficient in this. We all have roles to play. I take care of Alexander, We take care of him. Trust Lucina she knows what she do. Go with Ric and use your friends as I use mine.'

They parted, Hep left the exclusion zone and vanished, Ric and Penny settled down in the computer room and worked for the rest of that day and many days to come.

## Chapter 2

Hera and Thea, working from a parallel timeline in Psathi, between them followed all the members of the Advisory Group as they made their respective journeys back to their normal existences. Hera focussed particularly on two of them to get an idea of how they might play their role in the events hereafter and to consider where she needed to make her own adjustments to maintain control. She picked on Jose Condamine and Matsuko Morii, as she liked them particularly, Thea kept her eye on the others.

She watched Jose Condamine, drive himself back from Markham in the hired car provided by JNO. He turned off the main road to find a village pub for a pint of cold draught Guinness, a luxury hard to get in Latin America. As he meandered into Woodleigh Bottom, the Six Bells was pretty much the part, crouched in black and white livery on the edge of the manicured village green, flanked by a post office and half a dozen cottages; three of them thatched. He never got over the way villages in the heart of England nestled into the landscape as if grown from the very soil. He spent most of his time in anonymous hotels in cities these days and loved the idiosyncrasy of these places. Maybe one day he'd buy a thatched cottage on a village green and see if he too could grow roots into the soil. He felt a bit lonely and his head was full of the import of the morning at Markham. It was past lunchtime and the pub was empty apart from the landlord.

'Ow do, sir, what'll it be then?' was the cheery welcome.

'Aha. Hi there Mr. Landlord, I'd like a measure of that Guinness beer you do in this country. Great stuff.'

'It's Irish as a matter of fact, sir. You're not from round here, I sees, sir. From Lunnon is it then?'

'In a kinda way, via Rio de Janeiro.' They both laughed.

'Not much Guinness, in Rio dee Janeerio, I don't suppose sir.'

'No sir, not at all.'

He sipped the amazing liquid and scanned the place for a telephone. The barman cocked his head quizzically.

'You gotta 'phone here I kin use, Mr. Landlord, long distance.

'Certainly, we're modern here. Over there in the corner by the gaming machine. You can put in your credit card for expensive calls.'

'Thanks a bunch, watch after my beer I won't be long.'

He walked over to the 'phone and made an international call. In the quiet of the pub the landlord heard every word.

'Hi there, Pete?... Si, si, Jose, I'm in Europe...Si England...Yeah, How's it going there?...okay so, life's a bitch. Listen up now, y'know that report on that corned-beef thing, the prostaglandins hormone thing. The one you're sitting on. I want it released. I wanna scare people. I know I said keep it under wraps for a bit, well now's the time to let it go. Yeah, I know, but ranchin' out there's got a limited future anyway. Put it out through the networks, I'll make sure it gets the coverage. I tell you what, give it to Bill Watkins, yeah the McManus Press - so it's dynamite? I wanna see it on all the networks by the day after tomorrow. You got that Pete.....okay? Great. 'Bye now.' He replaced the receiver, thought for a moment and made a second call.

'I wanna speak to Frank Tyndall...Just tell him it's Condamine! Yes it's important!' he waited to be connected. 'Frankie, yeah, s'me. Okay, okay I'll be quick. Sell all you've got in beef. Yeah, beef. Hamburger's kinda goin'

outa fashion...from tomorrow...I thought you wanted me to be quick...How much you got then? Phewee! If you pull out that much, stocks'll drop like shit down a well! Well I'd put it into Dodona Agric instead...was I ever wrong Frankie?...Don't ask...trust me...and say hello to Myra for me, yeah....you too...so long.'

He replaced the receiver and went back to his drink. The landlord was polishing glasses seeming thoroughly disinterested as people do when they are burning with curiosity. Condamine watched him and took a long pull at the black stuff. He smacked his lips.

'We got beer in Brazil but this is somthin' else man.'

'You in bisnis then sir?'

Condamine finished his drink and gazed at the barman. 'You could say that Mr. Landlord, you could most certainly say that I'm in business for the first time in my life. Really in business.' He leaned forward conspiratorially and whispered to the barman. 'Say landlord, you gotta Ranch Burger round here somewheres? In the next town maybe?'

The landlord looked around the pub to be sure they weren't overheard and whispered back. 'If you mean Ranch Burger, sure sir, in the main street, I don't loike 'em moiseif but the kids think they're great.'

Condamine beckoned him forward to whisper in his ear. 'They doin' okay?'

'They seem to be full whenever I go by.'

'They're shit, and they're over. Yessir over. Just you watch the TV tomorra night if you don't believe me. Done for. You heard it first in the Six Bells. The only two people in the world who know today about the crippling of Ranch Burger is you and me, amigo. Watch it on the TV man.'

The landlord's chin was resting somewhere near his sternum. He nearly dropped his glass.

'And you are sir?'

'An absolute nobody Mr. Landlord. Just a street urchin. Well thanks for the beer. I must be on the road.'

Condamine saluted the man and tossed a five pound note on the bar top. 'Keep the change, I've enjoyed talking to ya. So long.'

The next day the landlord was serving his regulars when an item appeared on the nine o'clock news on the TV in the bar which drew his attention.

'That's him!' He pointed agitatedly to the screen. 'That's that big foreign bloke what was in 'ere the other day. The one I told you about. He made a couple of phone calls and said Ranch Burger had had it 'cos of him. Blimey it is 'i'm! Shut up you lot I want to listen.'

A shot of Jose Condamine descending from a horse in a dusty ranch somewhere in South America cut to a studio announcer speaking. 'Jose Condamine, well known rancher and hydro-electricity magnate has released a report condemning beef and beef products from Brazil. This controversial report is having long range effects on the price of Brazilian beef and is having a knock on effect on beef from other producers as the use of Lutalyse, a hormone prostaglandin is said to have been administered to cattle not only in Brazil but by veterinarians across the globe. The report says that Lutalyse is an agent that affects human respiration, blood clotting, digestion, circulation, nerve responses and reproduction. The British Veterinary Association denies that it has any affect on humans. A Government spokesman said there are no reported adverse effects. He

categorically asserted that British beef was as 'safe as houses.' A clip of the him feeding his young daughter a hamburger at a village fete followed. Another clip followed of a spokesman for Ranch Burger. 'Yes, there has been a small reduction of customer numbers since the news broke but we assure all our valued customers that only the very best quality beef is in our burgers and there is absolutely nothing to prevent our customers enjoying the famous and nutritious food we always offer.'

When Condamine's report on the serious and long-term contamination of beef from Brazil hit the TV and papers, HIGO at Markham, silently and efficiently ensured the reduction of market prices of world-wide beef products. Stock-holders in companies involved in beef products as well as the fortunes of large ranching and meat transportation businesses were hit hard. At the same time every medical research agency known to have an interest in veterinary hormone production and their uses was alerted via JNO's media connections and the pharmaceutical corporations concerned with their manufacture were soon besieged by the media. Questions were asked in congresses and parliaments in every country where beef products were being sold, and where Brazilian beef in particular was exported. Questions were being asked about whether anyone could tell the origin of one dead and dismembered steer from another. Panic hit the whole beef industry everywhere. Questions were asked about domestic beef in European countries and the hormone product Lutalyse. By the time the boffins were able to get their counter arguments together, Ranch Burger and other outlets were being boycotted world-wide and beef cattle were being slaughtered for dog food by the tens of thousands in Brazil and elsewhere. Margins were too narrow for the ranches to change their rearing techniques. In six months there was hardly any beef production in the cleared rain-forests worth mentioning. People began talking about re-forestation for the first time. In the whole of the Western world, the call for safe animal husbandry was raised to screaming pitch, backed by donations from the many sources directly or indirectly supported by GRADE.

Condamine parked JNO's car in the National Car Park where he had been instructed by one of Marina's staff. He rode the Underground the few stops to the Dorchester Hotel which he entered through a back staff entrance. Making sure he was unseen, he rode the staff lift. Alighting at his floor, he made sure he was unseen and only then strode his way down the plush corridor to his suite. He noted the richness of the hardwood doors and mouldings, pillaged, no doubt, from his rain-forest. Hera smiled at the confidence of this stocky, well-kept figure, only just becoming a little fleshy now in his early forties. More leonine than handsome, his dark penetrating eyes fixed the world and made quick, usually accurate, judgements. He moved along the corridors at a clip of his extravagant cowboy boots more quickly than the cut of his figure suggested he was capable.

'He enjoys the luxury, he feels guilt at the extravagance of his lifestyle now,' Hera said to Thea on L1. 'See how he remembers when he was a street child with his boyhood dreams. I see the boy on his timeline.'

Hera reminded herself of the development of this key performer in the JNO network of world players.

She saw the child of seven struggling up a steep hillside in Morro da Favela, which grew out of the empty slopes of the hill in the centre of Rio in the nineteen twenties and from which all other shanty and slum settlements got their name. Rio de Janeiro is the only city in the world where the poorest of the poor have the most spectacular views. The settlement was well established as an eyesore and problem area by the time Jose was born. Hera watched him carrying an olive oil can by a bar of wood nailed across its opening and which he had filled with grey water from a tap on a pipe flapping loosely from a wall. He had no idea of the source of the water, but was grateful it was not further down the hill. The hillside was seriously steep. So sheer that Mrs. Costa's little boy of three, pushed over while playing had rolled slowly at first so that his playmates started laughing, but he gathered speed so quickly that he was halfway down the vertiginous slopes before anyone realised the danger. His career was only ultimately arrested when he fell into a thirty foot ravine where he died, impaled by a tree branch. It had taken all afternoon for several men with ropes to get the little body up. Jose knew it was true because he and his two friends Luis and Edmo had watched the whole rescue from the edge of the ravine while hearing Mrs. Costa wailing and shouting fit to bust. Like a mountain goat he was

used to the terrain and had no intention of falling off. Though after little Antonio Costa fell down he was more careful.

Jose, Luis and Edmo were inseparable. Luis and Edmo were brothers separated by little more than a year and were mistakenly known as twins. Collectively the three boys were the 'Gas Company'. Nobody went to school, there was none in the favela. Even had there been, nobody could afford the luxury. Instead of school the boys earned a little money plying up and down the slopes fetching and carrying the butane gas bottles needed for cooking. The rest of the time they amused themselves wandering around the city, jumping on and off buses without paying, guarding the cars of rich people for cigarettes, some small scale shoplifting and theft from cars, anything that raised a little cash for cigarettes and maybe a bottle of beer. They knew about drugs but it was not until Jose had grown up that they became as common as tobacco and the main staple of the Favela economy.

Walking the corridors of the London Dorchester he smiled to himself remembering the time when luxury consisted of a tap with untreated water and something more or less leak-proof to carry it in. Although the 'Gas Company' roamed the streets full of tall buildings, they had no conception of a carpet, or a corridor. In their imaginations the tall buildings rising above Rio, seen from the perspective of their precarious tin and clay shacks, seemed hollow, made of many large rooms. The sheer poverty of perception of the boys in the Favela, made him smile wryly to himself. How large and complex the world had since become, while the world inside his head had by degrees of experience ripened into something amazingly and surprisingly simple. His current sophistication and flamboyance were mere appearances. Disguises he used to conceal important weapons of vengeance for his past, aimed with deadly accuracy at the world he currently inhabited.

He inserted his flat perforated security card-key into the slot of the door handle and on entering reassured himself there was no one in any of the rooms. He had learned the hard way to be careful. There was time for a shower and change of clothes and one or two other vital telephone calls he'd decided to make after the meeting. He ran over the events of the morning. He'd seen it coming and was glad the thing was started. Like Ric, whom he'd known for a while, he wasn't sure if the thirteen of them were enough. They were playing corporate ju-jitsu. They'd discussed it often enough. He knew that many world companies and organisations were unwieldy and it only needed judicious shifts here and there, specific share deals, leaked information and so on to bring them toppling. It wasn't that it couldn't be done. All organisations changed all the time. It was just a question of when and how. Doing it systematically and deliberately was a new thing. He wouldn't have thought about it if it hadn't been for JNO's box of tricks providing the underpinning strength to counteract the worst effects and put in alternative systems.

Hera was pleased to note that Jose considered the meeting at Markham as a turning point in his already remarkable life. The boy from the tin-shack, now cattle baron and international entrepreneur with lucrative interests in logging, coffee and hydro-electricity; was about to become a busy 'eco-cop' for JNO. He chuckled at the idea, which had come from Penny. We are all eco-cops now, he thought. Driving back from Oxford, Jose's mind filled with thoughts about his developing role in the Advisory Group. Like most self-made men he was proud of his achievements. As someone for whom wealth was an merely an icon of his success, he cared nothing for money itself and had given away large fortunes without thinking of the numbers involved. Money meant accomplishment, doing something well. He had wanted to make his mark on the world. He wanted people to know that Jose Condamine, snotty-nosed ragamuffin, was indelible.

As the 'Gas Company' grew up they branched out into other activities. They learned how to tamper with the gas bottles of their rivals so they silently leaked before delivery and so were only half full. They guarded their own and ensured that way they got more deliveries than their rivals. Soon they farmed out the tiring delivery system to other children and made sure to get a cut from each child. Anyone not paying up was liable to have their shack blown up by a faulty gas bottle. A not uncommon natural occurrence in any case. They stole cigarettes and alcohol from downtown and sold the contraband in the Favela. By Jose's fourteenth birthday the 'Gas Company' was doing well. They had their own concealed lock-up full of goods. They controlled several

younger kids and were getting noticed as a force. Jose was a king. His were the brains and the 'twins' supplied the brawn and managed the personnel. He began to feel he had value in a world where everything around him attested to the fact that his life was no more consequential than the flies which made their living from the putrefaction into which he was born. He affirmed his existence with every new dawn and every blue sky. He had money in his pockets and position in his world as a 'businessman'. Until he learned the hard way the precariousness of his position and how 'disposable' he was.

On the fourteenth of June 1960 the 'Gas Company' went into liquidation. As usual that day, the three boys had set off downtown. Word of a cigarette delivery to a warehouse in the Arcos de Lapa district had them setting off to check out the location and to think about the best way to break into the premises. As usual they hitched a ride on a bus. What the 'Gas Company' did not know was that the bus corporation, fed up with freeloading and often noisy kids had organised a private security company to clean up the buses. Recognising the 'Gas Company' from previous times the bus driver called the police to arrest the non-payers. The bus stopped at regular stop and a policeman ordered the boys off the bus. Luis got angry and was manhandled off by the policeman while Edmo and Jose tried to calm him down. Once off the bus, usually they'd simply run off. This sort of round-up thing happened from time to time and it wasn't worth making a fuss. Jose watched the bus set off and was worried. Something wasn't right. Usually the policeman sent them off sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a clip round the ear and an oath. This time the policeman levelled his pistol at them and barked,

'Hands on the wall! Legs apart!'

'C'mon man,' said Jose. We won't do it again.'

'Dead right you won't,' hissed the policeman. I'm arresting you and taking you downtown. You stay here till the patrol car gets here.'

Jose didn't like the look of this. He liked things to be predictable. The police didn't have time to arrest kids for bus hopping. They weren't going to waste time in a police station with the likes of the 'Gas Company'. He scanned around him. He saw two men in black leather jackets approaching in a purposeful way. This was very wrong. The wall was no more than five feet high and not particularly solid. Pushing with his hands he felt it give slightly. A hard shove and it would probably collapse. Especially if three of them shoved together. Edmo turned and spat at the officer. Jose leaned into the wall pushed it with the palms of his hands making it quiver slightly, thus indicating to Luis and Edmo to push together. They shoved, the wall fell in a cloud of dust and dried clay. Although the wall was low it overlooked a steep drop of some twenty feet on the other side into a tangle of undergrowth and debris. Luis shouted something. Edmo stood staring stupidly into the space. Jose, launched himself into the void and winded but unhurt ran for all he was worth making for a narrow alley he guessed would lead him back to an adjoining road and into the crowds. Luis and Edmo didn't follow Jose. They couldn't. The two men in black seeing what was happening to the wall ran fast and grabbed the two boys who had hesitated before jumping the parapet. Jose was quicker having read the situation more clearly. He doubled back to the bus stop and lingered at the back of the crowd that had gathered, he was trying hard to appear nonchalant and control his breathing. Fortunately the crowd were too busy watching his friends and the two men. The policeman had disappeared. The two men, who were later described as off duty policemen moonlighting as bus company security guards, stood the twins on the edge of the drop, drew their pistols and simply shot them in the back of the head. Their bodies fell forward and disappeared from view into the only grave they would ever have. One second they were there and then immediately they ceased to exist leaving no visible trace. It was as if they had vanished into the air.

'They're just criminals,' one of the men said to the crowd. 'We have to kill them while they're young so they don't cause us a lot of bother after they grow up. They're scum from the Favela. They'll not be missed.'

There was a shocked and unnatural quiet in the crowd which began awkwardly to disperse. Unable to do



anything for fear of being identified, and numbed with shock, Jose backed out of the crowd and ran. Tears were flowing down his face. He couldn't breathe. He stopped by a doorway and collapsed, huddled, sobbing. His mind was filled with the image of the simultaneous shots and the twins crumpling like puppets, the strings cut suddenly, vanishing into air. He thought he would never get the surprise on Edmo's face out of his mind. His first thought was that he would have to go back and see if by any miracle either of them had survived. It was impossible. They were dead. Jose had seen death many times but not like this. He couldn't understand the matter of factness of it. The callousness. It was an execution. Pure and simple. For what? Freeloading on a bus! Is this what the twins lives were worth? Nothing! He would have been shot too. Some sixth sense had warned him to get out of there. He thought he was a king. King of what? The garbage? This was proof he was nobody, they were all nobody. They were debris, like the flies around the refuse of his home, they were nothing, to be exterminated as vermin. His first rational thoughts were to find these men and revenge himself. But the thought ran through his brain like fire. Even if he killed these casual murderers, there would be others to take their place. The fact was what they said to the crowd was the truth. Criminality was all they had and as long as the favela existed this was war and the kids were always going to be on the losing side. No he had to get away and deal with the cause of the problem. But how? What could he do?

'He is quick witted this Jose Condamine,' Hera said to nobody in particular at a point on Jose's timeline before Zeus consorted with Penny. I will support him, we will use him in the future. I will see to his experience. She had picked all the members of the Advisory Group by searching for faculties she admired in particular people and earmarking them for future use. Then often interfering in the natural course of their lives. She used the Morae sisters to check out Lifestrips for her and homed in on the unsuspecting mortals, making small adjustments here and there.

On this occasion she ensured Condamine was found by Father Ignatio. The doorway into which he had collapsed was the church from which the good Father was coming from hearing confessions. He tripped over the weeping, huddled figure and sprawled full length over him, letting out an unpriestly oath. Jose seeing that the man weighing down on him was a priest was struggling to get to his feet to run when he found his wrist was held in an iron grip. Father Ignatio sat heavily on the ground breathing hard but kept hold of Jose's wrist while he regained his breath. After a long minute he levered himself up from the floor, grunting loudly, using Jose as a counterweight to his own considerable bulk.

'Hold on my young scallywag! You don't get away from me so easily!' He gasped breathlessly. 'I've got two questions for you...and, and.... I will have them answered.'

Jose blinked at him through his tears, his only thought to get away from this unpredictable figure of authority.

'Firstly what are you doing blocking the doorway to my church and secondly what are you bawling about like that?'

Jose tried to run but the priest held him tightly and it was clear he was too strong for him. Jose also sensed a basic kindness in the enquiry. Nevertheless he bent his head to bite the massive fist around his wrist when his head was roughly yanked back by the hair.

'You will answer me my young ragamuffin. Or I'll....'

'Kill me!' spat Jose.

'Kill you? Of course I won't kill you, you stupid urchin!'

'You killed Edmo and Luis!'

'What by God are you talking about! I haven't killed anyone and don't intend to!'

'You did! You did! All you people did! Lemme go, I ain't don nothin' to you. Lemme go!' Jose tugged at his arm trying to release himself from the big man's grip.

'Come inside, my young panther, we're going to get to the bottom of this.' With one beefy hand retaining his hold on Jose's wrist and the other holding onto his long, greasy hair, Father Ignatio hauled the spitting cat of the scared but resolute boy into the body of the church. Jose had never been inside a church. He gazed around him with awe. He couldn't make it out. He'd never seen anything like it. Eventually he gazed up at the crucifix above the altar and was further amazed. Here was the same suffering he was going through. The priest felt the change of attitude in the boy and let go his hair, maintaining a hold on his wrist. He let go as Jose pulled away from him to approach the huge figure of Christ which towered over both of them. It was an unusually graphic carving, and the artist had given the features a particularly poignant half-smile as of someone exultant while enduring the greatest pain.

'Who's that?' Jose asked.

'You don't know?' replied the priest.

'I wouldn't ask if I knew would I!' Jose slumped on a chair. He stared at the figure of the Christ and then allowed his shocked emotions to flood out of him in a paroxysm of tears.

There were two important consequences from this apparently chance meeting of criminal street urchin and rough priest. Jose joined the church as the only available place of safety, and where he could learn to read and write, and Father Ignatio set up one of the first refuge's for the dispossessed children of the Favela.

As an alter-boy he received tuition in the three R's from Father Ignatio and being quick he was soon teaching the boys who came after him. Father Ignatio wanted him to train as a teacher, and found funds for his enrolment at a Catholic teacher training school in Sao-Paulo. But for Jose, teachers were ten-a-penny, he wanted real substance from life, he wanted quantity. Father Ignatio was badly disappointed but, thinking Jose's talent was God given and needed its head, he arranged Jose a job as a clerk with HydroNorte, a company specialising in hydro-electric engineering and Jose found himself in the Northern forests as part of the Tukurui great dam building enterprise. From there to here, the story of Jose, Condamine, would fill several volumes in themselves.

Throughout his eventful life the Tukurui remained with him and drove the motivation for his task in JNO. The boy from the Favela, seeking meaning for his life found what he sought in the struggle for power and the means to acquire the things of the world. He was not naive, he knew his winning meant others must lose - and he was determined to win at all costs. His ruthlessness was a local legend.

Despite his determination he was surprised to find he was not ready for his part in the 'pacification' and ultimate destruction of the life-ways of the Parakanan Indians and was as surprised at his positive reaction to the vengeance of the pretty water-hyacinth. He was astounded to discover that deep in his psyche, in his efforts to escape, he had taken no account of his own history. To this point his struggle had been simply a personal battle against insuperable odds.

At the moment of his greatest personal achievement, he found himself reeling from a feeling of responsibility he could not shake off. The devastation of the Parakanan meant he had selfishly, and with relish, helped to destroy something greater than anything he might ever create whatever his own efforts. He vowed thereafter, 'if you can't make it, you have no right to destroy it.' As the local representative of the seriously corrupt Indian Protection Service he recognised too late that the thirty-million dollar fortune he opportunistically made from the dubiously legal sale of hard woods from the forest of the Parakanan, was only made possible through the destruction of an entire nation of innocent people by deliberate genocide through the activities of his colleagues at HydroNorte. While he took no direct part in the cynical introduction of infectious diseases, he

certainly profited highly.

As a requital, the gods of the lost forest and the bereft peoples, threatened the finished dam with the water-hyacinth. Its violet-pale flower and shiny leaves haunted engineers' dreams and cost HydroNorte millions of dollars as its silent progress swamped the megawatts by threading its way naturally into the central heart of the machinery erected on the bones of a people and the desolation of a forest. Nature worked its revenge on these works of man and silted up the lake from the decaying vegetation under the flooded ancestral lands of the 'pacified' Indians. He knew then he would have traded all that he owned to restore life to the Parakanan and he knew in his heart the destruction was a crime against time itself, for no more than a fistful of dollars. But it was too late. So he saluted the water-hyacinth - and sought ways of making amends.

He kept his millions without which he would be powerless, and found out how to re-invest in the future to develop what he had previously helped to destroy. Money opened doors and made opportunities. As a subterfuge he gave the appearance of turning away from his growing business interests and behaved as the extravagant playboy millionaire, courted the paparazzi and confused the business press by falsifying the true extent of his wealth and the direction of his true spending.

He was rescued by Penny Conway before his inevitable bankruptcy became public. They met on the luxury-yacht of Matsuko Morii, anchored off Recife one summer. Together they explored the Amazon. With the help of the JNO network, changes began to appear in the fortunes both of the Indians in the Amazon Basin and people in the exploitation business. Indians began to prosper more often while business had an ever harder time. It was the beginning, of a David and Goliath battle with the odds in public, only seeming to be in favour of Goliath.

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Matsuko Morii, Hera's other protégé, was a star in the firmament of a certain kind of international upper crust. She shone brightly in a society which made the very essence of being from who you are, where you winter and summer, where and with whom you weekend. Without her to develop and nurture the 'scene'; its collective light would be sadly dimmed. If nothing else she was a known intimate of the elusive Dodona's. This made her intriguing and sought after since gossip about the enigmatic family was all but impossible to acquire. She would let drop hints and asides about their doings. It was known they 'allowed' her to act as kind of spokes-person for them and there being no other source she was therefore much solicited by her set and much pursued by the media.

Voted the hostess of the decade, it was said she had raised more money for charity in ten years than anyone else had managed in a lifetime. What no one knew was that each Dollar, Pound, Yen, Deutchmark and Rouble had been matched with two by Lucina Dodona and the proceeds invested by JNO, the profits founding schools and colleges in third-world countries and in the so called fourth-world where the under-class's slums were infesting the 'first-worlds' cities.

Three weeks after the meeting of the Advisory Group at Markham, at the 'Friends of the Earth' charity ball held this year in the Peggy Guggenheim Museum, she totally ignored Jose Condamine, any connections between them were merely socially coincidental.

Matsuko even without her expertly applied make-up, resembled a fragile porcelain doll. She was taller than the average Japanese, a willow gliding on tiny feet, deliciously shod. The skin of her delicate limbs against the dark fabric of her dress, was like the luminous sheen of ivory on velvet. She held her head with an authority surprising in one so slight. Her short jet-black hair, a living helmet, was expertly cut to her fine skull and nape which framed her head in the same way as her simple dress defined her body. Her face at first bland in its lack of obvious expression was paradoxically fascinating in its symmetry. Her slow, hesitant smile revealed small, even teeth, but failed to give any effective insight into her personality. Her movements were studied and

semi-formalised. Paradoxically, the unexpected perfection of her body and its movements made observers aware of the crassness of their inevitable feelings of physical desire.

While the men dreamed of taking her to bed they could not imagine actually putting their coarse hands on that fragile, perfect body. The women were both intimidated and fascinated.

She had discovered early in her years in the USA that to fascinate the American mind was to achieve inexhaustible admiration and continued attention. She cultivated subtlety to disguise her shock at their rawness; understatement to foil their brashness; she perfected to a high level the Eastern stereotype of inscrutability; to avoid too much real contact.

She was vitally present, but unattainable: or was she really so aloof? So strong was the illusion of absence in presence that together with her wealth and position as favourite daughter of billionaire industrialist, Sigiura Morii, she was a natural queen unable to be ignored or dismissed. For her part she played her role impeccably, disdain and arrogance perfectly camouflaged to fascinate as one desired but unattainable.

The people she cultivated socially were the important people of the world. They were the keystones in the world's business, political and financial establishments. She met them all one way or another. Her known social links with Zarian and Lucina Dodona made her increasingly important to know as JNO grew.

Completing a conversation with Erika Pannayotis, the fashion model of the year, she moved across the floor, through knots of people who were no impediment to her studied movements and she snared her quarry for today. Franklin T. Colwyn the American President of the McManus Publishing Corporation. She expertly detached him from his less than animated conversation with a couple she vaguely knew had something to do with aggregates in the Mid West, of whom the wife was an avid collector of lesser impressionists.

Extracting a grateful Colwyn from an effusive description of a wonderful Pissaro, with a divine politeness, she led him away through the throng with a subtle pressure of her hand on his arm, until alone in a quiet recess, he was flattered despite himself, to receive direct attention from this celestial creature.

'Mr Colwyn,' she spoke confidentially. 'There's a favour I would ask. Not for me, you understand, but for my good friend Lucina Dodona, who would have asked you herself, but being busy, she could not come tonight. She sends her best wishes and wondered if it might be possible for me to arrange for you to travel to Ios, she would be so pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Franklin T. Colwyn like the rest of his world was aware Lucina Dodona never gave interviews. It was as if he had been summonsed for an exclusive audience with the Queen of England.

'Miss Morii, there is nothing I would not do for your sake, and even more so for the legendary Mrs. Dodona. But why afford me such an honour?' His large frame inclined towards the fragile creature who had her hand on his arm.

'Oh Mr Colwyn San. 'Afford the honour' - you are so droll. Mrs Dodona as you know is shy of publicity and would not wish, how shall I put it? - to burst inelegantly upon such a scene as this and cause consternation by changing her habits as far as the press are concerned. But I have already taken the liberty of telling her she can rely on you to understand her needs in this matter.'

'Come, come Miss Morii, please be more direct, I am a newspaper man not a diplomat, what can be so important that the president of the McManus press must travel to Greece? I have many excellent journalists on the pay-roll who would do an excellent job.'

This was stated without impatience, he was actually amused at the prospect of working more closely with this

renowned beauty and personally encountering the formidable and retiring Mrs Dodona. The thought of the great lady was enough for him to agree without the incentive of there being something in it for his company.

'I'm afraid I cannot say Mr Colwyn, but there you are, I have discharged my responsibility. Can I say you will go?'

My dear Miss Morii, I am honoured in the extreme. Wild-horses would not prevent it.'

## Chapter 3

Even as each member of Penny's Advisory Group was making their different mark on the international scene helped by the information and interpretation gadgetry at Markham: in the JNO building in New York an impromptu meeting between Hephaestos, Athena and Prometheus, took place after Zeus had grandly announced. 'Hera and I will go to Ios, we will make our centre of communications in this obscure place far from prying eyes of whomsoever. You may do as you wish. No doubt you will need to consider your strategy. Hera and I are as one - are we not my cuckoo?' Hera remained silent. Zeus continued. 'I tire of the helter-skelter of commercial life in this city. I leave it to you. I need rest to make myself ready for the test with Yahweh. Where better than on Homer's isle with my wife at my side?'

Hephaestos lifted his massive head to his mother who merely raised a shapely eyebrow. 'Once again Ios will become the centre of JNO' she said. 'My Lord and I will see to the main events from there.' Hephaestos couldn't be sure but he thought she winked at him.

Prior to his departure Zeus spoke with each of them separately and then, as usual, swanned off in billowing clouds, without indicating his complete intentions. He and Hera went together with Mnemosyne and Themis. Pan disappeared altogether on business of his own. Hephaestos, Athena and Prometheus remained in the JNO building in New York.

They sat in the same leafy bower communicating on L3 in an instantaneous web of pure thought melding and branching. Since the battle of the Titans for the control of time, the senior gods had rarely needed to commune in this way. The virtually complete hegemony of Yhawhe had given little opportunity for public appearances. Some had managed a little counter-culture here and there with a favoured mortal, and were happy to have kept a bit of balance between Yahweh's 'out there' world and the more solid earthly experience of human reality.

They were acutely conscious that all communications between them were available to anyone on the Chronosphere with the desire to listen in. Since Zeus' announcement there were many eavesdroppers. So they communicated on L3 to discourage any but the most dedicated of them. Those inclined to listen in on this high level deserved to hear the communications of such senior gods, for it would be known how they stood and thus may avoid unnecessary complications and recriminations later - were there to be any after all was done. A thought meld on the 'sphere at L3 by expert users is nothing like a conversation and it cannot be reproduced. However, the essence of the infinitely far more complex communication, could possibly, be quite inadequately rendered or reduced to mere speech, to appear something like:

Hephaestos:(Stumping up and down on his deformed legs.) I want the 'sphere to know what is going on. All must know it is not up to us - what happens in the world - but that mortals must manage on their own with the help of a puny, uncertain boy and his remarkable, but nevertheless, only mortal mother. I help as best I can and I think you do the same. So let it be said clearly that we three are the best companions mortals have.

(the word 'companion' understates the actual communication which was that over the aeons since the creation of this fifth race of mortals, there has been a continuous argument in the Pantheon about the status of mortals in the world and their relationship to the undying gods. Even the word 'mortal' fails to convey the complex relationship the gods have with time, compared with the pitiable replenishing capacities of reproductive life on earth which for the gods only makes the species appear immortal. The short lives of its individuals makes constant new beginnings tedious work).

This is not Zeus' battle. His struggle is with the control and use of time itself. He will not let Hades make new links with Chronos to strengthen the past beyond its real value and allow it to spill over into the present, despite the fact that Hades' big battalions of the long dead may now be developing the power to confront us.

Prometheus: Even if together we can hold back the waves of the past, I fear we have less hold on the future.

Athena: Do not forget I understand Zeus better than you.

(an allusion to her birth which also implied her mind was as his except female in form and therefore more likely to have understood more of the subtlety of meaning and relationships between things than he would wish to acknowledge was in him)

He likes all his life-forms and delights in the way they re-make themselves in their myriad ways. But, like us, he affects humans best. For all his irritation with them, he prefers their likeness to us and their need for us despite their forgetfulness. We remain deeply embedded in them, in their unconscious minds, secretly supporting and steadying them to maintain their correct place in the world. We must continue to trust Zeus to keep the past in its proper place, and keep it and the present working in harness to shape the future. Hades would have mortals stay in the past, constantly reworking what is gone, safe in the known and the knowable. Zeus holds the past and lets the future in, link by link. He will not have the future from Yhawhe for he takes it too far into an abstract nowhere. Yhawhe is in this much closer to Hades than He is to Zeus, whom he paradoxically professes to hate. Yahweh is wary of too much creativity in mortals for it challenges his supremacy. Nevertheless despite all His works, He will never be as real for mortals as we.

Hephaestus: I fear the big battalions of the long dead. We cannot enlist the unborn and those in the present are too few in number by comparison. If the barrier between the past and present is breached.....

(Here Hep indicates that there is too much generality being communicated and that something more practical needs doing, and that soon, if Hades is to be stopped from believing he can take advantage of Zeus' apparent weakness.)

Hades is making a deal with Chronos even now. I believe he has found a way to listen into the Chronosphere and may be able to follow our communication and...

Athena: What! How can he? There's no way to cross!

Hephaestus: I may be wrong but I am sure he has tried to tap into the human internet to follow their communications and he is probably seeking a way to enter the 'sphere as well. He may be using Persephone as his messenger, but I doubt it - she has always been loyal to Demeter. I agree it's unlikely he has broken in, but it's only a matter of time. We also have to consider that we may have a traitor in the camp somewhere.

Prometheus: I am using all the powers of foresight at my command and see Zeus and someone huge in a vital communication - it might be Yhawhe but equally it might be Hades and Chronos.

Athena: There is a great change ahead. I feel it. But what of Gaia - she is the cause of this...

Prometheus: No. She has to act for her own sake, she has no choice, but the cause is in mortals and Zeus knows it. I fear Hades sees this last chance he is giving them as betraying a great weakness. Gaia does not care who saves her. She would prefer it to be Zeus, but she is angry with him for risking casting her off to the very mortals that are doing her the harm. Hades brings her certain relief. Past realities are entirely predictable without the unexpected tumults of the living. He has multitudes enough and can maintain majesty over them for as long as he needs. He may even have plans to bring his multitudes back into our realm if Zeus' plan fails. If that happens time will stop and there will be no more moving forward. That will suit Gaia well enough. Then what of us? An interesting question.

Athena: What do you see Yahweh doing if this is true?

Prometheus: I cannot read Yhawhe. Zeus' challenge to Him is unprecedented. He is giving mortals the chance to be free of gods, to absorb our essence in them and take their own charge of Gaia for their own sakes and not

for ours or Yahweh's. It cannot be known how the three elements of Hades, Zeus and Yhawhe will interact. Yhawhe has always been paternalistic, I doubt he will allow people to take control and deny his Heaven. For Europa's children to look the God of the Hebrews and His Christ full in the eye and say 'NO' to him with complete consciousness; is to court unknown effects on the human psyche. No, the effects on Yahweh are unknowable. Zeus has made his will and is determined to give mortals their freedom. Yhawhe has no concern for Gaia but only for His own hereafter...

Hephaestos: Enough of this speculation!

(What was communicated was more a sense of complete understanding of the historical relationship of gods to people in all their manifestations and a serious question of the future relationships of the external and internal worlds of the human mind. Hephaestos nuanced his input with an impatience which requested the meld turn its powers of communication to heading off what seemed to him to be an impending catastrophe for the Pantheon.)

- We need evidence of Hades' activities on both the human and the divine levels and in particular knowledge about his relationship with Chronos. We need to get him here and negotiate. I want no more wars. There are stirrings in Tartarus which I fear will spill out of their dark confines into the light.

Athena: Then we will fight them as before.

(She introduced a frisson of excitement into the mind-meld. Her warrior instincts were touched, and like Hephaestos, she pulled the communication round to a more active inclination. Prometheus introduced a philosophical dimension to the prospect of action and held them together with a vastly complex assessment of the relationship of gods, mortals and the prospects for the continuation of the human race in a psychological world without external gods in which mortals had to rely on their own devices. At this point in the meld the voice of Hera winged its way via the timelines.)

Hera: Shh! You stir my husband with your thoughts. He hears you and knows you from old. He fears your speculations and will have you more practically bent. Athena - go arm our friends and their hordes but do it softly so neither Zeus or Hades hears of it. Hephaestos, see after Alexander. Prometheus, get you into the mind of Gaia I must know where she is placed in this. Know that Zeus pursues Yhawhe. We are in dangerous times.

The meld ended. It left merely a trace on the 'sphere, and only the keenest watcher would have noticed it had happened at all. However, watchers were getting more alert all the time. It would not be long before private communications on the timelines would be hard to accomplish in safety.

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In a timeline nearer to us, Alexander and Marina stepped out of Phoenix airport into the bright, desert sunshine of Arizona. Half an hour later Marina was driving their hired Cherokee Jeep Northwards on Route 17 towards Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon. Just beyond Flagstaff they turned off on Route 89 and left the hurly-burly of the USA and entered the Navajo Dinatah - 'Land of The People.'

Alexander had been to the USA many times before. Marina too had learned much of her surveillance skill in New York and the cities of California. Neither however, had spent any time in the hinterland of the continent and they were new to the Southwest. As they drove, the contrast of the country with the England they left only that day was hard to take in. For speed they had used JNO's Lear jet for the flight to Phoenix. Even so Alexander was tired and a glance at Marina showed she too was less crisp than usual. Their fatigue however was somewhat overtaken by the unfolding country before them.



'It's like someone was unravelling a travelogue in front of the car - it's every cowboy film you ever saw!' Alexander was entranced by the sheer size and magnificence of the country as he watched the sun begin its spectacular evening performance with the supporting cast of mountains, mesa's and valleys. In particular he was as excited as a kid by the outstretched arms of huge cacti silhouetted against the arc of the sky.

'It certainly is something!' echoed Marina. They rode in silence for a while each watching the country, thinking their own thoughts. Alexander was simply relishing being alone with Marina. He kept stealing glances at her throughout the journey when he thought she was not aware. He was in danger of losing sight of his work. Marina was clearly aware of this and did nothing to encourage his amorous inclinations. His mind was in a turmoil, her lack of response made him wonder if they had a relationship at all. They had to have something after all. But she had paid him so little attention and had prevented him even touching her.

'We're at work.' She'd made it plain before setting off.

He did his best to be matter of fact, but her perfume, the crisp sheen of her hair, the fineness of her facial bone structure, in short everything about her made him want to grasp her at every opportunity and her resistance was causing him actual physical pain.

She for her part, was thinking that this couldn't go on, there was work to do and they needed to be highly concentrated if they were to succeed. Part of her was touched at his predicament and she was a little flattered that someone with his genetic structure was besotted with her. On the other hand she was used to male reactions to her sexuality, which always set up a harsh reaction in her. Having suffered because of it at a time when she was innocent of her effect on men she now deliberately used her sexuality as a weapon to get what she wanted. She had had enough pain from that source in her life and had learned to control it for her own ends. She had given him enough of herself to satisfy his urges and get his infatuation out of his system, and that would have to do until things were clearer. She was aware nevertheless she had some feelings developing for this son of her boss which she quickly dismissed as irrelevant to the task in hand.

'How far to Tuba City?' she asked.

Alexander consulted the map. 'About a hundred miles, a couple of hours, it'll be pretty dark when we get there.'

'I've got reservations at the Tuba City Motel, Manuelito Kanuho is expecting us the day after tomorrow. We meet him at 'Fourthworld' at nine. He has asked us to stay with him in his home in the Grand Canyon, imagine that, he actually lives down there! I thought a day first alone in Tuba City to check out the ambience would be a good idea, to acclimatise a bit. Okay by you?'

Alexander was in a state of suspended animation. Internal and external phenomena were becoming more and more blurred and he was treating them together as a whole. The membrane that divided tangibility and illusion was breaking down in him, and on top of everything there was Marina. There, but not there.

Behind him was the collective history of the earth. In front of him was the aggregated potential of mortals; between them, the world lay open, naked and vulnerable - Gaia was calling him and he felt the pang of her hurt and sensed the work of the gods as a busyness on the 'sphere. The net under his shirt quivered slightly on his arrival in Phoenix. Like a dousing rod it seemed to sense changes of activity on the 'sphere both within him and when it occurred outside. Arizona had something in its atmosphere which registered as he entered the Navajo and Hopi tribal lands. He and Marina had read-up the history and current situation of these nations and Nemmi had supplied information about their cosmology and world view.

Nemmi too was enthusiastic about the way these Native Americans faced their origins and continued their own relationship with the earth, despite the genocide they had suffered at the hands of the invading citizens of

the land of the free, intent on the destruction of them and their land. Through the net around his shoulders he felt he could hear her voice separate itself from the background static, communicating on L2. She re-enforced the message;

'They share the Pantheon's understanding of Gaia and keep their respect for her in spite of all they have suffered. Even through the impact of modern life they keep her with them always. They have her inside them and they live for her well-being, which increases their own. They suffer as she suffers and will continue to do so while those who afflict her, try and force them to weaken their roots in her. Their story-tellers weave the strands of their people's past into a complex but unified whole which can be read in the designs of their rugs and jewellery. 'Fourthworld' represents the last of four worlds of creation - the fourth glittering and bright where all people coexist with all forms of life including that of the earth mother herself. None has dominion and there is no hierarchy. The all has intrinsic value in its parts. Despoliation is unthinkable and punishable by the inevitable reaction of the despoiled. They wait for the children of Europa to be educated and despair of her offspring's intemperate behaviour. The Earth will have her revenge in due time and they, The People, know they will be virtuous in her eyes when this occurs.'

The setting sun splintered the resplendent horizon and they stopped to fully admire the light play with the palette of the Painted Desert. They watched the changing colours until the light dimmed.

Alexander was conscious they had left the USA somewhere behind them. The land of the Din, The People, was free of the hoardings, and other clutter which normally decorate the American roads. Here the road shot ahead clear and straight for miles and where it bent, it merged with looming bluffs and again shook itself into line once past. The road marked by telegraph poles marched in steady ranks into the far distance.

A low double-wire fence at the roadside kept travellers off the land. Here the road was the intruder to be fenced in bounds. Smaller, unmade tracks went off at crazy angles, and were lost behind hillocks of dense mesquite and the occasional clump of alders and pinion pine, marking the presence of mostly dry, water courses. An arid land needing its vastness intact to sustain life. Occasionally he glimpsed in the gloom a lazy, rising plume of smoke denoting the presence of a family dwelling or hogan.

There was little traffic, no more than three other pick-up trucks shared the route after the turn-off to Tuba City. They arrived at the motel in the dark. There were no outskirts of the kind he expected of the USA, no string of out of town filling-stations, no Taco-Bells, pharmacies or shopping malls. One minute they were in the open country and next they were in town. In the gloom, 'town' seemed to be no more than an overgrown crossroads.

The following morning they set out to explore. If Alexander had expected a 'city' he was mistaken. His surmise of the previous night was correct. Tuba City was an overgrown crossroads. They saw Fourthworld sited behind the motel, a collection of wooden pre-fabricated huts. Apart from the visitor's centre and the motel itself, all the buildings were single story higgledy-piggledy wooden huts or mobile homes. There was a gas station and a small minimart in its precincts. The dusty township, sprouted usefully where roads met to encourage travellers to stay awhile, spend some money, refresh themselves and make or remake acquaintance. Were it not for electricity and telephone lines, mobile homes and asphalt, he might be in the last Century. Nearly all the people abroad were Navajo. His most potent thought was that he really was not in the USA but truly in another, an original landscape. He also felt particularly ashamed and guilty of being European. From the moment he became aware of the countryside spread before him, he sensed dimly what he supposed every Navajo he saw carried in their genes. Strolling like tourists in this place, he felt acute embarrassment from the way his own race had treated them and, he also reflected, Marina's forebears. He felt acutely face to face with the genocide committed by his race. He turned to his companion self-consciously aware of her African origins.

'To have had all this land, as it were, within you, and to be dispossessed by an incoming horde of alien

invaders. They must be sick at heart.'

'Oh my little Eurocentric! My, but it was a long time before you got it!' she replied, sarcastically.

'Sorry, but well...I didn't think it through properly before. I know it of course, but being here, seeing this land and these people, as themselves in this country, this crazy USA...well...this isn't the USA. This is Navajo land, truly belonging to the Navajo. But not really after all, the reservation is only a poor attempt at something given back. What a terrible irony it must be for them to be given back a bit of what was theirs as a kind of consolation for being overwhelmed by a genocide that is quite ignored.'

'It's far worse than that...it's not even as if it were theirs - the land - it is something they share with all life-forms. Every life taken of any form was apologised for before, after or during the event. Killing was never justified for its own sake, only in necessity is it allowed. Your race of total barbarians have to own everything, and what you own you can destroy without conscience. This land was never the Navajo's to own, so how could it belong to white people? Its destruction was and is utterly unjustifiable. These people know it so far into their roots and the crime is so immense, their cries of despair flow back to creation and forward into the vastness of the universe to be heard by life-forms everywhere. As for me my lovely boy: I was born in Streatham.'

'Don't you feel dispossessed, from your own roots I mean?'

'You feel for their dispossession and so do I. But it's more to do with the utter insensitivity of your people to anything they can control. Europeans are such control freaks that they miss the intrinsic value of everything. Why do you suppose I fetched up in JNO. Penny, Rick and the Dodona's are the only Europeans I have ever met who feel deeply about this relationship between people and the Earth. I know others do as well, but the Dodona's are doing something practical about it and I am helping. But just feeling is not enough although it's a beginning. Humpty has had his great fall and no one has yet put him back together. It's not just the Native American who has been dispossessed, we all are. If you think I yearn for a lost Africa of my soul as the Navajo mourn for their lands - I don't know about that - perhaps somewhere I do, but I think it's more global, more to do with the loss of a world where I can be myself, in relationship with it. More whole...somehow...where things are less fragmented.'

It did not take long for them to walk round the whole of Tuba City and they had walked in a circle back towards the motel.

As they entered the foyer a short, stocky, weather-beaten, Navajo man of about sixty, in a large dazzlingly white straw Stetson, jeans, colourful waistcoat and dusty, tooled, patent leather boots was waiting by the desk to greet them.

'Mr Alexander Conway and Miss Marina...er...I'm sorry I don't know your second name...they are important...names...they tell a story. Forgive me...I am Dr Manuelito Kanuho MA Oxon, Ph.D. Please call me Manny. I'm sorry to accost you thus before our scheduled meeting tomorrow, but your being in Tuba City is of course noticed, and I am too impatient a man to see you and not introduce myself. It would be rude for you to know I had been watching you from afar and not to acknowledge the fact. Please sit and take refreshment with me in my office before I take you round Fourthworld.'

Marina thought he spoke as if taking care to be what he seemed, and in so doing she found him pompous. Alexander was struck by the nobility which belied his apparel and immediately forgave his manner of speech. English was probably not his first nor favoured language. He was aware that he too did not know Marina's second name. She made no reference to this omission and did not help him out.

'Dr Kanuho - Manny, what a pleasure, Alexander and I thought to acclimatise a little. We are far from home

and...'

'My dear friends, you are at home here in Tuba City. I have taken the liberty of checking you out of this motel, fine though it is, and have arranged for your valises to be taken to my place. In the meantime I would like to show you our little operation here at Fourthworld.'

Before they were able to comment, Manny had them walking briskly behind him the few hundred yards into the pre-fabricated huts of his empire. He spoke continually as they walked, and maintained his monologue within the fake-panelled walls of his office as he arranged coffee and cookies.

'So you see, without the assistance of Ric at JNO and the Biteasy Corp., we might not exist here. Anyone from JNO is welcome as a friend. We gain in strength, we The Din, through your help. We do a new long march back from the darkness that has befallen our own land and our own way of life. There are of course some among us who want the American way, but they are confused. Here at Fourthworld, linked now with JNO we can begin to re-connect with our ancestral voice and regain confidence in our relationship with the Earth.' At this he stopped and smiled.

Once more Alexander began to lose his bearings. He felt through the net round his shoulders a renewed sense of omen flow from the land, from this man and from Marina whom he sensed as on the alert. He felt very close to her and he wished he could read her on L1. She had no link to him other than the simply human but, and maybe it was his training or the net or both, he seemed to pick up her scanning mind. Not as clearly as he could now hear other voices on the 'sphere, but real enough.

Mannuelito Kanuho, MA Oxon, Ph.D. continued. 'I speak of the new dawn of my people. You will be surprised at the sophistication of our little operation here Mr. Alexander. Mr. Ricardo has given us, the Navajo Nation, the tools to outwit the Federal Office of Indian Affairs. And not only them,' Manny giggled infectiously. 'They have no notion of our holdings or our real wealth. That is thanks to our connections with JNO and the foresight of your mother Mr. Alexander. We have immensely broad connections here through the JNO/GRADE programme. Did you know my friends, we are directly and indirectly connected to most of the indigenous peoples all over the globe. We are not so simple as we seem. Hey Mr. Alexander? You are of course representatives of JNO and I am frank with you. Here, I have maps. They show you the depth and breadth of our liaisons between peoples, unknown to world authorities who still think of us as backward, downtrodden. Some think the peoples we connect with may be dangerous nationalists, or religious fanatics or all of these. This is the face we show to confuse. But we have through JNO, bought up loans from international banks and the World Bank. This way we get leverage in international business and slowly we will turn the tables in favour of the economies of so called third-world peoples. As yet the process is marginal and hardly noticeable. But you wait and watch, my friends, first world controlled cash crops will soon give way to local planting for local needs and we will create the means for raw materials to be processed locally. Then, Mr. Alexander, then we will be able to bargain with big chips my friend. With the help of JNO we will withhold our produce from your white exploiters. The most wonderful thing is that the centre of operations for all this for the central Americas is here. In little Tuba City, in this muddle of buildings at Fourthworld. All we do here is also part of the growing information data bank of HIGO at Markham. I astound you do I not my friends. I too astound myself every day. What do you think? We turn the tables at last.' The flash in Manny Kanuho's eye surprised Alexander and made him uncomfortable. Nonetheless he really was astonished. He wondered if Marina knew the true reach of Penny and Ric. If she did, she showed no sign. He knew JNO was large but was continually being surprised that he had no real conception of the scope of its myriad tentacles. Manny's eye gleamed even more malevolently and Alexander's mouth dropped further as he peeled back layer upon layer of information.

'You see how we take back what is ours. Revenge is a meal to partake of cold, isn't it so my friends? Are we not subtle, do we not work insidiously to right the wrongs of centuries against the insane and criminal damage inflicted by Europe over centuries? See how they will suffer and diminish as we strengthen. It is no more than

justice!'

Alexander felt a sudden and profound sadness at what seemed a lack of concern for the hardships awaiting the victims of the retribution to come and was suddenly less enthusiastic about Manny Kanuho's intentions. Also there was something in the eyes of the man which prevented Alexander from making a direct challenge. The proud Din chief wanted his pound of flesh to put the record straight and he no doubt had the right. But Alexander felt there was more to it and he was very disturbed but unable to put his finger on why. Manny was in every respect convivial and charming so what was it that made Alexander feel there was something sinister in the background? Something it was imperative to conceal .

He caught a sense of Marina professionally skimming the atmosphere for discrepancies in the normal routine of the busy office. He followed her with his mind and found by using Zeus' net he thought he was able not only to follow her general train of thought but also move ahead of her into other rooms. He was the first of the three of them to register the presence of the dissonant factor Marina was seeking and Manny was at pains to conceal. He remembered the origin of the hacker had to be somewhere in this ramshackle, tumble of buildings.

Manny had left the office door open and the coffee was brought in by a young man of over average height. He was a striking individual. Alexander noted with distinct jealousy Marina's appraising glance convey approval. He was over six feet, long boned and slender but well built, with the strength of the cheetah rather than the lion. His face was a hawk similarly beautified by a strong gaze. The wide planes of his cheek bones, spoke of an ageless calm. The jet-black hair was cut in a fringe, then combed hard and chopped sheer at the level of his cheekbone, the rest of his considerable mane was combed back and tied in a chignon at the nape with a fastener of many coloured beads. The way he moved indicated his total awareness of his own presence and he knew exactly the effect he had on the people present. His hard, smooth male sexuality exactly matched Marina's feline feminine and Alexander was right to be jealous. This man was a natural rival. Of similar age but seeming to carry more wisdom about him, offering a maturity gained from his people and the world. He was the scion of his people, the youth destined to lead them to greatness again.

He gracefully set down the tray of coffee cups as if it were a prize of the hunt. The pride of his race was in this simple gesture to drink and take hospitality. All three had their own reasons to admire this powerful youth.

'This is my son Barboncito, he welcomes you to the land of the Din,' observed Manny with obvious pride.

Alexander noted that without doubt he was the source of the dissonance. It seemed to him Marina had not yet picked up that it came directly from him. His obvious charm must have deflected her. She was not on the 'sphere, although in Alexander's mind she ought to have been. As he considered this, he heard Thea on the 'sphere amplified by the golden net.

'Concentrate on the boy, Marina can take care of herself!'

Alexander attempted to shrug her off as the interfering sister. He was shocked by the fierceness of the rebuke lanced via a flash of L3. The sting of her mind brought him back to the purpose of his visit and he began to use his training.

He was not surprised to receive such messages, subliminally he was continually monitoring noises on the 'sphere and quickly linked into anything that commanded his attention without losing any concentration for what was happening in real time. It needed an effort, but he could do it. Losing his bearings was dangerous. It was one of the caveats used by Zeus to Hera about his being placed on the 'sphere. The sphere was not designed for mortals and even the slightest inkling of its existence was apt to send people mad. His origins and training had lessened the likelihood, but nevertheless he found the constant skipping between parallel worlds and telescoped timelinks hard to hold onto. Dissonance in the ordinariness of the human world was

another new twist. It made sense when he thought of it, heightened awareness would logically point out the unexpected. Although he felt discord in the young man, he knew neither its cause nor intention. Was it innocent or malevolent? He now registered Marina's concern, so she was not being fooled either. She still found the youth attractive despite her misgivings. Still, he would take his twin's advice and assume Marina would take care of herself, he hoped this would not mean she would take less good care of him!

At a signal from Manny the youth bowed graciously and left the room. Manny then hustled them in the friendly manner of a broody hen on a tour of the complex of buildings.

Alexander continued to be surprised at the sophistication of the operation. Ric had certainly given the Navajo Nation the tools to outwit the Federal Office of Indian Affairs who nominally monitored the reservation. It was clear they had no notion of the holdings or real wealth of Fourthworld thanks to their connections with JNO. A twinge of the net suddenly made clear the enigma of the Navajo youth. While Manny Kanuho had set up the process using JNO's technical help, the youth was to be the instrument of revenge. No wonder he was so self-possessed. With the power of JNO behind him and the incontrovertible moral power of his argument, the dispossessed could and should bring down the established world order. Alexander wondered if Penny was aware of this as a possibility. Did she know what JNO had potentially unleashed on an unsuspecting world?

During a moment in the tour of the complex, Manny was called over by an employee allowing Marina time to observe;

'Alexander, don't you get the feeling that he is rather enjoying himself. From the moment he knew we were here he's making sure we don't get out of his sight...the lad has a big role in this too...by the way I'm an independent person so don't you get any proprietorial inclinations.'

'I...you...we...' Alexander was unable to get his words out.

'Stop that...I need to know more about myladdo there and I'll use whatever means I can, and enjoy myself too if I can. Get it!'

'I get it!' He began to draw himself up but before he could remonstrate, Marina grasped him behind the neck with fingers of steel and drawing his ear to her lips hissed with the force of a steam train through his brain;

'Nobody owns any part of me! I give what I want to whom I want! I'm in control - all the way lover boy! Now observe...there's something going on here. I've no scruples about what they want to do to the white-man's way of life, I can see you've got some qualms with that, and that's your problem. But don't forget the hacker comes from here and it's my job to protect JNO. Now I don't know what your job is, and I don't care. Just as long as you don't get in my way. As far as I'm concerned we are on the same side until you prove otherwise, and if it's any consolation, it's usually the other way round. But don't you bug me, is that clear!'

She kissed him swiftly and hard on the lips, smiled and disengaged as if nothing had been said.

Alexander's pride fell about him like the vast folds of a deflating hot-air balloon. He knew he did not own her but had hoped he had meant something to her. That she was tough he had no doubt, but he wanted her to reserve her special gentleness for him. His pride in himself demanded it. Their relationship sustained him in his confusions with his different worlds. Without the gift of Marina he felt alone. Having the Pantheon in touch was all very well but he felt he was mostly human and since his time with Marina he knew he desperately needed that kind of contact.

The net round his shoulders tightened as if offering an alternative emotional sustenance and he registered it as helpful. Was he wrong about her? Was she only, merely, an ally? Essentially was he alone?

After the tour, Marina drove in silence through the hot afternoon in the air-conditioned comfort of the Cherokee as they followed Manny's pick-up on the way to his hogan. Manny stopped at the crossroads to offer a lift to the youth who had brought the coffee, and Alexander was unhappy to know Marina would encounter him again.

Marina was not usually talkative and Alexander agonised angrily in the silence. Her disregard must be contempt for his wimpish adolescence. But he could not help himself. He wanted to own all of her and the thought that tore him to shreds was that her freedom (which was what he loved in her) allowed her to consider the Navajo youth as a possible lover. It was worse that she could consider giving her body for the fun of it in the conduct of her work. Was that all he was to her, a bit of bounce that came with the job? Thea's voice was live in his head telling him to concentrate on what mattered, and he was ripped in two pieces by the need to leave Marina to her own devices while he concentrated on other tasks. He sat glumly, determined that if that was what she wanted - if that was all he meant to her - then good luck to her.

He kept glancing at her for a reaction. Surely she would feel the strength of the passions surging through him. How could she act so calmly as if things were perfectly normal. Was she thinking about the body of the youth as he thought of hers - in the arms of the Navajo? Still he would not speak of it. Her instructions were clear. There was no way he would get in her way. He would keep his distance and she could do what she wanted. She was an employee, she could do her job in whatever way she wanted. He did not pay her wages, he wasn't even sure if he was an employee of JNO himself any more. So much had happened to him that was strange and unexpected, why did he think she was anything more special than that Ljeschi character. He would stick with Thea, she cared for him, was concerned about him.

Peripherally, he was aware of the country as they headed towards the Grand Canyon. Despite his mood the idea of visiting this natural wonder filled him with enough expectation to partially soothe his adolescent jealousy.

Few travel there on business, even fewer go with a Navajo chief and his acolyte. Fewer still go over the rim into the mountain-upside-down to search for the Sipapu, the hole in the ground through which the first people entered this glittering world from their subterranean mountain top. He kept the feel of Thea quick in his mind for courage and despite his mood - the presence of Marina for support.

They left the main road about two miles from the South-Rim of the Grand Canyon and drove side by side to avoid the dust, dodging through the dry grasses between ranks of pinyon pine. As they drove, trees whistled between them and on either side. Manny grinning from ear to ear, devilishly cast off his seat belt with a flourish and in a series of surges and decelerations indicated a race.

The ride developed into a crazy scramble between the trees and increased in speed as Manny, sensing Marina could cope with some fun, tested her driving skill. Alexander soon forgot his mood in a mixture of sheer excitement and terror as side by side their speed increased to seventy-five miles an hour on open ground thick with trees and boulders. Alexander held onto the grab handle in front of him, his backside in the air more often than on the seat. Marina dripping sweat despite the air conditioning, hurled the vehicle from side to side like a bucking bronco. Alexander was aware of the tense faces of their opponents in the car alongside. They brushed wheels more than once, as each speeding vehicle converged and parted to avoid the many obstacles.

They stopped almost together in a scream of brakes and a cloud of dust at a point not far from the brink of the Canyon. How Marina knew when to brake was a mystery to Alexander. Manny clearly knew the country and as far as Alexander could see had given no signal to Marina. They could have been hurled into oblivion were it not for her well honed sense of danger. Manny and the youth got down and approached Marina who was draped over the steering wheel, breathing hard.

'You are a very special kind of woman Marina what-your-name,' Manny said, sweat too glistening on his

brow. 'We thought it was the boy at the wheel and we would test him. When I realised it was you I wanted to slow down but Barboncito here would not let me - You win his trial and he is proud of Marina No-Name.' Barboncito threw open the door to the Cherokee and without a word thrust his hand to grasp Marina's in a hand-shake of equals. Alexander recognised the young man's appreciation of her skill and although he felt he ought to be jealous, the sheer honesty of the gesture unexpectedly made him warm to him.

'How did you know when to brake?' Manny asked, taking the words out of Alexander's mouth.

'Something to do with the relationship of sky and landscape, I don't know exactly, but I knew ahead was just void.'

'You feel the power of this place, you are one of us, Marina No-Name'. The Navajo youth spoke for the first time. Alexander was surprised at the caressing softness of his voice. 'Come I'll show you where you are.' The four of them walked towards the South Rim of the Canyon. After a few paces Alexander was amazed at the starkness of the break in the ground. Somehow he had assumed you would come across the canyon gradually - but it just happened. At about eighty yards from the edge he was aware of what Marina had fortunately sensed before him - a change in the light indicating great space. He was however, quite unprepared for the ground to fall precipitously away hurling his senses far into the void.

This first shock left him hanging like an eagle on a thermal up-draft, suspended over the ends of the earth. Giant forces had abruptly rent apart the flat ground over which they had been driving so recklessly a moment before. The magnitude of the space threw his mind into the immeasurable profundity to leave him breathless. As he tried to take in the vastness, his heart resisted the attempt. He knew it was possible to describe what he saw in scientific, geological terms - so many kilometres across, so many miles long - so many feet deep - but he could only take it in into himself as a wholeness and found he could not fathom its size, colours, depth nor mystery. He was simply enveloped and absorbed into the fact of it.

The four people, from very different backgrounds stood silent for a long moment with their own thoughts.

The drive from Tuba City had brought them into late afternoon and the sun dipping Westward over Point Sublime and Tuna Creek revealed a golden grandeur and nobility of form, beyond the imagination. This was a manifestation of the infinitude of Gaia herself, a sense of her capacity to dwarf the mortal into proper insignificance. Every passing cloud, every fractional shift of the point of the sun recast the mountainous terraces into cathedrals and great amphitheatres of rock, clothed in moving light and shade. While all was the stillness of eternity, all was moving planes of ethereal fragility and everlasting solidity paradoxically melting and reforming.

'There is my hogan,' interposed Manny suddenly breaking the silence, pointing downwards into the rocky chiaroscuro. Alexander followed the direction of his finger and with some difficulty made out the trickle of a trail plunging and winding deeply into the heart of a chasm and ending at a sloping grassy plateau atop a steep ravine at about the half-way level to wherever the bottom of the abyss and the mighty Colorado seemed to be. A thin, blue line of wood-smoke suddenly snatched by an internal wind marked a round man-made construction like an upturned coracle. Next to it a wooden shack appeared to almost slip off the edge of the plateau, about to fall into the bottomless ravine. Answering his thoughts, Barboncito, standing close to Alexander spoke softly into his ear.

'It is a four hour trail by mule from here to the hogan, now we go to Supai to get mules and supplies from my friends the Havasupai for the descent before dark. Tomorrow morning we will descend further - and when we are ready,' he hesitated and glanced at Alexander. 'Further to the Sipapu.'

Alexander was as shaken as if Barboncito had launched an arrow at him. The meld with Thea had told him all he knew about the Sipapu and the reason for his visit and its significance. It was natural that Barboncito would



know everything about the Sipapu and its significance for his people; but what made the hairs stand up on Alexander's neck was that somehow Barboncito knew that he knew.

'You see I know that's where we must go, you and I my European friend. To enter the world below. To find our destiny there. We are well matched. We are the ones chosen. Isn't it so? You and I will enter the Sipapu, we will revisit the time before and know the past as good. Together we will open the Sipapu, all the gates linking the underworld of the past to the now and together we will retake what is truly ours. The Din will have our country back as before. We need each other. We are the twinned entity where past and present meet.'

By the time his shocked brain began to be capable of response Barboncito had joined Manny and the pair of them with Marina retraced their steps to the vehicles. Alexander's first thought was to run after the younger Navajo and demand what he meant. He suspected however that it would yield him nothing and he was not yet ready for any kind of confrontation. He suspected a show-down with one or both of these men was more than likely at some time and he had no idea if he was capable of coming out unscathed. He was certainly out of his depth and it was only Marina and his link with the 'sphere that prevented him from fleeing. Added to which he had no real idea where he was nor how to get back. Anyway he was committed to the task now. Flight was out of the question, the humiliation of having to confront Lucina, not to mention all the others as a wimp, was an impossibility making the potential confrontation with Barboncito or Manny a vicar's tea-party by comparison. There was more going on here than he could fathom all at once and he had no choice but to go on. The demeanour of these Navajo, the Canyon, and Marina's keen sense of dissonance made him keep his thoughts and feelings to himself.

## Chapter 4

Two thousand feet down at the dead-end of the trail from Peach Springs which leads to Havasu Canyon, is the village of Supai, which is happily cut off from the rest of the USA. It is the home of some five hundred Havasupai People sandwiched between the towering walls of the canyon.

The town was built originally of willow wickiups, but now was made up of mobile homes or near collapsed, single-story buildings, typical of 'towns' in the reservation. The main building is the Havasupai Lodge constructed to exploit tourists which stuck-out as the only attempt at 'development' - a cynical gesture to Mammon to make white visitors feel at home. Alexander concluded the Native American's relationship with permanent structures was at best equivocal, similarly their use of possessions was more nearly related to daily needs than the mere satisfaction of possession - they had other, more satisfying things on their minds.

Their land invaded, their psyche under siege; they eyed the American dream with a cultural indifference only just now being understood by their ubiquitous, neighbours of European stock. The Native Americans had struggled against the white tide to barely cling to a culture based on a philosophy once considered utterly alien to their conquerors and now, just as some of the victors were beginning to appreciate its real value, they realised they had wantonly, all but, destroyed it.

The unbroken link with Gaia made Native Americans the natural allies of JNO. Their cosmology and that of the Olympians was a kinship shared. Alexander was sure that Barboncito and Manuelito Kanuho were exploiting this relationship for all they were worth. He also knew that the link to the underworld represented by the ancestors of the ancient people, the Anasazi of the desert and the canyon, was significant to the Named and the fact that the hackers' computer link was here made it all the more so. The key to his mission was here in the Grand Canyon and Barboncito was important. He knew he knew about the Sipapu and what he had to do there once he found his way to it. Barboncito would lead him there. But what then? He felt small and helpless against forces well beyond his managing. Compared with him Barboncito was accomplished, suave and confident. In any confrontation Barboncito was sure to win.

Alexander's thoughts found no place to rest as he swayed uncomfortably on his mule facing the gyrating rear end of Marina's mount, which from time to time seemed to disappear over the edge of precipitous cliffs as they rode in the nearest possible position to vertical able to be managed by the animals. He opened his mind to the noises of the 'sphere but there were no messages for him. He felt the presence of Thea 'on duty' but neither had anything worth-while to say and he was not in the mood for idle chatter. He was on his own at this moment and would have to do what he could. He was comforted by the Named being there if he needed them.

As they descended he felt he was being swallowed by the immensity of the canyon. The last rays of the sun played breathtaking games with the rocks in the foreground and set mountains into movement. He descended uneasily in the brilliant ruddy-golden glow of every possible hue in the yellow-red and indigo ends of the spectrum, relying on the sure footedness and experience of the mules to keep him from certain death on the rocks below.

It was almost dark when they reached the grassy plateau supporting Manny's hogan. His every bone ached from the unaccustomed ride, the permanent sense of danger from the steep descent and ascent from the track to the top of the promontory added to his fatigue. The relief of its ending was edged with the realisation that, the nature of his task meant he had no idea of when, or if he would return.

The journey, Marina, Barboncito, the incredible reality of the canyon and his task, settled heavily on his mind as tried to sleep. He had refused the light refreshment offered and seeing his obvious fatigue, Barboncito led him immediately to a small room in the shack where he settled his weary bones on a narrow truckle-bed. Myriad thoughts ran through his brain like trains in the Underground for most of the night.

The following morning he woke early with the sun - refreshed, ready for anything. A few minutes passed before he realised where he was. He was aided by the glimpse of a bright slash of new sunlight on a distant outcrop of rock which created the feeling of flying he had since his descent. He made use of the wash-basin in the corner of the room, and ventured into the outside air. The sun of the early dawn skimmed the lip of the canyon bending shafts of light which vanished like arrows into pockets of rising mist, shattering into pallettes of colour on the facets of the rocky outcrops all round the hogan. Alexander walked in the same wonder of disbelief at the incomprehensible vastness he felt the night before. This was a place of unspeakable mystery which he would never grasp if he lived there for ever. It had the same effect on him as the 'sphere - there, real - but unfathomable in its sheer size and the conceptual turmoil it evoked by its mere existence.

He found a place to sit at the rocky edge of the rim supporting the hogan and leaning back against a boulder, felt the warmth of the sun in the cold of the morning mist, when he heard the sound of a human voice in incantation. At first he thought it came from within himself, such was the effect of the sound in that place. Unable to locate the sound, he rose to peer over the edge of the precipice. Some hundred feet below on an outcrop he saw Barboncito naked, arms outstretched to the sun intoning what Alexander thought were ancient verses, he was also scattering pinches of yellow dust. The young Navajo was otherwise quite still, like the world around, blending his muscle and sinew with that of the rock. It was the most natural sight in the world to see the limbs of the man combine with the wind-carved contours of stone. The sounds from his throat merged with the breathy whispers of air wafting into the vastness of the canyon through the sparse vegetation struggling for life in its cracks and crevices.

Alexander watched bewitched, drawn into the song of the man and in turn drawn further into the folds of the canyon. A slow movement behind the young man broke the reverie, and Alexander made out the dark, slim arm of a woman followed by the head of Marina, who, also naked, pressed her body against his bare back, clasping him to her. The man, continued his song, apparently oblivious. Alexander did not wait to see more.

The spell broken, he did not know where to put himself. It was obvious that the outcrop was part of a cave reached from a descending ladder within the hogan, and Marina had spent the night there with Barboncito. Alexander cursed himself for leaving her alone and allowing his fatigue to get the better of him the previous evening. He felt betrayed, small, lost and angry. Like a small boy he wanted to lash out at something and also felt the intrusion of a new reality which had been absent since the meeting with Lucina. He had so absorbed himself in the other-worldliness of the 'sphere, Thea, and the rest; that his own real feelings in the present had been put aside. Even Marina's body had been in some way other-worldly until she offered it to another which broke the magic and put him in touch with his immediate feelings. He had no right to be as jealous as he was. It wasn't as if he had not been given notice that she would do what was needed to do her job. While he had been indulging his flights of fancy, she had gone to work. He realised at once that she was as independent as Barboncito. The driving thrust of carnality would have been shared in that night of lovemaking with hard-headed interrogation. He calmed down as part of him recognised, with relief, that Marina offered her true gentleness to few people and he was one of them. He hoped that she would have given to Barboncito only her body. At least Alexander had a little of her care. He had to reluctantly admit her body was her own to satisfy, and as yet he could have no exclusive claim to it. He would however make sure that was all the Navajo would ever receive. Not that he knew how to do it. He didn't know whether he was angry or sad with jealousy. He was certainly very jealous.

'I have to return to Markham straight away.'

Marina dropped her bombshell after a simple breakfast of fry-bread and some kind of honeyed syrup, taken out of doors later, on a patch of green outside. They were alone for a while as Manny and Barboncito went to see to the mounts.

'You are to stay here with Barboncito. He wishes to take you deeper into the canyon where there are things he says you must see. While you slept, I have been working. He is the hacker we came here to identify. I know

because he told me. Manny knows too, he didn't want the boy to tell us for fear we would take reprisals. I told him this was not my problem and that you had come here to deal with the hacker and my job was your protection until he had been discovered. Manny is relieved the truth is out and that Barboncito means no harm to you personally and is quite prepared to be honest about the hacking business. I'm glad it has been this simple so far. I envisaged more danger in the finding of this hacker, more opposition, more subterfuge needing my skills. So now my job in this place is done. Yours, whatever it is, begins. I got that from JNO on email this morning. By the way - I was with Barboncito last night - I said I would need to get close to him; and I did. Keep your feelings about that to yourself my lad, I am only doing my job.' Alexander gestured as if to interrupt.

'Just listen, there's not much time they'll be back soon, Barboncito it seems is something of a computer buff of some ability, and Manny was a cryptologist for the US Army in the last war, so they know their onions. In case you don't know, Fourthworld is one of JNO's key switchboards for information passing between first and third-worlds and co-ordinator of Latin America's counter-activity. But that's only by-the-by; what's important for both of us to know is that Manny told me privately that he thinks Barboncito has links with another Firm. This is the first JNO has heard of any rival in this business and he is very worried both about its existence and of another Firm getting onto the linkage. Penny and Ric have taken great pains to be concealed as you know. It seems that Barboncito has been using his computer knowledge to try and get information from JNO not usually available to his operation and which is not part of Manny's brief. Manny is worried about the lad and thinks he is getting a bit above himself, and says he seems to think he's invincible. He said Barboncito believes by setting this new Firm against JNO he will gain great advantage for his people. Manny is less sure and doesn't want to upset anyone at JNO. So both Manny and JNO want you to stick with Barboncito to see where this leads and report back as soon as possible. I have to get back to make sure there are no other links with this new Firm from any of the others on the third-world network. I'll be in Fourthworld for about twelve hours working on their security systems and then back to Markham. Barboncito was arrogant enough to be quite open with me about these other links, and while he susses them out he is happy we should know he is trying to play us against them - he thinks it'll up the stakes for him. I told him what he is up to is terribly risky, and at the same time I pretended to be bowled over by his cleverness and the power this is giving him. He is susceptible to flattery, at least from me, but make no mistake he is clever and dangerous; but he may, and I repeat, may, be quite genuine for all that. He has enough faith in this other group to believe their powers are at least equal to ours and he is playing both ends against the middle quite candidly. I told him I admired his bravery and his hopes, but said I was worried about the effects, which he chose to consider as my, rather JNO's problem,' she paused.... 'So there you are my laddo. You're on your tod. I'm told senior people from JNO will contact as and when. I'm also told you're not to worry about your physical safety, stick to your guns and you'll be okay.'

There was no time for more discussion, Barboncito and Manny were ready and almost in earshot. They indicated the prepared mounts and Manny and Marina set off back the way they had come the previous day towards Supai village and the long trek upwards.

Barboncito, dressed in blue jeans, chaps and a large white stetson, set off wordlessly down-hill gesturing for Alexander to follow. The trail was not wide enough for them to ride abreast and forced to ride in the rear Alexander's mind was full of Marina, and his mission. As they progressed, the back of Barboncito remained as irritatingly enigmatic to Alexander as the rest of him. Unable to talk, only to follow, Alexander's thoughts were soon overwhelmed by the sheer spellbinding qualities of the canyon itself.

Havasu Canyon towered behind them, the jagged rock chiselling chips of early sunlight from ledges and outcrops. Majestic cottonwoods lined the creek and led by degrees past several water-falls each more beautiful and magnificent than the last. Maidenhair ferns and mosses, lined plunging rills and spouts of turquoise green, filling pools of travertine rock. The trail followed the river along limestone buttes, columns, and boulders. At points the trail climbed up parched ledges studded with cactus and scrubby vegetation high above the creek bottom. Compressed rocks squeezed the wind into tunnels and together with the noise of the falls all

conversation was impossible.

How far they rode Alexander was quite unable to say. The state of his knees and the bony parts of his rear told him they had been going for at least three hours if his experience of the previous day was anything to go by. It was nearly lunch-time judging by his stomach. The trail led precipitously to the creek floor. It arrived at a kind of dry, sandy beach which undercut the towering wall of the canyon and it seemed as if the great weight of rock above might sink the opening to the floor under its own mass, were it not for the giant natural pillars of sandstone at each side. The roof actually bowed with the strain and dipped dangerously inch by inch as they rode into its cooling shade.

Barboncito dismounted and pulled lunch from his saddle-bags. Alexander assumed this would be some exotic local food and was surprised to be offered beef and pickle sandwiches wrapped in polythene. A flask of coffee followed. Only the slip-slip of the water bubbling round the rocks broke the absolute stillness exemplified by the black comma's of three ravens wheeling acutely slowly, suspended high against the slash of clear-blue sky between the towering walls. They sat and ate in the stillness for what seemed too long a time. Barboncito broke the silence which had built up like the walls of the canyon itself.

'We're in a side canyon, the Havasupai call it Matkatamiba,' said Barboncito. 'We'll eat and then go on to the Sipapu. That's what you came here for - isn't it?' He did not give Alexander time to answer before going on. 'She told you, the black woman, she told you I hacked into your system. It was you she said found me out. You must be good, as good as me to do that. How did you do it?'

Alexander found it hard to speak to Barboncito. The sound of his voice echoed as unreal and too loud, amplified by the cave walls and contrasting with the enormous stillness that was around and between them. He also realised with a shock which rendered him almost speechless, that all his doings of the 'sphere had so far been with people or beings who were sympathetic. The net he wore indicated this man knew more of those things than he admitted. He mostly felt that by responding he would start something he would not know how to finish. The clear planes of his companion's face offered nothing and he was unable to read anything in the tone of voice. Added to which he had been a lover of his love and he was a probable traitor to JNO, so there was no communication that could be other than confrontational.

'How did you know it was me?' Barboncito repeated, a new hard edge to his tone.

'I read the numbers on the entry nodes, it led to Fourthworld - I didn't know it was you until Marina told me this morning.'

'How? How can you do that!' It was more of a shout than a statement. As he spoke, Barboncito turned to face him fully for the first time since they met - it was a direct challenge. Alexander felt for the first time that the Navajo was rattled. Could it be that this young man was as disturbed by his own poor mystery, as he was himself disturbed by his? His instinct was to say he had no idea how he did it, that it was done by - what? - magic? Maybe as a Navajo Brave, Barboncito believed in magic, he certainly seemed to believe in ritual if the morning intonation and sprinklings of yellow dust was anything to go by. Though to a computer expert of some ability, he thought the idea of magic would be unconvincing. Anyway, the net told him things were not as they seemed. If Barboncito thought he had computer abilities too he could play on this without hopefully giving anything away and await developments. He was also now very curious about where they were and how Barboncito knew he had knowledge of the Sipapu as being significant for JNO.

'You wouldn't expect me to tell an expert hacker how JNO combats them would you? What I really want to know is why you would compromise Manny's contract with the Firm and seek information to which you are not entitled? I thought you wanted to advance your nation, not put it at jeopardy by making enemies of people like Richard Trefoil.'

He was about to go on about the Sipapu since this was more important than the hacking. The hacking was history, Marina was handling the consequences - the Sipapu was the critical thing now. How did Barboncito know of his mission?

'Trefoil isn't the only ally we have in your world. There are others, in our world, just as, possibly even more powerful.' He paused. 'That's the problem with you people, you hold us in such poverty of esteem you think we are bound to believe in your superiority.'

Alexander picked up the edge of hatred mixed with a deep contempt. He began to get some insight into the intensity of feeling that was part of the gulf between them. It was true he had no real knowledge of what it meant to be a Native American in his traditional surroundings. The need for the well controlled emotions he sensed in his companion came from deeply held beliefs. Alexander remained puzzled and alert. He knew the next few minutes were important. That he had mystery of his own for his adversary was a revelation, and he knew maintaining it was the only thing that made him relevant to Barboncito. Were it to be lost, Barboncito was perfectly capable of abandoning him alone in the depths of the canyon to fend for himself.

'So you think yourself clever enough to play one firm off against the other. But we got to you pretty quickly.'

Barboncito laughed. 'I calculated on that. I didn't think I'd get away with it for long. I admit you're better than I predicted, faster than they thought too. Maybe they are less clever than JNO after all.'

This other firm?

'Yes, well you'll soon find out who is the cleverest. They're closer than you think.'

At this Barboncito turned from him and carefully stowed the remains of the lunch in his saddlebag and walked down to the creek to wash the coffee cups. When Barboncito turned from the creek to face him, Alexander thought to take an initiative of his own.

'Why did you admit hacking to Marina?' he asked. But Barboncito was ahead of him, he knew why they were together in this place, which was more than Alexander did. He thought Barboncito had sensed his lack of bearings and thereby kept the advantage.

'What have I got to lose? You already knew a hacker was loose in Fourthworld, we're not so big nor so well endowed with technical experts that it would take you long to finger me. In any case this other firm wanted to get someone from JNO out to meet them, especially the one who found me out. It was just a matter of flushing you out, I have nothing to lose - like I said you're all exploiters, setting you against each other can only benefit us, you'll have to up the ante to keep us in the game.'

'What game?' Alexander realised as soon as he spoke that his false innocence was easily detected. Barboncito sadly raised an eyebrow at him.

'You're actually none of you any of my business, except that when you've all stopped fighting each other, I'll still be here and I'm going to take advantage of the aftermath. Once your race tried to wipe us out, now you need us to learn how to survive and heal your rift with the Earth. Our price for co-operation is high and we won't be sold so cheaply a second time. Your rivals want old defeats revenged and a new and different order that will not challenge the Earth. Well; you'll have to work it out between you and we'll be waiting on the sidelines and this time you'll all pay dearly for the prize. I'm not so stupid as to take you on and think I can win, put I can make either or both of you - pay!'

Barboncito stowed the utensils in the bags and sat on an outcrop of rock, smoothed into a seat by the ancient action of water, and stared at Alexander.

'We don't want anything but this and the country beyond.' He swept the canyon with his hand. 'Neither do we want to own it. We will share it with anyone else who will cherish it as we do. Otherwise you will lose it - it's beginning to withdraw from you already and in the end, as we have always known it will literally kill you, your attempt to own it. We already have our covenant with the Earth. Our work with JNO now includes many indigenous nations who still have good enough relations with the Earth to ensure its survival. This is not as one-sided as Trefoil might think. The more we control the less you can exploit. Don't tell me - Trefoil and his ilk at JNO know this - but if they think they can maintain their hold of it and simply allow us our share - that's not what it's about. If you can't work that out then you're doomed to fight over it, and you can only lose. We on the other hand can only win, the land is on our side, and it recognises our worth and rejects you. We are growing fast and Fourthworld will soon be as powerful in our sphere as JNO is in theirs. The child is nearly as strong as the parent. You should watch out. We'll soon make our own alliances on our own terms.'

'What if you are wrong about us? What if we are with you - fully. What then?'

'Perhaps. But I don't believe it, why should I? I say prove it. I have seen the powers of the other firm and they rival yours. I will work in both camps, but the Earth will be ours in the end and you will pay for its use.'

'You've done a deal with them?'

'No need, our deal with the Earth was done centuries ago, that covenant has not changed. She waits for us to return to our proper place, the one taken by you. You, both of you: JNO and this other firm are rivals for a power over that which cannot be owned: for us that is the ultimate irony. All attempts at ownership will destroy you both. So far the other firm says that's okay, we can regain the land since they do not want it themselves they merely wish to prevent your domination. I don't believe either of you, so I bring you together to work out between you what you can. The unintended consequences of a war between you will hurt us more, so we are patient and prefer diplomacy.' He turned to his mount and placed a foot in the stirrup.

'Enough talk - mount and follow, we go to the Sipapu.'

'Wait, I'm going nowhere yet. I want to finish this conversation. For a start, I want to know how you know I want to find the Sipapu? Marina couldn't have told you. Who did?'

'Marina is good at getting people to talk,' grinned Barboncito. Alexander ignored the intended taunt

'Answer my question! Whatever Marina got out of you, she knows nothing about the Sipapu, at least no more than the general knowledge that it is a holy place kept in the hearts of your ancient people as the point from which your ancestors believed they emerged from the nether-world into the light...'

'But we, Alexander Conway, know it is a real place do we not? And you want to know how I know you know this.' Disarmed, all Alexander could do was nod lamely.

'You have information about the ancient Havasupai people. I assume you have read something of it.'

Alexander nodded.

'You know then they are the cousins of the Hopi through the ancient Anasazi line. Over time the ancient powers of these peoples mixed and merged with the Navajo belief systems in which the black underworld of spirit people first emerged from a fissure in the earth into the light of the world...'

Alexander felt the strength of Barboncito's belief give stature to the young Navajo leader which gave him his splendour. His own belief in the Pantheon brought him closer to this youth as he listened. This they had in common. The dissonance between them gave way to a potential comradeship of understanding. He listened

without interruption to Barboncito.

'...The eventual emergence of our people from darkness and chaos into the glittering world of now was a continuous marvel that lasted for centuries to be spoilt utterly by the coming of the Europeans.' Barboncito stood and spoke as if to gathered multitudes of his people. 'Do not wonder my people, there will be a re-visitation through the Sipapu and we will re-emerge in a world without the presence of the white-men who are without appreciation, whose god demands they use everything in the now for his gratification in the future and who want everything for themselves. The very Earth will destroy the white-man as our new-world folds over and absorbs the old. This I know for I have found the Sipapu and have entered.'

He gazed down at Alexander. 'I have entered and found people who know you Alexander Conway. They know JNO and what it does.'

This unexpected pronouncement made Alexander gasp.

'You see I know things. They know of you on the other side, and I have been asked to bring you there, for we are close by. Maybe you are the leader to come of your people as I am of mine. Understand me, I will win the 'game' and I fear nothing on either side of the Sipapu. My hope is that you will reconcile your differences, and avoid the destruction of war in which you both will be weakened while I and mine will prosper. This a better way, there is always a better way than war. Come we will meet the guardian of the Sipapu, it is guarded of course - entry is not for anyone.'

Alexander felt the stuffing knocked from him. A tightening of Zeus' net reminded him that he was not totally alone. Thea 'on duty' communicated her presence and referred to his training which revived him a little. Physically he was at the mercy of the Navajo, in his country with no way out, and mentally he was seriously perturbed by the revelation that he was known about by this other firm. Were they also linked into the Chronosphere?

'Part of my task, like yours,' continued Barboncito. 'You see I know your mission, is to bring the time of the ancestors into the present to safeguard the future without armed conflict. We share this, since it is the only way, why else do we accept J.N.O.'s support? For us it is easier, for we did not abandon our ancestors like you. We connect where you have broken with the past through indifference and inattention. I go through the Sipapu to meet the remembered, with faith in the ancestors of my past to maintain and strengthen the links. You will go through without knowledge and with fear of ghosts. You have no bearings in an alien past, and you are in too great a hurry to leave the uncomfortable present for a future you cannot know or control. We the indigenous peoples of the world live with satisfaction in the past and in the present. Those on the other side know this and use me against you. You are right, I am against you - but I am less an adversary than a critic. I do hate what you have done to us, but things are not over yet. I will not harm you, I am merely a constant reminder that you cannot keep the thing you desire most and over which you will lose control. I currently embody what you cannot achieve. I am the torment of your race. But you can join us and re-link yourself. Together we will re-live with the earth as before.'

He felt Thea's sigh of exasperation flow through the net round his shoulders rather than heard it. It was a warning not to be taken in by this man.

Suddenly he was tired of being her agent or that of Lucina or even Zeus himself. Like Barboncito he wanted to be himself. Barboncito was his own man - he made his own decisions from his own certainty of understanding.

His mission to bring the past into the present was not a task he did for himself. The Named required it, and until now that had been enough. Great things were afoot and he was part of it. To have a role was more than just something. Nevertheless he felt small and not a little used.



He wanted to cast the net from his shoulders and join Barboncito a free man, but felt too unsure of himself and too exposed to go so far in one go. Spontaneous action without certainty, while melodramatic, was dangerous, even if he was right in the end, there was at this point enough of the unforeseen billowing around him without his adding unnecessarily to the store. He would keep the net of Zeus around his shoulders, but secretly start thinking about making his own decisions. He began by failing to respond to Thea's injunction not to argue with the lad and go with the flow.

'I can understand why you hate Europeans, but you use our technology and gain greatly from your contract with JNO. Isn't that a bit cynical. Don't you have any faith in JNO to help your people without ulterior motives?'

'Of course I do. We're still signed up through Manny aren't we? But you miss the point. There is not enough you can do in the present to solve the problem, JNO is doing its best. But it won't be enough, nor will it be in time. We 'natives' are poised for 2012 and beyond but you righteous conquerors have too far to go. The other firm knows this. It doesn't fight the past - it is the past. But come, there is little point in continuing this, you will have to experience it for yourself.'

Alexander's attention was wrenched away by a blast from Thea. He watched Barboncito mount and go on into the cave through the tension of a mind-meld with his sister which left him limp and obedient. In a daze he too mounted and followed deep into the gloom. For a good deal of the way the extreme brightness of the light from outside illuminated the vast interior, darkening by degrees as they penetrated further.

Soon they came to a shack of the kind Alexander expected to find on the outside but not in the relatively sheltered interior of a cavern. They had been following a track which led directly to the door of the ramshackle wooden construction framed against the lowering roof of the overhang, hardly visible against the increasing darkness. Alexander was astonished to see the figure of a man sitting on the veranda, apparently snoozing in a creaking rocking chair. He was for all the world the archetypal prospector like Gabby Hayes in an old Western. They approached as far as the tie-rail of the boarded porch and without dismounting, Barboncito called out to the sleeping man.

'Hey old-timer, we want to go through!' The old man slowly lifted his head revealing the unmistakable features of Pannie Ljeschi. Alexander, utterly astonished, recognised him. Pannie immediately engaged Alexander on L1 while holding a different conversation with Barboncito. With the Navajo he entered into a complex question and answer rigmarole, at the same time Pannie was remaking his acquaintance with Alexander.

'Hi there pardner, I gotta do the stuff with the Navajo, he likes the mumbo-jumbo. Funny how things sorta have their place. Didn't expect ter see me huh? I tol' yer I wouldn't be so far away. So pilgrim, yer wanna join the ancestors huh? Happy huntin' grounds of yester-year an' all. Only jestin' pardner, cep'n I gotta tell yer sump'n important. This brave here, this Barb'ncheeta kin come 'n go as he pleases through the Sipapu.'

Pannie stopped to light an old cob-pipe over which he to his time, spitting elegantly twice into a spittoon on the floor by his creaking chair. 'T'aint so easy fer you. 'S'a one way ticket fer the likes of you boychik. Don't s'pose they tole' yer that upstairs. Which ain't ter say there ain't no way out nohow. Better folkern you made it outta there. But it warn't easy no sir! So git used ter staying fer a bit. Maybe y'all will wanna git out, maybe not. Cep'n it's not yer time fer to be in there, not yet it ain't. Y'all still wanna go?'

'What are you doing here? Turning up like the Cheshire cat!' said Alexander.

He began to wonder if the experiment with reality and Barbonchito was merely another illusion, except for the fact that this far into the cavern it was becoming decidedly chilly, so it was real to that extent. He was however concerned at Pannie's communication. His mission meant he had to enter. Only in the halls of Hades

would he find what he was sent to seek.

'Jest fer now I'm the guardian of this partic'lar portal, pardner. I says who goes in an' who or what comes outer there. An' I says you ain't ready ter go in. The Navajo laddie, 'e kin go but you ain't ready boychik.'

'I thought you were on our side - and that your job in this was to keep an eye on me'.

'S'right pardner, so I ain't lettin y'all go in until you're ready. S'posin' I did? S'posin y'all got lost in there and met up with some bad folks. There's all kinda folks in there'll make clam-chowder of a kid like you.'

'I get my orders from your mistress, Lucina, and I am sent here to enter. I don't see where you get your authority to prevent me when I am here on a far higher authority than you!' Alexander was becoming anxious and as part of the meld on L1 with the little manikin he confronted, he allowed his anger to come to the surface. 'According to the legends there are more dangerous guardians than you to the Underworld. What if I merely set off after Barboncito into the Sipapu?'

'That's jest it, pard, an' there's no need to get yer dander up, it's his Sipapu, this partic'lar entrance belongs really to the Hopi, an' they'll let in another Navajo like this Brave here. But what's it ter do with y'all. No place for you in there - too dangerous boychick. Stay where y'are is my advice. The dark side of human experience is no place fer a lonesome whipper-snapper the likes o' you! Ain't no link to our 'sphere works in there like to 'elp yer git out.'

Alexander had come too far to identify and follow Barboncito into this realm of the past to be prevented by this play-acting fellow complete with comic voice. He remembered Lucina's injunction to pay heed to Ljeschi as someone who would have things to teach him. His new inclination to be his own man overcame her scruples in that regard. In any case this little creature was a decided nuisance, popping up whenever he felt like it. He had enough to worry about without him. Given the ways of the 'sphere he was not particularly surprised to find him here in this underground cavern. He did however expect a friendlier demeanour and was unprepared for direct confrontation and blank denial.

Barboncito, in real-time, had meanwhile answered the questions put by Pannie and having made his peace with the prospector gained his way past him. The Navajo bent low to untie the gate through which the path led deeply into the canyon wall, and ambled his mount through. His form diminished by stages along the steeply descending trail until only the crown of his hat was visible. Alexander undecided, was unable to move and remained in the mind-meld with Pannie. Seeing Barboncito's hat disappear from view he simply panicked and charged his animal through the open gate without heeding the cry from Pannie. Barboncito was about already some two-hundred yards ahead of him, when he seemed to disappear into one of a number of tunnels in the cave wall. As Alexander approached the place at speed, he became increasingly aware the wall of the cave was honeycombed with entrances and it was impossible to know exactly through which Barboncito had passed. He was by now going too fast to stop and choose a particular entry as the ground was falling precipitately away in front of his mount. It was all he could do to hold on. The terrified beast made for nearest opening and plunged headlong into pitch blackness.

## Chapter 5

Alexander stuck in his meld with Pannie on L1 was in a state of terror no less total than the mule's. The thunder of hooves in the confined space of the plunging tunnel added to the panic of animal and rider. A hundred times worse were the screams of Pannie on the meld, searing Alexander's mind.

Notwithstanding his blind terror, he made sudden contact with a part of his brain which was acutely aware that he had done something supremely stupid. A piece of Pannie's mind seemed to have torn from its owner and had lodged in his own - an internal banshee intent on driving him witless. This was no mind-meld of the kind he had so far experienced, it was a personal attack on his sanity.

The rest of him was busy trying to stop from being violently dashed against the walls of the tunnel or thrown under the flying feet of his crazed animal which hardly touched the steep, rock strewn floor of the descent. In the narrow darkness of the tunnel all sound and movement was hugely magnified. For what seemed like a life-time, he plunged downwards so far into a blackness from which he was certain he could never emerge. Sheer reflex action alone kept his grip on the animal and prevented him from death by trampling. This irony was not lost on the hugely amused maniac in his head, much taken with the double absurdity of a human heading through the Sipapu to the lands of his ancestors and killing himself before entering where he was ultimately destined to go.

He was vaguely aware that to arrive dead was not the purpose of his mission and that to enter alive into the halls of Hades, to bring the past squarely and honestly into the present, was the key to the whole enterprise. That the future of his race somehow depended on his coming out with Hades himself. Lodged in his mind Pannie proceeded to lecture him on the idiocy of tackling obstacles without first thinking through the consequences. Thus with his mind fully preoccupied he exploded, like a cork from a champagne bottle, into a bright light and on to a wide and sandy, canyon floor where his mule ran until exhausted on the soft-going of a bank of a deep and fast flowing river, rushing through a gorge.

The mule, as if he had had enough of all this, stopped abruptly so that Alexander sailed gracefully over its bent head to land winded at the feet of Pannie who was sitting cross legged on a boulder tamping his pipe angrily.

'Now then, boychik,' he barked when Alexander finally sat up, brushing sa from his clothes and was sufficiently in his wits. Maintaining the L1 connection he continued,

'How'se about us gittin' back to where we wus up ter? First off, don'cher ever do anythin' so dumb agin'. You ain't got no idea where you is now, 'as yer? So you gonna need me ter put yer on the trail agin ain't yer? If'n you'd a' paid a bit more attention back there you wouldn't be in this fix. I really dunno how I'm a' goin' ter git yer skin outer'n it.'

'Where's Barboncito? Where's the Navajo I was with?' Alexander stayed seated in the sand and dusted himself down some more as he spoke. Barboncito was important to his mission and Alexander was fully aware that Pannie knew perfectly well what he was doing at the entrance to the Hopi Sipapu. Pannie was beside himself with frustration.

'You was trained weren't ya, ya big dope! Well weren't ya?'

'Don't you yell at me! You...you...joke of a...a...whatever you are! What I'm doing here... It's not easy!'

'That's as maybe boychick. Ya'll knows there's a bunch 'a entrances to the underworld known ter the ancient gods of many peoples. Don'cher?'

'What's it to you what I know or don't know?'

'Oh it's like that is it me boychick. Well if'n y'all don't want me around it's no problem pardner! I'll jest git along an' leave ya'll ter fend fer yerself.'

'No!' Alexander said alarmed. 'No, really, I'm sorry. It's just that I've a lot on my plate and don't know what I'm doing. I feel it's too much for me and I don't know what it's all about.' He felt like crying but knew he couldn't in front of this prickly figure.

'Jeeze, whatta dude! Yes you sure do know what it's about. Mnemosyne she larned ya, over'n'over. Till she'd had enough of ya and 'ad ter leave y'all alone ter git on with it on yer lonesome. Okay, okay, so yer know don't yer?'

'Yes I know that a few entrances to the underworld are known by some mortals who still have effective connections with their ancestors when everywhere else they've been either broken or totally devalued. So it's not really surprising Barboncito has knowledge of the location of the Sipapu.'

'Right, boyo, an' yer gotta remember that the Named are shit scared of the possibility of two-way traffic. From down 'ere ter up there. They're a shittin' their breeks that mebbe them in'abitants of the underworld wus goin' ter find a way back upstairs via them self-same trails and swamp the present with the past and stop 'istory in its tracks. So what yer gotta do boychick?'

'I gotta - I mean I've got to stop and reverse any attempts at that happening'. By the gods, listen to me. What the hell am I talking about?'

'What yer talkin' about is the deal Hades signed up ter with Zeus after that there 'orrible battle of the Titans corralled up Hades and sent i'm down 'ere out of the way. Olympus and Hades separate like fer ever. Zeus made a clear break between 'em and it's worked real well so far. But that was then. Things 'ave moved on. In partic'lar the balance of power's changed so Hades is stronger'n he used ter be. Probl'y stronger'n Zeus 'imself if'n yer counts up the souls each of them's got over all. So yer knows don't'cher they got separate zones in different, 'cept parallel lines. Sure some partic'lar folks done the crossin' over like, and gotta lotta publicity. Some folks tried and got into a lotta trouble. So's yer knows them parallel zones can be got through in special cases.'

'That's me, I'm a special case I suppose. Just because Zeus is my father, that makes me a special case does it? Well I don't want to be a special case thank you. I never asked to be a special case. By what right do I get put in this unreal, stupid, fantastic, situation! Eh? Answer me that you little goat!' Alexander sat on the sandy ground and hung his head. 'I want to go home,' he said weakly. 'I don't want to play any more. It's all just too fantastic.'

'So yer don't care if'n the forces of the past git stronger than the present. An' I s'pose yer don't care that the longer mortal 'istory lasts, the greater'll be the numbers on Hades' side. Yer knows I s'pose that nowadays fer every mortal on earth there's at least thirty of them thar dead 'uns in Hades.

'It's true. According to Thea, people like Barboncito are one of the few who represent the peoples of the earth still in touch with their ancestors. She said that once they were all linked up, through GAIANET, any one of them would be able to provide a ready means to give Hades a bridge between past and present through which the long dead could emerge and take over the present for ever. If people in the present continued to fail Gaia, Hades through the likes of Barboncito might be able to use this as a means to position himself to merge the past with the present and thus cut off the future to save Her. She said it was a risk, but she couldn't say how much of a one. By preventing his brother Hades from using the Chronosphere to communicate in the present, important logical step though it was, it made it possible that he might find his way through one day by a

separate route of any analogue that mortals would inevitably invent.'

'Dead right pard'ner. Ole Hep's partic'larly afeared a' that hap'nin'.

'She said it's one of those critical details that Zeus always ignores. She was sure that if Zeus' grand scheme was to have any chance of success, it was inevitable that mortals would need some kind of sophisticated communication system of their own to help Gaia so that their information data base would be equal to the task of self-governance in partnership with Her.'

'Thet's one of them gripes 'ole Hep's got with Zeus. I dunno if the 'ole Thunderer's thought it through, like, but Hep's 'oppin mad, he don't take no cognisance of it 'ap'nin. 'He said if Hep was worrit about it 'e'd better do summat about it hisself.'

'That makes sense of Nemmi's anxiety,' said Alexander. 'She said there were real dangers in the challenge set by Zeus' Last Will and Testament, and this was seen by Hephaestos in particular, as well as Hera, Prometheus and Athena, as a probable sign of feebleness not lost on Hades in the real-politik of the gods.

'Sure thing. Once 'old Hades gets wind 'e kin get through to an 'ole bunch'a folks on the other side there'll be no stoppin' 'im.'

'So why are you stopping me following Barboncito? He's an expert on the Earth side's communication system and one who's in contact with the Underworld. I've got to stop him getting there at all costs. Given all this why you're holding me up with all this chit-chat is incomprehensible.'

They were still melded on L1. With the rest of his mind, Alexander tried to make contact with Thea. He discovered with a jolt that he could maintain a meld with Pannie in the here and now, but on the other side of the Sipapu there was no communication with the 'sphere to the other world. Of course he knew it, it just hadn't registered it wouldn't work till he'd tried.

Alexander thought once again with a flicker of fear there was a difference between knowing a thing and experiencing it. Feeling Thea and Hep in touch helped him keep sane. Knowing they were out of reach filled him with levels of anxiety that were by now being picked up by Pannie.

On L2 however he detected other presence's on a parallel 'sphere which he had been taught existed on the wrong side of the Sipapu. He did not recognise any of them, but could guess who they were. Meanwhile he had other more pressing things to handle, like finding Barboncito and getting Pannie out of his hair. While this was going through his head the comic voice of Pannie thrust itself into the forefront of his consciousness.

'If'n you'd'a bin inna' a bit less of a hurry boychik, we could'ha worked out a better way of gittin' in here and what's more to the point, how ter git out. Now we're bothern us stuck onner wrong side without any ways a' knowin' the way back! Like I said, you weren't ready ter git in here. And what's more pardner, you got me in here with ya!'

'Nobody asked you to come, if it wasn't for you I'd still be on Barboncito's trail and not spending time in this stupid chat with you.'

'Stoopid chat is it!' Pannie drew himself up to the most considerable height he could muster, which as he remained sitting on the boulder, made him even more comical. Alexander was inclined to laugh, but something in the other's demeanour conveyed caution.

The little manikin was so absurd both as Gabby Hayes and as Pannie Lejeschi that the mixture fed Alexander's sense of the ridiculous and inclined him to ignore the little man. Pannie was genuinely infuriated.

His cynical temperament and farcical appearance were not enough to disguise a real level of feeling. Alexander, despite himself recognised this, calmed down, partially admitting to himself he may have done something to genuinely cause his ire and said less petulantly than he felt. 'So? Go on, what's getting to you?'

'Oh! So now y'all 'll listen - now boychik, now when it's too late ter do anything about it! Now we're there he wants ter know what's gittin' ter me!' Pannie stood on the rock and threw his hands aloft, his goatee wagging brightly in the sun.

'I'm prepared to listen if you're going to talk sense. Where exactly are we?'

'In the shee-ite, that's where we is 'xactly' sonny, in deepest shee'ite up to 'ere!' He indicated his Adam's apple with the flat of his hairy hand. 'An' he wants ter know where we are!'

Pannie jumped from his perch with the agility that always managed to surprise Alexander. He strode off towards the sandy bank of the creek which glittered away into the distance between the high bluffs on either side.

'Jest look about ya boychick! Where d'yer think y'are? What's it all like eh? Where was yer and where is yer now?' Pannie danced around the boulder flinging his arm about him indicating the river, sky and the distance.

'It's like another canyon to me. We've come through one into another. And I need to get after Barboncito,' Alexander said gazing about him.

'Look harder boychik!' Pannie demanded with more than a hint of sarcasm.

Alexander, who had spent the whole of this communication seated on the ground where his mule had unceremoniously deposited him, now stood up, and stared about him. He was indeed in another canyon, but it had a different feel from the others that morning. There was something different about the light. Although the sun was still high there was a distant gloominess towards the glimpse of horizon visible at the end of the canyon where the bluffs petered out into what appeared to be a flood-plain. Where he would have expected the light of the sun to be brightly illuminating the middle distance, an ashen grey melancholy seemed to have settled. The cause was not apparent. The sky overhead was as bright a blue as he could have wished.

It was as if a smog grew up from the earth or the river in the distance to cover the terrain with a different light from that cast by the sun. It was definitely eerie. Added to which he had the feeling of having been here before. The river dashed boisterously for a long way, at least two miles by his reckoning, and then changed to a leaden colour more as if the light ebbed from its white-water of its own accord, giving up its light to an absorbing darkness. He turned to take in the way he had come in such haste. To his astonishment he seemed to have come through a solid wall of granite. Gone were the travertine limestone terraces, this ancient rock was impenetrable with none of the softness of the Matkatamiba, it was hard and cold, with no visible sign of where he might have issued. He stared back at Pannie registering a new anxiety.

'Hades?' he asked tremulously.

'You got it Boychik, Hades! But you knew that's where you was headed didn't ya? But what you didn't stop to consider was, what it would be like when you got here. Never gave it a thought did ya? Too busy follerin' that Navajo ter take notice a' me sittin' there ter git yer ready fer what yer was lettin' yerself into.'

Alexander considered the goat-like manikin again. The exasperation in the tone of the communication was very real. Beneath the comic external trappings and the silly accent was a genuine emotion. Alexander recalled Lucina's words and began to believe there were things he should learn from Pannie. Pannie registered the sincerity of Alexander's feeling and was more conciliatory in his approach.

'Listen good, I'm goin' ter git inter L2 with ya.'

The meld lasted a while as they considered their position. When it was over they set off up-stream in the opposite direction towards the closed end of the canyon. The river was in full spate and even deeper than Alexander had at first realised. Without a means of bridging it or some kind of easier ford, there was no way across. It was hot and dusty. Alexander rode his mule while Pannie skipped along in front. Every now and then the little man would crouch on all fours, put his ear to the ground and listen intently. On his signal the oddly quixotic trio would move forward again. After some two hours of this Pannie turned to face Alexander on the mule.

'It's no use, there's no way 'cross this creek in this direction. I didn't think there was, but it was worth a try. Iff'n there'd be a way old Hecate would'a' stopped it up by now. 'Istry says there wus a back-way in. The Sipapu was one of 'em but it only gets us as far as this side a' the bank. An' now we're in, that's bin and got itself stopped up. I spec' the Navajo'll 'ave ter find 'is own way out agin same as us. 'Cep 'e's allowed ter come 'n go. I don't have much hope it'll be thet easy fer us.'

They retraced their steps, passed the boulder where Alexander was thrown from the mule and went on. Pannie travelled even more carefully now than when going in the other direction. As they breasted a low ridge Alexander caught a view of the leaden stream losing itself in the gloom. About a thousand yards before the atmosphere of the canyon changed, just at the point where the granite bluffs ended on his left-hand side, a cloud of white steam billowed along what he took to be a tributary of the main creek they were following.

The river Plegethon, the burning river, thought Alexander, tributary of the Styx they were following into the shade. The Styx was unable to be crossed except at one control point. They had tried up-stream first to find a crossing Pannie had heard of aeons ago. If it had existed then it no longer was where he thought it to be. They had no choice but to cross where they were supposed to, via the Charon Checkpoint.

Well in front of the River Plegethon, which literally boiled its way into the mother-stream contributing its steaming heat to the atmosphere far ahead, Alexander spotted what Pannie had told him to watch for in the L2 meld. A wide, dark, well beaten, path leading from a dim grove of black poplars which lost itself among fantastical rocky outcrops in which black fingers of leafless aspens, shook uncannily in the windless air.

As his eyes became used to the changed perspective he saw the path was moving. Closer observation showed it was thronged with a procession of hundreds of people. This constant stream brushing past the trees made them sway in the airlessness. More amazingly, as he saw further into the middle-distance, the stream of people became a veritable lake milling around a dilapidated wooden building and spilling right up to the left bank of the Styx.

'Okay pardner, this is where I go - see ya on the other side - maybe?'

Pannie grinned and taking Alexander by the shoulder with his hairy left paw, pumped his hand with his right.

'Good luck Boychick, it won't be easy. Remember what I said, if'n yer hears barking when yer gets across, stick ter the main trail and whatever yer do show no emotion of any kind - Here's lookin at yer kid.'

With that he hopped behind an outcrop and disappeared from view.

Mindful of the strategy they had worked out on L2 Alexander worked his way round to the eastern side of the dark grove of poplars. He was aided by the gathering gloom that shadowed his approach. He felt silly, trying to move as if he were invisible. Pannie's instructions however, were quite clear. He was to get as close to the throng of people as possible without being seen, there to wait for Hermes. While the dangers on this side of the Styx were not life-threatening, the discovery of a live being passing without permission from the Hadean

authorities would be disastrous for his mission. Of that Lucina had been adamant. This was an essential point of his training with Thea. He had to make his own way into the presence of Hades and Persephone.

Direct help by the Pantheon in Hades' own territory would break the covenant between Zeus and Hades. His task was to act as his own man and use what help was available locally. This was easier said than done. When he had tried to be his own man in recent times - with Marina, Barboncito and then Pannie - he had made little impression. Now he was waiting for Hermes - hardly a case of self-reliance. Still he had got so far, without so far losing his senses and had no bright ideas of his own about how to cross the river. He found his way as instructed, to the interior of the dark wood, and in the dim light, accompanied by a creeping coldness, he lay in a ditch fragrant with pine-needles, beside the road, watching the endless movement of people.

They were of all races and nationalities. The vast majority was elderly, some quite ancient. The most striking feature of the wayfarers was that despite their age and probable infirmities they all walked easily unaided by sticks, wheel-chairs or other paraphernalia associated with this age-group. There were a substantial number of young men, who laughed and joked, pushing each other about, and being scolded by their elders. Many were in military uniform of different kinds. There were a good number of young women with babes in arms and a surprising number of children alone carrying or leading younger children. While he had no real reason to be amazed, he knew people were dying in their thousands all over the world by the minute. To see a snapshot in time of a selection passing along the road towards Charon's Crossing on their way to the Underworld was nonetheless a shock to the senses.

The thousands who passed on at the same moment all over the world went unremarked, except by their own relatives, unknown and invisible to everyone else apart from the demise of an occasional celebrity. At Charon's Crossing they all converged, unseen by any living eye.

From this perspective Alexander observed first hand how the exponentially increasing throngs of Hades posed an ultimate threat which the Pantheon could hardly ignore. Charon Crossing clearly acted as a census checkpoint so Hadean bureaucracy knew not only exactly how many exhausted souls were in their hegemony at any time, but also of what each was capable.

Zeus on the other hand had no way of knowing the numbers of births moment by moment, the potential of each new person nor the moment of their deaths. Only the Fates knew this and a computer trawl of their library was far too tedious a task, even if it was possible. They had enough on keeping up themselves. Life by comparison with death was too dynamic to lend itself to such regimentation. Furthermore, thought Alexander as he waited in his ditch, if Gaia was to fail because Zeus' challenge failed, people would die from flood, starvation, war and every other kind of mayhem in the arsenal of torments specially available to his species and thus play right into Hadean hands.

An increased sense of his mission came home to him more forcefully moment by moment as he watched the host of travellers heading for the crossing. Every fibre of his being told him he was incapable of seeing his task through. He had no resources of his own to match the might of Hades. The Pantheon in this place was powerless to help him their powers didn't even reach into these realms.

Pannie was somewhere about, but up to who knows what? It occurred to him fleetingly that it was odd that he was having such a difficult time of it getting across the river, while Pannie seemed to have other plans for himself. The comic demi-god was almost a complete enigma to him, he supposed that over the aeons, Pannie had laid down enough of his own entries and escape routes to find his way around anywhere.

The 'sphere was however empty of activity. While there was no communication between the realms there were beings in this realm, confirmed by the net round his shoulders, that were able to communicate with him.

They were not tuned into his existence since he had made no attempt to connect. Thea had almost incinerated



his mind when, during training he suggested using the localised 'sphere to contact the likes of Hermes or Persephone or any others who had the ability to cross the sealed time-loop which separated the domains. She retorted that if he was to be convincing in this place he had to behave as a living mortal not as a half-baked apology for a god, whatever his antecedents. If Hades or any of his acolytes in the underworld got a whiff of his Olympian connections that would be the end of his mission. His chances of getting out of the underworld, slim as they already were, depended on nobody knowing he was there as Zeus' envoy.

Thea kept from him Zeus' view that he was too feeble by half to do this work and was all for Ares and Athena to tool-up the whole of Olympia with the latest weaponry, and do the job properly. As it was he and Athena were secretly getting the equipment together and talking to their generals. The only thing which prevented Zeus from pulling Alexander off the job and going at it hammer and tongs with Hades, was Hera's sensible reminder to Zeus that only genuine striving by mortals would have the right affect on Yhawhe. So he agreed to see what Hera and her people could pull-off before he made his own preferred moves with Ares and Athena.

Pannie had been right, thought Alexander, I should have waited at the gate of the Sipapu for a better understanding of how to handle this place. It's so out of my ken that the maps implanted by Thea and Mnemosyne are no more than one-dimensional representations of what was turning out to be an unearthly experience for which he was not mentally prepared and for which his physical powers and knowledge of useful survival strategies were wholly inadequate.

This new thought struck him the hardest. Until now he had felt the whole adventure was in some way out of his hands, that the Firm was in ultimate control - but this was a place where its all-seeing eye did not reach.

He felt a strong surge of emotion for Marina who seemed so far away as if it were she in the land of the dead and he on the right side of life. There was no warmth or softness to be had in this land and...if he never got out...the thought was unbearable. He was alone, more alone than it was possible to be. The excruciating heart-rending loneliness of a complete body and soul in the world of shades and half-beings, of arrested development where everything that was going to be, had already happened. Where no new thing was possible, where there was no future. A constant reliving, going over and over what was done - no wonder, he thought, the place was gloomy. Only the previous doings of the new arrivals added anything to the entirety of what was already here. There was some leaven in that knowledge except the sum-total of what was coming in despite the numbers, added only a little to the sum-total of what was already known. The idea of Hadean authority being allowed to break the strict bounds of the Underworld and emerge into the light of the quick, was unthinkable. It might save Gaia but at what a price. The end of all creativity.

He really was on his own, the only life force present in the vastness of this parallel and growing world. There was no other living soul here to assist him. He would have to do his work alone, any help he got might be a bonus but equally he had been warned by Thea that help might well be disguised as an attempt to use his life-force as a precious commodity in this futureless world. He had to rely on his own resources such as they were, to not only get to Hades on his own account but to get both of them out and back to Lucina. Fortunately the mind-melds with Lucina, Thea and Mnemosyne gave him some understanding of Hades.

This they had from Persephone on her excursions to Olympus, and only partially from Heracles and Hermes who rarely got as far as the central square at Erebus. A lot of the information was aeons out of date. Persephone was renowned for her loyalty to Hades despite the fact she refused to have his children and she was always tight-lipped. Hera suspected her of deliberate misinformation in the interests of keeping anyone from getting very far if they managed to penetrate the Underworld alive.

Hera badgered Demeter unmercifully to find out what Persephone said to her about her visits to the living world and had decided this was a subject mother and daughter rarely if ever discussed. Demeter was too cowardly to risk losing her dearest girl again to attempt the third-degree on her - however nasty Hera might

get. In any event Gaia had told Zeus to forbid such unfair extortion.

A sound in the trees behind his position by the road made him attend to more pressing realities. Turning his back on the passing hordes Alexander moved into a particularly dark part of the wood. As he moved, for the first time he was aware of his hands in the darkness. In contrast to the pallor of the limbs of the people on the path, the healthy glow of his body shone brightly with a luminosity that easily marked him out from the lifeless forms on the road. He quickly rubbed soil on his hands which had some effect, but not nearly enough. His face similarly shone in the grey light and he rubbed dirt into his cheeks and forehead and pulled his hat down over his eyes. He thought he heard a sound nearby as of something moving. The uneasy fear he had felt as he entered this place from the brightness of the canyon grew, at the sound into terror. The realisation of where he was had been heightened by the spectral forms flowing down the road. This was no flight along the 'sphere with Hep behind him ready to rescue him from a dreamlike state. This was reality substantiated by the feel of the bark of the tree against which he leaned.

He crouched to make himself as small as possible, and strained every nerve to locate the sound. Whatever it was, it was now silent. Perhaps something was watching him as he was watching for it. Like a space-traveller in an alien world, nothing was like anything at home and any similarities may be dangerous false-clues. Added to which, the sight of the dead along the road had made a kind of sense intellectually, but now he had reached the end of the time-lag before his senses cried out against the sight. His own shining life-force, brought home the nature of the place quite differently from the way it seemed in a mind-meld with Lucina and Thea or in a bed-time story from Nemmi.

Again the difference between theory and practice, rhetoric and reality struck him into a mindless heap. He fully expected to be caught by some demon-monster of this terrible place and simply devoured. His fear was physical and engulfed him of its own, he could smell his fear through his clothes and worried that the thing out there could smell it too.

He drew himself in tightly and girded himself for whatever might appear out of the shadows. It was no wonder the fears of the ancients carried through into the present sub-consciousness of people to maintain the belief in the horrors of hell. While unable to contain his physical dread he fought with his mind to get his thoughts in some order to be able to act when the time came. How he wished he had been less hasty with Pannie at the entrance!

As a basis, he had the visions of Hades given by Lucina and the others. None of them had actually been here and much of what was known was myth anyway. Maybe what he feared were merely figures from his imagination, a pattern developing inside his own mind to give him pictures he could handle. The whole of Hades may merely be built from his imagination. What if there was no reality? What if he used his mind to confront his real fears as irrational? Would they turn out to be merely spectres without substance? Having nothing but his imagining and the maps from the Named together with a pastiche of the nature of hell from books films and religious instruction at school, his conception of Hadean territory could only be provided through the notions existing within him. Perhaps that was why Pannie had disappeared, he had no place here.

This was helpful thinking. While it did not distract him from the physical horror of the 'reality' in the wood it gave him something to grab hold of. If the sensation of place was real, maybe its dread population was more drawn from the imagination.

Suspended thus between an unknown reality and a fertile fantasy nightmare, Alexander peered into the dimness between the trees, waiting. Long seconds ticked by, turning to even longer minutes. Every shade hid a dreadful unknown. Every whisper of leaves and dank, drip of dew from fronds of rustling ferns, rose up demons of hell on every side.

'Don't move a muscle,' he voiced to himself. 'The important thing for your mission is not to be discovered. 'Is

that not so?'

It was the interrogative that froze his bones. He had thought nothing himself. The noise in his head was external - someone had melded with him. Still crouching, he pulled his hat down as far as possible to hide his face and still be able to see, he slowly and with utter trepidation crept round the thick trunk of the tree against which he had been leaning. Something unknown, unseen behind him, was the worst thing he could imagine. Whatever appeared in front would be what it would be and he thought he could manage that. The idea of something behind him, unseen, made the hairs stand up on his neck.

'Why do you not engage? I was told you could.' The voice on L1 thrust itself into his mind like someone impatiently prodding with a finger.

'Who is that?' Alexander sent out a thought wave. The response conveyed the weariness and resignation of a public servant who had dealt with too many boring members of the public to have any interest in his work and was getting close to retirement.

'The gods help us! I am the messenger you were told to expect. Don't tell me..., ' the voice went on in its disinterested way, almost a monotone, '...you are frightened of the wood, and to be consistent with your fear you want me to be a horrific monster. I can do it if you want, or better still I can get one for you to fight if that's what you want. That used to be the way of it. There's not been much call for my services as guide for ages and ages. To call up a juicy monster or demon for you to vanquish with the greatest of hardship would liven things up. Wait a bit I'll get one for you. Do you want something in the dragon line or would a big, hairy, multi-headed monster be more to your taste? Don't go away. I'll be back with something suitably horrid.'

'Stop, don't go anywhere!' shouted Alexander aloud, looking around him frantically. 'Who are you? Where are you? Are you far away or nearby?'

'I'm right here brother,' said the voice on L1. 'And I'd prefer you to keep in touch on L1 if you please, noise travels far here and you have your mission to consider.'

A tap on the shoulder caused Alexander to swivel on his heel to stare into the eyes of a tall, athletic man who without warning pressed him to his sinewy bosom and rained kisses over his face.'

'Pthaa! you're all covered in dirt! The apparition rubbed the soil from Alexander's face rather more roughly than he liked.

'It's so boring here, It's really nice to have a live person to protect, especially a half-brother.'

'Hermes?'

'The same! I wondered how long it would take you to recognise me. Sorry about the bit about monsters. Couldn't resist it. So boring here. Of course you are right about this place. It is both real and imagined at the same time, full of tricks of the light and darkness, peopled with your own demons and unknown potentialities. But it's as real as a place of the past can be.'

He chuckled lightly to himself, 'I just appeared didn't I - like that. I'm not usually a jack-in-the box like Panni. It's just that I was here waiting for you and I was bored so I played a bit of a prank.'

Hermes released Alexander from the tightness of his grip which gave him the opportunity to regard him more clearly. He was tall, about six-three but slight, like a long-distance runner, sinewy and meagre. He had the appearance of someone who could run all day without fatigue. He wore a tight-fitting, silver, lycra-style costume with golden embroidered wing motifs.

In his hand he carried a round helmet, equipped with an opaque visor which could be pulled down to cover the eyes. His thin beaky face, was split into a broad grin and he held Alexander at arm's length in deep contemplation. He was such an utter contrast to the dread of the place that Alexander was unable to react, fear was still his dominant emotion.

'I expect you've noticed the helmet.'

Alexander's mind was slowly adjusting to this new invasion of his sanity. Hermes continued unabashed and was clearly taken with the visor element of the helmet he carried.

'It's only a prototype at present, a gift from your friend Hephaestus. What you do is to cover your eyes with the visor thing here which you just pull down, see, like this; then what happens is that...'

'Hermes! You are Hermes?' Alexander communicated credulously. 'You're not a figment of my imagination welled up from some deep sub-conscious of my mind?'

'What did you say?' Hermes turned his attention from the visor. 'Oh, I don't know about that! Since we are both in it, it's probable that neither of us is here really. But that's not the important thing. This is the important thing.'

He indicated the helmet. Alexander was slowly coming out of his state of terror and while he was aware that for some reason his half-brother through Zeus was preoccupied with the visor to the helmet, he was fully preoccupied with the thoughts of a little while ago.

'What do you mean by - we are neither of us here really? - I thought this was Hades - the Underworld.'

'So it is, but to get back to the...'

Alexander interrupted again. 'But you talk like it's an illusion!'

'Yes. So?'

'What does that mean?'

'There you go again,' Hermes complained. 'Here am I about to explain the only way you'll be able to cross the Styx without getting caught and being sent packing with a flea in your ear, and probably much worse to boot, and you behave just like all the other tourists I guide round here, few as they are; asking a lot of unanswerable questions. And you're a difficult one, most of them come with Hades' knowledge, even with his express wish. The last one was a young Navajo name of Barboncito, he, unlike some I could mention, was very attentive. He was specially invited by the Master. You on the other hand are here on Zeus' orders, and probably without Hades' knowledge, though he probably already has an inkling someone's illegally here. So you had better pay close attention to the visor I'm going to give you. Don't worry about them hearing us on L1 if we stay at this level we only transmit very locally. Unless...' he giggled, '...Hecate or Persephone are up in one of those trees...'

'What!' Alexander lifted his eyes in consternation.

'Only joking!'

'Please answer my question, and please don't play any more jokes, I promise to keep quiet afterwards.'

'Don't make promises you can't keep my little godling. All mortals or half-mortals ask me questions when I'm

showing them around. It's not an easy place to make sense of for sentient beings, it raises too many questions for their own good. It beats me why people find it necessary to come, when they'll get here soon enough for ever - still, that's not my business, I'm just the messenger. What was it you wanted to know? Articulate simply my lad this is a very complex place.'

'You said - It's possible I don't really exist any more than the past exists - You said it easily as if it was normal. Well it's not normal for me, if this is the past, how can we be in a place that no longer exists? There, that's put simply isn't it?'

'It may be a simple question I grant you, but there's no simple answer. Also I'll better be brief. If what usually happens down here applies in your case, and it may not, given who sent you and why, we don't have a great deal of time to waste chatting rather than getting on with things. What I say will make no real difference to your mission, but I suppose it will help you carry it out better if you can master the basics and make them work for you. Okay? You ready for this?'

Alexander nodded.

'It's a time thing and a now thing and a memory thing. There's a guest in Elysium over there,' he pointed to a blue haze to the far south-west of where they stood, just visible as a blue-silver light on the far horizon. 'He knows a lot about time and relativity and so on. Mind you this place still foxes him mainly because he can't add any new knowledge - has to apply all the old reasoning you see. But I'm getting off the point - the point is - to take the time-thing part of it: timelines exist endlessly, from Chronos onwards and if they have an end no one knows when it will be, or at least didn't until Zeus set the cat among the pigeons with this last will and 2012 and all that - Okay? Now then, people exist on a timeline at any point. That's the now-thing. So depending on who you are, that is to say when you are, or were, or will be, determines your place in time. Simple see? Now for mortals it's a fixed place on the line, you call it a 'life-time'.'

Hermes picked up a twig from the ground and drew a long line in the sandy ground.

'From here to say - here...,' he made a mark at right angles to the line at two places about an inch apart. '...Might be the life of a mortal. A fraction of the infinity of a timeline. Another mortal might be here, the distance between them might be a minute or ten thousand years; and there might be a few or tens of millions sharing the same or overlapping lifetimes. We gods, who can range up and down the timelines have no such thing as time, as it doesn't affect us, no 'life-times, see? Only being. Now when Uncle Zeus made his treaty with Uncle Hades after the battle of the Titans, mortal people were created soon after. For them Zeus arranged for some timelines to be made into a special skein, with connections so they can link up with the gods during their 'life-times'. Now, because people only live in the now, that's the only time they've got to connect with the gods. After their lives were over; their used up time went with them to Hades and Zeus made new connections to the gods for all the new lives. Similarly with the futures they had left-over, because not everyone lives as long as they could, you know, violent death, pestilence and all that kind of stuff, Zeus ignored their redundant futures as no one in the Pantheon had any use for the future, Olympus is mostly based on the now, Zeus only allows in small doses of future, it's too confusing to dwell too much on the unknown, so they kind of floated about. They were eventually gathered up by Yahweh after flapping about on the timelines like discarded old plastic bags for quite a bit. So you see, Hades has got the accumulated past and Yahweh picked up the previously discarded but now accumulated future. Now it turns out that Zeus, who is only concerned with present 'life-times', has an unforeseen problem with Gaia. His predicament is that consecutive 'life-times' are destroying her; and both Hades and Yahweh have their own different solutions for Her; neither of which include the now or the individual creativity of people, which has been compromised by their treatment of Gaia and their own lost faith in gods to manage things for them.

'So all those dead souls passing down the road there, are sorted out for their past and future value by Hades and Yahweh to be used against Zeus for the benefit of Gaia?'

'Exactly, except I don't think either Yahweh nor Hades really cares about Gaia or people and that's what Zeus thinks too. What they really want is the power to be in control of people. But what you see over there making for the checkpoint at Charon Crossing are not even souls. The idea of souls going back into oblivion or forward into a hereafter is a purely mortal conception. It kind of anthropomorphises a heaven and a hell as dwelling places for souls. Actually there's no such thing as either. Because there is no such thing as a soul.'

'So what am I seeing over there - marching?'

'I don't really know. I'm getting all my cues from you. Remember I'm only the messenger. For me there's nothing here but you.'

'You mean everything is going on inside my head.'

'Exactly!'

'Then where am I, where's my body?'

'Not my department brother.'

'You're only the messenger!'

'That's right.'

'But why does it all feel so real, why am I cold standing here, why does it seem dark, why can I see people marching?'

'Like I said - too many unanswerable questions. In my opinion, and I say this only so that you understand, and don't go about the place saying Hermes knows the answers. I think you mortals need conceptual props to make sense of things that you can't grasp in the here and now. Because you can't think round the blind corners of the future and the past, you people them with images or ideas which you so grow to like that you actually give them lives like your own. It stops you going mad or becoming purely existentialist. What I find so depressing about you is the fact that most of the images of the past are so similar. So 'hellish', if you will excuse the pun, and those of the future so 'heavenly'. But since you can't handle the ideas without the framework you share in common I suppose it's got its uses. You might as well stick with your conception of the past of Hades as Hell because your mission is to bring him to Zeus so he can outwit Yahweh who Zeus sees as some kind of Johnny come-lately in the Chief God Business and would prefer to keep things in the old Firm if he can. He wants to maintain the strength of the present and put the future into some kind of better relationship with it so as not to leave it in the hands of this rarefied One God and his Son who is full of unfulfillable promises. Basically, you see, it's easier to land a being of known substance than a chimera. So my lad, you stick with your images because that's what you know, and they will deliver you what you want. Keep changing them and you'll never find what you seek or ever get out of here. There is treasure here, but it's like all treasure - hard to find.'

## Chapter 6

Zeus was edgy. Hera thought he might be displeased and was cautious. They had journeyed to a particularly favourite timeline to bask in a sun-dappled olive grove overlooking the bay at Psathi. They lay side by side on beds of fragrant herbs, she facing him, he on his broad back gazing heavenwards. It was the time after the battle of the Titans and before the advent of mortals. Normally in this place of unalloyed peace he would relax in the simple pre-existence of an un-peopled world. He particularly enjoyed the natural simplicity of Gaia's undemanding creation, and gloried in his victory and the divine reconciliation of the gods through which, he was made all powerful.

Hera saw the incipient frown. Felt the tension in the old, but vigorous body. She knew the signs and she worried about what he might do. She tentatively tried to engage him in a deep mind-meld.

'No wife, do not!'

She shrank inwardly at the force of his rebuff. She was afraid he might do something dramatic for the fun of making things happen. She had desperately disguised her misgivings about his plan though the maintenance of cordiality. Neither was it all pretence. Her admiration for the scope of his work was genuine. But now they were in uncharted territory and she was alarmed. She had no idea how much interference in the lives of mortals would be acceptable. A high meld might convinced him she had nothing to hide. It was risky, since if he called her bluff, he may well think she was taking too much on her own shoulders and by implication was plotting yet another challenge to his supremacy. Risky or not, she needed to deflect him from his apparent and growing belief that Alexander was making heavy weather of his mission and that he would inevitably have to intervene.

Zeus got up hurriedly, and paced on the shaded ground between the gnarled, squat olive trees. Suddenly as if he had had a great thought he turned to face Hera.

'Wife! Where's Persephone these latter days, is she up here or down there? The world's got so big and complicated with all these time-zones I can't keep up with her.'

'You know perfectly well that those old ideas don't work any more my Lord, she comes and goes more or less as she pleases nowadays and...'

'Well tell her, if she pleases, that I, Zeus want her here with me for a little while. We have things to discuss.'

'I will send Hermes to her my Lord, but it might take a while. Anyway you know how you upset Demeter when you intrude in her affairs.' There he goes, thought Hera, take great care my girl.

'Why does everyone argue with me nowadays! Nobody does what I say any more! Can't you just do it without a song and dance? Or do I have to do everything round here myself!'

He turned his rage upon her so that the ground shook and the wind whistled in the trees turning the leaves to shivering silver. Fortunately Hera knew her husband well enough to know when to confront his innate unreasonableness and when to be prudent. This needed careful handling. He was clearly nervous. She knew he would never admit it and she needed to keep him under control.

A summons for Persephone meant he was going to dabble. Hera needed Persephone to help lead Alexander out of Hades, in his own time and at a pace he was able to handle. Zeus was likely to over-play his hand and get his own notions over to Hades and unintentionally compromise Alexander, making his task even more difficult and more than likely make things messier than they already were.

'Sire, all is in hand. Your son is in Hades and will do your will there. You are just a little impatient for action my Lord, you want things to happen now, when with a little patience all will be better done.'

'Don't humour me Hera, I won't have it! Not even from you. I'm very easy going but I will not be patronised - least of all by you! The boy is slow and weak, you know he is. The timeline lengthens. I still have to deal with Yahweh and I don't want Hades at work behind my back. Yahweh's going to take all my concentration: I don't have the energy to worry about that boy - it's alright for you, you don't have to make these executive decisions. It's a question of ultimate responsibility, Gaia can't wait - I must do what I said - I will...'

Hera gazed at him with soft, glistening eyes. She allowed the shoulder strap of her chiton slip a little and she spoke gently. No mortal could have resisted her and many gods would have given in. Her husband for all his protestations of business, actually had nothing better to do for the moment.

'My Lord, husband, you know me better than that. You want to know why nothing seems to be happening after your announcement should have turned everything upside down. Well believe me things are happening...'

'They are? Oh good! Tell me, wife of my loins, have I made a splash, are my ripples drifting outwards down the Chronosphere and is there resonance on the timelines? You know me. I am the impatient one, but I am not without subtlety, that is why I would not have you meld with me. I will not test you in this my little cuckoo - a deal is a deal, I have done my part. (she did not feel it was timely to remind him that his announcement was not part of any deal he had made with her and that the problems she faced were as a consequence) Gaia and I have agreed and she will not be harmed more! Tell me what doings are afoot.'

'See for yourself O Master, follow the timeline with me and enter the place called Markham where your English woman is.'

'No, no wife. No more recriminations in that direction if you please! I've given all that up for good. Don't start all that up again. It was necessary, you agreed it was. Look, you may travel the globe to your heart's content but I am weary. The doings of mortals now only interest me in the broad. I have not the energy for the games of before when I held sway over all their doings and Hades was small fry and Yhawhe wasn't even a figment of the imagination. In any case Markham is in that wet, damp land where his mother comes from is it not? I do not wish to go there, I never much liked the place. So tell me and I will lie back and listen for the voice of my beloved Gaia who will whisper in my ear and tell me how she feels today.'

'She will give you better cheer my Lord if the work of my chosen mortals continues to go as it does. They know this point on the timelines may be their last and they work to heal our Mother.'

'Do they do it well, my love? Do they have many enemies among those who do not see and who are allied to Hades and Yahweh?'

'Their enemies awake and have allies in many places.'

'Do your chosen ones know about us and our great plan?'

'Not yet and they are told nothing as you willed. But they are not stupid or we would not love them. Hephaestus helps them and Prometheus and Athena keep watch for their enemies. Pan and Themis watch over your son.'

'How does he do? My One Alone, my senses tell me he is no Heracles, no Ulysses. There is no fire in him, there's no sinew in these modern youths. What does Themis do to guide him, does he know his fate?'



'Shh! my Lord, trust in us. This is a modern world, here there is doubt and people have need of proofs for they no longer believe. There are too many choices in this world where everything is interconnected and outcomes are hard to discern. But let us listen to Gaia, what does she say?'

Hera drew her Lord into her bosom and together they listened to the wind rise through the trees. Bird-song littered the air, water rippled in an endless chain of sound sighing for a world without people. Nothing interfered with the harmony of the sphere and the great Zeus slept in the arms of his beloved listening to the heart-beat of their mother, far back on the timelines when all of Gaia's offspring nestled innocently in the vast breadth of her broad bosom.

Zeus slept like a baby. Hera summonsed nymphs in whose arms she left him coupled with the ineffable softness of the pre-existing Mother.

She moved to the timeline of Penny and Ric. Six times had the Earth passed round the sun since Lucina met Alexander at the foot of the lift. Though for Alexander in Hades, time was stilled.

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Penny too was troubled. She knew from Hep, Lucina and Thea that for the last six years Alexander was alive but inaccessible. They told her no more than that he was working undercover for the Firm and she was too busy to keep his prolonged absence as personal grief in the forefront of her mind. After all, children are supposed to grow up and leave home. The rest of the world thought him dead and that was an advantage to his mission, so there was nothing to be done but get on with her work.

His disappearance had been world news for a week. Teams of rescuers, assisted by Marina and her resources scoured the side canyons around Manny's hogan and the trail hit a dead end at Matkatamiba. The newspapers were full of maps and theories about how the two young men might have come to grief, probably as a result of Alexander's lack of experience in the canyons with its highly treacherous freak winds and sudden land slips. They had been travelling in obscure reaches of the Grand Canyon known mostly to only a few Navajo. They had travelled areas not well tracked, dangerous with ravines and subject to flash floods. Unwary travellers disappeared all the time in the mountain upside-down, and although most were eventually traced alive or dead, a few were never seen again. It was conjectured that the knowledgeable Navajo had come to grief rescuing his companion.

Life went on as usual. Marina, in particular, found it hard to believe Barboncito and Alexander had fallen into a ravine. Although this was the official conclusion, scuffed tracks at the far end of the cave where Matkatamiba ended at a barren wall of limestone put doubt in her mind about the ultimate fate of both young men. Manny's own lack of help and concern confirmed her own thoughts that if Alexander was a novice in the ways of the canyon, Barboncito and Manuelito were experts.

Manny was taciturn in the company of the rescue teams but with Marina this became an indifference which spoke volumes. This she confided in Penny who could do no more than nod her agreement.

Marina's suspicions were aroused. She hated mysteries. She also and unexpectedly, missed Alexander. She put down her unbidden sense of loss to the mysteriousness of the disappearance. Had she allowed herself to analyse her emotions she would have known the reason was more heartfelt than intellectual. However the situation plus Penny's reaction, set Marina's investigative nose into Manuelito Kanuho's past and that of all senior JNO personnel including Penny, Lucina, Thea and the dreadful Ljeschi.

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As for Penny she was distracted from Alexander's absence by her work and the proximity of Ric. The work

itself was totally absorbing leaving little time for either of them to express a developing but unspoken love, which hung between them like a fragrance in the air, sensed but unacknowledged.

Hep was a frequent visitor, working on refinements to both HIGO and GAIANET. For most of the last six years, including during the search for Alec and Barboncito, Penny and Ric remained closeted at Markham. The intensity of the work and their own burgeoning relationship made short work of the passage of time. To maintain their advantage in the complex world of corporate and political activity, they needed to act invisibly through their networks of contacts using HIGO and GAIANET to inform the creation of increasingly accurate thrusts at the workings of the human world, to change the ideas, attitudes and actions of key world players.

Gradually they arranged their disappearance from the business world with as little comment as possible. They correctly calculated that like all news, the doings of JNO had ephemeral value. Marina ensured that even the nosiest journalist was deflected from investigating Markham and they worked on in secret. As an added precaution, and as part of the overall plan, JNO the trading company, was gradually liquidated. Its assets sold off or raided by a multiplicity of companies owned or influenced by people like Jose Condamine or Chieko Terakoa. Deals were activated by Advisory Group members or their colleagues networking in such organisations as Johannesburg Airlines or Haifa Real Estate.

During the time JNO was being quietly and unheedingly absorbed, GRADE grew and grew, invisibly fed by the profits of the JNO businesses ploughed back by the Advisory Group.

GRADE was Largely Penny's work, while HIGO and GAIANET were Ric's. Acting together a gradual transformation was occurring to world trade with some consequences foreseen and others not. At the same time, the relentless march of technology had caught up with the early GAIANET magic and almost everyone could afford a mobile phone which linked anyone at rest or on the go, the latest models being linked to the internet, with satellite communication for all, on its way in the near future.

As the poorer third-world grew a little richer, thanks to GRADE, this included more and more people. Personal isolation and the sense of helplessness and remoteness was gradually being changed and was bit by bit, changing the face of human relationships. The time was coming when everyone would be able to communicate with everyone else simply by saying hello in cyberspace. HIGO however was not available to anyone except Ric, Penny and Hep and the Advisory Group. As information about everything became more and more available, the question of how to know what to access, to evaluate its value and then to decide what to do with it, if anything; was overwhelming. An even bigger unanswered question was how to exercise control over events fuelled by the availability of ever greater information.

Simply knowing something is only part of the story; how to interpret the information and know that it is properly understood and in what context it may or may not be significant; is another. To corner a market in particular information blocks, was to control the received truth. If information confers power, knowledge of its veracity and control of its style, type and methods of accessibility conferred ultimate authority. HIGO in Ric and Hep's Hands gave them the ability to take as much information as was available at any point in time and interpret it against, or into, commercial, social or financial trends. While everyone else on the internet was interested mainly in their own bit of business, Ric used HIGO to put it all together and was able to interpret the global effect. Penny, by shifting judicious sums, sometimes large, though often surprisingly small, through GRADE agents and enterprises; was able to play ju-jitsu with big corporations, their middle men and raw-materials producers. She was able to effect their use of labour, their ability to exploit or develop people and resources.

The way that Jose Condamine, had prevented an increase in the plunder of the forest in Brazil for large-scale export of beef, was now history. The biggest hamburger chains were forced into the more expensive home-reared beef or soya and bacterially produced substitutes - hamburgers were never the same again. The jungles of the rainforest were re-planted and Jose Condamine, earned the Nobel Peace Prize for his work

reinstating the Parakanan Tribes in the Tukurui region. GRADE stepped in with alternative projects and local assistance for development often routed through non-government agencies sometimes through partnerships with agencies of government and sometimes directly, through JNO's banking interests.

In six years, Brazil from being a nation dominated by foreign corporations for most of its agricultural output, was now finding it more profitable for its citizens to grow food for local and regional markets. Large owners of landholdings had been forced to sell to land-hungry peasants as their products became less profitable in the West. These same peasants were well on their way to becoming prosperous owner occupiers, a powerful yeomanry dedicated to local development. Similar developments were taking place in other South American states. Columbia had virtually ceased to grow cocaine except for the medical market as other crops became as profitable. The story in Africa and the Pacific was the same. The Third World was rapidly catching up with the first.

As Jose Condamine told Lyle Etchart at a World Bank meeting - there was going to be hell to pay before it was all over. The Advisory Group was well aware their behaviour and the influence of Markham would put untold stress on the developed world to adapt to the loss of taken for granted resources, exploitable labour and compliant governments.

At a session on developments in Brazil, Condamine was chairing the UN's October conference on world trade called by the Big Eight. He took delight in telling the story of the HydroNorte crash, caused by his Agricom company buying up EletroNorte's debts through a consortium of Western banks, (much to their relief) and using the interest to fund the Parakanan's purchase of more and more of the land the company was forced to sell which it had cleared for cattle grazing. Eventually the hydro-electrical company's star dam produced less and less commercially viable electricity due to the incursion of the water hyacinth, and it was eventually closed. GRADE made a deal with the Brazilian Government on a dollar for dollar basis to tear down the dam, sell the salvaged machinery and metals and give the land back to the Parakanan on the basis they would use it for sustainable forest product cultivation. In four years the countryside showed signs of there never having been a dam. The overall cost to Agricom was \$100m. \$10m was received in interest on loans, \$15m was received by GRADE from the Brazilians and Agricom would cover its costs over fifteen years from the marketing infrastructure it set up for Parakanan produce - mainly hardwoods and tourist artefacts - sold in Brazil and all over the world.

At Markham, Penny managed GRADE to support strikes, fund schools, colleges and universities, organise co-operatives in the Third-World and develop cadres of young people educated and dedicated to the husbandry of the earth's resources. JNO's ex-subsidiaries secretly poured profits from oil, gas and shipping into GRADE's coffers. Ric watched the effects as they rippled out into the wider world.

A hiatus was developing, small at first, but developing like a storm begins with the coming together of a few clouds and gradually adding to the mass until at last unable to contain the coalescing forces - it turns into a hurricane. This was one of the foreseen consequences of JNO's work but for which they deliberately had no ready-made, straight-forward antidote. They were approaching the critical point and knew they would have to play it by ear and see how the alliances of the Advisory Group held up and what deals could be struck. The great risk was that they would either succeed in riding the storm or be destroyed by their own creation.

Hep was called in to strengthen the capacity of HIGO to ensure they kept ahead of the game. Lyle Etchart at the World Bank used their information to keep a lid on the cauldron for as long as possible. Karl Khan, the munitions expert used the buying power of his subsidiaries from JNO to purchase as much of the world's armaments and their makers, as possible to head off potential military confrontations as tensions mounted. He secretly decommissioned them deep in the Urals thanks to help from Piotre Ulybin of Moscow oil.

However, Markham's predictions of the medium-term future of world relations made Penny call an urgent meeting of the Advisory Group, this time in an obscure hotel in North London.

Marina, Penny and Ric left Markham for the meeting via the cellars, through a well maintained underground passageway, which exited on the main London Road via a hidden, wildly overgrown, culvert. Barely fifteen yards from the exit, round a sharp bend, was a bus shelter with a seat, into which someone coming through the tunnel from Markham could slip unnoticed from the road. Anyone already in the shelter would have thought they had come from round the corner in the normal way. Once in the shelter the dirty glass hid the occupants from the view of any casual observer. From here they could be picked up by one of Marina's staff on the open road, or simply slip into a pre-parked vehicle once the coast was clear. They returned via a different culvert which led to the same passage.

They left separately, mildly disguised and by various routes, and planned a rendezvous at the same safe-house Marina had used for Alexander, where they were to check and finalise the agenda. All contacts with anyone outside Markham happened away from the house and grounds to ensure a cold trail to their headquarters. Since Markham was to all intents 'invisible' - to keep it so, any trail left by these three, must lead anywhere but Markham. Penny parked her non-descript, mass produced Ford two streets away. Operation 'Denial' had to have total secrecy if the advisory group were not to be picked off one by one like ripe cherries and exposed or destroyed.

Since the hacker Barboncito, had gone missing with Alexander, there had been no more incidents. Marina however, kept her weather eye on Fourthworld and Manny Kanuho. Manny, so far had not put a foot wrong and his network had played a crucial role in the reinstatement of the Parakanan and other similar projects.

Penny entered the living room of the safe house from the garden entrance using her DNA code to open the bomb-proof, plate-glass door. Suburban Mock-Tudor may not be her preferred style, she thought, but as medium into which to disappear - it was perfect. She smiled at the thought of the neighbours being unaware of the world shattering planning and discussions held in the fake Jacobean panelling of the lounge of des-res 36, Hillpark, Stanmore.

She was met by the concierge and her husband, both employees trained at Markham by Marina, who as far as the neighbours were concerned, lived the lives of prosperous retired stockbrokers. She was glad of the break from Markham. Simply to drive in the cold crisp air was a joy after the close confinement she had experienced for so long. It had been months since any of them had ventured forth, although her work had sent her virtually round the globe many times.

Since the beginning of Operation Denial - she had been in a state of heightened awareness, living on adrenaline, excited, frightened, exhausted and totally immersed. In the little time available to consider anything other than the particular problem in front of her; she was amazed at the positive effects of their work in such a relatively short time.

She found it hard to believe it had been so easy to trip up the largest and best organised companies merely by making it impossible for the local populations to be blackmailed or coerced by other interests. The speed with which GRADE investment in education, health and administration had ushered in political and social change in otherwise dependent peoples and countries had astonished even she who was doing it. The effect on the rest of the world was only just being realised.

Their calculation was that the process of change only became visible to a critical mass of people after the event; so what people thought was still only potential had in fact passed the point of no return and had already happened. Many people merely responded to change and told themselves they were in the vanguard of events, the mass were simply buffeted - only a very few made trends happen.

Intellectually she was as highly stimulated as it was possible to be. Emotionally she was in a bad way and knew it. Alexander's disappearance was a constant background worry, her relationship with Ric was causing turmoil in parts of her psyche she preferred not to visit. The responsibility she was taking to reframe the

relationship of production to the ownership of the natural resources of the earth in the development of sustainability, caused her sleepless nights.

She knew what the coming storm contained, and was worried sick that JNO would not survive and was paradoxically as concerned that it would. In many ways it would be easier to fail. The world would go on and she would be relieved of her burden. What gave her the right to interfere? Without Hep and his presence maintaining her link to Lucina, she would easily be able to stop what she was doing even if it meant throwing away the work of many years. But their assumption of the rightness of what she did brooked no slackening of effort, especially now. Even Hep wore a frown more often than not. Lucina was as tight as bow-string and on the rare occasions she saw her, she found it even more impossible to gaze directly into her eye.

There was no real choice but to go on into the unknown in an increasing internal panic. Internally she was close to emotional flight. She told herself there was nothing wrong that a rest would not cure. But rest right now was the last thing she could afford. Her emotional life was getting out of control and her late forties were not the time to be acting like a forlorn schoolgirl, especially now. She felt things with Ric were building up like flood waters filling a dam that was already weak from lack of maintenance and wondered if it would ultimately hold. The cruel irony she visited on Ric was that she falsely blamed him for this major assault on her defences.

Apart from Alexis no man had got through to her secret self. That part of her which true lovers give freely she had already given to Alexis and he had taken it with him. (Zeus never really realised the affect he had on the mortal women with whom he coupled - he considered them honoured and paid scant attention to the effect his proximity cost them emotionally. If he considered it at all, he supposed their super-infatuation must be functional as it enabled them to provide the exceptional support his offspring would inevitably need. In any case his jealousy would brook no rivals after him.) Alexis seemed to have wrapped all her emotional feelings into a ball, pocketed them and taken them away with him. She had hoped her son would provide a kind of substitute but somehow 'They' had kept him at arm's-length and Thea and Nemmi had had most of him.

Her non-work contacts with Ric were mostly in those few off-duty moments when they found themselves in the staff recreation lounge after work, or during periods of intensive activity when he and Hep brought HIGO and GRADE together to inform her next moves. In the little time she and Ric spent alone, she saw he had a pretty clear insight into the truth of her emotional condition. It made her think about spending more time alone with him as a human being rather than as a hard working colleague. These thoughts were a salve to her hardened heart while simultaneously making her feel she might weaken her grip on the workload. At the point when Alexis disappeared she had rejected all thoughts of other men from her feelings. She had done it then and so she could do it again. She was therefore surprised at the persistence of Ric's presence in her mind. After all, she was no youngster out for a fling. Thoughts of him intruded where no such thoughts had been these many years. Several times she had been on the threshold of declaring herself to him and had drawn back while chastising herself for stupid adolescent lapses. Alexander's disappearance weakened her further and she felt her mental dam shudder without quite shattering. A vague sense of loss swept over her and left her feeling totally alone.

Ric's sympathy communicated by looks and light touches, sped straight to the core of her emotions and she responded without knowing that she allowed him glimpses of her vulnerability. All the time she thought she was hardening herself against him, she revealed her condition to him more and more. Her fractured defences were already past repair. Even as she thrust all ideas of him from her, she desired him, wanted to lose herself in him and let the world go to hell.

Sensing this, Ric allowed her to succumb enough to assuage the pain of the contradiction and maintain the workload. She would be eternally grateful to him for his comprehension. Like many important relationship shifts, it had occurred in the workaday experience and only later did its full significance come home to her. For now, the work only became more intense. Only two days ago Ric had entered her department excited as

she had ever seen him.

'Penny! Penny! Listen to this!' He waved an email print-out at her. 'It's from Ulybin - he's got the Tempests! That'll put the cat among the pigeons. See we can do it! Penny - we can do it!' He yelled out triumphantly. 'Manyathi did her bit well, whatta girl!'

Ex-pilots of the Johannesburg Airline, had successfully infiltrated the military establishment which delivered the new Tempest fighter bombers and had taken twenty of them on an unauthorised private journey to an unknown destination where Piotre Ulybin's people had dealt with them. This was the tenth disappearance of high-grade military equipment in a year and was by far the biggest. The news did not reach the world's press simply because the governments of the producing countries nor those of the bereft recipients' wanted it known that a third party was stealing their materiel. So far the secrecy of each country concealed the reality from each other, this could not last, hysteria was growing in a lot of ministries of defence and procurement around the world as they were beginning to suspect each other.

'Thank god for that!' was all the response she was able to manage. Coming close to where she was working at her computer screen he placed a hand on her shoulder.

'I'm sorry,' she said simply. 'I had to suspend Christopher Boltkin today, it wasn't that he did anything positive to endanger security but Marina had suspicions that overwork was getting to his sense of proportion and he was becoming a risk. She'll monitor him round the clock until he can be reinstated - or...'

She tailed off and turned her swivel chair to face him. They both knew that any breach of security at Markham could not be allowed and that Marina would do whatever was ultimately necessary to ensure the reliability of the workforce.

'The strain is getting to all of us,' he said quietly, keeping his hand on her shoulder longer than a mere pat of concern required, but not so long as to signal too great an intimacy.

'I'm tired and upset, but of course I'm elated by your news. Look, I need a break from this damn screen - it's late, I'll just log-off and meet you for a G and T in the library in five minutes.'

He left with a friendly squeeze of her shoulder.

She entered the old, comfortable library, the oaken walls with their aged patina and well stacked shelves glowed warm with the gentle radiance of the log fire in its large dog- grate. Ric was at the antique Japan cabinet where the spirits were stocked. He brought her drink to her on the deep sofa, her head back, eyes closed. She sensed his presence behind her and reached up for the glass. When she took it he chinked his own against it in recognition of the success of the Tempest operation. She expected him to move round the sofa and take up his usual position on the armchair facing her. When he did not, she wanted to lift her face to him but was prevented by the tears that had welled into her eyes under closed lids.

Sheer fatigue and relief at the success of an operation which had taken weeks to mastermind, coupled with the warmth of the fire, the strong gin and the presence of a man she should love - was too much for even her. This was only one successful operation - there would need to be many more, some of which would inevitably go wrong and jeopardise the others. A sign of her deep trouble invisibly escaped and slipped the fortress of her mind. She needed all her strength of will to hold back further tears. She hoped he was unaware of the rogue droplets. She stood and walked over to the window to disguise her momentary lapse.

'HIGO's doing well, Ric. Well done to you and Hep.' She attempted airiness. 'Send a message to Manyathi in Jo'burg. I think we're at a watershed in the armaments situation. What's HIGO's estimate of the international reaction?'

While she spoke she was aware of a tension between them, as if she were one electrical pole and he the other and the potential between them was building. She tensed unconsciously waiting for the inevitable arc of energy to unite them. She sensed him come behind to stand close without daring to touch her. They both swore later that a crack of electrical power passed between them for a split second and they made perfect contact. He said simply,

'HIGO is a wonder of Heps'. Without it we wouldn't have a chance.' He paused, aware there was another more important but unspoken, conversation taking place between them.

'It's time, Ric said. 'Time to make final decisions which will take us beyond anything we know.'

To himself he said it was not time to speak of what he felt.

They stood, very close but not touching. She felt his restraint and mentally thanked him for it, knowing she was unable to withstand more. He deliberately broke the spell once he sensed something in her resolve had broken for ever and she knew he knew it. It made her more vulnerable to him and he recognised he would have to take special care of her exposure and was glad for her as well as overjoyed for himself at her trust. He knew how near moral collapse she was and that she needed all her resolve and strength. There was no room for other distractions. He knew he loved her and had always done. He also recognised she had a mission which was so vital there was no place for human feelings to get in the way. At the same time he knew she was not made of the same indestructible stuff as Lucina and Thea. His love would need to remain unspoken if Penny was to succeed. The action they undertook demanded its own emotional toll. No one went where they trod without feelings of responsibility which could not be held alone.

She had to hold the moral certitude of what they were doing with all the powers at her disposal. He knew she got some of her strength from Lucina and Thea in a way he did not know. His own came from her and he was certain that to maintain his own efforts he would have to support her as the fountainhead. Although he believed utterly in what they did; he knew he did not have the internal certainty of Penny to believe as thoroughly in the inevitability of what they had to do. He was neither a tyrant hungry for power nor a fanatic with an irrational certainty in an external truth. An ordinary man of doubt, he could never have gone as far as they had already come. Although Penny's drive came from a conviction which he felt was right, like all such convictions he was prepared to mistrust it.

The source that emanated from Lucina and was present in Hep seemed however, too luminous and right for him to be churlishly mistrustful. He talked of it with Marina who trusted nothing for longer than five minutes at a time. He was partly the unwitting cause of her investigations. He was quite aware of Marina's total fearlessness and moral neutrality. And he also saw her as supremely efficient.

When Marina entered the drawing room of the safe-house about an hour later than Penny, soon to be followed by Ric, they found Penny fast asleep in the armchair by the coal-effect fire. The concierge had gently placed a cushion behind her head - they spoke softly so as not to wake her.

'Thea said she will take her to Psathi after the Advisory Group meeting,' whispered Marina, 'she needs a rest. I can't allow her to continue like she has, it's too dangerous for her. I think she can go on longer but there's no point if it leads to an eventual collapse. You'll have to take over or hold up operations for a while.'

Ric stood for a long time seeing Penny in repose. Even thus she seemed unrelaxed and tired. He thought she should go with Thea to Psathi immediately. He and Hep would cope with the AG with Marina's assistance. But he knew she would not go now. Perhaps if she could finally get over Alexander she would feel things were more able to be handled. He could only hope.

## Chapter 7

If the manager of the surprisingly large and elegant Olympia Hotel, tucked away among the larger 'thirties' villas, off the North Circular in North Hendon, was surprised to be chosen as a venue for a three-day international conference of 'shoe manufacturers' he did not show it. New reception staff booked-in some highly recognisable members of the Advisory Group, as the manager and all of his usual staff enjoyed an unexpected holiday. Marina's people had recently been taken on as temporary staff to service the conference with all its needs for food, 'phone calls, faxes and email communications. Only people in Marina's pay would get near any of the guests. The hotel was discretely located and the Thatcher Suite, was ideal for small private conferences.

As usual, Penny and Ric were on hand to greet the guests for drinks at the first evening session, before the admirable dinner. The guests were cut off from the rest of the world, and closely guarded by Marina's staff. No one entered or left without her knowledge.

The guests filtered in from their rooms, clearly pleased to see each other. There was much hugging, kissing and hand clasping. It was a quite different atmosphere from the early meeting which set up 'Operation Denial'. Although members of the group met each other from time to time at functions and gossip-worthy sporting and artistic events; only at this gathering were they able to lower their guard and be themselves without playing a role. They were in constant touch with GAIANET and monitored by Ric and Hep but telecommunications, were a poor substitute for flesh and blood contact. Electronic contact would never be quite the real thing. Penny was revived in spirit by the presence of these hand-picked people. For the next two to three days she would have her energy recharged by people in tune with herself and Ric. The only missing person was Alexander, a thought she quickly put from her.

It was a unique gathering, dedicated to reframing commerce and industry to ensure mutual balance between the needs of people and a more easily maintained sustainability of the earth's resources - but with the financial muscle to make a difference. They were not merely urging corporations and governments to try and change things at some indefinable time in the future. They were activists in association who deployed great financial, social and technical strength. This was the phenomenon of the now dispersed but highly active JNO.

They knew the vast wealth they had 'inherited' from the break up of the Dodona's enterprises gave them an edge and their access to HIGO and the resources of GRADE, put them ahead of other interest groups. Between them and with Ric's information they influenced modifications and productive capacities in the biggest commercial conglomerates on earth. In six short years this group had become the unknown back-room of the planet.

The first phase of Operation Denial was complete. Their success, came largely from the element of surprise. While it was not possible to siphon billions of dollars of profits from oil, shipping, and money transactions without detection and re-deploy them without causing problems which would give them away; they had got away with a significant amount of re-deployment and were still in control - just. While some observers had always been suspicious of the Dodona empire, a few of the more assiduous were beginning to smell a conspiracy, not yet identified but unseen in the background.

Penny and Ric moved among their guests saying their hellos. Hep and Marina were in a sealed room recording the whole event for analysis. Marina was searching for any dissonance's which might betray total trust. Hep was after the overview to feed into HIGO.

At the oval conference-table in the centre of the room, each place was rigged with an videophone. These were encrypted and linked by JNO's private satellite to the internet and were connected to a large monitor visible to all. They were also coupled to HIGO and GAIANET. All the delegates could communicate instantaneously with each other and anyone, anywhere in the world. All information, incoming and outgoing, was



simultaneously interpreted by HIGO.

Clapping her hands for attention over the steady hubbub, Penny brought the group to order. When everyone was assembled for business she flashed the agenda on the screen. No paper ever exchanged hands, nothing was recorded except by HIGO. Marina insisted on this simple precaution.

As on all previous occasions, Ric as chairman opened the proceedings. The meetings of the AG were informal and allowed time for people to find their own ways into the meat of the discussions and decisions. Ric, pushed the electrical paraphernalia in front of him slightly to one side and remaining in his seat addressed the group informally.

'I suppose it sounds trite to say this, but it's a privilege to sit here with you at these meetings and particularly at this time. Our coming together becomes more and more important and the more crucial it becomes, the more difficult it is for each of you. So I want you to know that we are fully aware of the problems many of you have experienced merely getting away from your work; finding time in your busy calendars and putting up with the intricate security arrangements dreamed up by the indomitable Marina. At least I can assure you of the quality of the food and I hope you are comfortable. We think we have thought of most things to make this conference as easy and convenient as possible, but as you know, each time it gets that bit harder to ensure success. Should you need anything, any of us will be pleased to try and meet your requirements. That said, I have one piece of news I could not impart electronically as it has to be for your ears only. It is that Lucina Dodona has asked to spend a little time with you tomorrow morning - if that's okay with you of course?'

He waited to see the reaction to this announcement. They were all aware the Dodona's were central to their work as a group through the fortunes of the enterprises they, or through them, their principals manipulated. Apart from Penny and Matsuko Morii, none of the members had met either of the Dodona's. A visit from Lucina was a significant event not to be missed.

'Before anyone asks why she is coming, the answer is that none of us know any more than she has made a simple request to share a small amount of our time. I am as much on tenterhooks as yourselves. Until then I ask you not to speculate pointlessly. Not that that will stop you.'

There was polite laughter,

'But honestly we have no idea and can only wait. We have already been pointlessly speculating for twenty-four hours longer than you have and it's done us no good so far.'

Another polite laugh went round the table.

'Can I take it that there is no objection to her coming?' He searched the listening faces and was struck as always by the sense of satisfaction he felt at the energy and the poise of the members. These were important and influential people in their own worlds. The highest of high-flyers. Whenever they met outside the group they behaved as themselves and on their own terms. Here, by contrast, they were a team; their own needs and desires sublimated or linked to achieve joint goals.

He thought it a miracle of Penny's commitment that each one of them shared her unshakeable desire to bring harmony into the world as an objective over and above any of their personal ambitions or those of their firms or countries. They knew the dangers and costs of acting independently. Of taking complex initiatives often against the direct interests of their employers, colleagues or friends. Even though they did it for ideals beyond personal or corporate ambitions, if detected they each would be ruined. That they believed they should act together in this way; was a major connecting strand that kept them involved. None of them gained anything personally in terms of worldly power, influence or reward from their activities with JNO - but they changed things. Many of the original, now defunct advisory group, had believed their association with the Dodona

empire would be good for their own enterprises and or social standing and left when they realised they had to put more in more and more resources than they would ever take out, and expose themselves to ever greater risks. Of the several hundred candidates and early members screened by Marina; those assembled here were the best of them.

They could be trusted to seek out like-minded people and nurture them as supporters. Each member of the group represented at least a hundred other individuals on a first ring of a network, like ripples in a pond, each of the hundred were in touch with another hundred and so on to the outer limits; where it was harder to see the connections even though they existed. Not even the group knew how many they influenced, but it must have been tens of thousands, probably millions. The development of the information super-highway enabled their influence to reach further than ever possible before - millions were linked unknowingly to HIGO through this small selected gathering.

In response to Ric's question Dov Krajowa the grizzled old Sabra, asked ironically, a half-smile hovering on his strongly hewn face,

'I thought the Dodona's were a law unto themselves. Don't they go where they like?'

'True,' answered Penny. 'And it is as a mark of her respect that she first asks our permission. As you know our work now reaches a critical point. The Dodona's have long waited for this time and it is our belief Lucina Dodona wants to check where we have got to for herself.'

'What's the exact nature of your relationship with her Penny?' asked Doris Botham. 'I know you were Executive Chairman of JNO for many years and a partner, but since JNO, well - broke up, I've been meaning to ask you for a long time but it didn't seem important as long as GRADE was shelling out....but her coming here like this...well it begs certain questions about our relationship with the ...what shall I call it...the 'mother company' springs to mind.' Doris smiled her nicest smile.

At first glance she personified homespun Britain. A motherly figure, no more than five feet two, almost as round as she was tall, her little legs hardly reached the floor of the solid armchairs provided by the hotel for the additional comfort of their conference guests. Despite her fifty-five years her face had maintained a smooth roundness and her hair, expertly cut, framed large, intelligent, piercing, cobalt-blue eyes. She had never married, wedded to her work and her politics, she was however, against all appearance by no means the innocent figure she seemed. As Chief Secretary to the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Innovation in the UK Government. She also chaired Europe's standing committee on trade and industry. Her strategic intellect and fearsome homing instinct for the phoney and the spurious in human endeavour had killed off many who thought to benefit from the support of either governmental body. Her staff called her the smiling assassin. Many who accepted on face value her 'butter wouldn't melt in her mouth' demeanour, later found themselves totally undone without being at all aware, until too late, of the ruthlessness of her decisive genius.

Penny smiled back, 'dear Doris, I wish I really knew. When you meet her you will form your own judgement. To be honest I don't ask and never have. She, as you say, enables GRADE to keep 'shelling out' and that's the main thing.'

'I don't think there is any value in this conversation continuing any further,' Matsuko Morii trilled in her soft, clear voice. 'Madame Dodona will make it entirely clear why she comes. Penny's relationship is not an issue, as you will discover when you meet her. I can say that I have met Madame several times in recent years, and I say you do not have a relationship with her, she has one with you. There is no more to be said - wait and discuss this after her visit, if you still have need.'

This comment was met by a silence during which Doris continued to smile sweetly and which Ric believed meant that Matsuko's statement might or might not be the last to be made in relation to the forthcoming visit.

Not wanting any important threads left dangling he addressed the point and speaking to Matsuko said,

'Okay - Fine, an interesting experience to come. Thank you Matsuko.' He turned to Doris. 'Is that alright with you? I felt you might want to know more from Penny. Do you have any reservations about our relationship with JNO or any other of the principals?'

As if to clear her head, Doris coquettishly shook her hair and smoothed it back with her two hands. Her bell-like voice filled the room without being too loud. It was impossible to do anything but pay attention when she spoke.

'We all know we are at a watershed. What happens next will make all the difference to our success or failure. Look, on one level I don't have any problems with it either way. If we succeed then my dreams will be fulfilled (and while I don't know what that would do to me personally, it will certainly be a time for universal rejoicing). If we fail I will go on ploughing my furrow as I always have. Things will be slower, more damage will occur, I probably will lose more in the end than I will gain in terms of real success but I will have the satisfaction of having done my best according to my abilities. You can't ask for more than that. But on another level, I have to say what alarms me is the fact of the Dodona's being at the back of things. When all this began several years ago, I was too pre-occupied with getting things done and the thought of being able to manipulate events from the wings was, so to speak, too enticing. Like, getting the Euro linked to the Dollar and the Yen to make what is now essentially a world currency, took all my and other people's time and well...you know the effect of more or less taking out the money traders from the world scene. But without the Dodona fortune, it could not have been done. I now realise I don't know these people. I assume they share our aims or they wouldn't put such resources at our disposal. But what's in it for them? It's a question I ought to have put at the beginning, and I'm not sure why I didn't - why any of us didn't!' She turned her penetrating blue eyes on Penny and continued. 'And if you don't know Penny, who does?'

Penny felt a strong need to answer but knew she had nothing to say that would satisfy Doris. She sensed correctly the others were equally as interested in her response. She again faced the feeling that Lucina had another agenda as well as her own. Her basic honesty was driving her to answer Doris' reasonable question with her own inability to grasp their ultimate motives. Her more considered response was to utter some platitude about all of them sharing the same goals, but was afraid she would sound insincere. Doris had asked the question deliberately, and Penny was sure her reply was vital. Any hesitation would also be read by the group as an evasion, whatever she said afterwards. Before she was however, able to say anything, she was grateful to be rescued by Ric, who, without a glance in her direction, simply interposed,

'I think You'd better wait for Lucina Dodona, and put the question to her. I think it's a question none of us should speculate about, not even Penny.' He paused for a long two seconds and in view of the silence he continued by introducing the business agenda. Doris smiled ever so sweetly at him.

'The first item is my report from the GAIANET work since the last meeting. You should have been receiving coded information directly. We think that with the speed of change now developing, this method of disseminating information to you is outmoded and potentially insecure. We have therefore, devised a direct link to HIGO which you can only access with a special programme. This is written in a new form of computer language which you can voice or type into your PC's and which is coded differently for each of you so that HIGO will automatically know who is doing the accessing. Any unauthorised user will get nothing from HIGO and it will recognise rogue equipment and automatically destroy the memory of an unauthorised computer which tries to make contact. The personal code programme will be given to you while you are here and we require you to memorise your own. It's not very long. Any questions?' There were none.

Right, if you will be so good as to notice the screen, I will take you through the developments in the time since we last met. The first set of diagrams shows HIGO's interpretation of the overall effect of our collective work since we began.'

Ric threw onto the screen a series of overlapping graphs figures and patterns which lasted for about an hour.

The overall effect clearly showed the extent of the multiple crises of social and ecological change acting and reacting. The series on global warming alone, showed the actual effect on the polar ice-caps and rising sea-levels, coastal inundation, together with shifting weather patterns. These were linked to the human and financial costs of hurricanes, severe cold-snaps, excessive summer heat-waves, changes in desertification, insurance costs, employment changes, new dust-bowl areas from soil erosion, deforestation, shifts in the production patterns of oil and electricity, the effects of acid-rain - and so on. The next set of screens traced the changes of industrialisation on society and the ecology of the earth from the early nineteenth-century to the beginnings of the twenty-first and projected several alternative scenarios for the next hundred years. The conclusions of all this analysis were inescapable and simple. While production of raw-materials, foodstuffs, and economic growth used the marketplace as a natural regulator, there was simply not enough time for human ingenuity to come up with sufficient antidotes to the existing consequences of the ignorance and greed of previous and current generations before the conditions for human life on the planet as it was now lived; became simply untenable. The consequences of global warming alone included the dual catastrophe of a drying out of the American Mid-Western grain-belt together with an inundation of coastal agricultural lands amounting to a third of all global cropland. This linked to the current difficulty of feeding the rising world population, was only one of many socially explosive ingredients. Then there was the addition of the destruction by the permanent flooding of the Egyptian and Bangladeshi Deltas. Other screens dealt with the social and ecological effects of pollution, growing amounts of indestructible nuclear waste, the effect of global agricultural production and land ownership and the effect of all this on economic and social life. Interestingly, a hypothetical scenario slipped in by GAIANET showing the time-scale for the earth to rehabilitate herself naturally, assuming people were wiped out, coincided with the critical date to reverse the worst ravages of the industrialised world.

The year which acted as the pivotal point of no return was set by the computer as 2012. For reasons best known to itself, it gave a twenty five year caveat as leeway.

Mo Chu of the Chinese Food and Agriculture Commission, sitting on the left of Chieko Terakoa of Taiwan shipping, with whom he was on very good terms despite the attitudes of his Government, ostentatiously cleared his throat. He was everything a Mandarin might be expected to be. Tall, dressed impeccably in a Saville Row suit and tailor made shirt, his elongated frame seemed to thrust his long head in a majestic rise from the loose confines of his high collar. He was almost completely bald, with deep set eyes, cadaverous cheeks and an enormous Adam's apple which danced as he spoke a too impeccable English with no hint of an accent, despite having learned the language entirely abroad.

'My dear Ricardo, do you mean to say that the world as we know it is to come to an end in such a short time. Because, if I may say so, this puts the wondrous GAIANET system into the same category as many other 'earth-enders', if I may put it so. I cannot believe this is a prediction of certainty. Surely you would not presume to be so absurd.'

'It could be true,' said Piotre Ulybin of Moscow Oil. 'If you take it all together and if you don't take into account our current work - I take it Ric that this information doesn't take into consideration the collective work of this group. Of course I don't either believe the year 2012 is any more than convenient stab at a watershed time - a computer simulation of prediction based on limited information. I agree with Chu here, to take literally would be absurd.'

Ric scanned the assembly and spoke in the same quiet even tones he had been using so far. He wanted to keep emotion out of the discussion for as long as possible. The facts which he knew would be pouring from GAIANET once HIGO delivered the interpreted work of the group would make it difficult to keep things calm later on.

'No, I don't take it literally Piotre, but neither Chu, do I think it absurd. But if you will bear with me, I want to leave such considerations on the back-burner for now. We need to feed into the machine the finer details of your experience of the last months. If the indications are right you may well be at the point of turning the tide. By the end of tomorrow morning's session I want us to have a clearer picture of the potential for change you have initiated, contrasted with the predictions of GAIANET. I am not however certain that 2012 is a bad year for us nevertheless. - I notice however colleagues that it is dinner time. I suggest we adjourn to the dining room and continue afterwards with your own inputs.'

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The dinner was excellent but regrettably for several, without alcohol. Minds needed to be kept sharp. They were there to work and given the tight time-frame, through the night and into the next day if necessary. It would not be the first time, and given the current scenario, it probably would not be the last. When the members were again seated after the meal, there began a brief input from each of the participants in turn. They were recorded by GAIANET and interpreted by HIGO. In much the same way as the bottom line of a spread-sheet changes as information is changed on the grid, so the interpretations of HIGO changed the predictions of GAIANET. The burning question was whether the inputs would change the sixty four thousand dollar date of 2012. Or despite whatever they did, would it remain inexorably the same?

Three themes gradually developed. The production of mineral and vegetable resources; ecological consequences; and social and political effects. Several trends connected to these themes interwove, as each member spent about fifteen minutes indicating the current effects of their work as they saw it. Screens flashed over and over as members checked new information against their own and up-dated effects. All the time HIGO re-interpreted the three main themes and all eyes kept re-checking the 2012 date as it changed as new information was fed into it - sometimes lengthening, sometimes shortening.

The last speaker, Lynne Farrell had been working on digital telecommunications. After many boardroom and stock exchange battles, her international corporation, Sydney Communications, now dominated the international digital TV and telephone networks. While the internet remained free territory, SYDCOM could exercise control over nearly all the server systems and although it would take a computer genius all his time and several thousand million dollars to funnel everything into GAIANET. Lynne was getting into position to link nearly three-quarters of the population of the earth directly to JNO's computer at Markham at Penny's instruction; but not for some considerable time. When asked how long, she could not yet answer. This news had the effect of bringing the date back from 2043 to 2015.

At the end of the session there was a hubbub of conversation. Ric allowed people to talk freely for a good half-hour and when the conversations subsided a little he called them back to order.

'Ladies and gentlemen, as you see there is a terrifying inevitability binding our work to the approximate 2012 date. It seems that if we are unable to accomplish the changes for which we strive, after 2012, the earth will have gone beyond the point where its self-regulatory mechanisms can permanently restore it to full historical functioning. After 2012 it will always be less of itself and there will follow a slow but inexorable decline of the optimum conditions for human life. If we cannot modify this scenario we will have failed in our task. If we remain on course it is still possible we can just about change things in time. However our current predictions rest entirely on the interpretation of this model of events - as if they were to go along in the present pattern and this we know is unlikely.

Before the visit from Lucina Dodona we must therefore concentrate on worst case scenarios and how they can be offset. I suggest we now retire as it's three am and resume at eight a.m. to prepare for Madame Dodona's visit'.

The group, tired and inclined to silence slowly made for their rooms. Penny, exhausted, went directly to her

room to sleep. Ric lingered with some of the delegates over a night-cap in the bar before retiring.

A mere four hours later, a little rested Ric and Penny ate a light private breakfast in the conference room to make arrangements for Lucina's visit.

'What do you think?' asked Ric over his coffee cup.

'I'm tired and not sure I'm thinking straight but right now to make it, feels like it's going to take a miracle. You saw the lengths Karl Kahn is having to go to prevent a good dozen Third-World powers from crushing the empowerment of workers we have already liberated. It seems as if we shall have to arm them to the teeth and encourage bloody revolutions to shift things properly and the history of violent revolution is not on our side. Besides there isn't time. The requirement for anti-personnel weapons from countries struggling to control the movements of ordinary workers and the landless are astronomical. You saw how some of them are even thinking of going tactically nuclear as a way of blackmailing the West to help them control their shaky power bases.'

She shrugged her shoulders helplessly, overwhelmed by the size of the task facing them. The despair in her voice encouraged Ric's previous doubts about her ability to continue under such strain. Her next comment made him sit down as if a heavy hand had forced him into the chair, it was her attitude more than what she actually said that affected him.

'It seems to me that for every step forward we take to deny the power of capitalistic enterprise to keep exploiting either people or resources, results in a backlash which means unacceptable bloodshed or intolerable destruction. It's as if nobody can conceive that the future of people in the world depends on a changed model for human commercial and industrial behaviour. The worst thing is that the more you know this to be true the more ridiculous it is and the more tragic. See how the West is deregulating environmental curbs to encourage growth. This is in the teeth of all our work, which means we have to redouble our efforts. The only response to this must result in a tightening of the already destructive spiral - so that the harder we work the greater is the opposition. The harder we work - the worse they behave. We also have to deal with the political fall-out of unemployment in parts of the West and especially in Eastern Europe. I'm also very worried about the potential of migration patterns of the middle class from the third world and its effect. China is flexing its muscles seeing the weakness of the West and India believes it can catch up with the Pacific countries even faster now. Also there are the religious fundamentalists who just want to make everything go backwards.'

Now she was walking around the room talking to the walls, to the computer screens - her mind was a whirl of conflicting images of force and counter-force. Her voice was tense,

'What I thought we are doing is certainly highly complicated, but it is an orderly strategy for change. Now it's countered step by step by an inexorable return to the status quo. It is as if there is really no alternative than the inevitable self-destruction of the human race, whatever the power of JNO might perform. As hard as I try I can't make the spectre of 2012 diminish - Ric - I just don't think we can make it in the time, barring a miracle. The forces of reaction are just too strong. It's like lemmings heading for the cliff edge simply because the momentum alone sweeps away every argument for even slowing down, let alone stopping. It's pure lunacy and everyone knows it but they can't stop. However much GRADE helps to redress imbalances, money is just not going to be enough in the time-scale we have. I used to think it would. I used to think that if it were no longer profitable for companies to destructively use up the world, the ecology movement coupled with Operation Denial would bring things to some kind of acceptable equilibrium.'

She stopped pacing compulsively and pulled a chair round to face him,

'I figured without the incredible force generated by the sheer momentum of the opposition. I knew there would be opposition but I thought enough reason would have prevailed by now. That when Governments saw

the benefits of our work they would pitch in and support it.'

Ric's spirit rallied a little thinking about the important progress they had made in some quarters. 'I'm sure,' he responded. 'The time frame of 2012 is too early for the necessary changes to take hold and I don't believe in the doomsday scenario thrown out by the computer. There are too many variables for any logical machine, even for the highly sophisticated fuzzy logic of GAIANET. I'm a computer man to my bones, but my faith in the machinery and software I create is always limited by the knowledge that the input is always flawed in some degree and that conclusions are always relative to the absolute quality of the input.' He spoke calmly, taking her hand in an attempt to soften her mood.

'You've made some excellent progress in Colombia, Brazil and parts of Africa in particular. You shouldn't get too despondent Penny.' Always the realist, he tried to build up the positive elements in the scenario. 'The colleges and universities in something like thirty countries are already sending out a second generation of graduates trained via GRADE enterprises in JNO techniques and values. In eleven years there will be three generations of JNO trained graduates and entrepreneurs at the helm of world affairs. You can already see a difference in at least twenty or thirty countries and...'

'Don't you see, Ric,' Penny interrupted grasping his hand so tight that it hurt, as if grasping for her very safety to prevent her falling into the abyss confronting her mind. 'It isn't that we are on the wrong tack, on the contrary we are doing everything right and we are getting amazing results. It's just that there's not enough time! If we could prolong the prediction to say 2025 we might have just the merest chance. But as you see, even assuming that scenario we are tight up against the deadline. An appropriate use of words don't you think in the circumstances.'

He smiled wryly, he was about to say he did not believe in artificial deadlines - but her mood did not allow it. She continued, becoming ever more agitated.

'There's no time Ric! Your computer is the most advanced yours and Hep's technology can make it, and you're the best there is. I know you don't believe the date business - No don't tell me! It's probable that the rest of the group, possibly with the exception of Matsuko, who alone of them has met Lucina, is of the same opinion. But believe me the date is not simply a computer prediction with a plus or minus leeway...'

'My dear you are so right,' Penny heard the familiar voice more in the mind than through the physical involvement of the ear. She was not sure if it had been heard by Ric. Both however turned in surprise to the hallway to see the majestic figure of Lucina Dodona, a galleon in full sail, enter the room, accompanied as usual by Pannie Ljeschi who danced about her before spiralling his crooked body round them and upped himself cross-legged onto the table among the gadgetry. Lucina flashed a glance at him and as if he had been physically lashed, he slid off the table and insinuated himself into a chair. Lucina pealed with laughter. 'Pannie, behave or...' She turned to Penny and Ric without finishing her threat. 'Penelope, please to introduce me to your friend.' This was an instruction disguised as a simple pleasantry. Penny did not like her tone. It was as if Lucina read the depths of her heart even to the parts of it she herself preferred to leave unvisited. Lucina clearly disapproved of their relationship. She conveyed at the same time approval of the work they did by her manner towards him. As usual in the presence of her benefactor, Penny felt her loss of control. Ric on the other hand was as charmed as he was supposed to be by her majesty and graciousness. Penny was helplessly irritated by the effect Lucina had on Ric. It was however only to be expected and she was surprised at her own reaction. She supposed she had hoped, without actually voicing her feelings to herself that Ric would be somehow immune from the effect of Lucina - above it in some way. She had no reason to suppose the power Lucina exercised over her would not be felt by him. But she was disappointed nevertheless. If she did this to him, the Advisory Group had no chance. Under the gaze of her mentor, Penny made the introductions,

'Lucina, this is Ricardo Trefoil, our computer expert, he and Hep have made our system what it is- second to none.'

'Ah Hep, how is he? I see so little of my family these days. He works well for you? - ne? Mr Trefoil I have heard so much of you. Delighted to acquaint myself at the first hand.' She beamed at him.

Unable to prevent himself Ric had risen at her entry and although he simply intended to shake hands, he found himself compelled to kiss the proffered extremity instead. Lucina spotting Penny's distaste at the gesture, laughed merrily and stretched her other hand in a motherly caress of Penny's cheek. Having thus established her presence she sat in Ric's seat at the table and motioned Pannie to a spare seat by the door.

'I am ready Penelope my dear. Ah - they are at breakfast, please do not disturb, so this gives me a little time to...how you say?...catch up with you. I have been examining your HIGO and GAIANET machines. Pannie here talks to Hep, do you not my boy?'

Pannie merely grinned more broadly.

'I don't actually know how it all works but Pannie here tells me the main points. You are surprised at the 2012 date I hear you speak of it. To tell you the truth I also am surprised. You would be amazed at the efforts I have put in to extending the timeline. The plain truth is that not even I with all the means of the Firm at my disposal, nor, it seems even Zarian, can alter this scenario. The plain fact is that it is out of our control. But I am into the substance of my subject for this morning.' She penetrated Ricardo with a gimlet eye, and he recoiled inwardly. 'You are a good man, Mr Trefoil, I can see it.'

Ric knew for certain she really could see into him, it was as if his psyche had been pulled from his mind and stretched like wet cloth on tenterhooks - on full view.

Lucina continued. 'I have to say I do not altogether approve of Penelope in relationship with another man, other than my poor brother, especially at this time, but if there will be a man - you will be he, I think it so. I like you and I trust you. Penelope is careful and knows her people. And you are her lieutenant so I will trust both of you with the information I bring you of her son Alexander.'

Ric started, Alexander was dead. What possible news could she have of him? Penny would not have lied to him about such a thing. Suddenly he became aware of Penny's changed manner in the shadow of Lucina and the words of Matsuko Morii rang in his head. It was happening to him. All contact with this formidable woman was being made on her terms. A great revelation fell into place in his mind - whatever Penny got from the Dodona's was involuntary on her part. He was in the presence of a mind more powerful than his own and even than Penny's. He disliked the feeling intensely and knew that Penny did too. This was why he had been deliberately kept away from the senior partners in the Firm. He felt a great urge to reveal his thought to her but knew that he was too easily read by Lucina and resolved to have it out with Penny as soon as they were alone. He had the uncanny feeling that his thoughts were being read by Lucina anyway, and there was nothing he could do about it, he could only let this woman speak what she had come to say and deal with the aftermath.

'Penny she knows he is not dead but on a mission of the gravest importance to you all. You should know he risks more than merely his life which in the scale of things is little enough. He risks all of you. Only we at Psathi know this. I share this with my Penelope for she is his mother and has the right. You Ricardo Trefoil are her man and she needs you. If you do not know all she knows you will mistrust her and may endanger everything. Mistrust grows like a virus in the system until it eats up all the good. So I tell you of him but you do not tell the advisory group of him. When they reassemble I will talk to them of 2012 and what they must do. You alone will know what Alexander does and what my Zarian must also do. The advisory group has their role assigned and they are doing well, this I will say to them. You have chosen well my Penelope as I knew you would. But as you say time for the people of the world is short and they cannot do enough in what is left without help. The powers of lassitude, ignorance, greed and above all the past - will slow you down too much. This Alexander confronts in its own realm. The weight of the past drags the heels of the future and will not



allow you to surpass the present. Alexander works in the gap between past and future for all of you. If all goes well he will return to you.'

'And if not?,' Penny asked tremulously.

'If not - then there is no future for him nor anyone else.' She proceeded to explain Alexander's mission, and Pannie's grin widened until his face was in danger of splitting in two.

At this point the others could be seen drifting from their breakfast into the conference room in ones and two's. They sat down eyeing Pannie and Lucina in the manner of people who see a celebrity they do not know personally, and not wishing to be obtrusive, keep them in view by glancing self-consciously in their direction. Pannie was too strange a creature to be ignored and Lucina was gorgeous in a light gold chiton, clasped by a large jewelled pin at her left shoulder. Her hair was piled high on her head exposing the marble of her neck and shoulders. Her presence, a fraction larger than life, flooded the room like light. Only Matsuko approached her directly as if to receive her blessing. She bowed her head in the traditional Japanese greeting and involuntarily bent a knee ever so slightly. Lucina beamed at her and touched her hair lightly. No words were uttered and Matsuko, thus blessed, sat at her seat at the table. A palpable silence fell over the assembly. Lucina's smile of welcome lit her eyes with an intensity which commanded the close attention of all present. Even the hard-boiled Johann Pettershonn was entranced by the illuminated face. What occurred next, none of the participants was ever able to share with anyone else as long as they lived.

Each found themselves addressed by this radiant goddess. Each uniquely; their individuality isolated and recognised. A gentle radiance invaded every mind separately, probing thought patterns and following them to their origins. Whole lives from pre-birth to the present were explored and then re-worked; private thoughts were analysed and made clear to them - many for the first time. So intense was the connection, they would be unable to convey the profundity of the experience.

An intense clarity about the purpose of their lives and the role of humankind on the planet flooded each one of them. They were praised for the integrity of their commitment to their task and any doubts they may have held were dispelled by the clarity of their own thoughts. It was as if they had always believed they had thought correctly and now they knew for certain. This was no dogma, believed because a greater power said thus and thus to be the truth. This was a clear rational analysis of everything they had known or experienced which, where it had been vague and mis-understood, was newly brought into crystalline flawlessness in tune with all they felt. The responsibility for what they each did became easier to carry and they faced the future with eagerness for the struggle, fully armed with a knowledge of the past and present to illuminate their path. They each saw with a unique and renewed vision the meaning of the year 2012. They understood the significance of the date of the Maya. With this understanding came a revelation. This was no arbitrary date, plucked from the air, nor was it a computer prediction. It was the last challenge of the gods to their race. It was not negotiable. Their earth would survive with or without them. They had just the time left to get the message across.

Lucina passed before them and blessed each one by placing her hand on each head in turn - and then she left with Pannie in tow.

The room was somehow empty. Ric's voice, even though he spoke as softly as he could, seemed harsh and alien as it broke into the ensuing stillness.

'Matsuko was right. Lucina's message is clear. The next session is the crucial one. I propose we waste no time. I have put you in three groups to tackle the three themes of production, ecology and politics. We will work until tomorrow morning and report back to HIGO and see where we get.' They worked long into the night and the next day, when they had finished - They had a strategy.

## Chapter 8

What treasure?' asked Alexander on L1 in his meld with Hermes.

'Why the thing that links you to the timelines of course. The past as it shapes the future. It's like a kind of DNA in the timeline system that makes you mortals what you are. Your Darwin was the first of you to understand the concept. But it's more than simply natural selection. There's consciousness to it. Your Freud got an inkling and Jung got pretty close, but who listens properly to any of them any more - if they ever did. The failure of memory in your race will kill you all in the end. Barboncito has remembrance, his people, and those like him whom you have despised and despoiled for so long will have the last laugh because they have the treasure. Without it you can do nothing properly creative. Inventive, yes. You can invent anything - and you do. But you do it as if you owned the stuff of which it's made and you don't. You just think you do, but it's an illusion. You have to use the collective memory of what the treasure is and what it can do. You must find it and add it like leaven to all you do if you are to survive. But from what I hear it's too late. The future is too unpredictable and the present too manic to listen to the past. That's why Hades will win. Zeus has lost control over you and Yahweh is too preoccupied with what ought to be than what is or what was. You have to stop dealing with should's and ought to be's until you have remembrance. You come from the earth not the heavens. You are made from good, honest clay. Your feet are stuck in the ground not floating somewhere in the great beyond where you fancy your heads to be. But now then brother, that's more than enough of my ramblings. I'm just the messenger and my job is to get you over the Styx without being detected. - Now this visor thing of Hephaestos'...'

'Is the treasure to be found here in Hades?'

'Of course it is, like I said it's in the past! - Now will you please listen and carefully observe this visor!'

'I'm sorry, Hermes - but there are things I need to know and Pannie said you would help me.'

The lanky being, gently placed the helmet on a convenient boulder. He positioned himself on another, higher up, and letting his long legs dangle, folded his arms across his thin chest. He let out a large sigh and in an exasperated tone said,

'Alright, my boy, since you're a recent relative and I've not had time to get to know you as well as the others I'll give time to get questions out of the way. Themis said you were full of doubt and that's very dangerous material down here, so I'd better help you as best I can. What do you want to know?'

'This treasure, how will I know it?'

'You won't know it as such. You feel it at work in the mind. Without the patina of experience the mind has nothing substantial to grip on except its present self. Thought becomes meaningless. It simply rehashes old truths as if they were discoveries. The treasure of remembrance is not just history, you have to struggle to keep its meaning alive, the meaning over the fact. The fact exists of course and what you have to do with it in the now is to take its meaning into the future. You can't just import facts as if they were truths or make truths into facts. Truths are living realities to be fashioned into states of being, into action and reaction, they are alive and doing, whether you heed them or not. The gods know this of course. That's why you need us. You let us do this for you and receive our wisdom as if it were given, coming from outside you. Which of course it isn't. You know all these things but basically you are mind-lazy, you no longer act on what you collectively know is true as a species, you act only on what you think you can prove in advance as fact. In the absence of provable fact you either leave it to the gods to act out your truths and you regard them with uncritical wonder, which leaves you off the hook of responsibility, or you search for truths well beyond your own realities in some promised hereafter where you hope all will ultimately be clear. Can't you see that it's all there inside each of you to find for yourselves? You don't really need gods of any kind because you've got yourselves.'

That's not to say there are no gods. It's that you don't really need them. We, on the other hand, can exist without you, no problem about that my friend, but so far you can't live without us. You've tried to substitute for us your inventiveness, what you call science, but it doesn't work. Making the earth do things for you is clever I grant you, ask Hephaestus he loves it. (That's probably why he is helping your mother) We think invention is fun too, but no more than that; without the use of the treasure it is destructive in the end as you are beginning to discover too late. Still if you get to Hades in time there's a hope for you. Not that I care...'

'You're just the messenger!'

'Exactly. - Any more questions?'

'Yes, What do you mean when you say Hades will win and that it's too late?'

'A question of balance of power, what you call real-politik. Think of the past as an active force not a dead weight to be got rid of. You ignore the past and think you are so clever in the here and now, while, on the other hand you are always being pushed forward from the point of origin whether you know it or not. That's Hadean business if ever I saw any - and that's the main point; you don't know it but it's there, it's from there that comes the momentum that drives the human spirit. Pushed from behind rather than pulled from in front. Hades knows this as do we all. Up till now, Zeus was clever enough to have made sure Hades cannot enter the now and has kept the realms apart so you could develop unhindered by your past overwhelming you and taking over (which of course is Hades' main objective now Zeus has set up the challenge). Mnemosyne maintained Remembrance for you but you ignored her and left Zeus on his own; the result was the take-over by Yahweh. When you forgot the past; ignored the present and dwelt too much on the hereafter, so you were pulled by the future - which by definition you don't know - unlike the past which you do - despite your forgetfulness. Once the future was seen for what it is - unobtainable in your short life-times - you lost your bearings altogether and left with the present, which you filled with your cleverness for making things, you ignore the treasure of the past and cannot contemplate the future. Things are closing in though because you damage your ability to maintain the present by pulling the rug of Gaia from under you. You know the rest.'

'Do all the members of the Pantheon know my mission then?'

'Well, it's not exactly a secret on Olympus, Zeus did make rather a song and dance about you and 2012. You were there for the announcement.'

'What about Hades, does he know?'

'Well he wouldn't know directly, and there's only me, Hecate and Persephone officially allowed to cross the barrier and we don't talk about the other side when we're down here. But I should think so. He's nobody's fool the old boy, even if it was none of us told him, he probably has other ways of getting to know things. He has links with a lot of mortal people on the other side, even though the gods don't communicate with him. But I wouldn't know about Yahweh, He goes on about his omniscience, as you know, and so is likely to be in touch with Hades or his agents.'

'And that's my problem,' Alexander hunched down against a rock opposite Hermes and put his head in his hands. He sat for a few seconds thinking deeply and rising slowly fixed his eyes at the drear landscape between the dark airless trees. 'I've been brought up by Mnemosyne and have an awareness of Remembrance but no real experience of it. Barboncito you mentioned is full of it, its meaning is in every pore of his being. My friend Marina has it too and...'

'You want to stick with her my friend, there's more to that one than meets the eye. I do believe our mutual father, has cast a glance in that direction, except Hera has seen his eye wander and she's not got over his dalliance with your mother for him to try his hand again so soon - and with all this going on, well - the

timing's not altogether right - if you get my drift?'

Alexander was shocked and deflected in his thoughts by the idea of Marina caught in the sights of the lecherous old god.

'Good grief! You don't mean that everything I do is known by you all on Olympus or on the top floor of the JNO building!'

'Gossip is what we thrive on, especially about the doings of our favourites, what else is there to do in eternity? Isn't that what gods are for? After all we've done the creation thing and if you can't play with the things you've made, what else is there? The problem is we're getting a bit bored with you and it's time you all grew up and got on without us. But...if we abandon you, we leave Gaia to Hades and if you can't control him - but you know all about that from Themis and Lucina, you don't need me to spell out what you're here for.'

Alexander's thoughts were so confused and dejected that Hermes was forced to use his powers on the meld to lever them into a different mind-frame. He leapt nimbly down from his perch and grasped him by the elbows lifting him to his feet. He walked him gently but firmly to a small concealed rise to give them a vantage point over the road of the dead revealing the line of the horizon as a bright land beyond the gloomy mist in which they stood. Alexander felt his heart lift, the far, slim strip of light offered hope of something good in this drear world. Between him and it however lay the river Styx with its sole crossing at Charon Point. Hermes introduced a new dimension into the mind-meld which hinted at far countries of the past.

'You will find Barboncito in that far ribbon of brightness. He is there waiting for you and prepares for your coming.'

'How do you know?' asked Alexander feeling better now he could see somewhere to go beyond the shaking shades of the aspen wood by the thronging dead. He looked forward to reuniting with the attractive Navajo, despite his jealousy about Marina, Barboncito seemed to beckon him towards his goal. He would eventually be obliged to confront Hades here in his kingdom, but he was not yet ready. Barboncito held keys to his work in the Underworld and he was anxious to find him. First he had to negotiate the check-point without discovery. Responding within the meld Hermes continued the communication.

'Now will you listen! Stop doubting, all will be explained in due course. Keep faith in us and you will survive in this land. Now this visor, as I've been trying to tell you, will keep you out of trouble and get you across the Styx, if you use it correctly. It's a vast improvement on the invisibility helmet I used to have. According to Hephaestos it uses all the benefits of virtual reality and adds some new features which means it's more than just virtual. I don't understand the technology, but working it is simple enough. As you know there's a different Chronosphere down here, since nobody is material they can visit any part of the realm easily. However beings of substance stand out as mortal...'

'What about Barboncito? Doesn't he stand out?'

'Listen and stop contaminating the meld,' Alexander thought nothing - admonished.

'You also don't listen properly. A lot of what goes on here is in you already. Barboncito is known to you.' Alexander was full of questions which Hermes pointedly ignored, he distinctly felt his mind shoved aside.

'What the visor does is take the information in your mind and ties it in with the reality you experience externally. It synthesises both into new experience which you can control when you get the hang of it. It's a bit like driving a car, the secret of making it work well, is clutch-control. I can't explain it you'll have to try it out for yourself. I can't take you through it now, I'm needed elsewhere, ever since Zeus started this thing I've been rushed off my feet with messages. Strange how when the chips are down the 'sphere is too leaky to allow the

most important messages to be sent down timelines and we resort to carrying them physically by messenger.' With that, as suddenly as he appeared, Hermes was gone.

Alexander lifted the helmet and visor from the ledge and placed it on his head. The helmet was extremely light, shaped a little like those used for cycling, but of much finer stuff. It needed no strap to fit perfectly and seemed to mould to his head like an old and comfortable hat. The opaque visor, hinged on either side, pulled down to cover the whole face. Immediately a skein of images and feelings began a kaleidoscopic whirl. His experience with the 'sphere made him less surprised than he would otherwise have been, but his inability to control the speed and fury of the pictures made him tear the instrument from his head before he lost his balance. Clearly, the thing worked, but it would take some getting used to. He remembered his driving lessons and the sheer complexity of the actions needed to feel in control, as well as to keep awareness of the world outside the car. He lifted the visor before replacing the helmet on his head. He looked southwards towards the bright strip on the horizon, checked out the foreground where the seething mass of shades continued pouring along the roadway below, and to a bearing on Checkpoint Charon in the middle distance.

Slowly this time, he lowered the visor. Keeping his mind on what he had just observed, he allowed his feelings and knowledge of them suffuse the screen. Shocked at the intensity of his feeling, in contrast with the paucity of his knowledge, he sat on the ground staring hard at the images in the visor. As he concentrated, the sense of external image disappeared and he entered a fantastic new inside-out world. The edges of his body melted and the outside entered into him. At the same time his understanding of the world increased as in a dream when the known and the sensed become certainty. Steadying his mind with his memorised retinal image of his physical place, he found he could move bodily from the spot to follow the contours of the land. At first he seemed to ascend high above the landscape, like a bird, soaring on an up-draft of air, while he feet stayed rooted to the ground. Spread far below were vast tracts of the four territories of Hades.

He saw the route he and Pannie had taken and the place where the Sipapu must have exited and he saw the small shape of his mule grazing upstream on the banks of the Styx. The flows of other rivers wound their way through the fields of dank asphodels and groves of grey aspens. Far in the distance, due south, lay the bright land of Chronos' Elysium from where beckoned Barboncito. In the east, almost invisible in silver haze he made out the towers of Erebus, seat of Hades and Persephone, the centre of Hadean authority. Far to the north beyond the Lake of Memory and its greater sister Lethe the lake of Forgetfulness, beyond the forest of white cypresses rose the treacherous hills, mountains and gorges of Tartarus. The grey fields of asphodels lay below him on the other side of the Styx and the road of the dead passed directly under him.

At Charon Crossing, crowds of the dead milled on its Western side, awaiting the formalities which would allow them to pass singly over the new bridge to a place where three roads met. There another bottle-neck occurred in their otherwise orderly passage. In an attempt to get a closer view at what he assumed was the immigration control check of Rhadamanthys, he lost control and careered downwards in any and every direction, until in total alarm he found himself unable to stop colliding with the crowd of shades milling around checkpoint Charon.

Unable to halt, he braced his mind for a crash. Instead he passed through the crowd, and soared again over the river on the other side. So, he thought, in this mode I am as incorporeal as they. This knowledge with that of the topography of Hades provided by Thea helped him steady his mind and soon he could soar anywhere, finding his way by the map in his head. Gradually he could direct his progression by adding new knowledge of external reality to his internal information.

If I think - 'flying' - he thought, and then think 'Lake of Memory' and of Mnemosyne and the times we spent remembering I should find myself directed to the lake which is just about due east of where I met Hermes. The effect was magical. He was at the lake-side in an instant. He focussed on the glassy surface. Staring fixedly he perceived movement stretching back and back, like facing mirrors, image upon image, down a timeline beginning with his consciousness as the fixed point. To join the movement he had only to enter the

pool to be sucked ever downwards into timelessness - from now to the point of generation. In a moment of blind panic, feeling himself drawn irresistibly into the water and frightened at the possibility of again becoming lost in realms for which he was not prepared and not knowing how to prevent the inevitable, he tore off the helmet at the very brink, only to find himself, somewhat unsteady on his feet, at the same place where Hermes had left him.

Nevertheless he was relieved that it was possible to have ultimate control over the instrument, even if it meant a sudden return. It was like pushing the button off and then on a computer when it starts to go haywire. Crude but effective. He also wondered if it damaged the helmet to treat it so. Donning it again momentarily, he was relieved to find no obvious defects. He would have to find a better way of controlling it. Sunk in thought he remembered the net of Zeus. He invoked the name of its creator in his mind and he felt it tighten familiarly around his shoulders. As with the 'sphere the net acted as an intermediary with the visor and smoothed out some of the more unpredictable quirks of its functioning. Hephaestos had made the helmet for Hermes whose facility with the 'sphere would be assumed. Zeus' net acted like automatic gears, effortlessly smoothing and linking.

Using the net by 'thinking through it' Alexander made several mind sorties to different parts of the country. He found he could travel instantly anywhere in his head; but he was seriously frustrated when he came to 'land' in any particular place. For as soon as he removed the helmet he found his body had remained where it started - on the wrong side of the Styx. He tried another experiment which at first left him bruised and battered but with a little practice he was able to manage tolerably. He found it was possible, by dint of great concentration, to walk while in mind mode. He had to keep two parts of his mind separated, a little like scratching his head with one hand while making circular motions on his belly with the other. His first attempt tumbled him unceremoniously down a bank of stones and brambles, close to the path of the shades progressing eerily and steadily. His second attempt threw him into a grove of trees where he tripped and landed awkwardly against a gnarled trunk, painfully grazing his hand. Several tries later, just as he thought he had the hang of it, he ploughed straight into a group of young soldiers on the road. Unable in his surprise to manage his sense of direction and expecting to be noticed, he stood stock-still, only to find they continued to march, making a detour round him, without seeming to be otherwise aware of his presence. Switching his attention to the visor he found he could see himself among the crowd but appeared unseen by them. He continued walking, watching himself from above. He at once realised he was using Hermes' new helmet, as it were, back to front. In his preoccupation with the technology of the visor together with his anxiety of being in an alien environment, he had quite forgotten the original helmet made the wearer invisible. In the same moment it came to him that Hermes had stolen the helmet from Hades and in all probability Hades would want it back. It was too late to worry about that now. Thanks to his half-brother he would be able to pass the checkpoint as well as observe himself doing it. He had complete freedom of movement as well as the ability to see all around and visit places in his mind before encountering them in the flesh. The strong possibility of his invincibility in a strange land made him walk with a new confidence. Zeus' net controlled the visor function with minimum conscious effort. He could go anywhere, see anything and remain aloof from the reality of the place. Or so it seemed.

He fell into step with the group of soldiers who made space for him, like water in a stream passing an obstacle. Using the visor he lazily floated ahead to the checkpoint to see how difficult it would have been to have passed undetected. A close scrutiny showed it to be similar to any other frontier checkpoint. There were two booths on either side of the bridge. In each was a figure in blue serge uniform, both with a good deal of silver and gold scrambled-egg on cuff and epaulettes, plus impressive looking badges on the breast pocket and cap-front.

Each traveller was taken through a lengthy questionnaire which the functionary laboriously keyed into a computer. The whole process lasted several minutes, which accounted for the numbers of shades milling around the checkpoint. No one was in any kind of hurry and in the dim light the whole procedure seemed to take place in slow-motion and under water. Alexander decided he would have had great difficulty passing

undetected between the two booths to join the shades on the far side making their way to the point where three roads meet. Invisible, it was easily accomplished. Increasing his pace he soon threaded his way unseen to the head of the queue and as instructed by Thea, he observed the computer questionnaire more closely. An easy task now but how to do so had hitherto been worrying him greatly. In the minutes it took the guards to take down all the particulars, Alexander was able to confirm the efficiency of Hadean bureaucracy. Each individual's file was highly detailed. The programme took superficial details from the traveller and automatically checked them against the life-strip of the Fates on the computer programme. If they matched, the shade was admitted as belonging to the life identified. Every detail of the life was imprinted on the life-strip and logged for ever in the Hadean data-bank. Alexander knew from Thea that this was used to simplify the next part of the process controlled by Rhadamanthys. Alexander left the bridge making sure he left space between the knots of travellers before and after him, in case he lost control of the mental balancing act he was using to travel in two dimensions at once. He was trying to prevent a disturbance in the unhurried and orderly procession which might focus unwanted attention in his direction.

His other self hovered some fifty feet above the road, peering ahead. The road wound through high sided, dry wadis, adorned with yellow scrub and dusty, battered, ancient cacti growing as a hedge on the banking. There was no sky visible for a curiously dry mist masked everything more than ten paces ahead. From the ground it was impossible to have any sense of direction as the road was confused by invisible meanders. From above Alexander saw it emerge into fields of dim lilies and dark daffodils. Never before had he seen flowers which offered no cheer and he was dismayed to his soul by the paradox. Through these, trooped groups of shades clutching passes provided by the border guards. Around a wide, curving bend, an extensive area of flat ground opened to reveal a cross-roads among the hills, at which three large tables were set. They were permanent to judge from their massiveness and the fact their legs were buried in the dry ground. Thick dust clogged their fine carvings.

Sitting one at each, were three personages themselves floured by the yellow dust, flanked by equally dusty security guards in what were once blue uniforms and a secretary working at a grimy computer, at which they flicked from time to time with feather dusters. A worn sign on each table written in several languages indicated Europeans were to address themselves to one table, Asiatics to another and 'others' to the third. The queue for 'others' was by far the longest. There was a certain amount of movement from table to table as major continental identities were correctly established. The three men had plaques set before them with their names written, again in several scripts.

At the middle table the sign announced it was Rhadamanthys who judged the Asiatics. To his left Aeacus tried Europeans and Minos sorted out the 'others.' To help him with the increased numbers Minos' table had been extended by several feet and he had several assistants squeezed in along its length. Alexander was careful to give the tables a wide berth.

Thea had insisted that the judges were highly sensitive to aliens or the unallowed of every description and, however he might disguise himself, he was not to get too close. Despite his great care, he thought he was aware of a hesitation in the smooth movement of each judge as they scrutinised the stream of people passing before them, directing them severally towards the road leading to the punishment fields of Tartarus for the high scorers, about a tenth of the numbers; the low scorers were despatched along the road to the bright land of Elysium, making about a fifth of the total; the vast majority - with average scores - were sent back whence they came; to await through eternity to be relocated only by the call from Hades. Alexander searched in vain for a fourth route to the heaven of Yhawhe.

He made a careful note of the way the judgements were made and watched as the clerk took from each shade, the pass given at the bridge and slotted it into a dusty box by the computer terminal. The entire life-strip history of each was scrutinised by the judge against a programme which scored them automatically by reference to a grid of virtues, vices, successes, failures, strength of character, levels of integrity, the comments of their fellow beings and several other more arcane criteria. There was no appeal, though each was asked by

the judge if they thought the judgement fair. There were a few mistakes, queries were sent down the line to Erebus and replies were swift.

Each judgement to consign a shade to their allotted realm for eternity was a matter of a few seconds only as the damage had already been done in life. This manifestation of inevitability struck him hard. There were no reparations possible in the past, nothing was redeemable in this realm. The thought stayed with him, harboured in his mind, while he pondered more immediate matters.

Which direction was he to take? Thea's instructions were unclear, most of the mind-melds with her had concentrated on his safety. Lucina's had been about his meeting with Hades and the importance of avoiding direct contact with Chronos. Thea had been distinct about the hazards associated with Hecate and Persephone, the only other beings in Hades on the Olympian Chronosphere, and she thought he might meet them anywhere since it was likely they were on the look-out.

His mentors had given him general information and knowledge of the topography, but in the last analysis, he was on his own; able to go in any direction. He was not ready to go to Erebus and find Hades, that was for sure. In all probability it was in Erebus he would meet Persephone or Hecate, and he felt ill equipped for either of them, especially Hecate. He was however extremely uncomfortable where he was and felt distinctly unhappy near the three judges. They might sense the presence of an unallowed at any moment and he already suspected they had caught a whiff of mortality. Even as he thought, he saw Minos lift his great head and sniff the still air. Rhadamanthys and Aeacus, noticed the movement and Aeacus turned towards the general area where Alexander stood hesitating. He backed away from them and made his direction along the Southern route with the fewest of the divided masses, towards the light of Elysium.

If he was not ready to meet any of the beings he was sent to examine, he thought as he followed a small group of pilgrims, what was his purpose here? The longer he meandered aimlessly, the shorter was the time for his fellow mortals. He had no idea of how time was passing in the land of the living, since here linear time seemed not to exist. He might have been in Hades an hour or ten years for all he could tell. A glance at his watch showed it had stopped at the time he must have entered the Sipapu. If he were to hunt for Hades in Erebus, or anywhere else he was too unsure of himself to make a serious impact on another powerful being, who knew more of his own mind than he did and would consider him as no more than a shade come before his time. His job was to be more than a messenger, he had to persuade. To make an offer unable to be refused. Come what may he was not ready. He needed more time for more understanding than he had. But time was the problem. His anxiety was raised all the more as there was no way of knowing how much he wasted in indecision. Years might have passed on the other side of the Sipapu and he might already be failing in his task as he stood wondering.

He considered his choices. He couldn't leave, he didn't know how. He could only think of one thing to do, to find Barboncito and find out his role in all of this. This at least had the merit of being his first starting point and might unravel enough understanding to take next steps. The time passing problem would have to take care of itself since he had no way of controlling or influencing it. He sent his freed mind far out into the distance to enter Elysium in advance of the shades he was following. Expecting to soar effortlessly into the bright land he was astonished to find his mind was unable to penetrate the space where the land began. His mind sheared away like a space-craft missing its entry window to bounce off an invisible atmosphere. Whenever he made the attempt he was able to soar as far as the margin of the light and no further. His physical self continued to march behind the souls sent before him.

The length of the uneventful journey was impossible to reckon as there was nothing to punctuate the passage of time. Ultimately the main route narrowed and suddenly, round another hairpin bend it plunged dangerously down a narrow defile to terminate at a tall iron gate. The supporting pillars and joining arch, hewn from the solid rock, were adorned with massive effigies of three large-headed dogs in repose.



The shades approached the gate which opened and with the easy gait of Sunday afternoon rambles, they disappeared into the light. Alexander, wary of blundering about in unknown territory thought better than to follow without information. Pannie's cautionary censure at the Sipapu was at last hitting home; he half expected the little man to appear and with the other half was surprised to find he was disappointed when he didn't - he actually waited for him. Realising he was alone, he cautiously approached the gates and to act with maximum efficiency removed his helmet. He scrutinised the gate from a distance of several yards and saw nothing untoward, other than feeling a growing reflex of fear about the very life-like statues of the dogs.

The fast approaching sound of barking made him wonder if he was dreaming. In mounting panic he put out his hand, touching the rock to confirm the too realistic dogs were truly made of stone. What he heard however, was real and definitely coming his way. He suddenly discovered one of the basic truths of life, that the most frightening thing to affect any sentient life-form, especially one like himself, was the irrevocable, and fast, approach of other powerful creatures hell-bent on making them into a meal. He also knew with frightening certainty that the size of his brain in the last analysis would be of no help without the time and space to engage it usefully. Fear of angry dogs was built into his species and the huge madly barking, cloud of dust which now hurtled round the hairpin at the top of the defile held him spell-bound as much by the noise it made, as the desperate scrabbling of twelve huge paws, which in their demonic eagerness to get to him, fought for maximum traction on the stony ground; clawing over and over each other in their frenzy. He had milli-seconds left to act and knew with sickening certainty there was nowhere to run.

His brain crashed like an overloaded computer as he turned to press his back hard against the closed gate and prepared for the onslaught. Dark, foam-flecked rottenness was flung hotly from within the rushing mass of teeth and hair, choking and blinding him. In an ensuing moment of pure horror he fell back, when the leading devil-hound, fractionally in advance of his foaming fellows crashed with all his might into the gate before him immediately followed by the other two. The hinges jarred in the rock and seemed likely to give-way. They were however made of stout stuff. Somehow, as he had fallen back, the gates into Elysium had opened enough to let him through and closed in time, the hounds of hell remained inexplicably on the other side of the gate.

Alexander lay still as a wailing and baying, rose from the disappointed monsters, fit to waken all the dead and bring every Hadean guard down on his head; while they never ceased from flinging themselves in a mounting and thunderous fury at the strong pinions of the gate.

'What did I say you wus ter do if'n yer heered dogs?' The voice in his head came from behind and he just made it out above the din. 'Down boys! Shut the hell up yer big farts! Git yerself back ter the Styx. You ain't got no right of entry here and y'all knows it! Git! afore I calls Hecate ter give yer a hidin'!

There was steel in the voice and the hounds knew a master when they heard one. Growling and snarling they ceased their lunging. The leader, braver then the others, came right to the grill of the gate and bared awful dripping, fangs. It spotted Alexander's helmet and tossed it in the air for his colleagues to catch, rending it in pieces in seconds. Alexander was astonished to see Pannie leap down from his perch on an apple tree behind him and bare his own teeth to such effect that the dogs quietened and all three slunk back up the trail. When they were a little way up the defile they let out a howl to fill the world with dread, before rounding the bend and going from sight.

'Well boychick?' Pannie confronted Alexander.

'Well what?' Alexander still shaken from the trauma, was furious at this late apparition and his instinct told him before he realised consciously, that Pannie's late arrival was no accident.

'I expected you before this.' His voice shook mixed with anger and fear. 'Those hounds nearly had me! Look at me, I've never been so scared in my life! They stink and I'm covered in their filth!'

'Never satisfied are you? Don't listen neither! What did I say ter do if'n yer heered dogs? Show no emotion I said. But you was too busy wonderin' where yer was. So you gotta git scared out'er yer wits. That's just what they react to - fear. Show 'em fear an' they'll have yer as soon as look at yer. Still you got here boychick. Din't yer? S'a pity 'bout the 'elmit and all, I 'spec Hades'll be cut up about that, not ter mention Hermes. Fat's in the fire now an' no mistake. It wus Minos who set the dogs on ya. Thea said not ter creep about near them Judges, but like I keep sayin' yer don't listen. Hades'll know y'all here by now. You'll be okay in here fer a bit, 'cos he don't come inter Chronos's territory without an invite. Jes' watch out when yer leave - if'n yer leave!'

'I thought you'd be here sooner to help out!' Alexander ignored the last remark. He was getting to understand when the little man was trying to wind him up.

'Wasn't me boychick, I just keep an eye out. Wasn't me gotcha in 'ere, it wus her!' He pointed behind him to a woman, in a long white robe, her features hidden in a large elegant cowl. 'Gotta go now, Lucina's gotta meetin' I'm needed at. 'So long boychik!' Alexander, used by now to unexpected comings and goings let him go without comment his attention fixed on the woman in white. Unsure of what to expect he remained standing as she approached.

## Chapter 9

There are moments in the lives of some people when in an instant, their whole experience is compressed into a point of understanding which then bursts through the psyche like the expanding universe, to thereafter guide all future thought and action. Through the sun-dappled orchard, Alexander Conway was aware of the approach of a creature of ineffable beauty, made of pure light and soft-movement. Rooted to the ground he experienced a sublime second of time which he instantly regretted never having lived through before. For the longest possible fraction of a second he hung, balanced on the exact fulcrum of past and future and felt in this suspension of time great visions and wide possibilities.

The moment passed.

Noting his disappointment, the creature gently led him by the hand.

On L2 she bore him through sloping apple glades to sunlit vineyards, and on to vast sweeps of corn fields, stands of verdant woods, glistening streams and bright meadows filled with grazing beasts of many kinds.

The creature received his delight into herself and returned it enhanced by Gaia's interest. In this meld he was at home. There was no anxiety here. Nothing nagged at his sanity. No unnamed demon from his psychic deeps flicked its tongue. Through the meld, a fount of goodwill, acceptance and concern seemed to cradle him in the gentlest of breezes. Their minds wound as one in silken skeins, harmonious and symmetrical. Together they soared and dived. Here was no difficult learning, no information for the memory, no shocks to the psyche. This was how dying would be, a release of pure spirit. If this was eternity he could welcome it. He was more alive than ever. His glimpse of the axis where past and future balanced, was shared in an almost painful counterpoint of delight not to be sustained. He must come to himself or implode into a black-hole of pure feeling for evermore. Using all his experience and aided by the net around his shoulders; he broke the meld.

Utterly disoriented he gazed at the creature standing before him, her face hidden in the depths of the voluminous cowl. Coming down to L1 he found this being knew the limits of his sensibility and would itself have ended the meld before he lost his mind.

'You mortals must keep mind and body intact. The dead here in Elysium are of stainless spirit and have purity of feeling unconstrained by the fragility of the body. I had to know of what you were capable if I am to guide you in this realm.'

Alexander, relieved at the lessening of intensity and exhausted by the experience allowed himself to be led by the hand, onwards at a human pace. His conscious self was full of questions for the apparition, but his emotions were still in harmony with her goodwill and he was loath to besmirch pure feeling with hard thought. They journeyed through ever more splendid country and he found it and his mood were bewitchingly matched. The slackened pace of communication and movement allowed him to assess the creature leading him. Had she discovered of what he was spiritually capable? How did he rate? The idea of spirituality as measurable was novel. He was unable to place the creature as a particular being. She reminded him now of Marina, now of Mnemosyne, now of his mother, and then Thea. The apparition was without definition but he felt an inexpressible safety in which to explore his thoughts.

They travelled now through large savannahs, vast and majestic deserts, soaring mountain ranges, profound gorges, gleaming lakes, foaming rivers. Animal life teemed in every habitat. But there were no people nor any sign of their presence. Questions tumbled from him like disturbed scree, bouncing, unstoppably down a mountainside. He was afraid to give them voice even in the meld, for they seemed to him banal, stupid, self-evident, to which he should have answers. Such a creature as this would have no time for his ignorance, his naivety.

'You must ask them my child, it is in the Remembrance to ask them over and over again. Your race have stopped asking the straightforward questions and think the difficult ones are the ones which matter. You are deceived. The simple questions are the hardest to ask, for the answers are not found outside you but are within. Such questions need authentic humility and a genuine desire to search wherein lie the most formidable of demons. The dragons of the mind are more fierce, their serpent teeth more sharp, more poisonous than anything in the world itself. They alone will destroy your race. The Earth itself cannot hurt you - the reverse is all too true. So ask, ask my mortal of divine conception, ask.'

Thus entreated, Alexander asked the most obvious question.

'Who are you?'

'Whom do you wish me to be?'

'I don't know. I can't seem to define you, perhaps if you were to lower your cowl?'

'I think you would prefer I did not.' The voice in his head caressed his mind. 'I am what you wish and I am most of what you are. I am the yielding centre of your soul which you barely conceive. You cannot make me visible for you do not know me yet. I am human and I am clay. I am your life-force and exist concurrently within you and without. When and if you define me I will be all too visible and you will know all there is to know. You will recognise me everywhere in all that is male and female, in lust and love, in passion and relief, in experience and feeling, in taking and giving.'

'Why are you here, with me - now? Are you of here, are you a Mentor? Do you know Mnemosyne and are you of her remembrance? Why am I here in Elysium...?'

Alexander stumbled out question after question. The being allowed him to exhaust his mind and answered on L3 and drove deep into his psyche. He understood the creature would be with him while in Hades to guide him and in spite of any appearances to the contrary he was to trust implicitly any being appearing connected with her whom he would know instinctively. The meld ended and like all the others left Alexander tired and disoriented with an after-image in the retina of his mind. The creature, left her trace within him so that he was unsure whether she had implanted something of herself or activated a hitherto unawakened part of himself. He was however given no time to consider this latest extraordinary event, for no sooner had the apparition left the scene than he was suddenly aware of his physical circumstances. He had been led to the lip of a canyon, in country like the American Southwest he had left on the other side of the Sipapu. It was early morning a moment immediately before dawn. The exact second before the sun came over the edge of the horizon was preceded by a bead of light that lit his mind and again, he saw all it contained like an Aladdin's cave of enormous wealth, cluttered and tumbled, full of interest, chaotic and jumbled beyond order.

A noise to his left made him turn to see a horseman loom from the vivid white-eye of the sun, followed by several others breasting the rim of the canyon. Blinded, he could make out only vague outlines. Shading his eyes with his hand he was aware that the leading rider was coming towards him at speed. Unable to make out what was happening, his first instinct was to run, but he was aware there was no escape. He stood his ground, helpless. He felt the rush of air as the leading horse and rider brushed past him with inches to spare, followed in succession by several more. The effect was to spin him round and round as he was encircled. Ceasing to giddy him they faced their snorting steeds inwards, like markings on a clock of which he was the central point. One among them, sitting very upright, rode in towards him, his back to the sun, an ever growing shadow bathed in a golden halo.

'You stand your ground white boy!' came the even voice of Barboncito from the midst of the shadow. 'I see you made it through the Sipapu to find me beyond the river of forgetfulness. You are better than I supposed and continue to surprise me! Come, we go!'

He bent out of the glare and his strong arm lifted Alexander onto the pillion. Gripping the waist of his captor, Alexander held on as best he could as the troupe descended to the floor of the canyon at a speed to discomfort the unaccustomed. Alexander managed to notice how the dry barrenness of the landscape gave gradually to trees and cultivation the deeper they penetrated.

At length the company halted in a green clearing among peach orchards and gnarled, ancient pines among which grazed fat goats and sheep. A hotchpotch of mud covered hogans was scattered in and amongst the trees encircled by small gardens and menhir-like weathered boulders. The canyon floor was several hundred yards wide at this point and widened yet further into the distance. On either side, steep cliffs, studded with fallen rocks, some the size of houses, rose in tiers to the blue of the hanging sky.

The rest of the troupe dismounted, Barboncito with Alexander now more relaxed behind him, continued to ride through the peach grove and skirting a massive boulder which dwarfed men and horses, they passed between it and the wall of the canyon into a defile just wide enough for a horse and rider, widening after several yards into a hidden valley of such lush beauty that Alexander gasped aloud. Here were more sheep and goats, plantations of corn, cotton and several other staples. Here also was a small population of children in bright woven materials and buckskins, dotted with silver buckles sparkling in the morning.

All dead, all shades of what once was, this verisimilitude of life Alexander reminded himself, was chimera, without being, negative. How far the valley was real, he knew not. How much of it was constructed from within his own mind, and how much tangible; he had no idea. He found hard to bear the notion of the children as mere shades, as they ran so gaily after the horses shouting and laughing. From the village situated beyond a grove of apple and peach trees, women and men appeared to welcome their chief and his strange companion. Arriving at a particularly well stocked garden, Barboncito slid effortlessly from his horse and handed Alexander down. From the large hogan before which they halted several children emerged followed by two tall women.

'My Sipapu wife, her sister and my children,' explained Barboncito, handing the headstall to one of the older children.

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Watching the sunrise, from a high promontory overlooking the secret valley, intoning with Barboncito their hymn to the sun and sprinkling corn pollen in remembrance of its benevolence, Alexander barely considered how often he and his companion had thus greeted the gold of the morning. He had no sense of time passing since Barboncito brought him to his Elysian valley. If he had stopped to consider it at all he would have described himself as on an ocean of time. As a leaf on the bottom of a pool rises with its filling so his whole being had risen into an ocean of time where past, present and future were contained as a single element. No longer a linear commodity to be used, drawn from an everlasting supply on a reel somewhere ahead of him, time had changed into a rounded whole, into which he slipped as naturally as breathing.

There were no voices on the sphere in this realm to insist on his taking action and the pressure of his mission slipped away. He drifted imperceptibly into the perfect timelessness of the daily rhythm of cultivation and husbandry in the valley, punctuated by ritual remembrance of the land's gifts. He simply forgot his purpose in an ever deepening agelessness, with no mental noise to disturb the ebb and flow of the harmony of daily life. The immediacy with which he entered and accepted this world surprised him. He thought his Western mind would have rebelled against this unchanging beat of time. He basked in the pleasure of all needs met and forgot he was in a land of shades.

He worked hard in the hunt and found to his surprise he was soon able to keep up with Barboncito and his companions. He learned to recognise and track the spoor of the deer and learned the habits of the rabbit and other small mammals of the valley and desert above. He loved the rough camaraderie of the chase and learned

to wrestle his companions for the sheer joy of testing his strength and afterwards to swim in the icy mountain pools to cool his hot body. His body hardened and he derived pleasure from its developing muscularity. He helped the women and children in the fields, although he had no need and was good naturedly teased by the young men of Barboncito's band. He argued that good eating required more than just the meat of the hunt and he must pay his way in the cultivation of the wherewithal for fry-bread and beans. But they ragged him unmercifully when they realised the woman he helped most was NightChant the sister of Barboncito's wife. It was the presence of NightChant which finally anchored him in Barboncito's Sipapu world. Suborned by its timelessness, elevated by its singing rituals, and its physical beauty he was at the last captivated by her. She who seemed to embody the wraith who had met him on his entry to Elysium.

He had reached a pinnacle of physical pleasure with Marina, few women he knew were capable of offering so much sheer presence and power to be shared. NightChant offered nothing of this. The moment she softly hid from him behind the presence of her sister when he entered the valley, he was entranced and instinct took control.

The bloom of the Kinaalda was upon her. The Blessingway rite over, just before he entered her world, had brought her into young maturity, and she had entered the life-way of the familial clan led by Barboncito. She was ready for her mate. But she was shy, proud and intelligent. This young newcomer to the group was an outsider. His acceptance by her clan leader gave him stature but he was not of them. She kept him at her distance but was flattered by the attention he paid. Her sister told her not to encourage him. He knew nothing of their ways, and was of interest merely by his strangeness. So she watched him askance.

The whole clan was surprised by the speed of his learning and the depth of knowledge he soon gained of their ways. Soon some of the younger unmarried men saw him as a rival. There was unspoken but incipient jealousy in his novelty value for the young women. To claim NightChant for himself meant public competition. He was nearly ready, when he felt strong enough he would make his move.

One particularly bright morning, late in his second summer season in the valley, he rose, as did the rest of the clan before the sun to be ready to greet its rising. He made his offering of corn pollen then made his way in the clear, cold, morning air to see to the flock, accompanied by Flatfoot, his dog, a present from Barboncito's mother-in-law, Singing-Woman. He set off to corral Singing-Woman's sheep for the winter which on this particular morning would give him solitude and time to think. There were things at the back of this mind which he could not locate and which marred the almost perfect tranquillity of his existence in this place.

Unable to think clearly about any of this among his adopted clan, he set off alone with his dog. He felt part of the clan but alien. He wanted to unite completely, with no visible join, and just be. He would take NightChant in the manner of a Brave and become a complete clan member. But something held him back, was it just his foreignness? There was something else, a sense of task which he could not fully grasp. He felt a need to act, to do something that seemed important. He needed to think more clearly. The clan had taught him the value of thinking before acting. In the group, the unintended consequences of rash action might compromise their existence. Much thought was needed, much discussion and communication with the Holy People, much travel along the Chantways. Decisions reached thus were the responsibility of all, the consequences everyone's, including the Holy Ones.

Of all the clan he had no family. Was this the problem?

He lived alone in an unused hogan. Barboncito made him a blood brother of his clan in an elaborate ceremony attended by the entire group. Publicly he was an equal member and part of Barboncito's family, under the watchful eye of Singing-Woman. In practice he would always be a 'bilagaana'- an interloper. He was aware he was not the only young male to live outside a family group. Other young men from time to time left the overcrowded hogans to live singly or in small bands in open country until they finally settled down with wives, possessions and mothers-in-law. But, as they made him acutely aware, even for them, the herd animals

remained a focus even for the most independently minded and they continued their familial duties of stock-rearing and hunting. They also developed their iron and silver-work. Most importantly they developed skills in the ritual Chantways and sand-painting. Periods of being alone were no barrier to acceptance if you maintained your duties to the clan, binding you to the web of mutual interrelations with it and the Holy People.

But without family, he was marked off as a stranger. To be of them, fully accepted, he needed a family of his own. A wife, Mother-in-law, land and animals. To bring disgrace on the family was hardly forgivable, but to have no family was equivalent to original sin, conceptually impossible and so beyond the ken of all the clan. Hence his public adoption which satisfied the conceptual difficulty but which still left the inexplicable mystery of his existence. He needed a Shima - a mother to anchor him to the clan, to provide pathways to the past, to give him substance. He had to marry. A blood brother, he had access to all the obligations and codes of conduct of the clan, so marriage was possible. He was ready, but for this nagging at the back of his mind. He was absorbed into the world of the Din. He felt himself so much of them he wanted no notion of himself as other. He strode as lightly as they through the scrub of the floor of the canyon. He understood how to maintain the fragile balance of the world in which each clan member was his or her own centre. The world flowed equally and separately through each person and came together, to enhance the group. All perceptions were shared to show a common face to the Holy People as they interceded with the earth on their behalf. He sensed the struggle each brought to combine life into wholeness - into Hozjo - balance and harmony.

Alexander struggled and at last lost consciousness of the self as separate from the sage-brush beneath his softly shod feet, or the towering rocks which thrust through him to his sky, his crystal air, their world, the clan's world. The lizard warming in the risen sun was in him as was the sheep grazing among the crags. He felt all this and was ready. But he could not let go altogether, though he wished with his whole heart that he could.

In this mood he came to tend Singing-Woman's herd of fat sheep, to bring them down from the far crevices and blind-canyons into the safety and relative warmth of the valley for the coming winter. He sniffed the air and felt Flatfoot's busy nose pick up the scent of sheep. The majority of the flock had stayed together, but counting them he found some twenty short. He sent the dog ahead of him to seek them out. He and the dog were a team, they scrambled about on ledges, rummaged in crevices, one by one nudging the missing animals into the open. Flatfoot skilfully urging them to merge with their brethren at the valley bottom. Between them they found the lost sheep with Singing-Woman's mark and a few goats belonging to other family groups, which he rounded up separately in a makeshift corral. The work finished, except for the drive home. Alexander and Flatfoot made their way to a convenient platform of rock where they commanded a view of the herd. They both squatted and Flatfoot gawped eagerly as Alexander brought from his belt-pouch a hunk of fry-bread, a piece of melon and a portion of dried mutton, enough for man and dog.

Perched above the valley floor, the unchanged land of centuries enterted him with the air he breathed. The view filled his gaze, the touch of the soft wind ruffled his hair and caressed his skin with its edge of winter cold, a notice of snows to come. The world flowed through him and he merged with it. Transported he remained motionless for a long while. Sounds formed in his throat and without conscious awareness he was chanting a Blessingway in tune with the beat of the universe. This was Hozjo, perfect equilibrium, complete harmony. Time past, present and future gathered in one place, endlessly in purity of being. Thus lost, he was disturbed from somewhere far into himself. Unbidden, there came an awareness of other feelings. His own self, his essential difference, a life-force from another place and time threatened to separate from the wholeness and endanger the equilibrium. It grew and fragmented his state of pure being like clouds give way to atmospheric winds. Silently and unseen these thoughts broke the idyll, turned it ragged and brought him to full consciousness. A battle with the self had recommenced. The full reality of his marginal place in this landscape and the life of the clan came back to him.

As his mind re-focussed, he saw NightChant below him at some distance running towards where he and

Flatfoot were sitting. Her head was held high, he feet twinkled in the brush. In the profound stillness of the valley he heard the jingle of her ornaments, the flash of silver and turquoise at her waist, wrists and neck. Dressed in blue and aquamarine she darted like a kingfisher, as beautiful and as evasive. He knew she was not running to him, would that she were. He realised with a pang she was reliving her Kinaalda, running the timelines of her ancestors, following their footsteps, going as far as she was able to enter their world, to bring the best of the past into the present to pass on to the daughters she would bear. She ran hard, proudly, glad to be there, to do it, to be able. Watching, a long moan rose from his breast and he stood like a coyote baying at the sky. NightChant stopped, her keen ears located the sound, puzzled she saw him, and stood still, her dark head cocked slightly on one side.

He thought she might become frightened and go, but she stood as if waiting for him to approach. He watched her for a long moment. She was not beautiful in the conventional sense, she was too stocky, the planes of her face too angular. But, flushed from her running, he saw in her the wisdom and pride of her people, a symbol of the centuries of her race, the emblem of harmony and mutual respect for the power of the human group in partnership and proper awe of the complexity of both people and the world given to them.

No perception of his mission remained available to his consciousness, his desire only was to become fully part of NightChant's world and for his nagging self to disappear absorbed by all she represented - if only his individuality would leave him alone.

He was fixed on his ledge unable to move in any direction. To go towards her was to set up a whole train of possibilities all of which would lead him further into the clan. He was held back by the persistent sensation of other possibilities. Tormented by indecision, he stayed put.

Flatfoot, for whom such things were unnecessary, seeing the girl, ran off down the canyon barking delightedly, his tail stirring up the dust like a propeller. His simple greeting had the effect of breaking the tension and thus forced to acknowledge the reality of the moment, Alexander followed Flatfoot to make his own greeting.

'I saw you running,' he said simply, embarrassed, and awkward.

'You should have turned your head, Alex-Andre - Protector'

He had given them the meaning of his name, which she spoke in the fashion of the clan, to emphasise the meaning and thus the identity of the bearer with the clan.

'I run for myself not as a spectacle for you!'

She laughed and ran off with the dog barking in fun at her heels. She stopped suddenly, turned and came towards him.

'Who do you protect? It seems it is we who protect you from being lost!' It was a girlish taunt. He ignored it.

'Where are you going now I've interrupted you,' he said. She did not answer, instead she came close to him, challenging him.

'Why did you shout out like that just now?' He found he could not make direct eye contact.

'There are things I want,' he said. 'But don't know how to get.'

'Such as me?' She stood very close to him. He felt her breath on his face, her warm femininity seemed to fill the space between them. There was nothing he would rather do than grasp her closely and lose himself. He



was prevented by the same dissonance which had made him cry out. This instant of his hesitation was too long for the moment to be grasped and his fate was sealed. To make his claim of her would be to fix him in this valley for ever. He could see no reason whatever to deny this craving. It was everything he wanted, his heart's desire. What scruple made him hesitate for that too long a second?

'You must struggle for me, I have other men of valour with good families, big herds and skills to make me silver buckles.'

She laughed gaily and coquettishly ran off in the direction from which she came. At the same moment a group of four horsemen came from a side-canyon, one of whom detached himself from the group and chased after NightChant, coming alongside he swept her up into the saddle and rode off, her silver laughter following behind like a cape. Two others of the group galloped after them leaving the last, Barboncito, alone with Alexander. He dismounted and taking Alexander by the arm, walked him and his horse in the same direction as the others. Flatfoot had already set off, making his own small dust-storm in his wake.

'You have rivals - they will be displeased that you had her to yourself for so long this morning. They will think you came here early to catch her alone. Are you ready to challenge for her? You will have to out-do them if you are to have her. A worthy prize don't you think?'

'I'm not sure I should try.' Alexander faced Barboncito.

'It is what you want, is it not? It is what you came to the Sipapu to find didn't you?'

'I don't know I can't remember ....Yes, of course it is.'

'So, is it the challenge you fear?'

'Partly, but there's something else stopping me.'

They walked slowly, side by side, companions. Barboncito careful to say or do nothing to damage the illusion of permanence Alexander attributed to his clan membership. Barboncito's instructions were clear. For Alexander to remain on this side of the Sipapu in Elysium with his clan and to guide him in their ways. He was already more than half-way to being fully accepted. Marriage would take him past the point of no return, and the rest would be accomplished by Singing-Woman and NightChant. Responsibility for his own family group would complete his embedding. Alexander needed no encouragement. The family and clan, the life-way, ritual and wholeness of the experience filled all the empty parts of his psyche and clarified his confusions. All he had to do was to slip gracefully and with all appropriate dignity into the life-path of his host community. There were no ambiguities for them and as a full member so there would be none for him.

For Barboncito it was a kind of superlative form of computer hacking. To have his own world enter into the mind of another and for it to drive his will. Locked in the clan, time for Alexander, son of Zeus, will stop, as it had for all in the realms of Chronos and Hades. The road would then be clear for the next step. There was no place for Alexander's doubt in this realm, no place for any activity to promote change. Barboncito thus alarmed at Alexander's hesitation was careful not to reawaken his memory of his mission.

'Of what do you have doubts? I'm certain NightChant will have you. You will of course have to convince her of your superiority, but I will help you. If you are worried about Singing-Woman, leave her to me.' At this Alexander seemed to brighten. Barboncito pursued his advantage.

'I have spoken with NightChant, she thinks of you all the time. She has made it her goal to bring you to fully into us through her. The rest is all teasing. She has no doubt you will beat off any challenge. Who do you fear most? I know them all, I will tell you their weaknesses.'

'That would not be right!' Barboncito was pleased to see Alexander respond vigorously. 'I'll handle the others in my own way, I don't want any unfair advantage. Not that I wouldn't find it handy,' he grinned. 'But you know full well I'll never be accepted if I can't win her fairly.' He hesitated for a long moment, before adding quietly. 'But that's not the main problem, the main problem is me.'

Thoroughly alarmed now, Barboncito's well practised inscrutability needed his full control.

'I don't follow you, my brother. Here is all you desire, a little effort only is needed to achieve it. Eternal harmony, fullness and completion is yours. I understand the prize is so large that you may find the means harder than they really are when there is so much at stake, but you are more than capable. You have fallen in with the ways of the clan and have developed your skills as if born to them. You track as well as any rival, You are skilful with the knife, you ride without fear and with ability, and above all you love us and our land with all your soul. You have a more thoroughly conscious conception of our world than anyone born to it. This is what NightChant loves in you. The others take for granted what you know to be special. There is a light in you missing in the others. This will serve you in the struggle for her. It will carry you to heights of achievement unavailable to my other brethren. It will make you our leader in due time. The world of the Sipapu and you will be one, home at last.'

'Oh I want it! I want to make the step. I was so close to NightChant just now, all I had to do was touch her and lose myself. It is all I want so much that it hurts. But I can't - I just can't!'

'I don't understand my brother, you can, just do it, reach out your hand and enter through NightChant, She will guide you, she knows. Do it. NightChant will choose freely, she has the right. We need you to make good...'  
Barboncito stopped short. His eagerness was beginning to show through. Fortunately Alexander seemed not to hear him.

Barboncito changed tack and rather than offer explanations pushed Alexander into offering his own.

'What can't you do? What stops you holding out your hand to her if you wish it so much?'

'I don't know in a conscious sense, but it's me. There is a bit of me that will not give up itself to anything exterior, however magnificent or beautiful. I want to let go with all my heart and soul, but there's a hard centre in me that won't let me go.'

'You mean you're not ready, you need longer?'

'No, however long I take, I know I won't let myself go, let myself go entirely, offered up in exchange. It's just not negotiable, I can't let it go. It's not that I wouldn't, I would do it now, without a second's hesitation, it's that I can't, I won't let myself.'

Barboncito was exasperated and very worried. His task to suborn Alexander into the consciousness of the clan and to lose him there for eternity was cracking before his eyes. This white boy was refusing the best offer he could have wished for. The offer of redemption never before made in this realm was here on a plate and he couldn't take it. Still it was not yet over, the desire was great. Whatever motivated the remaining scruples, if he could sustain and develop the desire he could yet push him finally him over the edge.

## Chapter 10

Zeus walked quickly through the scrub on the track from Chora to Psathi on the little island of Ios. He liked a little exercise now and again. He had a lot on his mind and walking helped him to consider his burden. Under his massive straw hat, the brow of The Lord of the Present was furrowed. A storm threatened the Cyclades, but just held off. His anger, deep and sad, he could not dispel. He did not wish to do what he did. He would have Gaia otherwise. He would have mortals otherwise. He would have Yahweh gone or melded with him. He would have Chronos and Hades out of their realms, with him and Yahweh - gone from this race of mortals. But nothing was as he wanted and so he must act. The nearer he got to Psathi the clouds cleared a little, a light, welcome rain fell on the high ground accompanied by a token flash of lightening. He strode onto the terrace to find his wife in close conversation with Themis. Sensing his arrival, they ceased their mind-meld ready to greet him. Zeus a-walking was bad news. He was up to something, something he kept off the 'sphere, working on his own.

'Wife, where is Persephone? Has Hermes brought her as you said? Be quick woman, I don't have eternity to wait!'

Hera, wise to his ways, was not at all abashed at his brusqueness, but had taken the precaution of ensuring Persephone's presence. If the Master were to dabble, she needed to be close to the action, there was always something a resourceful goddess could do if she knew what was going on.

'Hermes has brought her My Lord. He has news of Alexander. You know well Persephone is here out of time. The harvest may be affected badly. She is justifiably wrathful and she has brought Demeter...'

Zeus cut her short with a wave of his arm and the sky darkened ominously.

'Let them enter, I will converse.' Hera despatched a waiting nymph to fetch the guests, and offered her husband a comfortable chaise-long from which to greet them. He waved it away and paced up and down the terrace, finally he leaned over the balcony with his back to the company as they assembled. The sky overhead was blue-black.

'We await your pleasure Lord of the Sky,' Hera announced. He caught the sarcasm in her tone, but refrained from loosing the thunderbolt he fingered beneath his robe. Deep within he found her amusing, ultimately they were all so. They were designed for their purposes. Their responsibilities, clearly defined, they fulfilled their various destinies with consummate artistry, vigour and creativity. He admired them, every one. Their freedom of action however, had its reverse side. He had to be on top of his job. His strategy, based on his powers of divination, founded on both knowledge and intuition had to be tip-top. Omniscience was not enough. He fretted about his relationship with Yahweh. The World needed both of them, but Yahweh was so exasperatingly exclusive - no gods before me - was an explicit mission statement and excluded dialogue. He needed to get Hades and Chronos in partnership with Yahweh if his Grand Plan was to have any chance of success and both Gaia and mortals were to survive. This was not something he could do himself, if he could he would have done it already. This was the hardest part. He was happy to devolve power, revelled in fact in delegation of authority, would give it to anyone who asked. So long as he kept the ultimate authority. Unlike Yahweh he didn't require that people or other gods eschewed all others in favour of him alone. There was plenty of creation to go round. He didn't ask much, demanded nothing more than they kept their activity within what was reasonable. The ultimate assertiveness of this last race was too much. They overbalanced everything and used Yahweh as their excuse. He and Yahweh would have to have it out, before 2012, before it was too late. It bothered him that Yahweh did not seem to care if these people died out, maybe he would recreate them as he had done once before after that unnecessary and silly flood, which he had copied from Zeus anyway. It had done no good then and it would do no good now, and he, Zeus, would have to go through the whole creation rigmarole again. The very idea was tediousness personified. More had to change than an intensified belief in His Oneness. Meanwhile his brother and father, plotted in the underworld to wrest the

highest office from him. One thing Yahweh had in his favour was lack of family to get in His way. To have a clear run at things would be marvellous, except he would himself have to become a Oneness which he could not abide. So he couldn't get rid of either camp. The existence of Yahweh out there encouraged Hades, down there. If Hades won in the end, time would cease. There would be no future life and nothing would ever change. If Yahweh won, spirit would take over from flesh and blood and there would be no reality to conjure with, no curious life-force to enjoy. There would be no fun! Only he could bring them together. Only he could persuade them to leave their realms to mortals to work out for themselves leaving gods to depart for other playgrounds, new worlds, new peoples, new beginnings. This Earth was played-out for gods of every kind as of course was proper in the creation game.

Nevertheless delegating the responsibility of Gaia to this race of destructive people was a great risk. What if in the end they would see Gaia die by default than effectively tackle the challenge? Unable to see further than the end of their poking noses, they would fall off the world's edge while arguing about whose fault it was. Such a scenario fell right into the lap of the nether alliance. Of course the gods could start the whole thing again with a sixth new race of mortals. That way nothing would fundamentally change; though there would be the opportunity to do things better: except this time he was not prepared to play the game again. Maybe he would simply retire altogether and leave the field to Hades and Yahweh. But he could not bear such an outcome either, Olympus was made of sterner stuff.

On and on he mused, the only straightforward way out that continued to make sense was for this fifth race to be the last. For them to survive on their own or die out and save Gaia. The ultimate decision he had delegated to them. But first they had to recognise what it meant. Hence the deadline. But first they had to believe it. Not just think about it, or come to it in their own time. They had one chance only, to face up to their own potential to be their own gods. Only one of their own who understood fully, could help them do it. In the meantime Hades and Yahweh had to co-operate with him to give them the room they needed and not to interfere. All three of them would have to give up their respective claims on this race.

JNO was doing well, gathering together the means of communication so people could act with true knowledge. Alexander was the current problem. He knew the task for a simple human was impossible. A son of his, a genuine hero, might have a fighting chance. He'd done some good work among mortals by this means before, in different times though, but things had changed and he was less sanguine about Alexander's potential in these days. He wondered if the lad was getting all the help he needed. Zeus' inability to travel the sphere in Hades meant he had to rely on those few who travelled across the dividing line. His exasperation was acute. The lad had to get to Hades in his own time and there was only Hermes, Persephone and Hecate to call on. Pan would travel anywhere but was too unreliable for serious work. He also fretted that he had no final control of the Morae Sisters nor the Erinye Girls, the latter being more likely to listen to Hecate than to him. While he could rely on Hecate, she was the sworn enemy of Hera. Yahweh had it made, having no father nor mother, and no family to get underfoot. No wonder he sat smug in his heaven. He couldn't bring Hecate to Psathi because of Hera, and couldn't communicate with her on the 'sphere across the frontier with Hades. Still he knew he could rely on her to support Alexander. She was ever his ally. He needed good information about Alexander's progress before he finished his plans for Yahweh; but first Hades had to be in the bag.

He turned to the assembled company. Persephone stood proud and angry. Zeus' summons before the third of her time in Hades was properly up for the year was unprecedented. She had had to come without Hades knowing and return as clandestinely. This was no easy task and had meant asking favours of Hecate, which she knew would mean paying her back in some way, like as not unpleasantly. There was also the early spring to re-work later on her full return. Early warming followed by the inevitable frost on her restoration to Hades would have a bad effect on agriculture. Coupled with the effects of global warming, the effect on the suffering of Gaia was less than helpful. If Persephone was angry, Demeter was beside herself. It was time her brother let well alone and stopped interfering in her relationship with their daughter. Had he not conspired at enough trouble with Hades in the past. He may have always regretted it and he should know the first rule of holes by now - when you're in one, stop digging! She and Persephone had a perfectly adequate working relationship,

no thanks to him and here he was again dabbling.

Themis and Hera were forced to take Zeus' part. Committed to his strategy and largely ignorant of his private plans they followed his line, if not always knowing what his overall goals might be.

An L3 meld ensued which as usual ranged widely in time and space.

Demeter: (unable to forgive or forget his connivance at the abduction of her daughter Persephone to become wife of Hades) - So we are here, my brother. At your Lordly call. We cannot refuse but we can be revenged on uncalled for imperiousness. We await your reasons for such disruptions to our orderly arrangements.' (She drew pictures of fields of corn stricken by the early spring and of the efforts needed by both her and Persephone to ensure enough harvest for the coming summer)

Zeus: Save me from my complaining family. Sister, daughter when did I ever do anything to deliberately harm you. You know full well there would have been no problems with my brother if you Persephone had had the sense not to eat the fateful pomegranate seeds. (An mighty row ensued in which Zeus was mentally pelted with aeons of pent-up ire from sister and daughter, Demeter, usually pleasant natured, was a fury in the defence of her raped and duped daughter.)

Hera: These are old and completed things. We must look forward, Gaia, our mother calls out for our help. Quarrelling is of no avail.

Demeter: (Drew the assembled group into a vision of Gaia before the abduction of Persephone by Hades - just to make the point - and a vision of her in her current situation) - You see well enough what is wrought. Do I not know better than all but She, what is done. But sister you are right, there is no benefit in quarrelling.

Zeus: Demeter I must remind you that you were not invited to this discussion, you chose to come of your own will - and before you start again, let me also say I am glad you have come as partner to Persephone. I need you both.

Persephone: I remind you my Father I am here out of time.

Zeus: This I regret, I did not know when I asked Hermes where you were. The changes to Gaia are developing so fast I had no way of knowing. (A vision of climate changes, crop failures, floods and hurricanes brought them all to a more sober frame of mind and concentrated the meld on the pressing issues).

Hermes: What of Alexander?

(Hermes opened his mind to those present so they could see for themselves his meeting with Alexander up to the incident with the helmet. Persephone, the only one linked with the Hadean network, continued the story from her own perspective and via her link with Hecate, drew them into the mind-world of Hades, a place none of them save she and Hermes had visited).

Zeus: This world of my brother's is truly bizarre. It seems we all see it differently depending on our view of life itself. (He indicated a profound sympathy for Persephone and demanded and received forgiveness for his lack of awareness of the difficulty of life forms surviving in that atmosphere). I thought there was nothing I did not know, but Hades has kept his realm from me too successfully. Persephone, my child, You must explain how my son will do there.

Persephone: He has Hecate to lead him. Hades knows of his existence through the Navajo. Pan follows him, but dare not use any powers or he will be seen on the wrong side. Everyone knows he visits Hades unofficially, he believes he has some right since the somewhat exaggerated reports of his death. Hades doesn't

care as long as he keeps his nose clean. Barboncito is a problem. Hades is trying to suborn as many indigenous leaders as possible in the development of his bid for Gaia. He is working hard to convince them that they will be able to reverse time and bring things back to where they were before the Europeans dominated the world. JNO is unwittingly the cause of this, their Fourth World company has been infiltrated by Hades through Barboncito and the link between him and the network Fourth World controls is in his hands. JNO does not know this and Manny Kanuho is also ignorant. Barboncito is the only link and he is almost at the point of ensuring that Alexander never returns. He has almost forgotten the knowledge given by Themis and Eilithia. He needs an input from Mnemosyne quickly or he will pass over permanently into the nether realm and be useless to us.

Hera: What of Hecate? You say she leads him.

Persephone: In the form of a young Navajo woman. She will tempt him to become one of them and hope he sees through the deception. It's part of his learning to see this dissonance and act on his knowledge.

Themis: If my brother Chronos as a fellow Titan could be persuaded to meet me, we might engage him on our side. I would undertake the task. (This is merely the barest essence of a breathtakingly bold suggestion. Up to this point the idea of the nether-alliance being split was absurd. There had been ten years of total war before Zeus was able to banish his abominable father in Tartarus. It had been Hades, via his own hatred of his brother for posting him to that region, who had released Chronos' bondage and as an ancient king gave him the kingdom of Elysium to rule. Contact between them was minimal, but Chronos was grateful, and resentful of the usurpation of his powers of Time by Zeus. The very thought of the barest possibility of Chronos back in the world was treason. The meld became a clamour. Zeus had to exert all his strength to shut them up. Zeus conjured the history of the Ten-Years War, followed by a vision of Chronos devouring his children. Hera visibly shuddered remembering. Zeus was gentle with her, as he had not shared the same fate).

Zeus: If Themis thinks the unthinkable there must be wisdom in it, we will hear her, but before she speaks I want total security on the 'sphere. Fetch Hephaestos, and tell him to fix it. (He was duly summonsed and arranged for the meld to transcend L3. and take place in a remote corner of Time where it was unable to be overheard, to make certain he re-ordered the connecting timelines to by-pass the area. This would only hold for a short period, as the disconnection would eventually be discovered by assiduous watchers as a blank. They should spend as little time there as possible).

Zeus: We will be brief - speak Aunt and to the point!

Themis: Hera was right to say there are old and completed things. Such is the continued banishment of Chronos. Since is the rise of Yahweh. What need now of our subjugation of Time? Ever since Zeus' challenge to the future of the fifth race of mortals, it is clear to me Time is what they need. Working for, not against them. Chronos in Hades is more of a threat to us than Chronos in the world. He argues that we have used Time badly to allow the abuse of Gaia. He would use it differently to ensure she can never be harmed by reversing and stopping Time from enabling change. Gaia would never be harmed again. It's a very seductive proposition and doubtless Chronos is wooed by the idea of regaining his powers. After all it was he who tried to stop change by devouring its potential. Am I right Persephone?

Persephone: I am not privy to Hades' discussions with his Father. They are of recent origin and have occurred place only when I am here among you. But from what I can glean from my husband I think you may not be far from the truth.

Themis: Well then, we have more to offer. My hunch is that Chronos is tired of Elysium. Even he has understood that change is life and that Time is more than time past and time present. The future has to be allowed to unfold robed in the splendour of the past and the glory of the present.

Hera: A hunch isn't worth the risk even from you Themis. What if you're wrong?

Themis: I've considered that. What matters is that I sound him out, not that he is released. As resident in Elysium he has the right to come to Earth when he wishes. So far he has not exercised his right, believing reasonably that he would be met at the threshold and prevented by the implacability of the ban of Zeus. (They all knew as a matter of course one of the main reasons for the Chronosphere being unable to cross the Hadean boundary was to ensure Chronos could not cross without setting up such a din that all the forces of the Pantheon would be mobilised immediately).

Without the forces to engage Zeus he stays put and conspires with Hades. He would gain more by joining forces with us in the struggle for the involvement of Yahweh and the bringing round of Hades. That way he has his release from boredom and a share in the glory of success.

Demeter: I don't think I could stand the knowledge of him present ever again. Even as a reformed character. You weren't swallowed by him Themis, it isn't something you forget.

Zeus: She's right, it's unthinkable, and about Time, I've given this miserable race enough of it to hang themselves, I don't see how Chronos on Earth will make any difference to them, Hades of course must come now their timeline is defined and there's no going back on that!

Themis: No need to be alarmed. I will meet him on the threshold and talk there. If there's no deal, that's where I'll leave him. I'll take Ares and Athena, for additional comfort. He'll not grapple with them and escape. My main difficulty is to get him ready to talk.

Hera: Persephone, can you manage to persuade him?

Persephone: It's unlikely I'll be allowed to get near him. Hecate could do it perhaps, but she's tied up with Alexander and he's going to be a handful, I hear the Erinyes are on to him and will act depending how he handles Hecate's test. At present it's touch and go. Barboncito is very persuasive and he has Hades behind him.

Hera: Meaning?

Persephone: The effect of Elysium is forgetfulness and substitution of a rosy image of the past. Alexander is on the point of turning remembrance into a complete state of mind and forgetting the future. The spirit of Lethe works on all there. Even Chronos. Which incidentally, gives credence to Themis' idea of his ennui. Hecate as is her wont, will grant Alexander his heart's desire but he first must know it.

Zeus: I can rely on your training?

(Hera drew a picture of all the inputs she, Eilithia, Themis and Mnemosyne had made to the development of Alexander's mind. She refrained from referring to the elements of self-doubt he persisted in carrying with him but showed plainly his grip on self-hood was in conflict with his tendency for self-denial and possible loss of his own personality. Alexander's' potential for doubt was not lost on Zeus, who knowing all, felt the burden press him hard).

Zeus: He owns his own mind, so he must choose. On such a thread rests a third of my plan for this race. Would there were another way! I must rely on Hecate and your training! I must prepare for Yahweh. Hera you have things ordered in JNO. So - it comes together, Haphaestos tells me so. There must be no mistakes or delays. Persephone get you to Hecate and see she gets the boy to Hades. Help him with those Furies, the Erinyes. Themis - find and sound Chronos, but be very careful. Keep Athena and Ares by you but confer with Prometheus first and be sure Hephhaestos is near to repair any damage to the Chronosphere. Timing is the key

to our success. It must come together at precisely the right moment.

The meld on L3 plus came to an end. All departed save Hera and Zeus. They stood side by side leaning on the white stone balustrade of the terrace. The sky was still dark. In the lightness at its rim, a grove of olive trees were etched in the yellow brightness of the atmosphere, a promise of sunshine. The storm directly overhead would not break this time. Zeus, a little larger than life, raised a thoughtful visage to the horizon.

'Hera,' he called her name softly on L1.

'Yes my Lord,' she acknowledged.

'You think I do wrong, my cuckoo, you wish things were not as they are - do you not? His meaning was sharp on her mind.

'Husband, you know what you do.'

'That's not what I asked. Never mind, I know you well, and what you do is good. I know you will not fight me, even though you disapprove.'

Hera shuddered at the memory of her only, but massive treason and the consequences. Her wrists ached at the thought.

'The boy has my net still, he continued. 'I will make my own contact with Hecate.'

'Husband, I cannot prevent what you will do, but I would advise you leave him to himself. Hecate, is your friend and his. Hades knows of him and will not thank you for...' She hesitated, she did not want to give him the idea she thought his dabbling dangerous or accuse him of interference,'...too much help. You must rely on your allies. Why delegate if you cannot handle the consequences? You have the loyalty of the family, you cannot do everything yourself. You see JNO does well with Hephaestos' and my help. I am not fond of Hecate but trust her to do well by you. Persephone is reliable and Themis has never failed. I find the notion of Chronos back with us too hateful for words, but desperate times are upon us and Themis is always right.'

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## BOOK THREE



## Chapter 1

Franklin T. Colwyn was frustrated and worried. The invitation to Ios through Matsuko had almost been forgotten. It was years ago. The invitation, when it finally came was nevertheless real and clear. He was to arrive incognito and overland from London which forbade the use of the McManus Corporation jet and helicopter. Invitations from the Dodona's were too rare to risk finding the door closed if he failed to comply. He had waited a long time for his original invitation to be confirmed. Things were pretty bad in many places. It wasn't safe to travel overland. Only migrants and the dispossessed, those with no choice did so and they were left to the dubious assistance of the UNPEX police and the military. It did not do to ask too many questions about their methods of control. Those with money travelled exclusively by air, never leaving their security patrolled living zones.

He wasn't sure he ought to go. Such travel was dangerous, while things were largely under control - you never knew. Years ago in the eighties as a young newspaperman he had got himself from A-B under his own steam in often difficult circumstances. However once the initial shock of so imperious an invitation had subsided he recognised the Dodona's had issued a challenge and began to enjoy the idea, although he was sure, as before, he would find the reality less than fun until after the event. He had reported the particularly nasty Afghan war of the Russians from the side of the Mujehadin, and was no stranger to danger. He could travel in dodgy situations again. Only this time the environmental situation was unprecedented and he was twenty years older. It would be nice though to get out of the office into the real world again.

In Athens he found it impossible to get transport to Ios. The journey from Munich had been difficult. There were no trains and wheeled transport was either commandeered by the military under UN supervision or was full of coastal refugees being managed, more or less by the UN Police who were filling camp after camp with anyone they caught without the right papers. He had finally managed to wangle a lift from a journalist and cameraman from his own paper covering the arduous journeys made by legal and illegal refugees across Europe from the inundation in the South Eastern part of the Mediterranean and further afield.

Contrary to expectations the journey through Croatia, Serbszka and Bosnia had been tolerable. Although there was obvious great distress, as far as he could see the UN was doing an efficient and humane job and the military were surprisingly helpful if weary, and therefore brusque - like the rest of the world they were anticipating worse to come.

At present the refugees themselves were still relatively well organised, the camps and the food rations were effectively managed and apart from individual and sporadic outbreaks of violence and disease, the UN Police and the Red-Cross had things under reasonable control. He wondered how long this would last. He was struck by the 'Dunkirk Spirit' of most people he ran across. They seemed to recognise that a catastrophe was a catastrophe, and everyone was in the same boat. He considered how different it had been a decade ago when the former Yugoslavia had torn itself apart when the cause of the catastrophe was clear. He considered the psychology of natural, versus people-made disaster as their Landrover bucked its weary way to Athens. They were unmolested, contrary to the horror stories he read about unprotected travellers in his own papers daily. Everyone knew the disaster was somehow not entirely 'natural.' Everyone was somehow implicated in the blame, after all everybody had driven cars, and burned fossil fuels. Given the crisis, the consensus was that the Authorities were doing their best.

According to all reports, people in the flooded areas of the Northern Mediterranean were doing better by far than their counterparts in Egypt over the water and further East in Bangladesh, and his journey confirmed this. He was however concerned at the numbers of Asiatic people he saw on the road. He felt that things were only just holding and there was more going on under the surface than he was seeing, or being allowed to see. The coming wave of Southern refugees would swamp even the most organised efforts.

The man at Cyclades Ferries, a run-down operation contacted in desperation, had two small fishing-boats to his fleet. One was out of commission and the other was booked until the end of the week by a group from the UN Environment Programme in a hurry to get to Crete. He silently wished them luck, relieved he was not on board. He had tried all the other available carriers and despite offering fistfuls of Euro's, all was to no avail. There was no regular ferry, the last great storm had sunk most of the Mediterranean fleet, and damaged the few ferries left afloat. The immediate collapse of the tourist trade in the Eastern Mediterranean did not warrant their repair. The few who voyaged were locals in desperate need to maintain life on the islands by fetching and carrying for themselves from the mainland.

Meanwhile Athens, and the other cities and towns on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean were preparing for the flotilla of small boats from the South, which even now arrived in ever increasing numbers, seeking shelter on mainland Europe. Tension was mounting with the sea-levels and was set to finish off what the latest freak hurricane had started. There was not a beach worthy of the name left on the whole Mediterranean coastline. Had the Cyclades been less mountainous, they too would have disappeared along with a number of their more lowly sisters.

He walked over to his hotel balcony and gazed out over the remnants of the harbour and remembered from his youth the bustling port. The streets of rickety hotels of ill repute and the coming and going of colourful local caiques, larger cargo vessels, ferries to the islands and sailors of various navies on shore leave. He remembered sleeping rough for a few drachmas on the flat roof of a hotel on a balmy September night in '63, not far from the one he now occupied.

The Piraeus of the triremes, Phoenicians and the Argonauts was a sorry sight. Foul, slick and grey-foaming seawater, filtered into shattered streets, lapped greedily at makeshift landing-areas of broken buildings, washed in and out the cavities and broken teeth of fallen masonry. From time to time a weak summer-sun gamely tried to penetrate the grey skies suited to more northerly lands.

His thoughts were interrupted by the unexpected shrill of the telephone by his bed. Maybe one of the carriers had found transport for him. The voice was curt, husky with a tinge of irony and a quaintly old fashioned manner of speech.

'Yo man, you the dude goin' to Ios?' Colwyn confirmed the query. 'Like I gotta boat can go there man. You got the spondoolicks? Hey - Like, straight away? Huh?' came the voice.

'What kind of boat and how much? When can we go? and ...,'

'Hey man, cool it baby! You wanna go to Ios?'

'Sure I want to go there. How do you know that's what I want?'

'You like-er-payin' a visit to that Dodonna chick?'

'I'm not prepared to talk over the 'phone, where can we meet?'

'Hey man, cut the cloak and dagger stuff, I'm strictly legit, well almost.' Colwyn heard the snigger in the voice.

'Five hundred Euros man, and you're the only passenger. Okay? You into this shit man? I gotta know like now, you ain't the only dude wantin' a ride. I can get more from them UN guys but like I don't wanna be loooked over too close by them. Incognito's my bag man.'

'How do you know about me?' asked Colwyn. He wondered if he was being spied on by UNPEX for some

reason. In the absence of a better opportunity he said. 'I might take up the offer, What's your name? I'll meet you first.'

'There's a joint called Kafenion Thalassa on the block where your hotel is, meet me in the back room there in five minutes - you'll know me when you see me - dig?' The caller hung up.

Colwyn packed his suitcase, checked out of the hotel and made his way to the Thalassa, it was not hard to find, its name written in Greek and Roman script on a faded green board over greasy windows, streaked with the clammy fall-out from numerous sweaty bodies. He had to push hard at the door which had swollen in the damp atmosphere and was stuck in the jamb requiring significant effort to get it open. His attempt at a discrete entrance was confounded utterly as he fell, rather than passed unnoticed, into a long, high room, lit dimly by unwashed strip-lights, one of which flickered unceasingly. Regaining his dignity he noted the barman lounging on the grubby bar, looking him up and down with obvious curiosity. A group, probably seamen by their dress, sat at the table nearest the window, drinking retsina from an aluminium container. The back of the room was in almost total obscurity. He felt all eyes on him.

Until this point of his journey his obvious status as an international business-man had been useful with the military and civil authorities who had control over the travelling public. His McManus identity card had been a *laisser-passer* smoothing rights of way in what otherwise in all likelihood, would have been impossible situations. Here, in the depths of Piraeus, he felt highly exposed. To find his quarry, and trying to be inconspicuous, he made his way as nonchalantly as possible to the far depths of the room.

'Hey man, you gotta be Colwyn!' The low voice came from the very darkest corner. As his eyes became accustomed to the atmosphere he made out the form of a small, bent individual. Such light as there was, caught on whitely grinning teeth. The figure motioned him to a chair and leaning forward brought a hairy face too close to his own. Colwyn winced at the mixture of aniseed and garlic which assailed his nostrils. At this point he felt like a bit part in a 'B' movie. All his instincts told him the whole setting was ridiculous. Only the need to get to Ios and his total inability to find any available alternative transport prevented him from leaving. However, there was something intriguing about the bent creature with the silly voice. He gave off an earthiness which held the interest, a kind of authenticity and integrity which made him hard to ignore, in case he did or said something important, not to be missed.

Colwyn's travels overland had brought him into direct contact with the mass of humanity who were experiencing a different reality from his own. Part of the privileged minority, he lived in a world where life ran to a pace dictated largely by himself. The contents of his daily life, and those of the people with which he rubbed shoulders, existed on a plane where material needs were taken care of as a matter of course. His was a world of thoughts and ideas free from difficult questions about having enough money to go anywhere he wanted, eat anything he fancied, be warm or cool enough. He knew of course this was not everyone's situation. Especially since the storms, the melting ice caps and great sea rises of recent times, he was acutely aware of the displaced third of humanity and he was proud of the work done by the McManus Press to bring home their difficulties to the fortunate and was in no doubt that its coverage had added to the efforts made by the relevant Authorities.

Until his present journey he knew privation and displacement were unpleasant and thanked his lucky stars he was not directly part of it. He was glad the UN, NATO and NGO's used his taxes to assist the inundated and did not begrudge paying as some did. It was hard-luck that most of the inundated were the world's poor. The rich had found refuge on high ground as soon as it was clear what was in store. Despite his newsman's cynicism he had developed a grudging faith in the UN and the governments of the industrialised world to be of positive assistance, especially when pushed hard by the press. It was partly his efforts which ensured the gradual loss of important coastal agricultural lands was now a problem the whole world was taking seriously and he believed the resources existed to make sure things could be well managed. His travels confirmed this belief and although he worried about the longer term effects of the current displacement, he had faith that

companies like New-Agric would ultimately be able to cope.

Land travel, as the Dodona's had wanted him to experience, was indeed an eye opener. Few business-men ventured beyond their hotels, company premises or tourist attractions. Casual travel had been banned by the UN Police Executive (UNPEX) and news from the Coastal Rehabilitation Programme was strictly controlled. He was still trying to decide from his travels so far what was truth and what official fiction and in an odd way this little man in the dark corner of a seedy taverna seemed to hold clues and his newsman's instinct was aroused.

'I keeps one foot ahead of them UNPEX guys,' the man breathed over him. 'Them dudes man wanna register all the boats and they keep track of all travellers. They know all about you man, you shouldn't've spent so much time on the 'phone man, they got all the lines bugged.'

'I'm on legitimate newspaper business and if they'd have wanted to stop me travelling, nothing could have been easier, I've got nothing to hide,' said Colwyn. 'It's just that there's no available boats to Ios and that's my destination. It's written clearly on my travel documents and UNPEX are fully aware of it since they are the ones who made them out.'

'Hey, man, take it easy, It's not my bag where you wanna go. But don't you think it's a bit weird you can't get no transport to Ios.'

'Why should it be weird? I guess travel's hard these days.'

'You had any problems before?'

'Come to think of it, no, the firm made all the arrangements as far as London, England.'

'So why not now man?'

'I've come overland, I've had to find my own transport all the way from London. I expect like all those UNPEX people you want to know why I didn't fly.'

'Nope - not my business man, but I bet you didn't have any real hassles like.'

'Since you ask, it wasn't straight forward all the way but I suppose I didn't have any real problems until I got here.'

'You don't find that kinda strange then?'

'Why should I?'

'Because, man you're going to Ios to see the Dodona chick. And UNPEX, they don't want you to get there. 'Cept they don't want you to know that 'cos you're an important newspaper man.'

'If they didn't want me to get there they wouldn't have given me leave to travel.' The fascination of the peculiar little man kept him trading conversation. He needed his boat, not his chit-chat and Colwyn was irritated with himself at the things he was saying.

Since the call from Matsuko Morii to tell him his trip to Ios was arranged he felt an unusual loss of control over events. He had not forgotten the conversation in the Guggenheim, but as the invitation never came, he put it down to the Dodona's reticence, and forgot about it and put it to the back of his mind. Matsuko had been very clear about its reality this time and had given exact details about his itinerary. His protests about the

difficulties of overland travel were politely ignored by her, if he wanted to go that was how it was to be done. There was no way he would arrive by any other route. After London, he was continually surprised at the ease by which he got through the itinerary provided by Matsuko, like the foul breathed sailor he was speaking to, he had expected official difficulties at least and some personal danger. He was not so naive as to expect an easy passage. He of all people knew the official stories would be full of holes filled by events and circumstances the rich world was considered better off not hearing. Like the little man opposite he had also from time to time thought he was maybe in some kind of set-up. It had been too easy, until Athens. After all he only had the word of the man at Cyclades Ferries that his other boat was out of commission. But if it was a set-up to prevent him reaching Lucina Dodona it was too elaborate, there were easier, more direct ways of preventing the meeting.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Ljeschi's the handle, Cap'n Pannayotis Ljeschi, at your service. You can call me Cap'n or Pannie.' Colwyn caught the ironic eye of the barman who had appeared with a dusty bottle. He got the distinct impression the barman was amused at the posturing of Cap'n Ljeschi, and was offering in silent observation a clear indication he was an impostor or worse. Colwyn however could not get rid of Ljeschi's fascination which kept him trapped in this 'B' movie sequence. He reasoned none of this was important if Ljeschi could get him to Ios in the absence of any other form of transport.

'Five hundred Euros you said on the 'phone?' he asked.

'You a drinking man? Have a slug, s'good stuff, French brandy, '68 Reserve man, real cool.' He sipped it, it was good stuff, too good to be found in the Kafenion Thalassa.

'Five hundred man, and no other passengers.'

'I don't care if you bring a whole scout troop, just as long as I get there! Good brandy, where did you get it?'

'Gotta supply man, and no scout troop's goin' where we're goin dig? Just you, in case you got some woman or good ole buddy keeps you warm at nights.'

'Just me and this suitcase.'

'Great! Finish your brandy an' we'll split.' Two of the men drinking retsina by the door rose, forced open the door to let in the rank air of the newly defined harbour limits and fell into step with them. Colwyn swung his eye at Ljeschi.

'Crew!' he said with a broad grin. Colwyn nodded, in the gloom their faces were unreadable. His misgivings about the whole adventure increased by whole factors as they walked between broken buildings, down opened cellars, along murky banks of loathsome waters. Travelling overland grounded him in the reality of the Mediterranean inundation.

He was pretty sure there was an UNPEX gloss which veiled the actual face of suffering to fit the perception of a communicating world unused to bare truth. He recognised his own sense of cynicism had been softened by his own media. Recent days had brought home the reality of the world as a double-headed coin, one clearly etched warts and all, the other cleaned and sanitised, its resemblance to the other correct but smoothed and rendered harmless. One threatened - the other seduced. The effort of sifting the truth was too great most of the time. This Ljeschi character seemed to make him more aware of the need for a more healthy distrust.

He accompanied the group of sailors in the dark for some time, as far as a makeshift, plank bridge between fallen walls, above sewage laden murk, down a flight of steps belonging to a mangled block of flats to

confront a small blue and white fishing caique, its vague outline barely illuminated by a hurricane lamp swinging from its short mast. The night was chilly and Ljeschi offered a thick woollen blanket in exchange for five new hundred Euro notes.

'Welcome aboard Mr Colwyn - Yo! Let go man!' The latter remark addressed to the seaman on shore caused this worthy to toss the restraining line aboard, jump in after it and push them off.

Colwyn in the thwarts astride his suitcase in lieu of a seat, made an incongruous figure in his business suit. In the gathering gloom he was just able to make out his transport as a poor man's ark made up of numberless chickens forced into plastic crates. He thought he also heard pigs and goats. The smell and noise, mixed with hot diesel from the engine's throb, wrapped the whole experience into a totally unpleasant bundle. This was no slipping quietly out of the makeshift harbour. He felt as exposed as he had falling into the Taverna a while ago. He also thought twelve or fourteen hours on a suitcase in this loathsome din was going to be unbearable and was considering how to manage things better when a bright light poked suddenly and angrily out of the darkness and into his eyes with an intensity requiring him to shade his face with his hand. In the still air the tinny sound of a Tannoy loudspeaker sounded particularly imperious and frighteningly close.

'THIS IS AN UNPEX VESSEL - HEAVE TO - WE WILL COUNT TO FIVE AND THEN OPEN FIRE - ACKNOWLEDGE AND COMPLY!'

'Shit man!' this latter from Cap'n Ljeschi - 'We're too tied up in this bleedin' wreckage to out-pace them.'

'ONE!' shouted the tannoy.

Ljeschi spoke fast in Greek to the mariner at the wheel and then turning to Colwyn, grinning from ear to ear, said, 'I kinda hoped we'd get well out to sea before they spotted us. There aren't enough of them to bother to chase us in the dark, they like hang around the harbour trying to block us in man. We'll try and hide in the wreckage and hope they'll give up an' split.'

'THREE!'

The second mariner flung tarps over the crates of animals in a vain attempt to quieten them. Colwyn, finding the whole episode quite madly dangerous, in a reflex action fished his wallet from his inside pocket and extracting his McManus pass from within....

'FOUR!'

....waved it at the light, shouting,

'COLWYN! MCMANUS! LAISSER-PASSER! OFFICIAL BUSINESS!' It had worked well enough so far.

He had time to hear the count 'FIVE!' - see the flash but not hear the crackle of automatic fire and see simultaneously the figure of Ljeschi launch himself over the side before the thud in his chest turned everything in his head to a ball of fire which reached out beyond his skull to the black firmament above. It lit the world for an incandescent instant, to fall back swiftly into a profound blackness drawing him into a whirling black hole of nothingness, down and down. The light collapsed in on itself until there was only a pinpoint of extreme brilliance which extinguished as the third of half a dozen bullets aimed in his direction tore through his heart and lungs followed by the rest travelling fast from left to right, but of which he was totally unaware.

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Oblivious in any sentient way of the profound black nothingness into which he had plummeted, Colwyn, had he any shred of awareness left, would have agreed with himself that he was no longer anything. This being the case he was unable, at this moment, to register astonishment when the terminal pinpoint of light rekindled in the depth of his void and grew ever so gradually in breadth until what might have been a hundred years later, his vision of the world behind closed eyes that would not open, try as he might, was a curtain of diffused brightness as of a heavily draped window. Sounds also, filtered into a previously unheeding mind. Voices, one calm the other raised in irritation. Unable at that instant to register forms of speech, had he been fully conscious and could he have connected on L1 he would have heard and seen Pannie Ljeschi, still in his overdrawn mariner's garb, being admonished by a livid Hera on the terrace of Psathi, bathed in the clear Mediterranean light that was its trademark. He was yet to be amazed at the untouched state of the island in this turbulent and murky sea.

'I said you were to see to it he got here in one piece!' Hera stood at her most statuesque, communicating on L1 with calm deliberation just holding her anger in check; the effort of which suffused her magnificence with a heightened grandeur entirely lost on the incorrigible Pan. (Zeus, listening on the 'sphere smiled with satisfaction - what a wife! Of all his consorts she was The Magnifica, especially when angry. He wondered vaguely if it was just to see her thus and spar with her that he eyed other females so, but a call from Athena, on a far timeline, turned his attention to more important things). Pannie meanwhile sat knavishly astride the balustrade and endured his tongue lashing without overt demonstrations of dissent. He knew Hera's anger was not to be exacerbated and he knew she knew it meant nothing to him and that soon enough she would get it off her chest and he would have her laughing with or at him again.

'He is so My Lady - I did your bidding and brought him overland from that desperate and dank city we once so loved, it is now.....'

'Shut up Pan, I wanted him to see things as they really are, but I told you to see he got here without harm. He was to see, note and believe. There was no need for him to get physically injured! Now there are things to undo and re-do. It all needs energy, as if there was not enough to do already! Really! You never use your head Pannie, too concerned with the joke to consider the real thing!'

This last deliberate barb was designed to get beyond his laconic exterior and hurt. It was effective. With astonishing speed the little manikin launched from his perch and kneeling at his mistress' feet, clasped her knees and thrusting his hairy head into the fold of her rich thighs raised his conversation to L2 and communicated his undying devotion, his ever-ready love, his eternal loyalty to the Pantheon despite all the good offers he had from elsewhere. He prided himself on his ability to see the funny side of everything, which made him such a good guide and scourge of the pompous; but he never ever lost sight of the serious meaning of things. To be thus accused by his mistress was particularly distressing. The comedy of his entreaty, made the more so by his sincerity and the fact that his greasy sailor cap was thrust over his eyes, made Hera laugh out loud. Her amusement knew his honest care was not feigned, had it been, he was truly lost. He knew his place in the scheme of things and knew how to keep it safe.

'See he wakes - immortal mother - would I give you work undone? I have foreseen; thought ahead. A good joke no?' He shared her laughter and looked at her so dog-like she all but patted him.

'You moved his timeline?' she queried.

'Not me - too much like hard work, I asked the daughters of Zeus and Themis and well, Clotho came through and struck him another yard or two at the very last moment. Me and them Moerae girls, well let's just say we've got a thing going for the time being. So his time was not up, you said he had work yet to do. I thought he would do it better if he realised the urgency of the job and felt he was on borrowed time. He will think he died and got another chance, which ain't exactly a lie. My idea was to let the Japanese lady tend him, he'll like that and work all the better for it later. Antropos can't lie and she said it'd be okay.' Hera shook her head in

feigned serious censure.

'You're insolence and audacity will bring you down in the end my lad - but all is well and your plan will work. I think on balance I prefer it when you are less creative with your solutions. Still, we waste time, bring him to Matsuko and leave them. When he is fully recovered I will speak with them all. He will not be long in illness?'

'No, some days only.'

Colwyn did not regain full consciousness for another twenty-four hours. When he finally climbed by his fingernails - up from the great profundity into which he had fallen (Its unspeakable depth gave him serious heeby jeebies for the rest of his remarkable and potentially extremely long life) the first thing he saw upon reaching the plateau of his consciousness was the white moon of a face.

The part of the mind which connects to external things, slowly closed a trap-door over the pit from which he had so painfully climbed, and leaving it ever so slightly ajar, was left in the background. The face swimming before him gathered consistency. When it ceased to move and had coalesced fully he spent some time connecting it to other fixed objects in the place he was in. Consciousness finally took over with its usual shock of immediacy to leave him fully awake and totally disoriented.

'Mr Colwyn San, you can hear me?' He knew from somewhere the inflection of the voice and the finely drawn face. A cool hand was placed on his hot brow and he closed his eyes but unable and unwilling to find his way back to the darkness, he concentrated harder, sat up with a painful jerk and recognised Matsuko Morii leaning over him. He tried to speak, a severe pain in his chest reduced his attempt to an unintelligible rasp.

'You will be well, Mr Colwyn. Mrs Dodona had sent her physicians to you and you are recovering fine.' He tried once more to speak, Miss Morii sensing his need spoke his concerns and smoothed his rising anxieties.

'You are on Ios, and you are among friends. You were shot, three bullets passed clean through your thorax, it was a miracle, but you are not harmed substantially. The worst is shock. You strengthen by the hour and will be fit enough by tomorrow morning to meet with Mrs Dodona. Sleep now, I will return later when you wake. Rest assured you are watched over. We are glad you came, you will be needed. Welcome to Ios.' Overcome with fatigue, Franklin T. Colwyn, President of McManus Press, slept like a baby, and to his own surprise, as lightly as a feather.



## Chapter 2

As Franklin T Colwyn on Ios was coming back to his life, the world he had suddenly and violently left for the bright clear island continued to change insidiously but inexorably.

The world's media was full of it. Climatologists, vied with doom-mongers, governments contended with experts of all kinds. Reports from solar scientists, astronomers geologists, ecologists, geographers, oceanographers, space scientists, psychologists, environmentalists, astrophysicians, physicists, farmers, mathematicians, biochemists, agrilogists, businessmen, miners, albedologists, Paleontologists, Hydrologists - in short anyone who had anything to do with earth information of any sort, plus some of the more arcane specialisms of Astrology, Dousing, Mayan Astro-Mathematics, plus a whole range of Eastern Religionists, New and Old New-Agers argued with Aquarians - the list went on and on.

Numberless experts appeared from the woodwork and crawled, pupated and flew through the newspapers, through news reports on TV programmes during the day and late at night on a thousand variants of TV Specials. They also appeared in learned and not so learned journals and newspapers. The tabloids almost ran out of extreme headlines. Every appropriate and irrelevant PhD thesis was trawled for nuggets of new information and even the most obscure received their fifteen minutes of media fame.

There were the extra-terrestrialists, with their sun-spot maps of positive and negative ions together with complex and beautifully crafted computer models of doomsday caused by reverse polarisations described by Magnetologists. There were the Tectonicologists, Eustaticologists, Geodesists, Orogenists and Eperigenists, arguing with Galacticologists, Uplifters, Precessionists and Polar Wanderers, Abyssal Oceanographers, Seismic Tomographers, Quaternarians, Mantle Convectionists, Mohorovicic Discontinuities, and Isotopic stratigraphicologists.

Then yet more appeared. Some of them actually agreed about what was happening. Better still, some came together to increase their corporate ways of interpreting what they knew. The internet was alive with every conceivable piece of information to do with the complexity of the earth.

Airline seats were reserved exclusively for scientists, politicians, civil-servants and businessmen going to and coming from conferences on UN strategies and commercial and manufacturing damage limitation. Sociologists, medics, NGO's, social workers and volunteers travelled on UNPEX passes to stricken areas to spend aid and charity cash on water and housing, warmth and such care as could be made available to the dispossessed. The world was on Orange Alert moving to Red

Explanations and solutions, consequences and analyses were on all lips, made into bites, digitised, synchronised, synthesised. Earth Rescue Foods were sold in restaurants. The 'Save the Earth for God's Sake', Globalthon raised half a billion dollars, another half-billion came from an 'Earth-Aid' concert simultaneously broadcast on the World-Wide-Web, and international TV.

The Earth and what people did with it, as well as what the sun and stars, black holes, big bangs and mega crunches, did, together with what it did for itself, over aeons, millennia, centuries, decades, years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds and nanoseconds: became the stuff of endless and cacophonous debate.

Everyone agreed something cosmically serious was going on.

Everyone asked, 'what the hell is it?'

Nobody exactly knew.

Everyone had at least one theory.

The inundated knew the sea was misbehaving. The unexpectedly parched knew the rains were behaving badly. The wind-lashed knew what a good old hurricane in unexpected places could do. It wasn't, said all the experts, just that things were happening. They always had. It was the way they happened. There was more than usual inconstancy where there had been predictability. Expected long-term variations occurred out of time between predicted short-term variations and affected them in incalculable ways. Previous models of Earth behaviour were distorted enough to skew all known calculations.

At first the signs were weak, too weak to make safe scientific predictions. It would settle down, it might not, could not, would not, would, who knows? Adaptation was the name of the game.

There would be severe changes for a sizeable minority unfortunate enough to be caught up in local unpredictability. The Standing World Conference on Climate and Demogeographic Change had it under a sort of control. UN bodies were given executive powers over the territories of badly affected national governments and regional bodies. UNPEX policed, UNO made laws and resolutions. Corporations and individuals did what they felt necessary to survive until tomorrow. Old fortunes and reputations were lost and new ones gained. Adaptation theory went ape.

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Marina and Ric, stayed at Markham where the hardware was installed and were in touch with the rest of the Advisory Group's members and the team of useful people they had brought permanently to Ios. Ric worked as usual in close collaboration with Hep Mulciber. They were in touch with Penny on the electronic ether. Ric was working with Hep on a new communications package which he said would make the internet seem like the Wells-Fargo Pony Express.

Ric and Penny talked together about a technology of an entirely different order of sophistication from anything they had ever encountered and Ric confessed he was at the extreme edge of his knowledge and in danger of being left behind by the manic and ever more worried genius of Hep. The new invention had more to do with, biophysics and motor-neurons than bites, electronics and computers.

Marina, whose detective's nose had never ceased sniffing around the trail left by Barboncito, disapproved of Ric's communications on the internet, despite encryption and coding and the other security measures he devised. She too was at her wits end. She kept JNO's anonymity safe by confusing the rest of the world about the activities of its many disparate parts, but since the disappearance and supposed death of Alexander she felt she was living in a giant colander, every plug she made in any one direction was counteracted by leaks in two others. Barboncito had done his work well. Although he had been stopped, the whole of her intricate system was now riddled with 'worm-holes'. Something was at work. She and Ric kept tabs on the commercial and demographic effects of the change in the climate and made what adjustments they could using the JNO system of connections. Their network of people were well placed in strategic positions in the UN, NGO's and national governments as politicians, civil servants, academics or business people.

But each step they needed to get an overall view and control was scotched by a countervailing energy, sometimes in ways she was barely able to detect. She was convinced JNO's strategy was compromised, despite the best efforts of Ric and the Ios command post run by the Advisory Group. Furthermore, her investigations into Fourthworld and Manny Kanuho's communications empire had led her into some curious by-ways of the internet. Her other investigations into Penny, Lucina Dodona, Hep, Alexander and Pannie led her into entirely unexpected worlds.

From the time of the so called disappearance of Alexander she had been digging, following clues, disappearing up garden paths and all the while finding new continents of material. She persuaded Ric in the interests of security to use a proportion of GAIANET and HIGO's energy and time to co-ordinate her dossiers, hunches and other information.

HIGO's conclusions were at the same time inescapable and impossible.

Marina's expertise was an ability to read situations. A child of the welfare system she had learned earlier than she could remember, to know unerringly, who and what was bad news. She was also lucky. Stumbled over in her young teens by Penny, she confirmed for her an early suspicion that in rare circumstances some people could be good news. She was still working to trust the distance this would take her and so was, she knew, unreasonably suspicious of Penny's ultimate goals but not her interest in her. She knew in her head Penny was alright, more than alright, pretty damn good - the best there was. Her loyalty, once gained was unshakeable, but her ability to trust was too fragile to be leaned upon firmly. This gave her a hard edge, which she deliberately beat, folded and honed like a samurai sword until it cut through the crap of the world without blunting.

She was totally without fear. Others thought her ruthless, without feeling, inexorable - and so she was. She went where others more timid left her to go alone. She chased information firstly from curiosity and later learned that knowledge and information was the critical factor which gave control over her life and that of others.

She never considered her motives or inner drives. She had no need for introspection to delve into such things as cruelty or abandonment in childhood. For her, there was only one kind of person who mattered. Those like her grandmother, who's concern was coupled with action. Through her she learned the need sometimes to destroy in order to re-create. Abandoned by her mother, abused by the man who claimed to be her father, she was freed from him by her grandmother with one determined blow of a boning-knife - he defiled her no more. They so disposed of his remains he was never found nor was he missed by anyone.

This was care indeed, not available, after her grandmother's death, in countless children's homes and foster parents. She soon had more moves than she had had birthdays. One of Penny's sea captains found her a bedraggled, spitting, run-away kitten, stowed away on a JNO ship bound for Trinidad. 'Bring this young would be mariner to me at JNO,' she had said to the barely amused captain. Her first thought was to hand her back to the authorities, Marina divining her intent threw her so dark and venomous a glance, which she correctly understood as a challenge to her humanity and left her unable to refuse.

'You shall be Marina, my would be sailor, I have work for one of such ferocity.' So she stayed. Whatever her previous life, she was born again - Marina - no-name. She learned quickly and in five years, by nineteen was in control of Penny's developing security needs.

'I need people who can read faces and intentions, you can learn security techniques, its mainly your survival instincts I want.' Hiring Marina was one of Penny's best decisions. Marina gathered material on every employee, every customer, every rival, no one remotely connected with JNO escaped. Where she could, she got DNA records, you never knew who might be related to whom and you never knew when you wanted to check who might have left a trace of their presence in unexpected places. She kept finger-prints, voice-prints, school-records, college-records, job-applications, private correspondence, anything, everything. Until HIGO she had no easy way of cross-referencing and much of her knowledge was too diffuse until GAIANET was able to do the collecting and HIGO the interrogation.

After the disappearance of Alexander, she got HIGO to lay out certain names in two columns. Those with unusual and linked DNA patterns were Hep, Alexander, Thea, Ljeschi and unexpectedly - Barboncito. None of the other many thousands of records had similar patterns. They were different from other people, and were not DNA patterns of any kind she ever saw elsewhere - HIGO filed them as such. The surprise was Barboncito and she wondered if Alexander had known. The other list held Penny, Ric, Manny Kanuho, and the members of the advisory group - all perfectly normal, sharing no relationship at all. She had expected Manny and Barboncito to be related. This major surprise confirmed her suspicions that all was not as it seemed at Fourthworld. Barboncito the hacker, was related in some way to Hep, Thea, Alexander and the

others.

His electronic foray into the terminals at Markham was not what he said, just curiosity and a test of skill. His companionship with Alexander was probably no accident and she had never believed they had fallen off some ledge. So where were they? Who was traitor to whom? What was Alexander's relationship to these others and how come he shared their DNA, while Thea had none of Penny's? Was it possible Thea was adopted?

The hacking had stopped for a long time but the 'worm-holes' were there nonetheless. Despite all her efforts, Barboncito and or his agents must have access to GAIANET and were active. But where was the information going and how was it being used? Why did they not take over if they could? If JNO as it seemed, was holding its own, why was it? When would they make their move? Would they? What was going on in JNO in parts she could not see where Thea, Alexander, Ljeschi and Lucina roamed? She had to know!

She had checked out Fourthworld on the day she left Alexander in the Canyon. Her people had infiltrated Kanuho's operation at many different points and reported all was well. They still reported that everything there was alright. Still there was no doubt GAIANET was compromised. When Penny and members of the Advisory Group manipulated resources, the effect was often less positive than it should have been. It was as if the opposition knew what they were going to do and had been busy minimising the effect. The only neutral variable was the climate. Everyone was losing against that. Something was going on and all her instincts said it had something to do with the supposed disappearance of Alexander. She decided her best starting point was to renew her efforts within Fourthworld.

She spoke to Ric about her thoughts on the hacking problem, she said nothing about her investigations into the top brass at JNO. He told her to talk to Penny and so she called her up and they spoke for a long time. After this Marina sought out Ric in the computer centre almost as soon as she finished speaking to Penny. Marina directed him outside for a stroll in the grounds.

'I don't want to risk being overheard. I trust the people here but you can't be too careful. I've spoken to Penny and I've got to get to Fourthworld in a hurry.'

Ric had his own inkling about their conversation and wondered how much Penny had given away about her relationship with Lucina and the others at Psathi. They had to trust in each other. Marina was Penny's creation and her creature. He trusted her tenacity and loyalty, but realised he had no knowledge of her as a person. He knew in general terms what she did, but relatively nothing about her background. He knew via HIGO she was investigating all of them and had not made up his mind about what he thought of it.

'I want to know two things,' he said, first, what exactly did Penny and you discuss?'

'And the second thing?'

'I'll answer that after you answer the first.'

'Why are we sparring like this?' Marina asked abruptly.

'Alright, Marina I'll be as direct as I can. You're Penny's person, JNO is her creation and you are its guardian. I know I'm just an operative...'

'A crucial one and bloody good.' Marina grinned,

'Probably, well yes a crucial one as you say, though without Hep I'm not so sure I wouldn't be well out of my depth. Anyway, an operative in the end - but I'm no machine any more than Penny - or you for that matter. So I need to know what motivates you beyond doing your job. I'm concerned about Penny and her involvement

with the Psathi people. We've both experienced Hep and Lucina directly and we've never talked about it. We both do our job and report. We've both of us left the responsibility for making final decisions with Penny. We've allowed her to face them alone...'

'There's Alexander, you're forgetting him,' she interrupted again and stared him directly in the eye. She could tell, he knew something.

'I won't discuss him with you until I know what you talked about with Penny.'

'Okay, okay, I'll come clean. I talked about what's going down here. That most people know nothing about, some people know something about and a handful of people know everything about. I asked her what you know, what she knows, and most of all I wanted to know what Alexander, Thea Hep and especially what Lucina and Zarian knows. I told her I've looked at all of you. Okay, I'll tell you where I'm up to. Starting with you. Basically I think you're okay. You're in love with Penny, but you won't do anything about it while she's got the world on her shoulders. I think you should, although it's none of my business. You're working on a fast and more efficient form of inter-personal communications with Hep which links into SYDCOM and Lynne Farrell's thing with Colwyn. I know you're nearly ready for early trials and that the Advisory Group want it like yesterday. I'm right?'

'Yes, of course, you wouldn't be doing your job otherwise.'

'Thank you, you're not bothered I'm clued up about you?'

Ric smiled dourly. 'I'm not so sure about the personal stuff, but it's your job to know about all of us and as long as you're getting it right.'

'That's what Penny said.'

'You mean she knows?'

'Of course, but my guess is you knew and merely wanted it confirmed.'

Ric did not speak.

'So that's you. Penny, well I don't have to say anything about her; without her we're nothing. It's the others, and that's where I've drawn a complete blank apart from the DNA samples.'

'DNA samples?'

'You don't know about "Them?"'

'I want to know what you know.'

'Okay, okay. I thought you would have checked out what I was doing with HIGO.'

Ric said coolly, 'I don't have time to spend checking up on you. I know I'm alright and I trust Penny to trust you're kosher. Funny isn't it, we spend so much time on methods of communication that we don't have time to communicate with each other properly. So what's all this about DNA?'

'You really didn't check out what I was doing - thanks for the trust.' He's a straight guy, she thought, he'll be good for Penny if we all get out of this okay, and she told him the facts.

'So you see Ric, the great surprise is that Barboncito and Alexander are related. Thea and Alexander are too as you'd expect, and they are all related to Hep and the others but Penny is no relation to Thea, despite her being her daughter and Alexander's twin, while Alexander shares DNA with his sister. So there's no way Thea can be her child. Alexander is, but he shares DNA with his twin, a congenitally complete stranger to her mother.

'You spoke of this to Penny?'

'Yes. Is that the second question you had?'

' Yes. What did you speak about?'

'I asked her point blank why Thea had no DNA patterns from her but how it was Thea and Alexander were both related to the others. She went quiet for a long time, so long I had to ask if she was still there.

'And?'

Ric was astounded at her directness. With Penny It was a subject he had always treated like walking on eggs.

'I thought I'd overreached myself and she wasn't going to answer me. Before she replied I went on and told her about Barboncito and the concerns here about the 'worm-holes'. I think it was the practical consequences of this that brought her back to reality. I couldn't help thinking she was under considerable strain. She simply said she knew it was true and had no explanation but that she had given birth to the twins physically and that was all she could tell me. Once it was spoken, she seemed to recover - I thought she felt a bit relieved at not being alone with the knowledge. That's why I said what I said about you and her. She's terribly isolated in herself, needs your help Ric. Anyway, she said she was surprised about Barboncito and that Alexander needed warning. She supposed Thea would do it. I wasn't all that astounded at the inference that Alexander is still alive. I never believed the stories, Kanuho was too evasive about it. You knew didn't you?'

'Lucina told me.'

'I thought so, she threw her spell on you all in the Group, but missed me out. So you all knew about 'Them.'

'Only Penny and I knew for certain that 'They' exist,' replied Ric. 'The Group sense it but have no real knowledge. Now there are three of us and 'Them' as well of course.'

'It starts to explain all my doubts,' said Marina. 'Ever since I began recording DNA patterns it showed up, I've probably known longer than anyone, but until now it was none of my business. My job is to keep tabs and report back as and when.'

'Why didn't you simply ask Hep or Lucina?' Ric offered,

'I did think about it. But it seems clear they are not going to let us into the secret. If Penny hasn't got answers and, more to the point can't get them, there must be a reason which we'll have to search for because it won't get answered simply by asking. Anyway you're all far too busy with the here and now to spend time on it. I decided it will have to be me. I have a responsibility to Alexander now that we know he's alive. We sent him after the hacker and I stupidly assumed we had sorted the problem out and it wasn't my business to interfere with his business with the Navajo. But now I know this is the root of the problem. I've been making more enquiries about Fourthworld.'

'Doubtless,' Ric smiled.

'Manny Kanuho is clean. At least on the surface he is. Have you had HIGO check out Fourthworld lately?'

'No, I've been too busy with the communications thing, one of my people monitors it though.'

'Who?'

'Boltkin - he's a good man, works too hard though.'

'Yes I know, You had to suspend him once, I worked on it. He came out clear. Well Fourthworld has aroused my suspicions.'

'That's not hard to achieve,' laughed Ric.

'That's as may be,' she replied seriously, not responding to his jibe. 'But Fourthworld turns out to be a far more complicated operation than meets the eye.'

'How do you mean?' They had walked as far as the ornamental bridge over the stream which fed the lake and Ric sat on the parapet with his back to the water as Marina spoke. She stood next to him, looking out over the water. An observer would have seen nothing more than two people casually conversing in the unusually warm late winter air. The fact of the conversation having immeasurable consequences for the entire planet would have been entirely unimaginable.

'It's a long story - but shortly told. It begins with Fourthworld and leads on to God knows where - the rest of the Universe I think. But I won't begin to interpret what I've been discovering; let me tell you the facts as I know them first and then - well, we can talk about the possible consequences after. I take it you want to hear this?'

'Of course, but don't you think if it's so important it ought to be for the whole group?'

'I'm not sure the whole group needs to know yet, I think it's important for you to know because of what you are working on with Hep and because you know about 'Them', so I wanted you to know first. Penny's the only other one and I've already sounded her.'

'What did she say?' asked Ric, turning to face her.

She agrees with me, and said I was to have this conversation with you immediately. Be patient Ric, I'll tell you all about her views and what she wants to see happen in a minute, let me finish what I've got to say before you let your anxiety about her get in the way.'

'Sorry, it's just that...'

'I know and it becomes you well,' and Marina turned to place her hand on his arm. 'But like I was saying - it begins with Fourthworld. From the moment of Alexander's disappearance at the Matkatamiba I was suspicious. Like you and Penny I have to admit, since it's important to the situation, that I too have a personal interest in the Conway family in the form of Alexander.'

Ric raised an eyebrow and smiled.

'Yes well, that's my business. Anyhow, while we were in the Canyon at Kanuho's family hogan, I took the opportunity to, let's say 'get close to Barboncito', and you can keep your eyebrows to yourself, I did it as part of the job, which doesn't mean I didn't enjoy it. He lied at first to me of course about the hacking, but then thought he would see me off the track by admitting to it freely. What he couldn't lie about was the DNA test I did later. Don't ask! The other thing he couldn't lie about was the sheer physicality of him. He'd been eyeing me up from the moment he saw me, probably when Alexander and I were nosing around Tuba City. He got

Manny to test me out on the drive and by the time we got to the hogan he was like a cat on hot bricks. There has only been one other person in my life who behaved as powerfully and that's Alexander - and they share the same DNA! (I said to say nothing until I finished). But there was a intense difference between them that I couldn't put my finger on until much later, it affected me so much that I had to leave him immediately afterwards to find out what it was. I intended to stay with Alexander but I had the strongest feeling he was meant to face up to Barboncito alone, like magnetic opposites, depending how they face each other they would attract or repel. There was a naturalness to them when together which needed no third presence. I also knew it was vital for the firm that I checked him out as soon as possible. These feelings came from knowing without doubt Alexander's need for me had a positive and endearing quality and Barboncito's was altogether negative. Alexander bore me aloft, made us into something new and shining, it's hard to explain in words. With Barboncito it was the exact opposite. It wasn't that he used me like other men use women for their own gratification, he was more experienced and more adventurous than Alexander. I thought I knew everything but he knew something more. The main point of this story was that although he led me to greater and more extreme heights of pleasure than Alexander could, He left me feeling diminished, used, lessened - without a future. It was as if I had known everything with him and there was nowhere else to go, not even with him, we had done it all and we could only repeat never innovate. With Alexander there was everything to play for, with Barboncito everything was ended for all time. It was like going on a far and splendid journey to the horizon, with the world behind and nothing in front, with nowhere to go but back to the world you'd come from. It was as if in the end the world is flat and he steered me to the edge. It came to me later when I was talking to Manny Kanhuo. I saw a vacancy in his eyes, a despair and a resignation. It was the opposite of the fire I saw and felt in Barboncito. Barboncito revelled in what was done and what was to be repeated over and over again. He had a strength in the certainty of knowledge. He saw his world without doubt, clear and clean, he knew what was what. Not in the fire of hope, that was in Alexander, but in a fervour of conviction, of a faith, already given. I was truly shaken by the force of him. But what got me really scared was that I felt relief in finding such conviction, so much so that I nearly gave in to him. He has such strength, such 'correctness' there seemed little point in struggling against him, in finding the power within me to struggle for unknowns and take risks. He would do all this for you, carry your burdens endlessly and without complaint, all you have to do is believe in him and what he knew. It was my waning resistance that made it imperative I left him as soon as I could before it melted down altogether. It was so strong in me that in leaving him I also left Alexander to his own devices and in his company. But there was nothing else I could do to save myself. I've worried about it and what's happened ever since. I feel really bad and have a strong sense of responsibility about it. I was too frightened for myself to stick with Alexander. What kind of loyalty is that? Did Alexander resist him like I did or did he go along with him? I can't rest till I know for sure. Manny knew it too. He had already given in to Barboncito and I now know that's the secret of Fourthworld.'

'Wait,' Ric interjected...

'I said not to interrupt me, if this isn't crystal clear when I've finished you can ask all the questions you like, until then please say nothing, I need to keep my concentration if I'm going to say what's on my mind?'

'Okay I'm sorry - You were saying you knew the secret of Fourthworld.'

'Right. I saw it in Manny's eyes. I knew in my gut they were up to something that was no good to JNO but I couldn't work out what it was. I've always worked on instinct for the dissonance in things, and there was a clear difference between what Manny said and did and what went on underneath his Stetson. He was in thrall to Barboncito in some way. Now the whole point of JNO's support for Fourthworld, which you set up if I remember correctly...'

Ric nodded.

'...was to get indigenous peoples all over the world into their own network, linked to GAIANET ...'



He nodded again.

'...they were to act in opposition to the multi-corporations armed with the strength of Markham's information to counteract their manoeuvrings and where possible take over local operations and hand them back. Manny called it 'Operation Robin Hood.' What got me though, was he ought to have been cock-a-hoop with it and while everything on the surface was tremendous, it seemed to me somewhere he had lost heart. I don't think he would ever admit it, even to himself if you strung him up by the goolies. It had to be bound up with Barboncito. It was clear that Barboncito was cock-a-hoop alright, so why was Manny down in the dumps? It had to be they had different things to care about. I spent enough time at Fourthworld to be sure your expectations were being met. There were no leaks that I could see, but yet they seemed to be disproportionately strong. Condamine used them to great effect in Brazil as you know. But I couldn't account for the difference in attitude between Manny and Barboncito. It was ages before I fathomed it out. In the end it was something Penny said at one of the group meetings that sparked me off. It was one of her asides I wasn't supposed to take any notice of. She said to Piotre something about however hard we try to promote change in what people could do, whatever opportunities we put in their way, something always seems to prevent them from collectively taking the initiative. It was always down to one or two individuals to take the risk which made the whole thing vulnerable however much sense it made and that individuals, however strong they were, were not enough any more, there just wasn't time. Piotre said some platitude or other about the way of the world and an explosion went off in my head. It was tied in with something Barboncito said to me that evening in the hogan. He more than said it actually, he was boasting and arrogant with it. I told you about as soon as I could get a line out.'

'The other Firm.'

'Exactly, the 'other Firm!' We've never found the other Firm have we? I've been searching ever since for anything that could be a rival to JNO and there's nothing there. Nothing tangible. I've found lots of companies who confront us here and there and they win some local skirmishes from time to time, but they have no direct involvement in the set-backs we are feeling and the worm-holes in my security system appear invisibly from no predictable source. I've thought and thought about it but it was HIGO that gave me the clue. I thought it had made a mistake and was about to report HIGO to you as a fraud (she laughed at the furrow appearing on his brow) a joke, Ric, actually HIGO came up with the goods, it wasn't its logic at fault but mine. The funny thing is that it's dead simple when you know. HIGO proved the existence of the other Firm, it's a dream of a programme, so powerful, pity it's not a human mind or I'd go for it in a big way! I think I'm in love with it anyway!'

She laughed, and Ric smiled indulgently, he knew the power of HIGO and that of the DNA freak who made it. He said nothing about what Hep was up to with synapses and neurons. She went on,

'Well, HIGO interpreted the data GAIANET and I put in about the worm-holes and did its stuff, whirring and clanking through it (Ric winced, HIGO was famously silent) In the end it came up with three letters. I was disgusted, it had laboured mightily and brought forth a mouse. Bet you can't guess what they were!'

'No. What?'

'JNO!' She paused for effect. 'And for good measure it put in an exclamation-mark. If it hadn't been for the exclamation-mark I'd have thought it had made a fundamental mistake and was seriously flawed. The exclamation-mark was its little joke. Did you know it had a sense of humour? Anyway, at first I thought it was bonkers, and then it came to me. What the 'worm-holes' were doing was the 'same thing' as JNO. It's as good as JNO! HIGO was paying it a compliment with its little exclamation-mark! So Barboncito, that arrogant, beautiful, hunk was right, there is another Firm - as invisible to us as we hopefully are invisible to the rest of the world. Since it undoubtedly exists, it isn't that we are being 'hacked' into; it's checking out if it knows what we know, see? - we're being taken for our own ride! Get your megabytes around that my

gobsmacked computer champ! Two Firms - us and Them - but where in all that's electronic are They? How do you get to Them before they take us apart by inches? What's more - I bet that's where Alexander is right at this moment, where the other Firm is. I've got to find him, he's too inexperienced to face up to whatever's behind Barboncito and what gives him his faith. He needs me by him at the very least!

She popped her athletic body up on to the parapet in a smooth movement. She waited for him to speak. He thought for a long moment,.

'What have you to say about these two Firms?'

'You're right I've got ideas about that but I get the idea you are ahead of me.'

'What makes you say that?' Ric quizzed her with his eyes.

'I have a strong suspicion it's to do with what you're working on with Hep,' she replied.

Ric smiled broadly,

'You don't let much get past you, Marina, Penny always said without you JNO would've collapsed from its own weight and from those who would have undermined it without your preventive strategies.'

'That's as maybe, bonnie lad, but I've not been as successful as I should have been since that Barboncito came on the scene.'

'About those two Firms, Marina, what about them? - tell me what you think and I'll see how they fit in with what Hep and I am doing.'

'Okay - First off what I'm going to say is still indistinct in my own mind. So, Barboncito was the gun that started it off and the DNA discrepancy set it running. The idea of another Firm, was screwy but scary at the same time. When HIGO clued me into what it really meant I went into over-drive. It had to do with 'Them' I got all the information about Them I could and where d'you think it led me?'

'Is that a rhetorical question or do you want me to answer?' asked Ric, who pulled himself up to join her on the parapet, less elegantly and less athletically. She stared out over the stream and challenged him,

'Yea, you answer it!'

'Okay I think it led you to ancient Greece. To Mount Olympus and to some old, old fairy stories. Mine's a guess from what Penny has told me but I reckon you know something better!'

'I don't know how you know, but it's mad isn't it? - quite totally, gobsmackingly, barmy!' It was a while before I got it. It wasn't easy either. I started with the DNA patterns and went to all the experts. No one had seen anything like it. I began to think it was all fake, and I was sure I was being set up except for the fact that I had got hold of samples of blood from Alexander and semen from Barboncito myself and made the tests under my own scrutiny. They seemed real to me, so I made the assumption the other samples were too. The amazing thing was the experts told me all the DNA patterns were fake, except they didn't know how you could fake DNA patterns. To cut the story short I got eventually to an old Greek archaeologist who had been carbon-dating finds from a dig on the island of Paxi or Paxos I think it's called today. There he found a glass phial containing a substance which was later identified as a lock of rough, reddish hair. The locals had kept this phial in a chapel dedicated to St Thomas on the brow of a hill far above the sea and revered it as having great interventionist properties and religious significance for conversing directly with God. The old guy was at the end of a long career as an expert in Greek mythology and he was following a hunch he'd had from a very

confused legend about the reported death of the Greek demi-god - Pan - on the island of Paxi. He traced the mythology through finds beneath and around the little chapel and he discovered, like with many local Greek saints, that St. Thomas was probably a corruption of 'Thamus' an ancient Egyptian name. Now the old man said with a light in his eye that made me blink, that according to an ancient called Plutarch in some piece or other he wrote on why the oracles went silent, one Thamus, was an Egyptian sailor who was on his way to Italy by way of Paxi or Paxos when Plutarch says he heard a divine voice shouting across the sea 'Thamus, are you there? When you reach Paxos make sure you proclaim that the great god Pan is dead!' Which the legend says he dutifully did and the news was greeted with groans and lamentations. The old man was convinced that the phial contained a relic of the old god and did all the tests possible. Carbon dating turned out to give the hair an age of about the time when the Pan cults were pretty widespread. Well you know me, I checked out the DNA of the so called Pan hair. When I compared the DNA sample I got with all the others it was the same patterning as those on the 'Them' list - as Alexander's and Barboncito's. Of course each individual one is different. but the patterning is unmistakably different from ours. I asked the DNA people if it resembled anything like that taken from Palaeolithic humanoids and it seems what they have in that realm is inconclusive but that my sample was quite different from anything they had ever seen. You can imagine how excited I was. The bugger of it is I haven't got a DNA sample from all of them.' I need to check out Lucina's and Zarian's, I've only got Alexander's, Thea's, Barboncito's and Hep's. I particularly want that Ljeschi fellow's to check against the hair from Paxi. If there's a match - I reckon we've got hold of the other Firm'

She held Ric's eye and with consummate satisfaction tossed her finely chiselled head in triumph. Ric spoke quietly, it was clear to her he had an idea about her conclusions already, which slightly blunted the edge of her achievement.

'You mean that 'They' are the Greek gods of mythology living in the here and now and that Zarian, Lucina etc are running a parallel Firm to JNO? I can go along with the gods bit; that surprises you doesn't it? To tell the truth it surprises me too. But working so closely with Hep and the work I've done with Thea and Alexander, plus some things about Penny's history made me think about the old Greek myths. I don't know if it was anything specific, certainly there was nothing as provable as your DNA checks. That's really exciting, even if it's so way-out as to be unbelievable. So I've done a little investigating of my own. Did you know for example that Lucina is another name for Hera, wife and incidentally sister to Zeus, and that Dodona is a place in Northern Greece, famous for its ancient oaks - a favourite symbol of Zeus? There are other links in the names from Penny's past, and you're right about Ljeschi being a verbal disguise for Pan and that there's a legend about him dying on an island called Paxos in the Adriatic. I can't explain Thea or Alexander, nor Barboncito. But have you ever commented to yourself about the relationship of Penny and Thea?'

'Like she seems to exist in a sense outside her mother and the Firm?' He nodded,

'Yes I've seen it, they're obviously fond of each other but I've always thought of Thea as so self-confident, sure of herself in a way that makes her frightening. I've thought for a long time Penny is frightened by her - no frightened isn't the right word - it's more like in awe of her astounding abilities. But if they're not actually related, it wouldn't be surprising, if like she'd been foisted on her as a baby by somebody else?'

'Lucina for example!'

'Sure! Lucina would be a prime candidate! But what about Alexander? That relationship is altogether different, and now I come to think about it, his DNA pattern is less distinctly different from Penny's while not quite being of it, on balance, the pattern is more like his sister's than his mother's but there are traces of Penny's. They are so slight as to put Alexander squarely in the 'Them' category, but it's as if he straddled them in some marginal way.'

'So Penny could be his mother, while she couldn't be Thea's?' Queried Ric.

'Yea, that's right! And that can only mean one thing! Christ Ric, are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

'What...' Ric smiled. '...Are you thinking?'

'Don't play games with me Ric!'

'Okay, okay; you're thinking Alexander is a hybrid, half one of them and half one of us - but mostly one of them, extrapolating from that hypothesis and adding what we know about Greek mythology, it's not unusual for mortals to be used as vehicles for the birth of new gods. Zeus was famous for picking on beautiful women and coupling with them...' Before he could finish Marina continued the narrative -

' So Alexander's father is one of Them, could even be Zeus himself!'

'Probably is Zeus!' exclaimed Ric. 'Which is why Penny has no real knowledge of it. The myths are clear that the, how shall I put it, the 'visited' of Zeus were not usually apprised of the identity of their ravisher.'

'Wait, wait a bit!' Marina jumped down and Ric joined her to walk by her side, both were excited and needed motion to calm them a little.

'I can't get my head round this at all. Logically, it makes sense but the premise is unbelievable! If there are Greek gods still here - extant, and If Penny was ravished by Zeus and if Alexander is the issue of such a coupling; then...'

'Then Alexander is an immortal and the gods are active and they constitute this other Firm; and you are right one does exist!'

'Whoa! Slow down a bit, Ric! - If we go along with the ifs' for the sake of the argument, and I say only if we do, it doesn't make sense. The Firm, JNO that is, is run and was created by Penny and Lucina who is one of 'Them'. So if 'they' are undermining JNO they are undermining themselves. It doesn't add up!'

'No Marina, left like that it doesn't, but add another dimension and it might. What if Zarian Thea, Hep, Lucina etc are one branch of the Firm and there's another branch out to get them, of which Barboncito is as yet the only representative we've fingered? What then?'

'You mean rivals of equal strength more or less cancelling each other out!'

'Exactly, it would explain a lot wouldn't it?'

'It certainly would! It'd explain what I've been loosely calling 'hacking' but which feels much more accurate if you call it equal forces neutralising each others' effort. So while Penny, the group you and Hep and the rest are working away at changing the way our system affects the earth, the other Firm are pulling the rug out from under you. No wonder the weather is unpredictable! It feels like the JNO faction is trying to save the earth from despoilation while the other Firm is doing the opposite. It all logical and mad. You have to believe in Greek gods first. And I don't!'

'Maybe not,' said Ric. 'But remember Greek thought and Greek mythology are part of our Western culture and forms the basis of much of our thought patterns. There's maybe a cross over where mythology and metaphor merge into reality. There's definitely a reality in what's happening even if the logic doesn't work in the real world - if there is such a thing. So let's go with the flow and see it out.'

They walked a while in silence along the bank of the stream, and over a little rise built to accommodate the resonating, wooden, foot bridge which echoed their foot-falls.

Ric, in an attempt to calm the maelstrom of his thoughts, stopped to admire the view. He often walked to Thunder-Bridge when he wanted to think. The way the ground slipped away was always a pleasant surprise which he imagined before he saw it, and without fail it was always better in the fact than the imagination; revealing a nestling copse beyond a water-meadow, sometimes full of wild-flowers, softly-green in spring, in summer turning to gold in the full heat.

He watched Marina move ahead and felt a growing admiration for her many qualities. He had never really spent much time thinking of her, he was too busy with his feelings for Penny and his work to notice other people as long as they were effective at their work. He considered Marina with new eyes. Not only was she stunning to look at, graceful, athletic, feline almost - if a bit short in the leg for his taste - but she knew more than he imagined. He had seen her as an efficient security chief, ruthless when necessary, but without much creativity. Suddenly she had become a close confidante, holding keys to the same large issues he had been worrying about for a long time alone unaware there was anyone to share them with. He had tried to broach them with Penny but sheared off from either her ignorance of the truth or her felt desire to keep him at arm's length from her own worst fears. It was a relief to speak of these things to another person. Ric broke the silence,

'Marina, how long have been worrying about this other Firm - only since Barboncito?' His voice sounded too loud in the still air.

'No, I had my suspicions when the hacker was first discussed that day Alexander came here to Markham and the monitor melted down. Of course I didn't know about another Firm as such, like the rest of you I thought it was a 'normal' hacking operation by another company. But I recall Hep getting particularly agitated about it - you remember?'

'Hep? God yes Marina! Don't you think we ought to get him to talk to us about this? On second thoughts, he's so wrapped up in his work, I don't think he would give us the time. What's more I don't think he would reveal his origins to us without it being part of the overall plan of Lucina. I wouldn't want to inadvertently set hares running that we couldn't handle while there's so much to do and such little time.'

'My point entirely, Ric, you've too much on here, my job is security and I'm worried about Alexander. I have the strongest feeling he is the key to everything and he's alone amongst the other Firm whatever it is. I have to get to him and soon. I can get a laissez passer from UNPEX and fly to Arizona. I'll start at the Matkatamiba and take it from there.'

'What about Penny?' asked Ric. 'What did she say to you to do?'

'She wants me to find Alexander and she wants you to finish what you're doing with Hep and Lynne Farrel. She says you know Franklin Colwyn is on Ios and what they're working on with Lynne and SYDCOM is your priority. She says what you're up to is the only possible antidote to the other Firm's inroads. She's leaving the Alexander thing to me, and won't have anything to do with it. I'm just to give her news and not to involve her. She wished me luck, I first thought she was afraid for me, but now I think she was relieved someone else was getting involved and leaving her off that particular hook.'

Rick stopped walking and turned to gaze down on her from his rangy height. He held her by both shoulders and then to her utter surprise and inner pleasure, he clasped her to his chest and kissed the top of her head.

'Do it for love of her, and for love of Alexander - do it for care of them, find him, help her. What Hep, Lynne, Franklin and I do will astound the world, what you do will help rescue it! Pray God, Zeus and Hera and all the gods that ever were, that you succeed!'

## Chapter 3

Marina left Markham via the culvert and picked up a car with an UNPEX plate provided by the Chief Constable of Oxfordshire, one of her many helpfully placed associates, and drove to Heathrow airport. She had her UNPEX ticket for Phoenix Arizona, designating her as a senior civil servant of the new Republic of Great Britain. Her UN travel documents, were courtesy of Doris Botham's department. She had no trouble getting access to the airport precincts in the distinctive car nor were there any problems getting through emigration, and she was sure her entry papers for the USA would be okay.

Her consternation and frustration were all the more acute on hearing the flight was delayed. A liveried and effusively apologetic, employee came to the VIP lounge to inform her personally that the 'plane was delayed in its inward journey by bad weather. There was no knowing when the weather would change. In the meantime would she like to book into the Concordat Hotel at their expense?

In the absence of Atlantic flights, she had the man check on Eastward schedules. In a little time he returned with the information there was one Concordat flight available via Tel-Aviv and Bangkok to San-Francisco but because of the situation it was fully booked. Whereupon she asked if the UN Airport Controller was in the airport at that moment, and if he was, to inform him Marina would like a word if he would be so kind. The attendant, used to domineering VIP's and aware that these days all sorts of people were travelling who could pull strings, and jobs like his being scarce, acceded to all her requests without qualm. He was also particularly and unusually impressed by this stunningly attractive woman. She was dressed in a fiercely severe and expensive suit of fine wool, it fitted like a second skin. It made her desirable while giving clear hands off signals. He was used to dealing with haughty women belonging to VIP gentlemen and to business women in their own right. Somehow even the most attractive were either self-conscious or imperious. He had come to the conclusion that only the dowdy were real. This woman was certainly not dowdy, but real as paint for all that. Minutes later he returned with a 'phone number and a mobile phone and leading her to a private room offered it to her and retreated to leave her in private. 'An official with both good sense and manners,' she thought. 'We could usefully recruit him.' She punched the number into the 'phone. In a while a voice answered.

'Hello, Marina, how can I help you?'

'Hi there Gerry, How's it going...okay? Good. Look, I'm stuck here - bloody weather - yea - I'm told there's an Eastward flight, can you get me on?'

'For JNO anything. Give me a few minutes - love to Penny when you see her!'

'Sure thing Gerry - thanks a lot - JNO owes you one!'

'What JNO's done for me!... No probs. sweetheart, consider it done!'

She returned to the lounge area. Minutes later the liveried attendant walked over to a severely dressed man, ostentatiously fiddling in his briefcase. He bent over to have a few words. The man closed his briefcase with a snap, surprised, then soon dismayed. He spoke quietly at first and after a reply from the attendant his voice went up several decibels.

'You mean I've been bumped! Me? Bumped! You can't do this, I'm on UNPEX business! Tell whoever did this he'll hear from my people! I want to see someone in authority, this instant!' He left the room abruptly, followed by the attendant. Seconds later another attendant approached Marina to inform her, her flight to San-Francisco was confirmed. Boarding was in ten minutes.

Marina gazed at the plush elegance of the first class fuselage as she arranged herself in the comfortable recliner. She enjoyed the opulence offered by her position in the Firm, but it was something she never actually got over, nor took for granted. Although habituated to VIP treatment and quality in her surroundings, she always remembered her inauspicious origins. She was neither proud of her beginnings, nor was she in any way ashamed. It was what it was and what was done was done. Today luxury came with the job and she accepted it while it was offered. It was undeniably pleasant, but not essential. In the same way she kept her body honed, her approach to life was essentially pragmatic, quick to spot and act on the necessities for survival. She felt no satisfaction 'bumping' the man in the VIP lounge. For her, JNO business had priority just because it had universally applicable purpose in this new, crazy world, where people like those around her travelled in the lap of luxury, while the rest of the world were confined to their zoned precincts. UNPEX control was by now pretty well absolute. Her expertise in security told her it was not surprising that UNPEX should so quickly be in global control. No single government had the resources to co-ordinate the international effect of waves of refugees from coastal inundation and famine. At first NATO, the EC and the USA, together with Russia and China had tried to co-ordinate a response and soon delegated the day to day running of the response programmes via the Security Council to the General Secretary who created UNPEX. A world wide emergency had been declared and the UN machinery was quickly re-worked. The G8 countries, took less time than the rest of the world had imagined possible to come to an agreement to forestall global panic.

Like Colwyn before her, Marina along with many other sceptics, was pleasantly and continually surprised at the efficiency of the UN machine and the new UNPEX authority. Natural disaster, it seemed, evoked a psychology in people different from that produced by man-made misery. People sought an effective authority to clear a way through and were relieved to give up their independence when uncontrollable events unfolded, sped up and washed over them.

That is to say most did - some, individualistic to the last, were upset that UNPEX had transferred to itself the instruments of freedom of action previously held by national governments in the interests of international order, and railed and protested about the global dictatorship of the UN backed by the Great Powers. Marina, like most people was not sanguine but saw the sacrifice as necessary in the emergency. She was aware that her own circumstances allowed her uncommon privileges and hoped for to the day when control would be re-devolved. She however shared the general consensus that things had probably changed forever and that national governments would find it difficult to reinstate their authority after the emergency.

She agreed with those who implacably opposed UN power as an abdication of national politics and proper democracy - and while happy with the pragmatism of the present arrangements found it difficult to envisage the Security Council agreeing to a return to the anarchy of nation-states competing with each other for hegemony of resources, trade or the freedom to defend their own local interests. At the same time there had been a rise in very local and regional authorities, and sub-governmental liaisons to regulate the immediacy of life for many groups sharing similar interests and geographies.

JNO's associates had been and still were, highly influential at the international level but were most powerful in the regional and local alliances. It was their task to ensure these structures would grow and strengthen. It was clear that after the emergency, however long it lasted, the current changes in global political, commercial and social arrangements would be recast and also there was potential for everlasting conflict between localised and centralised government systems. Just now, Marina was more concerned with the here and now to dwell on hypothetical futures. Like most people the future lay in the penumbra just outside her frame of reference, to be picked up on one day - whenever, if ever.

In the current battle for common sense and practical arrangements, JNO worked in the UN and inside UNPEX to maintain fairness in commerce, continuity of adequate food production and aid. Her understanding of the global situation from HIGO gave her confidence in the present and probably the future. The immediate danger was the way the other Firm in opposition made what ought to be straight-forward into hard work. It was this

that preoccupied her as the aircraft taxied to the main runway. She consulted her new hand held computer to get the latest information from HIGO. She had become sensitive to resistances. By recording her thumb-print on her set she was able to receive HIGO information directly via bluetooth to her ear-piece. HIGO's sexy female voice grated as usual, on her ear. Hep's little joke, or was it Ric's, to give HIGO a voice that was supposed to resemble her own, irritated her but not enough to insist it was changed. She made a mental note to talk to Ric about it but knew she would forget and be just as annoyed the next time she used the gadget. The information she got was more or less what she had expected to hear. There was a long list of changes in production and distribution due to the weather and the continuing loss of the polar ice-caps. The predictions were that this would continue for the foreseeable future. As usual the consequences of this were inconclusive and she told HIGO to ignore the speculations. She noticed a number of small indicators which confirmed in her mind the reality of the other Firm at work. There were several cases cited of UN or UN supported operations, some aid related, others commercially driven, which in the name of order or effective assistance, were adversely affecting the work done at Markham and the group on Ios. It was clear that global-warming and the financial firepower of the G8 via their UN system gave opportunity to certain operators in different markets and agencies to quash gains made by local people in the power relations between large-scale conglomerates and smaller eco-based, production co-operatives.

'S'right, d'arlin' They ain't never goin' ter gerrit right.'

Marina started, for a moment she thought Ric must have changed the voice in her ear-piece for a joke and was about to speak a few well chosen expletives into her machine when she realised the voice overrode HIGO and came from another source altogether. She couldn't be certain if it came from the ear-piece or from somewhere inside her head. She knew she was not hallucinating. She also knew what she heard.

'Not while Hades' got 'is finger in the pie. See 'e don't want 'em ter get inter sustainability 'cos that'd give Gaia a too early chance and 'e's playin' a double game. See, what I means lady? Like he's sayin to 'imself, people's not goin' ter change. Them 'as 'as, ain't goin ter give nuthin' away ter them as 'asn't, if they can 'elp it whatever 'appens to the world. They don't believe it's as bad as it is really. All this UN stuff is just kiddin' them along that things can be sorted out. So Penny's wastin 'er time really and there ain't enough of that left for her ideas ter take 'old. It 'ud be nice if she could like, but she knows it ain't gonna work in time. Summat else 'as got ter 'appen - see! The voice rattled on. She fiddled with her set but was unable to turn it off or get rid of it.

'That's where Alexander comes in! But he's making 'ard work on it. It's not 'is fault altogether, people's outa practice bein' heroes these days. They relies on science and exactness nowadays. No soul see, that's the point. Sense an' feelin's separated like. Know what I mean? They don't 'ave no problem with what they knows, but it don't fit wiv what they really feels an' its drivin' 'em mad - 'cept they don't know it yet, not properly.'

The voice became wistful and trailed off dreamily. Just as Marina thought the aberration was over, it came back with vigour.

'So you've gotta 'elp 'im! Like now!'

I'm not hallucinating, thought Marina, but I am hearing a voice. This set's picking up something, probably to do with the plane. The aircraft was gathering thrust for take off and the noise made all thought difficult. She removed the ear-piece and held it in her hand. Minutes later, in the air approaching cruising speed, the noise-levels abated and the aircraft levelled-off. There was no voice now in her head - it must have been the ear-piece. Now she was bothered by what the voice had said. The interference had mentioned Penny and Alexander and the main mission of JNO. The only explanation she could think of was somehow, the other Firm was able to make contact with her. She knew enough about the abilities of Hep and if, in the maddest of mad worlds, Ric was right about the Greek stuff, anything was possible.

Most of the time she kept an open mind about all things, whatever the confusions that happened inside her



own head. She was proud of making some clear decisions for herself which affected her management of the external world, for example that she would be oppressed by no one. She had made another decision not to indulge in introspection. Nevertheless the connections of her involuntary internal thoughts to her perceived external realities always fascinated her. She considered them as the difference between private thoughts and public doings. She often thought of these different realms like patterns printed on transparent acetates. You can set them down separately or on top of each other. You can layer them ad infinitum - remove some add others. You can have part of a pattern on one completed by overlaying part of one from another.

What it all meant to her was that she considered her life as having existence in both realms simultaneously. She lived mostly in the tangible external world rather than in her less clear, internal world. It seemed to her that periods of happiness came from an integration of both. Her normal external world of present immediacies required masses of information built into an unassailable reality. She was continually aware of the insistence of the immediate world of up-and-doing which overlaid her differently arranged and differently coloured internal understanding.

Her private thoughts had a tendency to become indistinct - and therefore less tangible, but not less powerful for all that. At times of relative quiet, such as before sleep or in that period just before waking when dreams can be at their most vivid; her internal perceptions were often very clear. Except when on waking, the outside world drove them away - seeming to prove that external realities had more insistence and logically, more importance. She wasn't sure it was altogether good to keep her private thoughts so private. This tended to make them unreal. Reality being an external thing. She fully believed that as people are of the same species, they all felt things similarly (cultural differences taken into account) rather than differently, so the potential for a fully integrated, inter-personal communication was possible. She believed - I feel therefore I am - is equal to - I do therefore I am, but only if the feeling is expressed - which of course needs expertise and effort, if understanding is to be communicated correctly. This view of things made her strongly assertive without being dogmatic. The problem with all forms of dogmatism she felt, was that to establish 'rules' in the external world, it is necessary to deny any inconsistencies this sets up in the internal mind. In these days, she was concerned that in the name of 'order' and the mitigation of public panic the new UNPEX system of control was beginning to ignore many people's own internal understanding of truth and fairness. The big issue for her was she did not know how far her own understanding of her internal realities fitted with those of other people. You simply couldn't communicate with everyone on equal terms. You had to rely on external expression, the use of language and imagery, which was always flawed. She held in high regard those people who's actions were consistent with their declared beliefs. Penny and Alexander were two such and Ric seemed to be a third.

'You're dead right about all that my girl, but what yer gotta know is how are you to get that all working? 'Cos that's the point I'm making. People've gotta change. They've gotta fit what they feels with what they knows and be able to check it out with everyone else before they do anything and then act t'gevver. That's what Penny and Alexander are about 'cept Alexander knows the size of it and is scared rigid and Penny knows what to do but is shittin' 'erself there's no time to get it right! Just a few folks gettin' it right won't be no good. That's what Lucina says at any rate an' it makes sense to me. Cep'n 'istry's against yer innit? Know what I mean?'

This time Marina had the ear-piece in her hand. So the voice was definitely in her head. Still surprised, but not as shocked as she thought she ought to be, she recognised the voice as Pannie Ljeschi's, the manikin who dogged Lucina's footsteps. She wondered if she had summonsed the notion of him through the conversation with Ric. She noted to herself she needed a sample of his DNA to verify the Greek thing as possible. She decided she was keyed up and therefore her thoughts were playing tricks. She ordered a gin and tonic from the passing hostess and settled down to get some relaxing sleep. If the voice in her head went on she would go with the flow and not worry about it - no point worrying about things you can't control especially if there's something weird going on in the internal and external world at the same time. Things would resolve themselves and she'd have to cope as best she could.

She drank her gin and reclined the comfortable leather chair and rested, thinking about the conversation she'd

had with Ric and of Alexander.

From the moment she checked him out in Markham the day of the hacker, she knew he was in a different category from anyone else tied up in the complex web of personalities that made JNO what it was. It wasn't just the DNA sample, although she had been bothered by 'Them' for a while. She was particularly pestered by the dissonance set up when she compared Penny, whom she adored, with Thea whom she failed to comprehend at all and of whom in consequence, she was suspicious, and now there was Alexander - who was of Penny and of Thea; and Thea who in turn wasn't of Penny. There was no explanation she could find beyond the far fetched one of Ric's. She would have dismissed it as dreaming nonsense were it not for her own delving, HIGO's exclamation mark and her own DNA sampling. She must be sub-consciously obsessed with the Pannie Ljeschi idea to hear his voice in her head.

Her thoughts turned to Alexander. She was at first irritated by Penny's blatant nepotism with her children in JNO. One of 'Them' or not - Thea had simply walked in to a senior position. She suspected Lucina had something to do with it, but had to admit Thea's abilities were remarkable. Thea never had any doubts about any decision and had never been wrong. Such formidable behaviour was too uncanny for reasonable explanations. Alexander on the other hand seemed to be forever finding himself in complex situations which demanded depths of the kind of introspection which she found too much like hard work. Going after a hacker and stopping him in his tracks was one thing. Getting into a jealous relationship with her and going off into the blue-yonder with Barboncito and getting lost was another. She thought about her own relationship with Alexander and the comparison she had inadvertently told Ric about, of him and Barboncito: another one of 'Them'.

The spindrift of her thoughts rippled round her tired brain allowing remembrances of them both to curl into her. As the softening effect of the gin laced through her blood, she slid ever so gently into an entrancing doze where her arts of sexual reverie reached the endorphins of her mind and in the right mood, provided her with a kind of mental orgasm equalling in intensity, but quite different in kind, from the physical. This sexual energy was part of her character, it flowed from her inner core and affected all the men she met. She had developed a strong hands-off response as a control, which never failed. Those she allowed in more closely were inevitably bowled for six at the first encounter and so became too abject to bother with. Barboncito and Alexander had been 'let-in', and so she had already experienced 'Them'. Her relaxed mind mirrored them, twinned them into halves of each other like two parts of a mould. Her sexual memory conjured the painful remembrance of her unnatural father, from whom she had been liberated through his blood and her own violence. Her experience with Alexander had gone straight to her mind while by contrast, Barboncito had played her body with exquisite cadences. In the mind's eye of her abstracted musings, she saw her past and future entwined in these two lovers.

The thrum of the aircraft resonated through her and she drifted far away; her body gathered momentum, her nerve endings sang, as she tuned into her twin sweethearts as her body rushed through the air five-times faster than sound.

## Chapter 4

Zeus had a scheme for shaping the future. But only if Alexander was successful in his mission and the world of mortals was able to continue without gods. He would give an account of Alexander's sojourn in Hades deliberately wrought in the form of a new myth. His chronicle would tell of Alexander's early doubts and subsequent forgetfulness, attributed to the undoubted qualities of the river Lethe flowing through Elysium. It would tell how Alexander heroically overcame forgetfulness and helped Zeus and Hades link the past and present through a proper use of remembrance. At the same time he, Zeus the Thunderer, would show how, in his Magnificence, he treated with Yahweh and offered the future exclusively to the inheritors of Gaia. Thus She would be saved by this race of mortals. The tale would show how without the myth, mortals would have obliterated themselves by forcing Gaia to save Herself by first destroying them.

This, he reflected, had always been the point of Olympian Symbolism. To create a sufficiently complex and satisfying mythology to offer guidance in the present. It was right that Lethe should blur the detail of the past so the present could take hold; the dead should be mourned and left behind. Distillation of the past into myth, creates the right elements of remembrance, like the laying down of coral, to build strong foundations to support the ever increasing weight of the collective psyche. Through proper remembrance the present seamlessly dovetails into an appropriate future.

Zeus was right to trouble about the length of Alexander's forgetfulness beyond the Sipapu. He had for that reason acquired some insurance against leaving the Hadean part of his plan to an unknown quantity. He hoped this foray of his son in the Underworld would produce the third and final part of the total force needed to save his race. He nonetheless kept another string to his bow.

He spoke of his doubts to Athena and Ares, and sent them in full war gear to safeguard Themis as she journeyed to find his dread father Chronos and negotiate - a dangerous alternative given his vicious record. Hera, beyond anger and frustration at his meddling, renewed her efforts through Hep and Ric and the group on Ios. Show-down time was not far away. Pannie was on as full a throttle as she could make him go - and Alexander - what of him? Who would keep his failing remembrance intact in Elysium? Mnemosyne was on the wrong side of the Sipapu. Hecate, a shade of the darkness and much maligned goddess, was in Hades. Unknown to Hera, she had set her test and like Zeus - she hoped.

The Erinyes, from the unfathomable depths of Erebus in the black belly of the Underworld's Underworld, had sniffed the pride of illicit life in Hades. Now they hovered keenly at the verges of Elysium, beating glossy, black wings in gleeful anticipation of some real action. The rhythm of their wings fanned hotly in the inner darkness of Alexander's mind. Unrecognised, though he sensed danger. Not yet pursued by them he felt driven forward to escape something he could not name. Where was his namer, Nemmi now? Who would vanquish the darkness of the unnamed fear?

The subtle power of Lethe made sure he could not see that his work among the clan was inadequate. That whatever was done in this place could never amend the effect of Europa's work in the upper world. He felt so earnestly that it should, and as he was himself striving heroically to make amends, he proudly overrode his own doubts in the light of his tangible achievements with the people of the tribe. Zeus was right to fret about the effects of Lethe. This most recent Orpheus had found his Eurydice in the purity of a fellow clanswoman but had no desire to bring her forth into the bleak daylight of a world contaminated by the work of Europa's children. His pride would not allow the crushing of her spirit under such a defiled sun. Between NightChant and Barboncito, his heart gave way first to her superlative sweetness and to his magnificent vigour. The clan had to be fed, his wide family satisfied. His duty to the ancients performed, his oneness with the Earth and all it contained, expressed. In a delight of spirit; Alexander out-clanned the clan, out-sang the singing-way, rode fastest, fought hardest. Never having had a Way of his own, in his conceit he appropriated their Way and was proud. Unperceived by him, the smallest of shadows, were nonetheless cast by the flick of dark wings against the pearl of the sky.

In Fourthworld, Manny Kanuho was worrying about JNO and the losing battle and called out for Barboncito. At Manny's call he left Alexander and rode from Elysium and out into the world of the present. His job was to assist a drowning planet make to make sure the numbers flowed ever faster on the road to Charon Crossing and increased the power of the past. As fast as JNO organised new remedies for the continuing failures of different initiatives through their networks by diverting funds through its GRADE programmes, Barboncito used Fourthworld as a vehicle to peddle simple explanations of causes and to find many easy scapegoats for the increasing problems of the Earth.

He rode out of Tartarus concealing under his under his cloak numberless shades to trouble a frenzied population seeking explanations to make them re-affirm convenient old religious and mystical accounts for the untoward changes in the world. A great search for visible and easy things to blame overtook the four fifths of humanity who already had nothing to lose and who doubted the scientific and commercial motives of the last fifth who still had so much to lose. More and more of the peoples of the world were motivated by the shadowy hosts of Barboncito to re-define forgotten cultural fundamentals. As the world's seams unravelled, old gods and ancient spirits rose up to challenge the most rational minds. In the name of new simplicities, the great work of JNO, fell foul to assassination, terrorism and demonstration as people re-minted old solutions and argued, often violently, about their different but correct ways to put Humpty together again. They wrestled in overlapping attempts to establish their own truths and final solutions. Blind obedience fought against co-operation, zealots with bowed-knee, challenged the idea of personal responsibility.

'We have sinned against (the deity or deities) and taken too much on ourselves and we are justly punished. You who do not yet follow us must listen to (God, the gods, the stars, sun - any and all Redeemers) and (we, they) will save you from yourselves - see how we prostrate ourselves and interpret the signs for you. You must follow us and (the, our) revealed truth!'

But, despite the desire for simplicity there was only complexity. The secret contained in the heart of GAIANET revealed to those on Ios that nothing they touched was straightforward. Even the seemingly uncomplicated was in the end elaborately constructed from marvels of invention, containing hidden and beguiling syntheses of form, sense and imagination. In the diversity of the world, people, institutions, nature, creativity and development - everything, turned out ultimately to be deceptive. It explained their doubts about their work. They would never reach the simplicity of a single solution and knew they would not.

Billions of years - myriad's of diverse splittings and joinings had produced the world and its inhabitants. The geography, the human race, the flora, the fauna. Trillions more of separate acts by billions of people over hundreds and thousands of years made this present and would make the future for good or ill. There was no one Act to rescue them. No one God to propitiate in the correct manner. No One Right-Way to follow, no point to which they could return and re-work the path in a different direction.

JNO included all this diversity in an attempt to manage the complexity of an ultimately rational world - Fourthworld sought simplicity and purity in faith and conviction. On Ios they knew this would not solve the problem as it had not done in the past. But those on Ios knew that where before, time had been on their side, the human race was now running out of time and there was not enough to reverse what Barboncito and his people were fast regaining.

They worked on in the hope of the development of new learning, but with dwindling confidence in their race. Tantalisingly, they felt they were half-way there - half the world, the half they had been able to help, managed for themselves and faced the problems daily in board-rooms, on committees, in assemblies, in places of worship of all kinds, under trees in Africa, in halls in America, in long-houses, in school-rooms, in TV studios and radio-stations. Everywhere was the dichotomy. Save us! - versus - save ourselves! How long before we are destroyed?

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Far from the present, on the other side of the Sipapu, without Barboncito, the people of the Sipapu looked to their new path-finder. As in early evening when the stars in the sky appear small and few but with the enveloping of darkness their depth and number grow to infinity; Alexander, beloved of Barboncito, grew in wisdom and righteousness and joining with NightChant aimed at Hozjo - completeness. Once achieved he would sally forth at the head of the children of the Din. He would go to Hades, his mission complete, his example made. He would show first Hades, then cross the Sipapu to show to Europa and all the world what could be. From the mere power of his example, people in the Now must change and become as the Din, and Gaia would be saved. Wholeness they were, inclusion they were. Together he, NightChant and the tribe rooted in the earth would claim a Great Joining under the sky with all people. He was ready. He would find Hades and demand he accompany him to carry Remembrance out of Tartarus and restore it to the needful world.

Hecate, as NightChant alone heard the beat of dark wings on the grey-green borders of Erebus and Elysium. Her Harpies waited impatiently for the signal she was hesitant to give. She could not help Alexander's forgetfulness nor his growing pride. Zeus and Hera were adamant and at one, in their insistence that on his journey to self-knowledge he was ultimately alone. Hecate knew too that pity was not enough. As NightChant she clove to him, as Hecate she wished to intervene but as part of Zeus's Plan she must sit on her hands. Alexander became obsessed with the power of his knowledge of Songlines and Blessingways. He spent long periods meditating alone, in the hills accompanied by Flatfoot. He would simplify, he would bring the world back to natural ways. His conversations with Barboncito were as those with Nemmi as a child, visits to long past experience of perfect Hozjo, a kaleidoscope of interlocking truths, added piece by piece, blessing by blessing, true feeling unsullied by strife, in peace and without guile. It was righteousness given to his tribe via their authentic relationship with the Earth.

'Your mission,' Barboncito taught, 'is to learn, feel and know and you will comprehend. Strength will rise in you like sap through a tree rising from the good Earth. From this will come the vigour to quicken your limbs and uphold your heart. In the beginning you will yearn to feel the knowledge in you. When all is known, in wisdom you will bear yourself to Hades for his blessing and join me with enlightenment under your cloak to bring to all the insignificant peoples of the earth the power of Hozjo in each of them. You will be their teacher and you will be honoured throughout the world as a redeemer. When it is time, you will go to Hades and ask of him the way back and lead the tribe of the dead - re-born - with you, into Fourthworld, where together we will spread his word and the word of the goddess Gaia. We will be warriors of the renewed Earth and bring down the works of man until they equal the sweetness of Gaia herself. Hades will teach you to lead the hordes of his shades in renewed life - simplified. Untouchable and invisible your hordes will tear down the works of Europa's children and remake the world out of renewed tribes from the past. Hozjo will reign - Gaia will be free again!'

He was ready now. He would journey from Elysium to Erebus where Hades dwelt with Persephone. He was ready for his mission. He felt the power of the clans who made him their leader. Daily he watched them become more than shades, vesting themselves with his life, the life he had from Gaia cleansed through Hozjo. Starting with NightChant, he would proudly breathe his spirit into them.

Nemmi would be pleased with the remembrance he had from his new understanding of Gaia through the clan. She would acknowledge how his vitality had restored the vigour of his people to urge them onwards into the Fourthworld of their imagination. How they longed to regain their lost hunting grounds on the clear, clean plains in the land they had left, the wide open deserts, the deep canyons under a peerless sky.

Hecate, as NightChant produced a meal from the goodness of the earth fit for a conquering hero. In beauty she waited on her man, with beauty she gave him wholesomeness personified. As he ate he grew in his own estimation. Was he not a chief? Was he not in Hozjo? So why was doubt crossing like occlusions the eyeball of his mind?

'Go you soon forth to Hades in Erebus my chief?'asked NightChant, holding his hand - the test continued.

'Yes. Yes I will go.' He emphasised the will with only the faintest of a hesitation of which he was barely aware. Noted by NightChant it was seized upon by Hecate who alone, again, heard the flat beat of wings on the gloomy, heavy air of Erebus.

'I will gather all the tribes of Hades in a vast multitude and we will visit Hades himself in Erebus. I feel strong enough to confront him in his own country now I have the People with me. It's funny I thought of Barboncito as the enemy. I saw him leading me to another Firm, in another sphere which was out to undermine all that mother and JNO were doing. It's taken me ages to come to the idea of JNO being merely a different but later version of the Tribe of Barboncito, of Hozjo on a larger scale. I had to feel the power of Hozjo for myself to recognise it in JNO and to understand the stories of Mnemosyne.'

'Now you do?' queried a worried Hecate.

'Oh yes!', Alexander gripped her young, slim arms with fervour. 'It's all so simple really, I wonder why I never understood it before! I've been out walking the hills feeling the full force of Hozjo - these things around us, you, the hills, the tribe the way the wind strafes through the grasses, the water on the rocks falling fathoms to the canyon bottom, all this is the Earth and here in Elysium, it goes back into timeless, ageless Earth, the place that made and sustains us all. You have no need to own it, grab hold of it, or tame it. The Earth Herself is the only goddess, we are created through Her stuff, acknowledged through Her wholeness. There are no need for churches or temples here, we live in harmony with Her, a mother sheltering her kin, as the tribe shelters us, as the canyon provides for both me you the tribe and Flatfoot equally. Hades, who rules here has kept the secret of Elysium locked far from the gaze of living people. It is my mission to bring this to the present world, and for Chronos to be forgiven by Zeus my father so the past can be brought into the full light of the future and the earth saved, Gaia restored!'

His heart beat quickly, a light shone in his eyes and NightChant loved him as a god. Hecate on the other hand was worried sick. She had given him his heart's desire as she was bound to do. She could not however think for him. As NightChant she saw his nobility, his earnestness, his real belief and his comprehension. As Hecate she saw his pride and listened, with foreboding to the continued beat of distant wings.

'And if Hades will not see you?' said Hecate. 'What will you do then?' Her inquiry grated on the pride of his self-belief.

'I have the multitudes of the tribes of the past with me. I have not only walked these hills, Barboncito and I have travelled this land of Elysium from margin to margin, deep in time and space we travelled and we have allied all the tribes that were, before the coming of Europa. The power of Hozjo is unstoppable and Hades will hear or he will be overrun with the quickening dead.' His voice was triumphant. 'He must listen and we will ride from here to amaze the living!'

'You are to bring Hades to Zeus to parley, I wasn't aware the arrival of an all conquering hero at the head of his multitudes, was part of the plan.'

Alexander felt a jolt to the smooth rise of his self-confidence. What could NightChant know of the plan? She knew Alexander had a mission for he had told her as much. She, as far as he knew had no idea of any wider programme as it were, outside the frame of reference of the tribe.

Hecate had dropped her hint, would he, she hoped, take it up?

'Plan, what plan are you talking about?' Alexander burbled, not sure how much to say.

'I may have been in this place beyond the Sipapu for, well let us say a long time, but I'm not stupid. We have had people from the living world here before, but none of them stayed long and none at all ever attempted to

force us back whence we came. What you do here quickens us with your life-force. It is quite unprecedented. We are in Elysium, we are happy here. We lived good lives in the world, and we have our reward here in this land. We had no desire, need or ability to move elsewhere. Chronos as I understand things made time stand still here and Hades watches over the proper disposition of the dead in timelessness. You doubtless know there are other realms in Hades' lands where the dead have different experiences from ours in Elysium. It is a well ordered system and we grow in numbers as populations increase in the living world. Since we remain we grow faster, exponentially. Your coming, rather your staying, changes things in unfamiliar ways. I can't believe this is unknown to either Hades or Chronos. So there is a plan. There must be.'

Hecate needed to stay credible as NightChant, while working Alexander's doubts to their fullest without actually doing the forbidden by putting ideas into his head.

'Okay, I see; that's very perceptive of you,' said Alexander relieved. 'But it is true the people of Elysium are with me in this. My journeying with Barboncito has wakened a new interest in their restoration to the living world. The People of Elysium are not here by accident. I have seen the work of Rhadamanthys and it's true you are the chosen ones. More reason to lead you from here and for you to become mentors for the living world. It's what Barboncito told me is his purpose - and my people on the other side of the Sipapu share his goals. They see the world being destroyed and work for its recovery. There is a clear common interest which needs now to be connected if the world is to be saved. We are all in the same world whichever realm we inhabit, if Gaia dies so do we all.'

'But we are already dead, I passed over ten of your centuries ago!'

'But that's the whole point! You are uncontaminated. You are pure. You are before Europa's deluge which all but destroyed your people on earth and will in the end destroy everything. Fourthworld needs your unsullied experience of how to live. Few people in the now know, I mean really know how to live. There is no time left for people to change by themselves. NightChant, I can't expect you to follow what I'm saying for you have not experienced the world as I have, the world as people have made it. You are so lucky to know it as you do. You have helped me to realise the immensity of the tragedy we have wrought. It's so huge that I've been ages making sense of the magnitude of it. I used to think people were clever enough to work their way out of the hole they were digging for themselves. That there was time to invent ways out before the world became uninhabitable. That we would somehow stop the pollution, clean the seas and the air, free the people from their blindness, get it right in the end. But through the real meaning of Hozjo two things have convinced me that Barboncito and Hades are right.'

He paced about the Hogan talking quickly, breathlessly. NightChant regarded him with wonder and adoration. Hecate, however, almost lost her grip on her task and was thinking about shedding NightChant's outer skin and revealing herself to make sure this sad, mistaken apology for a son of the great Zeus got his act together. NightChant was such a push-over. Hecate decided she had got the mix wrong. Sure she had hooked him, but her purity made her too uncritical of his limited experience and inadequate sophistication. She would have to find a way of NightChant tripping him up. It would be a real effort of will to allow him to go on. Maybe, she hoped, if she left him alone he would come to it for himself.

She cursed that the whole Pantheon was under a new ban by Zeus of talking directly to mortals, apart from the exception of Alexander, and she was unable to reveal herself to him or he would fail her test. For people, she reflected, to believe they thought for themselves was one thing, it was another to actually ensure they did it. Talk about risky. It would also put the gods out of a job. However the alternative of a world without people would be pretty boring without being able to work on their thoughts. The gods were okay on their own, in their way, but without birth and death to turnover new people to give renewed interest, people would soon become predictable. Maybe the gods should wait another ten million years or so, make a new kind of flood and make a fresh sixth-race as the best way out of the present mess? Although she didn't like Hera much, she had to concede that it was too late for that and there was too much work already done. Perhaps their work was

really over in this world either way. Still, It would be a pity to allow it all to go to waste just because people refused to act out in public what they knew in private had to be done. Really, it was that simple.

She, like Hera and many others in the Pantheon couldn't believe it had come to this, despite having known it instinctively for aeons, as Europa's children multiplied and fanned out across the globe. Like Hera too, she wasn't sure about Zeus' alternative ideas to search for, or create other intelligent life forms on other worlds in other universes. What was the point? What use were they as gods if they couldn't work it out with this current lot? So, if she couldn't do anything as Hecate, she'd have to do what she could as NightChant. She would make ingenuousness work. After all, Alexander really believed he had got to the truth of the matter. See how he expounds, he's really got something to say. With Barboncito making way in the Now, with the endless hordes of Hades ready to sweep away the negligence of the Now for the apparent 'simple goodness' of the Past, he really did believe he was going to save the Earth. She would use this belief and hope to lead him away from too much pride.

'Alex-Andre - Protector,' NightChant spoke softly but her use of his full tribal name made him pay her attention. Such use of names had special significance in the Hogans of Barboncito. It denoted seriousness of intention and the need for the named to pay attention. To ignore such an address was unbecoming in a chief. When she was sure he had stopped his flight of rhetoric, she continued,

'I'm all ears to know these two things which have convinced you my Chief, but we are of the dead. We have passed our time in the Now. We left what we could back there for those who came after us, more we cannot do. There is no future here. You must listen to me, there is no future in Hades.'

'But there is the past, NightChant, we have forgotten the past and what I know now is that while it was not always good, you of the past know how to live. We who know only how to plunder the world, have forgotten how to truly live. We must stop what we do and live. Barboncito steals these ideas from here and is trying to make them live in the Now. Hades and Chronos together with Zeus can hold time long enough for the knowledge of your people to be re-learned in the present. A show of massed will-power at his door must make him pay attention. To balance Hades and Zeus, the past with the present is heroic work. This is my mission from my father.'

'And of the future?'

'There won't be a future without me! That's precisely it! I know from Zeus, Hera, Mnemosyne and even dappy Pan that there's no future unless I succeed. I must bring Hades to Zeus! But not in entreaty, I want him to come in full panoply, as he should, his hordes at his back and Chronos at his side!'

It was on the tip of Hecate's tongue to remind Alexander of the last time Zeus was directly challenged in the Now by the forces of the Past, but as NightChant she was unable to do so. Therefore let Alexander mass his hordes and present himself in Erebus if he could. Her Harpies had ways of acting for themselves once loosed on the over proud and Hecate would try to protect him - if she could!"



## Chapter 5

Persephone, lately returned from her confrontation with Zeus, was occupied trying to restore the disrupted weather systems of Europe. She too was dismayed by wider weather changes over which she found she now had limited control. Her coming to Zeus out of her proper time had meant a particularly late spring for the year. Her main task was the regularity of the seasons, which she struggled to maintain in spite of a fatigued Gaia who was slipping imperceptibly from vigorous growth towards mere maintenance. Gaia continued to complain to Zeus and anyone else who would listen, that this lamentable state of things must inevitably end with Her becoming too fragile to sustain a human population. Persephone was trapped in a three cornered conflict. She hated change. All her considerable powers of creativity were channelled to the maintenance of a seasonal cycle designed for all life. She had become used to one element of her conflict with Zeus, which at first she had found almost too difficult to bear. Her fury at her abduction by Hades to the alien realm of Erebus had been transformed in the arms of her dark and lordly abductor, now husband, into love for his clarity of purpose and the steadfastness with which he maintained the split between his world and the Now. A secure Past helped her work in the Now, gave people something reliable. There was no development in his realm. A kind of day/night in Elysium gave continuity, and was unchangeable. Seasons came and went and there was preservation. She used this as her anchor to cope with the complexity of change during her time in the Now. She would not bear children by Hades, for to create life was to conjure the unpredictable. As the centuries moved in the Now she needed constancy more and more as life became increasingly complex.

The second part of the conflict was also old but less constant. She loved Zeus her father, and Demeter her mother, as she loved her husband. But things were moving too fast for her in the Now. Demeter liked it as little as she, but they both reluctantly recognised the inevitability of the intrusive effect of people on the world and she also saw the growing powerlessness of Zeus and the gods to affect the minds of this fifth race.

The third element she liked least. There was movement in Hades. Life had entered. It wasn't the first time and probably wouldn't be the last. But this time there were differences. Life had always come by invitation, or at least consent. It was either kept in its place in Hades as she was herself, or allowed to leave on strict conditions of exit. Alexander, son of Zeus and thus her half-brother was not only uninvited and therefore not allowed, he was also counselling ideas of change. This she had from Zeus and not her husband. Hades too was changed. He was less determined to maintain the divide between past and future. He sought his father Chronos in his fastness and they spoke long together. The tectonic plates of time were on the move, serious shifts in expectation and understanding were occurring on both sides of the sipapu.

Persephone and Hades had never worked together much in the organisation of their day to day lives. Hades never confided in his wife about his work and she got on with her own tasks. Thus the seasons had come and gone largely without much remark. The relationship made for stability - it was good enough - in fact it was highly practical. Now her sense of stability which she needed for her work was under assault. Zeus wanted her to find her friend Hecate and watch out for the arrival of Themis and her rather worrying warlike companions. Chronos was to be brought face-to-face with the future for the first time and his recent fondness for Hades was a real worry. In the meantime she was to watch out for her new half-brother who by all accounts was the least predictable of them all and, if the reports she had from Ljeschi were true, he was still making waves in Elysium.

Hades seemed either ignorant or was deliberately ignoring these changes and while she suspected he already knew what she herself knew, he was never available for comment. From Hecate she learned Alexander was gathering his hordes and would soon be heading directly for the Halls of Hades. She too sensed the beat of silent wings knowing full well that no one fully controlled the Megarea, not even Hecate. She hoped Alexander would evade them successfully. His destiny was to do so but not everyone managed to fulfil theirs against such marauders as these sisters. Melding discretely with Hecate she updated her knowledge of Alexander, and was unsure whether to be pleased or unhappy when their communication was added to by the intervention of Pan, as sub-voce as he was capable. She protested and all three slipped into L3,

'As long as you are in Hades Pan, you are to remain silent. Only Hecate, myself and Hermes can be heard here and you've already broken you ban.'

Pan communicated on L3 in a spot flash. What he said animated Persephone and Hecate. It was the best solution to the Alexander problem they had heard even though it added new complications to the status quo. It however had the advantage of being likely to head off the delaying potential of the Erinyes. They hurriedly cut short the meld - all three hoping others on the Hadean 'sphere had better things to do than listen in. Fortunately their hope was fulfilled. Hades and Chronos saw the approach of Themis with Athena and Ares as the current priority and they would deal with Alexander in due time. So far, Zeus' diversion was working. Hecate and Persephone agreed to help Pan work his plan for Marina.

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Marina put down her experience of Ljeschi on her ear-set as a waking dream and refused to waste more time on it. Such experiences were not abnormal for sub-space travellers. She knew she was stressed by her work, by her concern for Alexander and the subliminal worry everyone had about the unexplained changes in the weather. There were also the complex gyrations practised by the UN and JNO to maintain a reasonable semblance of routine in a world of changing and often unreadable circumstances.

Her mind was full of Barboncito and Alexander. Lulled by the pulse of the aircraft she slipped into a deep reverie. As her mind spun away into fantasy she had the sensation of falling back to earth. At first she simply dropped in the kind of breathless free-fall she had experienced in her training as a sky-diver. Using these skills she righted herself against the increasingly forceful upward column of air upon which she seemed to be travelling. She enjoyed the sensation as she revelled in all physical activity. Letting her mind go, she entered fully into the experience and no longer knew or cared if the free-fall was a real bodily sensation or solely in the imagination.

The most astonishing thing was Ljeschi's voice in her head. Later when she had time to reflect, in so far as she was able to think about it at all, she decided it was less a voice than a sensation of communication. It was more an internal than an external trespass on her consciousness. The direction of her fall seemed to be determined by her own desire, and not really by a feeling that Ljeschi was willing her towards a predetermined spot on the map of Mediterranean Europe. Her first perception was of the huge rotundity of the earth. The height achieved by the aircraft allowed her to see clearly the curvature of the globe. At once awed and enchanted by the vision, the sensation of flying into its bosom felt like a longed for homecoming. At no time did she feel unsafe or in anything but the most reliable of hands. As the earth's circularity inevitably flattened into the long line of the horizon, directly beneath her in full sunlight, lay the coastline of Greece with her islands, tiger's-eyes in a velvet sea. In the silence of falling found only in dreams, she directed her increasingly fast descent towards a space between a range of sparse, dry hills, at first the merest speck in the boundless distance. At a point when she wondered, dreamlike, if she would crash to her death against the side of a huge cliff, she careered like a fighter plane silently screaming at low level, through the very rock - into a place beyond. The supporting air on which she flew softened and lay her gently on the sandy earth of Elysium. The voice of Ljeschi ground into her ear,

'Okay sister, I got yer here now it's up ter you. There's just two things yer needs ter know baby, one, like I'm not supposed to be here and two, you neither. We 'ave ter trust to Them bein' too bothered wiv other fings ter worry about us.'

She lifted her eyes and Pannie Ljeschi was grinning at her from his cross-legged position by her head.

'Look, you're a lady of quick wit, let me say wot I gotta say, and let's get the questions over like, fast man. You an' that Trefoil bloke guessed it right. Congrats darlin' yer don't need all that DNA stuff neither. I'm who you think I am and it's obvious, gods don't die they simply fade from yer mind like. We're still floatin' about in

the ether so's ter speak. You're dead right about the other Firm an'all. It's out ter get JNO and that's only the beginning. Yea, and that Barbonshitto geezer is one of its main agents. But what yer don't know is the big cheese behind the other Firm is more'n just another branch of the family, it's Hades 'imself aided and abetted by his dad Chronos. An' what they're after is just a little thing like the total stoppage of time and then its reversal so's there'd be no proper living human life left to spoil the world. It's the past coming to stop the future to absorb the present. See, no problems, no new thought, no accidents, no development, no complexity, Hades will have it all and Chronos will return and devour the future at last. See? You gottit lady?'

Marina Thought fast. She didn't follow all the intricacies of the little man's train of thought. Her knowledge of Greek Gods went nowhere as far as Alexander's. But she held fast to her intention to find Alexander at the point of his disappearance in the Matkatamiba. She believed he and Barboncito had crossed some kind of barrier into another place where the other Firm operated. She'd kept her mind open about the Greek gods stuff and went along with the idea of inner and outer realities. Whatever state of consciousness she was in, Ljeschi, Lucina, Hep, Alexander and the others were real enough to have entered her consciousness as live beings and she felt herself alive enough at this very moment and she needed answers to a few questions before she could act.

'Am I in the place beyond the Matkatamiba?'

'You could say that, lady,' Pannie smirked at her.

'Okay, I believe you're who...'

'That's more'n your boy did at first,' grinned the little manikin. 'I never thought he'd gettit. Talk about 'ard work, anyhow...'

'I thought you wanted to do this fast! Where's Alexander? Where Am I? What do I have to do and what am I really up against? Last question, what's my chances of getting out of here with him, both in one piece?'

'So you're ready for fast my girlie is yer? Okay, pin yer lugs an getta load 'a this! You, my girl are in Hades, inna realm called Elysium ter be exact. That's the Underworld to you. The Underworld, yea? Not Hell. Like, there's no such thing as Hell, that's all make-believe. Hades, or the world of Hades is like in the past. Everybody wot ever lived, their doin's gets logged here and goes on happenin' repeatin' and repeatin, 'cos there's no time here, no future. See? Now the Underworld's not just one place all joined up like. It don't all join up so's all the dead people sorta mingle and mix things up else they might all start developing sumfink from the contact like, and that'd be growth and that's not allowed 'ere, that's not what it's for. So they're in different realms. Erebus, where Hades and Persephone live; Elysium; where Chronos rules and Tartarus, which you don't want ter know abaht. See? Now then, your Precious Alexander reckons to know all about it - an' I daresay 'e does, he knows the theory like but he's right lackin' in the knowledge department. No experience, not like us, too new, see? You've gotta knock abaht the 'sphere a bit ter know how to 'andle fings down 'ere like. So 'e's gone and got 'imself inter a right 'ole. That's where you come in. All you gotta know is he's only got it 'alf right an' he's gotta get out of here on 'is own with Hades in tow. On 'is own mind yer, not in front of a whoppin' great army like, you got that lady? Nah then, abaht the enemy as you put it, it's mainly 'im, he's 'is own worst enemy, Alexander I means. Them Erinye kids are gunnin for 'im 'cos 'es overreachin' 'imself...'

She interrupted him. Her instincts told her that this was a time for action and she did not have time to make full sense of all this. Unusually for her what she was thinking came straight out of her mouth.

'Look, I can't be doing with all this. I'm sure it's all very useful to know who's who and what's what and all that. But like you said, I've got to get on with it. So where is he? How far from here? What do I have to do to get him out?'

'I guess you're right, you're all life and livin' you are. You'll pop outer here like a champagne cork an' take 'im wiv yer. P'raps the problem in the first place was ter give 'im too much info. Okay, okay yer not far from 'im. Stick around and you'll see 'im soon. All you gotta remember is that yer not supposed ter be here an' well, I dunno, just be yerself and you won't go far wrong! Hecate'll sort it all aht, I 'ope.' And he was gone as suddenly as he appeared.

Maybe she was still in the stratosphere and dreaming, or somehow she was here, wherever, in this dry land talking with a cockney chimera. Take things as you find them my lass, she said to herself. Fortunately her tenacity for her task remained undiminished. Alexander was her quest, dealing with the other Firm was what she had to do. She was sure he was in the same business as she was, whatever this Greek stuff was doing to him.

She gazed about her. Her blood sang with a love of life against the strong sense of desolation which came through the landscape. It reminded her forcefully of the contrast between Barboncito and Alexander. It was a kind of beacon within her. Life was making and doing. Physical action allied to ideas - thought made action. Weaving the present into the future as the present was woven in its turn from the past. She felt that if she didn't keep a firm hold of this idea in this place, her spirit would be dragged down and she would cease to be herself. JNO had to triumph over the Firm in whose territory Ljeschi had said she now was, if indeed she was anywhere tangible.

One thing was clear, Barboncito was the enemy and anyone remotely on his side was a risk to her work in JNO. Given that she was in his territory, everyone and everything she met was a potential enemy, including the little man who got her here. She would trust to her instincts and follow her own feelings. Her internal thoughts and external experience seemed to work fully together in this current state of being. She would go with her feelings and act in accordance with the strength of the life force she had in her, and ignore the drag on her spirit she felt from this place. She felt somehow incredibly vital. Physically strong and mentally charged, like a boxer at the peak of condition for the big fight. It was as if her whole life was a preparation for the acts she would be called upon to perform in this place.

'Right then - enough of this! To work!' The little manikin had said she would see Alexander soon. She jumped lightly to her feet and dusted herself off. She immediately regretted her clothing, designed to make easy passage in the male dominated world of UNPEX officials and not for gallivanting in mountainous country. She tore the seams of her dress to mid-thigh to offer more freedom of movement. Looking around she spotted a high, jutting rock outcrop which would give a clear view over the terrain. She climbed her way to it with a strong feeling of expectation, as if something critical was about to happen. The very air of the place seemed charged, as if happenings were imminent. Climbing to the edge of the overhanging rock was awkward until she jettisoned her fashion shoes. She got only occasional glimpses of the country below, until arriving at the precarious edge of the cliff, she craned over the brim and beheld its full magnificence. She was at the high limit of a soaring canyon of which a long defile at the nearest end opened like funnel, into a long valley fanning into the vast distance, bound in the farthest extremity of its span by high, snow-capped, mountains. Hardly visible on the flat spreading plain in a light, greyish, mist were spires; other tall buildings, and the cross-hatching of streets and roads, suggesting a largish town or city.

Towards it three main roads converged. Two entered from the open end of the plain while the third struck straight as a pencil from the narrow end of the canyon. Her photographic mind registered as much of the ground as she could and in particular she absorbed the general bearing of the country around the city as far as she could see. She also gleaned a generalised knowledge of the lay-out of the city. She was about to set off there; when in her peripheral vision she noticed movement to her left at the extremity of the narrow end of the high funnel. Till that moment the place was characterised by its brightness and utter stillness. She had subliminally noted the quietness and total lack of movement. No bird sang, no breath of air troubled the grasses. No person, nor the remotest sign of occupation issued from the sprawling buildings. Nothing entered or exited by any of the roads. Yet there was no peace in the stillness. It was like the lull before the storm,

except there was no weather to speak of, it felt like everything had stilled expectantly, waiting for a signal. For some reason the idea came to her that she was waiting for the onset of some ancient battle. That there were rival armies, hidden from each other in the folds of the hills, tensely waiting for the horn of battle to announce the first charge or the loosing of the first salvo.

Turning to peer into the darker narrowness of the canyon proper she first saw an expanding cloud of reddish dust from where the relative darkness of the canyon gave way to the blinding-light of the plain. It approached very slowly. Ultimately she was able to make out a moving column of people, then she saw some were mounted on horses, some on foot, others in a variety of vehicles, ranging from animal drawn wagons to motorised vehicles of all kinds, from what appeared to be ancient motor cycles, old first world-war buses, early limousines to modern cars. She immediately noted that Ljeschi had been wrong. If the past was as segregated as he said, how was it there was such a variety of technology on display in the procession that advanced strangely below her? As she watched her eye was soon drawn to the head of the bizarre cavalcade. Bareback astride a piebald pony, and the apparent head of the procession, was a young Native American, his squaw riding pillion. What had drawn her eye was the flash of gold from the cape over the young man's shoulders. She had no trouble recognising her missing lover and felt an sudden pang of jealousy towards the squaw at his back.

The motley crowd on the road was clearly making for the city. It would be some time before Alexander at the head would arrive. Time enough she calculated to cut across country and enter the city in time to see him get there. Although alert, she knew she did not have enough information about what was happening to conceive of any kind of positive plan. She needed to see and observe before doing anything decisive. She considered waiting and then joining the procession to follow events. An Alternative was to enter the city and pick things up there. A third way was to skirt the advancing party and follow it a discrete distance and watch, keeping herself hidden. She decided to enter the city in advance of the moving column. That way she could remain discrete, and suss out the lay of the land. Opportunity for action always presented itself and there was less chance of error if first you knew as much as possible about the terrain. Unsure of herself in this alien world of the other Firm, she resolved to make herself as like the people in the city as soon as possible.

Cutting across country was actually quite easy. She was glad she had chosen to do most of her physical training barefoot. Her instinct told her to be as natural in all situations as possible, to rely on a fit body and a clear mind as the best tools in all circumstances, a philosophy which paid off handsomely as she jogged silently and easily across the sandy plain towards the city.

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She was not however the only watcher. Three pairs of steely, hard, yellow-green eyes swivelled in their deep sockets from high on the opposite ledge of the canyon and there was an tetchy rustling of leathery wings.

'Got him Al. There he goes!'

'You betcha Tizzi!'

'You first Meg!' Al whooped.

'What, dressed like this? This is a modern man, and he's wearing Hep's net that Zeus gave him.' Meg lifted her six foot span of leathery wings and made the serpents on her head writhe. 'Just look at me! First off he won't believe in me. What's more this guy knows all about us and is forewarned. He's got Hecate up behind him who's pledged to help him out. I don't expect to make much impression.'

'Yea, but you'll put the frighteners on 'im and his horse good an' proper!' said Tizzi with a big grin.

'Shut up Tiz! She's right. Listen to her,' said Al. 'That'll only make him mad, it won't give him the message we want to get over.'

'Yea but it'll get up his nose and make him really pissed off and it'll show Hecate we're here at last.'

'Tiz! You're not listening.' Al clonked her beak roughly with a knobbly claw. 'If you were less impetuous and stopped just scaring people for the hell of it we might get somewhere'.

'Yea Tizzi, them days are over,' said Meg, exasperated. 'We got to be more subtle, just scaring folks don't make them think like it used to. Now they don't believe in anything it just plain confuses them. We got to explain what we're about these days.'

'Yea, an' while we're here chattin', this latest spawn of Zeus is upsettin' the whole of Hades and is about to unleash the gods only know what kind of mayhem on Gaia and it's up to us to...'

'I don't know Tizzi,' Meg hesitated. 'We have to think this thing through a bit more. I mean we haven't got a long term plan have we? I mean we just reacted like we always do. It's obvious he's got it horribly wrong and he's about to commit a terrible crime against humanity and intelligent life by removing growth and development from Gaia. But maybe that's no bad thing. I mean to say we've been that busy setting up consequences for the hubris of his entire culture we're run ragged.'

'And what good's it done us or anything else!' Tizzi raised her awful self to her full eight feet, extended her wings and breathed hot blasts from her great curved beak.

'Gods a'mighty! Tizz, I hate you in that outfit,' said Meg. 'In fact I hate all three of us. Just look at us, dressed to kill. People don't believe in us like this, avenging monsters are jokes for horror films.'

'Sure! sure!' cried Tizzi. 'But at the bottom of all of them there they've all got monsters just waiting to see 'em off. They won't ever get over that. Come on you lot, stop the chat and let's get on with some real avengin'! Look how's this for an outfit! Never fails!' Tizzi turned into huge filthy wolf, top lip curled in a growl, fangs dripping venom - the whole gamut.

'Knock it off Tiz! There's a love,' sighed Meg, exasperated. 'You really don't listen do you. I said he's about to commit a terrible crime, not that he'd done it. Hecate is keeping an eye on him. We can't avenge what hasn't yet happened!'

'Oh come off it Meg! It's in his heart so, it's like he's done it already! He really has forgotten what he's suppose to be about and it's only a matter of time. I'm all for punishin' his forgetfulness, and his pride has definitely got the better of him. He really thinks he can do it, he really thinks he can save the world with Zeus' cape over his shoulders to protect him and NightChant at his side to keep his pecker up, so's to speak! And what's more I get the feeling you're falling for the argument. It's not like you to make excuses for the punters. When they deserve a good frightening they just need it, no questions asked, no quarter given. What's up with you today? You gone soft or what?'

'Zeus, Hades, and Jesus H Yhahwe!' exclaimed Meg. 'Al, tell her - she hasn't got it yet!'

Alecto, nicest of the Furies changed into her natural motherly form, a signal to her sisters to regain their own. The Erinyes reduced to just larger than human size took the seriously severe form of Greek women on vases and Tisiphone, got herself up like Madonna in leather breast cones as she thought being a thoroughly modern vamp, best expressed the essence of her savage bisexuality. Alecto put her motherly arm round Tisiphone's waist and drew her close.

'Tizzie darling,' her voice was soft but without disguising its harder edge, indicated an ancient need for respect and attention. 'See what's going on down there do we?'

Tizzie wriggled to get away from her sister like the naughty child she was. Alecto increased her grip a might too tightly for comfort and Tizzie gave in and subsided to nestle submissively against her sister's body and pouted.

'It's a procession,' she said grudgingly.

'Yes my sweetest little petal, it's a procession. But what kind of procession is it I'd like you to tell me, my bitter sweet?'

'It's a lot of people coming through Elysium and going to Erebus, to see Hades and Persephone.'

'Right first time and who's the bloke in charge?'

'It's that Alexander chap who's been chatting up old Ma Hecate and he's in dead lumber 'cos he's getting above himself and we're going to get him! Real good!' At this she turned into a fire eating dragon and hissed a good flame far into the canyon. Hecate gazed upwards and smiled grimly. Alexander saw nothing.

'Now stop that Tizzie my girl!' She turned back to herself and snuggled into the warm shoulder of her sister once again, grinning and showing a filthy row of discoloured teeth. A little plume of black smoke curled from her lip.

'See? You make Ma Hecate take notice.'

'I'm not scared of her!' retorted Tizzie, and she stuck the middle finger of her right hand in the air in a well known gesture.

'No dear, maybe not, but we are wary. That's the point. We need our thinking caps on my sweet. This is no ordinary vengeance project. It's not a clear open and shut case yet, my sugar bun. You don't like this Alexander do you?'

'You bet your sweet arse I don't. He thinks he's all sweetness and light and he's got an angle on what's what around here. If he gets to Hades with this lot in tow he'll set the cat among the pigeons and things will never be the same again.'

'Right enough, sweetypie, we've got to stop him or at least see to it he is stopped. Why is that do you think my little cucumber?'

'Jeez, Al, stop treatin' me like I was a kid, be nice like only you can be.'

'Not now, my kitten, later. Now, you got to get it straight so's you me and Meg don't make any serious mistakes and upset the balance. Come on, let's go, it's quicker to show you than explain everything.'

'Where to?'

'I said let's go!'

Al held Tizzie firmly by one hand and Meg grasped the other and they flew wingtip to wingtip, three black crows towards the city. Al continued her discussion with Tizzie shouting to her as they went.

'We have to go careful like, slowly, slowly catchee monkey - Hang on a mo!' she braked and then dived almost vertically. 'Follow me. Quick!'

Tizzie lost several feathers in the descent. All three alighted clumsily in confusion on the branch of a Mesquite,

'Shhhh! You lot. Get a grip! See that!'

Al pointed out the figure of Marina dodging between boulders and almost at the gates of the city.

'That's my girl!' said Al in triumph. 'See her girls, that's the one going to help us sort out this Alexander person in the right way.'

'How'd she get here?' asked Meg. 'It's got to be that bloody Pan again. It's enough letting that Alexander in without permission. He's done it this time - we should set the dogs on him!'

'He's the least of our problems, but that girl's the answer to an avengers' prayer.'

'How's that then?' asked Tizzie.

'There's no time to explain everything, stick with me and it'll all come clear. The main thing for now is to remember we've got to watch out for that girl - okay you got that?' Meg was doubtful.

'Hold on Al, that's three interlopers down here now if you include Pan which I always do. Him and that Alexander bloke have already upset things and this girl's another risk. By the looks of her she's a determined type and put her with that Alexander and that'd make two of 'em, live bodies making waves. And you say we've got to protect her!'

'Not you too Meg, Tizzie's a bit of a slow cow at times, but I expect better from you. Just keep by me and keep your eyes and ears open and watch out for this girl like I said.'



## Chapter 6

All descriptions of the Halls of Hades, the Fastness of Erebus, the Shades of Tartarus, call them what you will, are inventions of the living. Hades frequently complained to Zeus that this irksome result was one of many unpredicted outcomes of his eternal assignment. He grumbled on and on to anyone who would listen that the living have no idea of the real nature and purpose of the underworld. What's more, he had it on the best authority that Yahweh too suffered from the same problem of misinterpretation by this reprehensible fifth race of mortals, only more so.

More than once, Zeus' testily, sent back word. 'Know you that people barely manage the reality of life on Earth when it's directly in front of them. Remember my brother, I am Chief of the gods. The last word is mine! I decide how things are organised. You know full well that you cannot ask mortals to think beyond the Now. They cannot think round the corners of time and have to make up things to explain what they cannot see beyond the end of their noses. The problem of these last centuries is mine to manage. I don't need to be told by you that these ghastly mortals have lately unfavourably judged our Greek notions of Elysium and the Underworld, with their airy and ungrounded ideas of Yahweh's Heaven and Hell. They have conveniently forgotten that the wonder of Elysium is as much part of your dominion as is the doom-laden darkness of Tartarus where their uncivilised monsters are banished. We all know this was one of the details that Yhawhe fiddled with and which compromised my main reason for keeping your world quite separate from mine. They have made the serious mistake of separating Elysium and Tartarus into Heaven and Hell and they've got it badly wrong. They've enough to handle with their day-to-day reality without coping with the dimness of the past let alone getting to grips with the indefinable future.'

He had said this often, and at that time Yahweh was not even a glimmer in the eye of Judea. Hades had something of his own back by wresting Persephone from Olympus and had the added satisfaction of Zeus admitting the wisdom of it in the end. So the separation was not complete, cross-over between the realms had its uses in the present.

Hades, admonished, got on with supervising his world of time-past in its different realms until he saw that in the numbers game he was winning hands down. In addition the people in his realm were much more controllable, being known quantities. All he had to do was to put them to work to perfect what was already known and he would have the answer to all Gaia's problems. His dilemma now, was how to switch Zeus' failing creation with the successful one of his own. He hadn't given the subject a lot of thought until recently. From the time of his unasked-for position as head of the underworld, an occasional fit of pique had prodded him into helpless rage. On these occasions he thought how pleasant it might be to redress ancient injuries. Now he had the numbers, Gaia gave him the excuse and Zeus' last will and testament presented the opportunity. At such times Hades thought of Chronos. Now dwelling in a pleasant corner of Elysium, removed by him from the pitch darkness of his invisible dungeon where in a fit of post war revenge Zeus had banished him to keep enduring company with his base monsters. Hades thought it fitting that such a King should reside in comfort rather than continue wretchedly for ever in Tartarus. Zeus nevertheless continued to remind him that Chronos was the defeated party.

'Hades', he said, 'Though you may now be the custodian of the past, never forget Chronos, created Time itself. None of us can forget that covetous of his creation he horrendously consumed us, his own children, to devour the future. We had to stop him, or he and his monsters would even now have their hold on the world. For the sake of civilisation he had to be vanquished, despite the incredible lengths he followed to ensure the impossibility of defeat by me, his youngest son. I, the one prophesied to bring about his doom, crushed and succeeded him. We brought intelligence and creative life to the world'.

In vengeance, even from the depths of Tartarus, Chronos worked on the conscience of Hades his eldest son. Zeus who used time creatively, was unable to stop Hades from softening towards his father, who would have time be still. Chronos enjoyed this latest paradox. Zeus, thief of his time, would be the unwitting agent who

would set him free. Chronos at Hades' back worked on his dissatisfaction with his lot. Hades began to consider rebellion only when his exigent father from the comfort of Elysium prodded him, at first subtly, but latterly more overtly. The moment Gaia complained to Zeus of this last race of people, was the justification for which Chronos had been waiting for such an ache of time. He risked all on one final shove in Hades' direction. Without the vengeful Chronos, it would be interesting to speculate how far Hades would have gone on his own in defiance of the Law of Zeus. Without Chronos' implicit challenge would a New Trinity be possible? Would Zeus and Yahweh meet in one colossally sensational mind-meld? Would Alexander have been conceived? Would JNO have been invented and would...?

Such however is the joy of the timelines that jerks, twinges and twangles on one, resonate on all the others to make things change. Such speculation is useless and the only true story is the one to be read in the endless outward fan of the timelines; their origins locked tightly forever in Chronos' clenched fist. He would not ever let them go. No. Never. Certainly not into the hands Zeus, nor even those of Hades.

Gaia as has been said elsewhere, is the least fussy of the gods. She just wants everything to go well. She is built for comfort, for endless regeneration, she is expansive, fecund and inventive. If Europa's race and their way of life were to go, then for Her, Hades' people would do as well as Europa's. Better to usher in the end of their history and minimise the harm to Her than Her oblivion and early death. If people were to continue to inhabit Gaia, let it be a people for whom time was a used and known entity. Its bankers rather than its speculators.

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Marina resolutely drove her strong body over the rough ground towards the city. Apart from the procession moving slowly in her rear, the only other movement she noted was three crows in impossibly close formation gliding high on invisible thermals in the airlessness and she felt a cold frisson in the small of her back. She knew she must be watched. Knew she was alien here. She chuckled softly to herself at the thought. The ultimate alien. Product of complex racial strains, daughter of abuse, abused in her turn; she knew alien. Ate alien. Breathed alien. Immersed alien into herself and re-worked the fear, the differences, the falsity and ultimately became herself. The aliens' alien. Acceptable to herself, unconquerable - in charge. If being alien in this Firm's territory was supposed to get her down, then the people in this city would get a surprise. Still, no need to take silly risks. Rule number one in a strange place, is to make yourself as anonymous and as inconspicuous as possible. She knew from her experience of Barboncito the people here were likely to be strange, not necessarily unpleasant but different in the important respect of being unable to see ahead. She was beginning to get some insight into this rival land where a new sudden expectancy was now superimposed on a timelessness that stilled the air, all was hushed and waiting. Her mind was full of Alexander and an increasingly urgent feeling of the need to get him out before he did something irrevocable to keep him here on the wrong side of the Sipapu. How she knew this was not clear to her. She supposed it was something Pannie had said. She would find a vantage spot in the city and watch for the procession's entrance.

The first sign of humanity she encountered was a circle of thatched huts below the low ridge by which she descended to one of the main roads. It could have been a village anywhere, Africa, South America, a ring of Mongolian yurts, a Neolithic farmstead. Were in not for the fact she was approaching a sizeable city, she would have said she was entering a simple, basic human settlement. Entering the main area between two huts, she smelled food cooking and saw naked children playing with small black piglets in a little copse on the far side of the enclosure. The village was on a small rise and she was able to see the city sprawling into the bluish distance. The life of the village seemed to go on in total oblivion to the closeness of the city proper. To her left, through the gap between two huts, she saw village after village stretching to the horizon. She was entirely unable to explain how this vastness of village life had been invisible from her earlier vantage point of the canyon head. Clearing the village she entered a small town, followed by an orderly suburb through which she found herself walking uphill, along a wide boulevard, flanked by grand buildings and which led to a vast circular area much larger than Tianamen Square she had seen in Beijing. Posed in the centre, in the bull's eye,

as it were, was a huge golden-pulpit accessed by a spiral-stair. The huge square was quite empty and eerily quiet.

She kept to the outside of the circle, and felt pairs of eyes watching her every move. Three crows, strangely flying wing-tip to wing-tip, circled overhead and were noticeable as the only movement. The square was built on the flattened top of a sizeable hill and from this vantage-point she could see that each different part of the city was separated from one another and seemed to confirm that village, town, suburb and central area, lived as if the other did not exist. The city was built in concentric circles, each band unaware of the others. There were hundreds of bands, like the rings of Saturn divided by the four roads like a giant dart-board. Each segment was built to contain vast numbers of self-contained people. To her simple eye, it was as though the circles grew from the inside, as if the centre of the inner circle, where the pulpit stood, pushed outward to create more and more circles which grew more city, more suburb and more village ad-infinitum. The imposing, pulpit glittered in the hazy light, expectant like those extravagant lecterns in the cathedrals of the world with their dominating but dormant air, waiting for the multitudes to arrive. The stillness of the place seemed to quiver with latent anticipation.

Within the huge central circle, nothing moved but herself and the three crows. But now suddenly, she was aware that people of all kinds busied about in the quadrants and sectors of the city, as if in different time zones, unable or unwilling to communicate across an invisible barrier or enter the innermost circle. She had crossed the zones of the city without meeting anyone directly. She accepted the illogicality of this in the same way she accepted the illogicality of her situation. Having no objective grip on where she was, she ceased to search for one. Present reality was enough. She would reflect later if she was to come successfully through this to her other reality. Her objective was clear.

Alexander and his motley horde of followers was approaching. The circle at the summit of a long, low cone of land on which the city stood; offered just enough elevation to see over the roof-tops and she easily made out the dust of his slow advance. He would be there in some little while. About fifteen minutes, she reckoned, although she had positively no sense of time passing in this place. It was as if time had no value and so went unmeasured. Time unclocked, was not time at all, she thought. Things can repeat as if they continually happened for the first time. Her immediate problem, however, was more direct than these involuntary thoughts. Where to put herself to observe Alexander without herself being observed and to think out a plan?

'Psst!'

The voice seemed to be more in her inner ear than an external sound.

'Oi Lady! 'You hearin' me?' Pannie's voice registered in Marina's mind like chalk grating on a blackboard.

'I hear you!' she did not attempt to hide the antipathy in her voice at this disturbing intrusion. Pan for his part sniggered quietly at her irritation.

'Ha! - Another one on 'er 'igh 'orse. They all gets ter like me in the end yer knows, Lady. Look Baby, does yer want my 'elp or don't yer? It's all the same ter me sweetie- pie. But I knows my way around 'ere an' you don't. Pick the bones outa' that!'

He had a point. This odious and disagreeable little man was part of 'Them.' The big question was on which side was he a player. She also wondered if it mattered to her. She was clear about her task. If Ljeschi helped well and good, if he hindered she would have to deal with him as best she could. So far he seemed to be behaving as if he was on her side. Go with the flow, she thought, until there is discernible dissonance. At present it all hangs together, so stick with it my girl - but be prepared for it to all unglue in a hurry.

'You're a bright spark,' Ljeschi continued. 'Can't think why Alexander let you go for that NightChant bird,

'cept I knows why really. Listen Lady, all you're thinking is dead right. Foller me an' you'll be okay. An' if you meets a real regal lady who seems ter know yer, do as she says. Don't ask no questions or it'll be too late, explanations require too much time, see? Oh yea, and watch out for three black crows, there's a good chance they'll be on your side too. Don't take no notice of what they looks like, 'cos they're changeable-like. The important thing is not to be scared of anything in here. Nothing can seriously hurt you, you'll get bad collywobbles from time to time, that's only natural, it's a funny place this Hades, that is for the livin', but a lot of it's in yer own 'ead like. It's hard to explain, if yer gets my meanin' so if it gets real confusin' the best thing's ter stop and take-five like, an' probably you'll find it's not so bad after all.'

'Okay me ole' cock-sparrer!' mimicked Marina. 'Are you calling the shots? Or do I have to work it all out for myself? I'm going to trust you for the time being since you seem to know what I'm thinking so I can't have any secrets from you. That doesn't mean I have to trust you, which I don't! If you turn out to be a good 'un fine and dandy, if not, you can sling yer hook, ole' mate! You geddit! Ole' son!'

'You're a caution you are, no wonder the 'ole man's had an eye on you. P'raps if he'd waited a bit fer you instead of that other English bint things would've bin different.'

'What do you mean?' Marina asked.

'Nothin', sweetheart. Nothin'. Look 'ere, now we've got some understandin' of each other, let's stop the chat and get down ter business.'

'Sure,' grinned Marina without humour. 'Let's.'

'Right, Darlin'. You see that buildin' on the other side of the Ring of Time, to the right of the podium thingy. Well, if yer gets yerself up onner roof, you'll get a good view of what's gonner' appen down 'ere soon as your mate arrives with NightChant and his 'ordes as he likes to call 'em. They'll be 'ere soon.'

Marina calculated that if there was any verisimilitude to time as she knew it in this place, then Ljeschi was right and she'd better get herself into a better position to follow events. She followed his advice and entered the imposing hallway of the building he indicated. She searched ed for a lift to the top floor but found only a stairway. She put her foot on the first step and without knowing how it happened, found herself on the parapet of the flat roof, some ten stories above the 'Ring of Time'. She had no opportunity to consider this phenomenon, though somewhere in her mind she recalled what Ljeschi had said about this place being in her mind despite how real it felt, for her attention was fully caught by three different occurrences at the same time.

The first was the arrival of Alexander on his piebald pony, his woman at his back, followed by the vast multitude. Seen pouring into the vast space, the throng came in waves, like water from a breached dam, only in slow motion and in utter silence. There was no roar of moving feet. No high chatter of excited voices. The crowd moved, layer by layer into the mighty circle, as if, being without end, it would as silently, but inexorably burst the buildings at its boundary, or be soundlessly crushed by them.

The second occurrence had begun without her knowledge about half-a-mile up in the blue to unexpectedly interfere with her amazement at the developing spectacle a hundred feet below. It took the form of an abrupt descent of three crows. Larger then life, they landed in a flurry of black feathers, and big yellowish, feet. One became entangled in her hair, a second firmly gripped her left shoulder, while a third nearly shoved her off her own perch as it landed squarely on her forearm.

The third event was the appearance on the spiral stair of the pulpit of two beings. She had seen enough of 'Them' by now to recognise their kind at once. Both were equally imposing, as strongly impressive in their different ways as Lucina herself, or Thea and Alexander. The tall, dark, masculine figure who preceded the

rest, as if it were the most natural thing, was complemented by the fair, regal creature who walked like a moving statue, two steps behind.

Encumbered by the three struggling giant crows Marina was unable to take in much of the proceedings. No sooner had they landed than they started arguing among themselves as if she was simply some kind of natural perch and not there in the flesh.

'Whose bloody silly idea was it to gallivant about in these crow outfits!' Marina was sure she heard the one on her left shoulder speak.

'Mine - ' said the one on her forearm. 'Want to make something of it!'

'Bloody right mate!' said the one on her head, its feet raking her scalp in a pained effort to keep in place. After a couple of goes it roosted uncomfortably for her, but adequately for it, squarely on the top of her head.

'Stop it now!' yelled the one on her arm. 'You'll upset the lady!' The dishevelled bird stared directly at Marina who was not the least amused, although highly surprised by the speaking bird.

'Allow us to be introduced,' it said. 'On second thoughts, there's no time! Things are about to happen fast! Listen girlie, whatever happens next, think of one thing only! You think of that lusty young man on the horse. You got that? Your job is to get hold of him tightly by any bit of him you can manage, and run for all you're worth - but keep hold! Don't you ever let go! Follow the woman on the back of the horse and do whatever she says however daft it seems. See the broad behind the fine got-up gent? Well she's going to make space for the three of you. Ljeschi is likely to help if he can get near. Whatever happens don't let go of the lad, as long as you're connected to him it'll be alright. Like don't take any notice of anything else but keeping hold of him and run like the wind whatever happens!'

Marina was about to question the overgrown bird as if it were a person. But the tone it used was unmistakably commanding, and even as she considered the stupidity of the situation things began to happen. The other two crows took off, throwing her to the edge of the parapet. She was sure she felt the third shove her forward with its huge wing. Her ten story fall this time was no dream-like floating on a convenient current of air. This was the real thing - sudden loss of balance without being able to work out what happened, followed by a rush of wind and the absolute knowledge of total loss of control. Her training told her there was always time to work out at least part of what was happening, so she used the interval before hitting the ground to try and grasp if she had any possibility of getting out alive. In the enhanced, seconds of her descent she decided to give up all thought of survival and left it to the chance of the place. If most of what happened was in her head, maybe she wasn't falling at all? There was nothing she could do and anyhow that Ljeschi man had said she could come to no harm here. Well; she was about to find out if he was right. Just feet from the heads of the silently milling crowd, she felt herself lifted aloft again by two vast birds. The two crows, bigger now, had caught her by the shoulders and were flying her fast and straight at Alexander as he wheeled his horse to speak to the crowd. All she could think of was the crow's voice ringing in her head.

'Grab him and hold on! Run for the life of all the world!'

The giant birds flung her at Alexander's horse knocking him and NightChant violently to the ground. A roar rose from the hitherto silent crowd. The sound was terrifying. All her being, told her to cower in abject fear. Were her head not filled with the cry of the bird, she would have curled into a ball and tried to hide from its awfulness.

The uproar was like no other she had ever heard or would ever want to hear again. It was the world tearing itself apart. It was the full voiced cry of a million mothers seeing their children massacred. It was the multitudes of the dying who knew for certain all hope of present or after-life having first been promised was

now refused. Later she realised they knew. It was the ultimate betrayal. Alexander's promise was in pieces. He would not lead them to join with Barboncito, not pilot them up into the living world and re-populate it with the best of the past. Nor was Hades longer to be their Lord.

She put the awful sound as far from her as she could, but all the while it sapped at her strength. She never knew how she survived those few, swift, moments as she concentrated all her force on grasping Alexander's wrist. As soon as she had firm hold, indescribable things began to happen.

In the mad career that followed she was never quite able to piece all the events together. The sensations she felt remained with her always, a reminder of the untutored facets of her soul - aspects of which she suddenly knew with an absolute clarity she would have to know better. That all people would have to know better if the whole of her species was to be remade not destroyed.

What followed affected Hades the most, and Persephone and Hecate as NightChant more immediately, and since they knew exactly what was afoot, it would have been better had Marina been capable of considering events from a Hadean perspective. Nevertheless, Alexander, to his undying confusion and embarrassment, never followed the chain of events half as well as Marina. Not that it affected his future standing in the world. Being part of it, it seems to have been enough.

## Chapter 7

Ric and Hep were the last to leave Markham for Ios. They did not go until GAIANET was hopelessly compromised. Their intuition, all their electronics, Hep's magical touch on the chips and digits; all useless in the end. Ric now easily recognised Barboncito's Fourthworld system as its virus, now grown into a full-blown disease, sucked GAIANET dry. Hep put it succinctly.

'This Barboncito, he steal our information from under our eye as we look Then he change what he do and that change our information before we can act. Like this we go always backwards.'

The group on Ios did its best with what it had, and the brilliance of its members was often enough to make initiatives take root or bring existing schemes forward despite Fourthworld. But overall, gradually, Penny and JNO lost ground. UNPEX once at least fifty two percent JNO controlled, was now only forty one by GAIANET's measure and slipping inexorably. At this rate by 2012 the balance of global influence would be passed to Fourthworld leaving JNO at practically zero.

The need for a change of strategy was urgent. Lucina for her part kept the news from her husband. He had other stratagems up his sleeve if she failed, and for the first time she felt vulnerable to Hades' strength. She hoped Themis, would succeed where she had failed, hopefully without the need for Ares and Athena's warlike alternative. All out war again made her shudder especially now that Yahweh was in the frame. It was better to follow Zeus' wish and cut their losses if it came to war and start again elsewhere with a clean slate somewhere in the universe. But the thought of such vast a waste of aeons of effort, made her redouble her efforts with Penny and JNO. At Lucina's insistence Penny agreed to wrap up GAIANET at Markham and call Ric and Hep to Ios. Fourthworld might as well have GAIANET.

Certain modifications were made to HIGO to slow Barboncito and his boffins down as much as possible. Ric was able to tell Penny that so far at least, Fourthworld had not yet been able to use HIGO effectively to interpret GAIANET. He imagined as a matter of course they knew about it, and used it. Unlike Hep and himself, its inventors, Fourthworld had to work out properly how the software worked. His modifications would eventually destroy the value of its interpretive accuracy, and give him and Hep enough time, for them to substitute their new communications gizmo which, if it worked, would, at a stroke, change human life on the planet for ever.

For Hep and Ric to get to Ios in these days was no simple matter. The chaotic Eastern Mediterranean was out of bounds to all but specially selected UNPEX personnel. The serious inundation of the Nile-Delta had effected the whole area in ways that were not merely geographic. A vast migration from the poor south to the relatively richer north was in constant flow. UNPEX resources were stretched to their utmost and it was hard to see how they could stop the flow without massive bloodshed. Violence was a daily occurrence. The papers were full of UNPEX troops firing at the increasing number of armed migrants who were determined to shoot their way into the productive high ground in Europe. Conditions prevented Ric hidden in Markham, to effectively use his connections with people who organised travel permits, not even the normally resourceful Doris Botham could arrange matters fast enough. Given the compromised nature of GAIANET, use of the computer for communication with Ios was out of the question. Fourthworld must never know of Ios nor of their new invention, or JNO might as well throw in the towel now. The ordinary satellite phone system was also too insecure. Fourthworld interlopers had more or less effectively shut down Markham as the switchboard for exclusive information, fortunately, thanks to Hep's screening system, without yet having discovered its physical location.

Hep and Rick worked in one of the comfortable lounges in the now otherwise uninhabited building. The staff had transferred to other JNO operations in an attempt to weaken GAIANET's power before it was inevitably and finally conquered by Fourthworld Corporation.

Ric had his new equipment boxed and ready for transportation, though he had no idea how this was to be achieved. Every time he mentioned the problem to Hep, he waved his huge paw in dismissal, and Ric had worried a little less and got on with the business of packing the highly compact, but fragile equipment. When it was all done Ric and Hep relaxed for short while.

'Okay, Hep, that's the lot, I'm already to go.' Ric slumped in an armchair and sipped a fine old malt, relishing the first hit of the liquid on the back of his throat. He was very tired.

'Sorry could not help too much with new gear. But work on means of transport to Ios.' Hep never drank spirits,

'You remember Refraction, something I play with for long time. This how we get to Ios.' He folded his knobbly, muscular arms across the brick wall of his chest, his broad smile the entrance to a cavern. 'We put all in 'Merc' and then I show you refraction, new-style, invented by me. First you communicate with Penny.'

'What! But I've packed everything on the basis that it's too dangerous to pin-point Markham as a place we ever occupied, and without using the new gear there's no way I can contact Penny safely.'

'Of course,' boomed Hep cheerfully. 'But I must test new gear in work conditions.'

Ric had no doubts the system worked but it was still highly experimental. It needed scaling down to wearable proportions. He observed the four small packets, the size of one pound chocolate-boxes. They worked linked together but needed too much external power and were as yet too bulky to be comfortably wearable. It was a long way from their goal of a miniature wrist set.

'How long for you to make hook -up? asked Hep.

'But I've just packed it very carefully, You should have asked me to use it earlier!' Ric said exasperatedly.

'If I said use it before for serious work what would you say to me?' Hep bored his eyed into Ric's.

'I would have said it's too experimental and there's no way of knowing if it would work without all the laboratory precautions and I wouldn't have let you do it.'

'Exactly. You make my point. But do we not have to tell Penny we leave Markham and leave GAIANET to Barboncito's peoples? Do we not have to demonstrate it to her as we promise? She need to know we come with promise of better things. You can't seriously expect Ios to continue to think GAIANET work for us when it not in our hand at all. In next hour we abandon computer for new communication system and must use it and work on it at same time. You sit in car and work system. You talk to Ios and I use refraction to do fast transportings to Ios. No one notice us I promise.'

There was still much Ric did not understand about Hep. It was clear he was one of 'Them', but if ever Ric tried to draw him out, Hep was able to shift the discussion so Ric was not sure he had heard him. Nothing Hep did surprised Ric any more. He seemed to have total control over all the detailed matter of the earth and the building blocks of the universe itself. He seemed to have the secrets of all the physical sciences and could transmute anything into anything else. It was all just a simple matter of re-arranging atoms and molecules. Ric was sure the work they did together at Markham was deliberately scaled down in difficulty and sophistication for his benefit - purposely made human sized. In the car Ric rigged the boxes to fit somewhat awkwardly round his waist in a spaghetti of wires and leads and plugged a wire into the cigar lighter electricity supply

'Hep, if we're to use this system for real, we've really got to miniaturise these components. It'll work like this - just - but I can't be lugging all this gear about.'



'Don't worry, on Ios we make new components, now I want to know system works in real world. Is power on?'

'Yes,' said Ric.

'Good. Put to head,' said Hep.

Ric attached to his temple the flat electrode which trailed from the last box. He rapidly punched with two fingers at a small palm held computer, linked to another box. No sound came from any of the boxes and had there been a casual observer, nothing seemed to occur. Ric, on the other hand entered into a strange new world. Had he been able to discuss this with Alexander he would have been amazed to find he already knew the feeling. Ric's mind seemed able to probe outside his own body, and feel outwards into the ether. Time and distance fell away from him and he searched for a particular set of co-ordinates using the hand-held computer to direct him. He shook his head, this was taking too long, the link needed to be instantaneous. This box of tricks, while working, was still far too slow to be of any use. He had already punched in the key code which corresponded to Penny's pre-recorded, mind-wave pattern. Tuning in to her so far away pushed the technology to its far outer limit. He fine-tuned and fine-tuned for what seemed like ages until he felt a thought-wave cross his own. The sensation was remarkable. He had only so far used the machine with Hep, who linked easily with it when they were both plugged in and seeking each other. This time it was one-way traffic, and while the process was the same, the margin of difficulty was several magnitudes higher. He was certainly in touch with someone, but he was not sure with whom. The finger of his mind probed delicately, guided by the last number of the twelve digit code. He would be able to initiate communication with Penny but, without a similar box of tricks, she would not be able to call him up independently. He was just at the point of giving up and telling Hep they were still too far away from getting the thing right when his hand-set bleeped and the screen showed he had connected. The investigating finger of his mind was connected with Penny.

She was in the topmost white house on the hill high above the sea on Ios. She and Lucina were concentrating hard on ensuring effective relief operations in the deltas of the Nile and Ganges. Particularly large migrations were currently being opposed violently by UNPEX forces representing Western countries who had all on coping with the problems they already had. Initially, in this situation, JNO's dispersed workers had managed to direct operations. UNPEX, under their influence, had been forging new linkages between nation-states and regional groups, and by the slow, but steady application of co-operative ventures, the world began to cope with the changes wrought by Gaia. While the balance was finely drawn, JNO was in the lead. By now however, the chaotic forces represented by those searching for more immediate and simple solutions, pointed to every act of terrorism, every riot and crime-wave as if in proof of the failure of JNO methods. The UN became no more than a talk-shop, while chaos crept like ink from a spilled pot over the map of JNO's influence obliterating it slowly. Penny was forced to concentrate the central organising force of JNO in Ios. The little island was crammed with its people, working in the background of the world. Ios was a busy and invisible ship, not moving but nevertheless covering the world. Jam-packed with technological gadgetry used by some of the world's best brains, with Penny at the helm, assisted by Lucina.

Franklin T Colwyn, fully recovered, worked with Lynne Farrell to ensure the world's media was swamped with JNO propaganda. So far, they had used GAIANET and HIGO linked into satellite TV and radio systems and battled with Fourthworld for viewer loyalty. People could be forgiven for being confused by the conflicting ideologies emanating from these sources. With the developing chaos outside most people's control, Fourthworld's appeal was to make people blame the authorities who were not offering immediate solutions. JNO was marginalised and the majority of the world's population were lemming like, rushing towards the cliff edge. A new initiative was needed and that, fast. At the precise moment Ric made mind-contact with Penny she was preoccupied using GAIANET to countermand orders from UNPEX to send aircraft-carriers to the Eastern-Mediterranean to launch an all out attack on the North-African hordes sweeping across Egypt and up the Israeli coast, and to repel the armada of small boats making for the Greek and Italian ports.

The impact of Ric's mind on hers in the middle of hard concentrated work had the force of a sledge-hammer.

She had to stop what she was doing and give all her concentration to this new phenomenon. While she had been expecting it, she had no way of knowing when it might come, any more than Ric could have precisely forewarned her. She hoped, after the first impact, that it was possible to get used to this massive invasion of her privacy.

'Penny, it's Ric.' He spoke a number as one does to confirm connection to a telephone caller. He communicated hastily wanting to reassure her she was not going mad. They had arranged the number code so that when he used the new system she would not be alarmed. It did not however prevent her being extremely surprised.

'Ric!' It was less her voice he heard than a connection of thoughts. The communication that followed was not a conversation but a thought-mix. Understanding was mutual and immediate. There was no he-said-she-said followed by processes of interpretation. Communication was immediate and complete. As conversation it would have been a little like:

'Ric, so you've got it to work!' said Penny.

'Just about,' said Ric. 'So far it's one-way only, me to you, and I'm the only person in the world able to do this. But before we talk about it, I've got to tell you we've packed up here and are on our way to you. Hep's got a way of getting us to Ios without needing the normal formalities.'

'What's the news of Fourthworld?' asked Penny.

'That's what I'm calling about, this is the only long distance person to person form of contact that I know is quite secret so I'm sure no one is listening in. We're leaving Fourthworld to GAIANET. They've hacked in so completely that they have the same information as we do. They don't have access to HIGO but they must be working on their own interpretational software or if they've got the sense I think they have they'll use GAIANET to find HIGO for them. I've built in some errors to put them off the scent, but after a while GAIANET itself will iron them out. I just hope it gives us enough time to get this new gadget up and running. In the meantime, I think GAIANET's got a few weeks life in it yet, so we've left the Mainframe running at Markham.'

'How will we know when we're fully compromised?' asked Penny. 'Mind you we'll be able to go on using the same information in parallel with Fourthworld for as long as we like, won't we?'

'Sure. Until they find Markham and switch us off,' said Ric. 'But we'll lose the advantage we've had so far.'

'That's been the case for a while already,' said Penny. 'I don't know how it happens that Fourthworld undermines us as thoroughly as they do. It's as if they have more people on their side. For every recruit for JNO we get, they seem to get two or three for Fourthworld. But it's great this thing works, get it here and we'll work on it. We'll have to refine it a lot, I found it a great shock and I've been expecting it. God knows what it'll be like for other folk who've no idea such a thing exists. Thanks for the information about GAIANET and we expect you when you get here. Christ, what a way to communicate! This will really give us the advantage we've been searching for.'

During the mind-mix Penny and Ric found themselves merging further and further into each other's thought processes and knew without doubt how they felt about each other. They were subliminally aware of a danger of entwining so deeply as to blur the edges of individuality. They were both surprised at the effect and used their basic instincts to break off before they 'got lost.' They were both hugely relieved at the relatively little effort of will it needed to break apart. This was a new tool that would take some getting used to.

'Look Ric,' said Penny. 'Fascinating as this is, I'll have to ask you to break off, one because it's so deliciously

amazing I don't want to do anything else and two I'm in the middle of something important. Just get here and we'll deal with the development of this great gadget.'

He switched off the connection and came to himself with a jolt. For a few seconds he felt more lonely than he had ever thought possible. The personal isolation of the human mind behind the relatively crude symbolism of spoken language loomed like a wall between himself and everyone else. It was as if he had never really communicated with anyone ever before. The breaking of the mind-mix with Penny left him, facing a mountain of personal adjustment so huge he could not contemplate ever scaling its enormity. Nevertheless, the only solution he could think of to the problems facing his species, lay in the development of this box of tricks. There was not much time before the 2012 deadline to do it. Communication had to be global and instantaneous. People had to do more than know things. They had to communicate real feeling and act decisively, individually and instinctively in ways that they knew were correct for their species in a proper relationship with the Earth. To ground their intelligence once again in the clay of their creation and incorporate their intellectual capacities without forgetting their origins. To be themselves, as clever monkeys, this time knowingly, and not as the owners of all they saw to behave in any way their spirit dictated. Ric was not sure where this notion of 'correct' species behaviour had come to him from. A boffin through and through, his whole life before, before what? Before Lucina! It came to him in a moment of revelation that the conversation he had with Lucina had been about exactly that. She had taken the scientist, concerned with pure development of physical things, and human ideas and related his work and that of all his colleagues, not to the enhancement of human progress, but to the development of the best possible relationship of people to Gaia. From that moment he was in partnership with the entire planet, and through her to the universe, as her son, Her child, owing his life, his future and the future of his kind for evermore, to the only Mother/Provider. Based on Her structures, using Her materials he was only himself in consequence of Her. He began to understand what he admired so much about Hep was more than just his phenomenal control of physical matter. He used the substance of the earth with pride and with care. He wasted nothing. He threw nothing away. What he did caused no detritus, no pollution, no left-overs deemed as useless. Everything was usable and to be respected for its proper place in the complexity of the perfect, balanced and life-forming, material of the world, with or without people.

He realised his view of the world before Lucina spoke, was partial, one sided, humanised. She taught him that a world which had managed to produce the astonishing fact of his species, was worthy of his ultimate intellectual respect and his unconditional devotion. And, he thought, what had he and his ilk given her up to now? We don't own the world and cannot make it our private playground. Our lack of respect is killing Her and with it ourselves. Everyone who thinks seriously for more than two minutes about it knows this is the truth. He hoped fervently that the machine he and Hep had invented could release into the public realm this buried knowledge which was as yet held privately. It would be touch and go. There were too many painted-on, hardened layers of culture in the way, like a carapace over the minds of Europa's children. They are the dominant percentage of the world's population and the most destructive. Information alone was not knowledge, wisdom was not just the ability to order information. But there was no time to find different ways to get a better understanding of the nature of this race and change the mind-set to save it. This new communicating machine was the last throw of this particular dice. Utter understanding had to come immediately and universally and prove quick and effective action. Hep's gadget was their last chance and they had to make it universal, cheap to make and simple to use - very soon.

## Chapter 8

Zeus sat alone on his golden throne on the top floor of the JNO building in New York, the lower floors of which, had had for a while now been rented to UNPEX.

Lost within himself, he built thought on thought into a towering pillar of pure mental energy. Locked inside himself he grew big with thought. He was pure sapient energy. The space he occupied filled with him as if he would burst the world and shatter it. Through his massive head ran the whole destiny of humankind. At the centre of his being the Chief of the gods forced together, as through the waist of an hourglass, all the timelines from the past out and far into the future. He gathered up the past, and let it flow through him, and saw it spread like an aurora-borealis into the far-distances of the Universe. He loved the creative accident contained in the colourful swirl of timelines, loosed through him from the strict order of the past and now brimful with possibility. He was the prism of the world, shooting lines of the past far into the future. Soon he would deal with Hades. Chronos he knew for certain, better than the rest of his tribe, had no stomach for another Titanic battle. He knew Chronos better than them all. He had waged war with him before. How come he was the undisputed Chief and not any other of them? Defeated generals if they are lucky to survive wars, are never stupid enough to challenge their Nemesis again. Though Chronos boasted to Hades that he thirsted for revenge, Zeus knew better. The visit of Ares and Athena with Themis was no more than a distraction. The Underworld would see them as the strategic priority and spend more time on them as known entities than the obscure Alexander. Even now his son was bringing Hades to him. Chronos was pre-empted, his big talk so much hot air.

The real task was to face the He who with His Own Son had separated this race of mortals from Gaia to divorce the human spirit from Zeus' Earth. He would strike a bargain with Yahweh. Now was the time to correct the connections between people and the Earth. To make things proportionate.

But how to make contact with the Great I AM, the Jealous God? Throughout the long campaign he had set running with the conception of Alexander, he had been brooding on this moment. It accounted for his preoccupied air noticed by Hera. For his walking about Ios, for his peremptory summoning of Persephone, for his irritation with Alexander's slowness, and in part for those elements of change in the weather which was not Gaia's doing entirely. His rawness of feeling about the arrant stupidity mortals, meant he was less inclined to control the skies than was his wont in the past, when he had liked them better.

His deliberations of the best way to ensure a viable working contact with Yahweh had led him to eschew many different approaches, from the direct to the highly serpentine. Some were downright laughable and others extremely dangerous for the psychic and even the physical survival of mortals. Large powers, big energy, fundamental thoughts, monumental shifts were elements in this game of games. In the end he went for straight-forward options. He began by thinking about loosing a direct attack on His Heaven, not unlike that he had launched on poor Chronos. This bizarre Heaven of His couldn't after all be that well defended from frontal attack. Any god that believed he was not only omnipotent but the only god there was, couldn't possibly fear attack from any quarter. It was a conceptual fault easily exploited. He had thought about this for a long time. In his mind he arrayed his battle formations and counted his battalions, considered his strategy. He concluded, not without some amusement, that even if he could find this Heaven of Yahweh's, since it wasn't anywhere he knew of, and he knew the skies better than any god, and supposing his hordes triumphed easily, what would it avail? He didn't want to conquer Yahweh, that way nothing would change for the future - he needed him as an ally. The New Trinity included the Yahweh/Christ unity as it included himself and the Hades/Chronos alliance. He cursed that he had not been aware of the incredible apotheosis of this new God at the time when all this would certainly have been easier. Then, proper pride in his own victories had superseded all other considerations. While he spotted some strange goings on in that obscure little country on the other side of the Mediterranean, he thought at the time it was no possible threat to him. By then those murderous Romans had already reworked his own Pantheon to fit their less sophisticated, blunted brains than those of his beloved, subtle, Greeks, and that was good enough in the circumstances. He had ignored new and

different stirrings in the same place. Now he knew he ought to have taken more account and even put a stop to that last extravagance which had such profound consequences for everything afterwards.

He had his Pantheon, his own Mount Olympus. He had to admit it was pretty good. A damn-sight better than that raggle-taggle, monster-ridden mess Chronos had allowed to spawn all over the place. He had brought some sense to the world-order of the time. He gave this fifth-race of mortals something tangibly recognisable in the tangled complexity of a hard to understand universe. A little patriarchy did no harm as long as mortal nature was allowed to maintain its earthy connections and he supplied enough of those to keep things nicely in balance. Of course he'd had to knock their worst fears and propensities on the head and lock them securely in the underworld, out of harm's way where death could have its place sensibly out of the world of the living. Sure, he thought, a little patriarchy in a belief system was okay to set a general direction out of chaos. But this obscure God from a nonentity of a people, in an outlandish desert, had gone too far. He had to own everything, had to follow patriarchy to its logical conclusion. At least I am big enough to recognise the error in me and share things out a bit. The pity of it is He can't. So He won't have anything to do with me. He's so far beyond me that I don't even exist as an enemy let alone an ally, The joke is He thinks He's fully absorbed me into Him. It's no surprise those chosen people of His are called stiff-necked.

Zeus's frustration at this last thought was almost enough to make him give up the whole struggle. How, he thought, can you communicate on equal terms with an entity who thinks you are already part of Him? - When you know you are not! Even if I could manage it, how do I get over that cleverest trick of all, the transcendence of nature - His very trademark! How do I reframe the ideological shift He used to such an effect by changing for mortals my own mythic-archetype? From a Gaia shared by all types of being, to a Gaia given to mortals, provided they followed their new Patriarch in total faith, having no other gods before Him, into a life beyond nature. What Zeus feared most was that Yahweh did not give a fig for Gaia. There were other Gaia's for experimentation if this one failed. Zeus would not let The Mother be played with for the gratification of One who believed the Great Earth Mother was contained within Him, absorbed by Him, become 'inner' and thus secondary. While Zeus had occasionally thought of going so far, his instincts had thought better of it. If only he had noticed this rival in the desert sands, with his strange new idea of a covenant.

Of course it was too late for recriminations. At the time no other deity of note had believed in the absurdity of this covenant. Gods just didn't make such thorough-going bargains with mortals. It was simply too dangerous. It led to too much unpredictability. It had so far split Earth from Heaven and allowed those mortals who signed up to think they were beyond the Earth, each one of them. That they had God with them in their development of this primal split. The last trick with the Son of Yahweh went beyond a joke. Not only could each person sign up and get their reward, but they could do it directly through the Son without the need for other intermediaries. They could do it person to person, in private, at any time they liked, in Zeus' own Now. No public offerings to tell where a person stood, no oracles for the world to judge, just private conversations. The route to Heaven was thus made available to anyone who wanted to travel there, as never before.

So Zeus brooded on, They made me the Anti-Christ for sticking by the Earth Mother, I, my Pantheon, my work and my love of mortals and my care of the Earth was made anathema. Well I've got news for this intellectual God of the 'Word' made Flesh. What about the Flesh made Earth, and the Earth made dead? How about that! Where will all those who've signed-up to his covenant be then? Will He (Blast this capital 'H'!) let Hades suck up all the quick into Him so the dead inherit the Earth? - With what then will He people His heaven? From where will His spirit come? When will He finally accept I am anti His Christ, and good thing too! When will He join us and so allow us all to move beyond the personal lives of this race of people and out into the cosmic universe available to all life. I, the champion of the Now - combining with Him, Chronos and Hades, to enter each individual and leave our wisdom within them and disappear; so mortals can heal Gaia themselves, through their changed natures. To make a new Trinity, an innovative paradigm, a new-fashioned mythology, where mortals live as guardians of the Earth their maker. Let their spirit be bonded with the Earth, not aiming loftily at a nowhere Heaven.

As he reflected thus, Zeus' thought moved through L1 to L4. At the limit of L4 no one, not even Hera, could remain with him. On a far time-line, Alexander remotely heard the rumble of thunder, and shivered. Pan too heard it, as did anyone, everyone on all versions of the 'sphere. While Zeus moved up the registers, fewer and fewer kept pace with the fury and speed of the communication as he pushed higher and higher gathering up the entire Chronosphere into himself. He left all but One far behind. Still he kept driving up farther and farther where no god had been before.

Tension mounted like atomic plasma - acceleration upon acceleration - it was hardly bearable, even for him. Surely the very Earth itself would break rather than sustain this onslaught. Gaia shook. Her seas raged, Her mountains shivered, Her skies stormed. Her very centre heaved and Her tectonic plates slipped and shifted. The entire planet fell gradually to a violent shaking that threatened its very axis. A violent cosmic wind drove into the centre of the storm and promised to send the Earth into an oblivion far beyond its proper orbit.

At the very heart of the storm, in his very core, the Great Zeus increased his power and pushed the registers of time to the farthest edge of their limits - until he sensed what he sought.

'Enough! I hear you! Do not break the Universe to reach Me!'

There is no way of reproducing even a crude version of the true interaction that now occurred between - what and what? History communicating with Spirit? Life-Force with Creation. Past, present and future fusing, soaring into places beyond knowing, outside time, beyond universes? Beyond the stuff of myth!

Was what happened Zeus calling Yahweh? One Great God to another? Was it the core of Yahweh calling from within to Zeus the Great Deity on behalf of Creation. Was it life-force itself calling Creativity and Regeneration to heed its origins? Whatever it was, what happened next was to change the world for ever.

The world shifted its conceptual axis.

Invisibly.

Inexorably.

Actually.

For the next aeon, if the world was to last.

Zeus communicated with Yahweh for the first, only and last time!

Bizarrely, most mortals had more pressing preoccupations and did not notice that things had changed for ever!

## Chapter 9

It was a changed Zeus who eventually allowed his white-faced wife into the penthouse suite. Hera immediately entered a high-level meld with her husband, and once beyond the need to know he was intact after the dreadful shaking of the world, she attempted to prise from him, the full import of his work.

'I have melded with Yahweh!' His communication with Hera was less than the total of what had occurred. Hera saw she had only part of him. Although she had as much of him as she had always had, there was a new-grown part of him that was inaccessible.

'You are different, my husband. You are greater than you were.'

'Things have changed, wife. I have melded with Yhawhe!'

'What does it mean? Masterful one. Gaia spoke to us all, she shook with emotion, she frightened even the gods who know her so well.'

'It means my little cuckoo that half our work is done. This part was the hardest. I had to offer all of us, you hear me Hera! All! The Pantheon, everything! Even Chronos and Hades! Gaia Herself I gave!'

Well into a meld on L3 the Great Earth-Shaker, god of the skies, transferred some of his newness to his long-suffering spouse and sister. This goddess practised in the relations between men and women, male and female was shocked at what he had had to contribute to achieve his new trinity and she correctly guessed he let slip only the half of it.

'And in return? What did Yahweh bestow?'

'My heart's desire.' Zeus gathered his wife to his vast bosom. They reclined on a sofa entwined.

'He would have it as you would? The New Trinity?' Hera asked on L3.

'At the price as I have said.'

Alongside the increase Hera felt in her husband, there was a different authority in the nature of the meld as if there were parts beyond Zeus that led to places where she was unable to follow without his guidance.

'What does it mean My Lord?'

'I only partly know myself. We have made a new settlement between us through which we add His might to our own and vice-versa. But we yet lack the third ingredient to make the Trinity whole - to make it work. To change the myth within, the one carried by mortals in themselves without the need for external symbols. So we can be free.'

'We work night and day on Ios for this,' replied Hera. Hephaestos, Ricardo and the woman Penelope work on the means. Myself, Thea and Mnemosyne work on the content. Others work on the dissemination.' She also privately wondered what exactly he really meant by being 'free'.

'Goes it well?'

'As well My Lord as it can.'

'What of the boy in Elysium? Has he brought Hades?'

'As we speak he comes. Themis, Athena and Ares will bring Chronos.'

'We must have him too.' Zeus' communication carried veiled warnings. 'You understand it must be complete, there must be no gaps for Time to leak out, no alternative timelines for mortals to follow. There is only one way now. I have melded with Yahweh. The thing is done for ever. We have no place else to go. All is given even that which I do not control. You must understand. ALL given. ALL! Hades and Chronos are crucial. The 2012 deadline remains. It is All or it is Nothing!'

Hera remained silent for a long while, she searched in their meld for more signs of the meaning of his meld with Yahweh. Some of the things he let her see were different from before. She saw a distinct shift in perspective from the time of the defeat of the Titans. Then the prospect from the top of Olympus showed the dominion of the Pantheon over the things of the Earth. It was a familiar outlook. It was how things were. Even with the view shifted to accommodate a modern, commercialised position from the top of the Olympic Tower, the aspect was in proportion to her relations with mortals. Everything fitted. Nothing was too fanciful, nothing was beyond one's grasp provided a little effort was made. Even now Europa's children could be brought back to a proper sense of proportion. Hades controlled the failures and held the ever burgeoning timelines under Zeus' control. But now there were new appearances she 'saw' through their meld. Her relationship with Gaia through the Pantheon had always denoted the outer boundaries of her universe. She of course knew there were other wider limits and probably other universes elsewhere, with ever wider borders, and ultimately no boundaries at all. Just time and space, one entity. Of these she paid no mind. They were interesting in their way but inaccessible and she left them to themselves. Now, in the meld she saw Gaia clearly as one among other similar Gaia's. There were other worlds, other populations of sentient beings. Doubtless other gods too. She saw through Zeus, part of Yahweh, was interested in the possibilities of these as new diversions. She was tempted, just a little but not really interested in following them up. He clearly had the intention one day to do so. She was too 'earthed' in Gaia. As part of something greater, she could see his temptation to abandon Her Earthly mortals and try elsewhere. But not as Himself. As part of this new Trinity. A renewed power of the Divine, fit to go a-hunting. Renewed thus he might well go. Well if he went it would be without her. She was too much part of Gaia and her offspring. So too were most of her closest companions, only Zeus would play-away, she thought. But he has given ALL. Must it therefore be that we all go too?

She searched the depths of the meld for clues. She found nothing immediately to help her. Without gods men were free to choose Gaia for themselves. This was right, this she was doing. But beyond Gaia she knew she would not go, even if she could. She would rest in the souls of people and speak to them from within. Happy with the idea, she snuggled into the breast of her Lord and let it be. Soon she would be back on Ios and at work.

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Back at the Circle of Time, Hades came to meet Alexander.

It was a deliberate act.

Planned.

A strange thing in itself in a futureless realm. It betrayed something of the complexity of the nature of this much accused god.

He had spoken a long time with Persephone while Alexander gathered his hordes in Elysium.

'I know who and what I am.' He spoke quietly and with dignity. 'Only you know with what hurt and vexation I accepted the gift of the Underworld from my brother. I still cleave the hurt to myself, and I relish the revenge I will have. I keep it to savour on a distant timeline as a reminder.'



'A reminder - of what my dark one?' said Persephone. 'I cannot believe it's simply because of poor luck in the lottery of selected tasks after the Titanic War - is it perhaps of other matters, perhaps more malicious? Do you challenge Zeus? Do we do it together as husband and wife? I need to know, I will be quizzed mercilessly on my return.'

'I do not know, wife. I do not yet know, and I may not ever be sure. It eats at me not knowing. You understand how at first I only wanted to swap this gift of the Underworld with any of my kin who would have it. But I was unable to strike a bargain. I was constantly told by the Pantheon, and several lesser gods, (which was worse) that I had something rare and rich; as rich in its way as the present world of Zeus. So I reluctantly took my place in Erebus. And I find I relish, nay I luxuriate in it. From the moment of my transition from Olympus I found it rich and full of variety. It was a totally new experience which never wanes. Indeed, I delight in every moment. My power is as absolute as only Zeus knows it. I have a universe of souls - all mine. There may not be future, but my past swells and swells and I now have more of the world than my brother. I can now switch the tables. I come up as Zeus goes down. Do you not revel in the delicious irony?'

'My Dark Lord. I too cherish the sharing the completeness of Tartarus, Erebus and Elysium. More than Zeus' empire of troublesome unknown quantities. I get pleasure from the gradual and inexorable building of richness of experience, good and bad, coming to you, the world passed down for ever. Indeed it is glorious. So what if people made you and this world into something dark and awful? It's true, Tartarus, we must own, is a bit unpleasant. But you keep its lid well bolted down'.

'Aye Lady. So I do. I was right to have pity on Chronos and released him from his banishment among the defeated monsters of the War. That was no place for such a great king - even if he richly deserved it. He grasps the timelines still in his huge fist, and needed somewhere more comfortable for his task of eternal holding-on. If the remaining nastiness heaves and strains a little from the monotony of awfulness for its own sake, it is only natural. If I let one or two out from time to time to play at a little exercise, it shows the world what is really bottled in there, it keeps the balance. It shows the real value of things'.

Notwithstanding his enjoyment of the huge richness of his House, there were still some irksome niggles which worked on him. There was Persephone's refusal to have his children, so he was without special ones to share his pleasure and help with the task. Persephone herself kept her aloofness, while she pleased him as no other of his realm was able, bringing thirst-quenching life-force from the World to keep him in relationship with Gaia. She alone knew how he felt fastened-up, and he was ever grateful for her understanding. Hecate too understood, but offered him nothing of herself. This was the root of his umbrage. Wanting life, he had been given its opposite. There were many compensations but none to counteract the immense loss. Zeus himself had made certain there would be no significant leakage between the realms. Hades' own forays upstairs had been few. Truth to tell he now found it too complex, too frantic and unpredictable for his taste and moreover, he disliked the feeling of being in someone else's territory.

As the numbers of souls in his power waxed to match and then surpass his brother's he sought his father, possessor of time. He had a notion to persuade him to bend time to his ends. To disassemble the lines and recreate them, woven seamlessly into his timeless empire and thus conduct the world from progression to circularity.

Another niggle was a temerity he felt despite himself, in confronting Zeus and the implicit challenge to Yahweh this contained. Like his brother he had ignored this newcomer, while being acutely aware of the belittling of his own role that his worshippers had adopted. Still the same had happened to Zeus - worse if anything. At least as Beelzebub his presence remained universal, which was more than Zeus could say in his forgotten penthouse.

Chronos had suggested the creation of Fourthworld to test the power of regressive forces on mortal minds. So Barboncito, ancient leader of the Navajo, was resurrected by Hades to carry out his will. He was surprised at

the way Barboncito had achieved freedom of movement and had easily brought the values of the Underworld into the living realm of Zeus. At first he put it down to Zeus' laxity, his inattention. Then he attributed it to what he saw as a more serious fault, an abdication of responsibility, and this reinforced his belief in his right to usurp his indifferent brother. Mother Gaia had no interest in the type of mortals ruled by her children, so long as she was left alone and intact. He had allowed Alexander into Hades to see if Barboncito could divert him from Zeus and thereby foil Hera's work. He was not sure how far it was in the nature of mortals to prefer Fourthworld's certainties to Zeus' unpredictability. The growth of converts to Barboncito in the wake of Zeus' last will and testament, showed his own mythology of certainty stronger than the creative energy, of JNO and Hera. But he knew Zeus was wily and Yahweh was still a wild-card as far as both Hades and Chronos were concerned. All attempts at Hadean connections had yielded utter indifference. He thought this meant acquiescence in his plans, while not really knowing if were true. When Alexander came on the scene, the mirror image of his Barboncito, Hades was intrigued at this life-force freely engaging in his world as Barboncito was doing in Zeus'. He had not expected it. Zeus had till now effectively kept the realms apart. No life-force was predicted to go so far in either. Of course he had known of the birth. Such things cannot be kept secret in one realm. Pan came and went, without his permission, but so long as he amused it was well enough. So through Pan, both Hades and Zeus kept tabs on this new addition to the Family. Persephone kept her counsel about the Now in her husband's presence, and Hecate had the welfare of mortals at heart - in the end. It was of course Pan who spilled the beans. It was his nature. He wanted freedom of movement and got it by making himself indispensable to both Hades and Zeus in his own inimitable way. Fortunately they both retained a sense of humour or he would have been in Tartarus with the rest of the uncontrollables. Unlike his two masters, he had noted the new God of the Hebrews and to cover his options, had offered his services there but also with scant result. He had been considered as already His invention, and was sent packing as merely another manifestation of Beelzebub. There's no sense of humour in Heaven, Pan had concluded to both Hades and Zeus. No ultimate future for such a god as that, they had all separately agreed.

Fortunately for Hades, Zeus too wanted Alexander to traverse the Sipapu, though for quite different reasons. Hades saw the subversion of the lad as a test of his superiority, while Zeus wanted him as the means to bring Hades back into the present. Fourthworld would persuade Alexander to use his life-force positively with his shades to convince them they had a place in the world. Once convinced, the best of his Elysians, would prepare to follow the youngster into the Now and at the stroke of 2012, would flow up from the many Sipapu's of the underworld and absorb the Now into the a remade world of the past - ready, to worship Gaia as she needed. What a triumph to use Zeus' own self-made hero as a weapon against him. The plan had worked. Was not this lad come to him, bringing the hordes of the best of his realm? Were they not ready for 2012? Was Gaia not pleased? All he had to do now was to wait the short time until the date of Zeus' last Will and Testament came due. The best of it was that the Pantheon knew nothing of this. While in Hades Pan had to keep his mouth shut, Persephone was constrained to silence, Hermes dare do nothing, and Hecate would not disobey. He still held the keys to Tartarus, and any of them would do anything than be shut up there among all that need for revenge. Accordingly he walked with satisfaction up the stair of the pulpit of the Ring of Time, his consort behind him, far less sanguine.

She saw his belief in his triumph as a double edged sword. It gave him added strength which frightened her, but it also distracted him from her own doings. She needed his lack of attention but feared her own failure above all. Failure meant not only living in Tartarus for ever, but the end of the World as they had created it. The work of the greatest family of gods, re-made by her husband - a retrograde and basically unsure god. She knew from Zeus their time was done and this race of people were to go forward alone, recreated by knowing what the gods knew. There was no place for this regressive work so dear to her husband. It was now or never but their plan was very insecure indeed. Alexander had to go all the way. Only she, Hecate/NightChant and Pan could make certain he succeeded. She felt nonetheless a weight of guilt at this conspiracy to betray her husband. She understood she had few choices. She was therefore, ready for the risk. Hecate and Pan were ready, the girl Marina, was in the right place.

Only when he was at the summit of the podium did Hades suddenly remember the Erinyes. Fool that he was,

they were under no one's hegemony, and acted always for themselves. He cursed himself for this omission in his thinking. Would they find this Alexander too proud and act against him, or would they help him as worthy? He should have found out before this! As he was thinking about a way to scotch them if they took the lad's side; he saw the crows launch the girl at Alexander's horse and knew everything.

It was one of those happenings which at the back of his mind he knew might occur but was too unlikely to be taken seriously and which he ignored in the welter of other things to be done. When it happened he knew exactly when and how the error was made, why it was made and that it was too late to mend it. He began thinking about the consequences even as they were actually happening.

As the Sisters crashed his mighty plans into the stuff of myth, Hades was gripped by the fiercest life-force he had known since he abducted Persephone. Events were extraordinarily swift. Marina flew at Alexander and grabbed his wrist with all her strength. A ghastly cry went up from the crowd, begun by Hades himself and sowed confusion all around. Hecate, tossed from Alexander's horse was picked up by Pan. Together they sped to the centre of the Ring of Time to open the secured door secreted in the floor of the pulpit. Hecate had the keys from Hades secretly reproduced by Hephaestos should they be needed and the opportunity contrived. Hades, aware of his mistake and recognising the significance of the moment stood over them, the keys to Tartarus in his hand, ready to unlock and thrust them in. He called to his wife for help. Persephone, ignoring him, grabbed Alexander's other hand and closed it round Hades' wrist. The regard Hades gave his wife was indescribable. Then Hecate was in the Sipapu followed by Marina who ran like the wind, pulling Alexander behind, who, maintaining his grip on Hades, pulled him with them. A moment later all four were whirling upwards through the Sipapu. Hecate with her supernatural strength wrenched Marina along. Alexander just knew he had to hold on to Hades with all his being if he were to get out. His mission to secure his uncle flooding back from the melds with Thea and Lucina. He had him now and he could not relinquish his hold. Hades struggled with all his power, and were it not for the extra capacity from Hecate, Alexander would have let him go.

## Chapter 10

Chronos in Elysium lay on his back, swinging gently in a golden hammock. The Origin of Time held the beginning of sentient life tightly clasped in a highly ornamented, vice-like device at his side. If he chose he could detach it and move on elsewhere. Even in the limitless profundity of Tartarus he had kept a rigid hold of Time, it was his work and he would never let go. He was pleased with this ownership he had from Gaia. It was her present to him at her release from Uranus at his hand. He clung to it tightly. No one would have it from him, certainly not Zeus, not even Yahweh and definitely not mortals, who had only the smallest notion of its properties. Imprisoned in the depths of Tartarus he kept it tightly in his grasp. He had not been so unhappy in Tartarus as his offspring had supposed. Titans liked their monsters. Did they not fight loyally alongside them against his traitorous and usurping children? Soon he would come into his own again. Hades at least understood the tenacity of his hold on Time. Without the renegade Zeus, they might well have made a different race of beings, one less susceptible to Zeus' endless family and Yahweh's special effects. But there had been traitors in the ranks of his Titans. Particularly, Mnemosyne and Themis who had changed sides. It was Themis he feared most and since it was in her nature to find justice in all causes, she of all the Titans would continue to challenge him. She would be the one to chastise him if she thought he was up to no good, which of course he was. It was she who had vainly tried to persuade Zeus to keep him in his own halls, to have Time on his side, rooted in the Now rather than in the past where Zeus was able to merely guide rather than control. The post-war clamour to banish the terrible miscreant from all sight to the farthest corner of the worst place there was, had been too great. She knew Chronos would have given anything to be forgiven for his deeds; but no one would have such crimes forgiven. Zeus too feared his father as Uranus, Chronos' own father had feared him and with good reason. Zeus may have wanted ownership of Time but he settled for its directing, fearing its begetter more. Themis, as usual, had been right. Chronos would have responded to forgiveness and would have, begrudgingly maybe, offered Zeus his gifts.

No matter, thought Chronos in his quiet Elysian glade, all was well as it was. This way, unforgiven, he was free to conspire for himself. Weakened, Zeus could fly away to worlds anew, or be overtaken by the hordes of Hades. Hades the Uncertain, he, Chronos would eventually banish and he would have the Underworld and the Fifth-World to himself. He would keep mortals strictly in place. With Time in his hand, he would at the last be the unchallenged Lord of all. Let Yahweh do what He would, He, Time-Itself, could not be dislodged. Then his Mother the Earth and Her son, Time, would simply, everlastingly and simply - be!

He sighed deeply and rocked himself gently, happily far into his reverie. His surprise was all the greater when he felt a clear voice in the essential bed-rock of his being. It was a communication on a level used only by Titans before the war and which he heard now only from his Mother. He thought it was she, but it felt wrong.

'It is not she - but almost she. It is I, your sister, the Titan who would be your saviour in aeons past. I speak again once more in supplication. Stop what you do. Forgiveness is yet to be had. But free yourself of your desire for power over all and thus gain more than you can otherwise have.'

'Themis, it is you, how do you commune with me here? I had not thought it possible.'

'Have you forgotten? It has been so long that I see you have it not in mind; a Titan speaks without obstacles, Titan to Titan, as one being. We are closer than that which divides us. We are prior to all but Creation itself. Wherefore shall we not discourse at will? Zeus may have separated his worlds from others of his ilk, but we are primordial, his sway on us is but tolerated voluntarily. This you know as well as I. You come not among us for fear of being locked in Tartarus once more. You know we would not have you released a second time from your chains. You and I know Tartarus has its fascinations, but you cannot scheme from there. Zeus has Hephaestus ready with his hammer if you stray again from the right path.'

'You think I will move against Olympus sister?'

'Not against us, against Mortals and against Hades, whom you despise as too weak for his task. Without you he would not be planning his move against us.'

'Zeus is weak also,' said Chronos. 'Our Mother tells me so. Look upon Her face, see how She wanes at this grandson's laxity. He had the world to keep, and he allowed these mortals to manage its destruction. Now he threatens to give up Gaia altogether to these malefactors - I will not have it so. Hades has the means to undo and remake Her as becomes Her glory. Zeus blames Yahweh for the rape of our mother by these mortals, whereas in truth it is Zeus himself who is at the centre of the rot. Whatever this later God of the Hebrews has done to encourage this race it is Zeus' doing that will make it the last to inhabit Her bosom. Had I won the war, a different race would have had more respect for Her. This Yahweh had His starting point in Zeus. I fear not Him and I fear not Zeus!'

Chronos gathered his timelines, and holding them proudly shook the thick skein so violently the reverberations were strongly felt throughout the Earth - it was all Zeus could do to hold on to the remaining future for humankind while wondering if he had been wise to allow Themis to make this visit.

'Enough!' cried Themis. 'More of such affronts, my brother and Tartarus gapes anew for you! Know I have Athena and Ares with me. We are at the portals of Elysium and will enter if provoked too far and we will war again with the whole of Hades - think! In what fighting condition are your monsters now? You will do well to listen to what I say.'

Chronos, bethought himself and allowed his mind to become full of Themis' thoughts.

'You plan to bring Hades to power over living mortals and hold back Time so they will no longer recreate themselves. You agree with Zeus that these will be the last humans so Gaia can be re-made whole as before. We agree. But not in your way. We know you are able to hold Time and can stop the future. Know well we believe in life. A thing for which we need Time of you. You know Zeus will not tolerate it otherwise, nor we believe will Yahweh. We all want humankind to succeed, and develop with Gaia as their support, supported in Her turn by them. You and Hades will produce nothing, develop nothing, save nothing. Your vision of reality is contrary and impossible in a living world.'

Chronos was about to remonstrate against the logic in this last accusation of his sister, but refrained. He really had not counted on so much resistance from the halls of a weakened Zeus. He had truly believed the plot he and Hades had contrived in secret was known only to them and he had had expected to have the advantage over the Pantheon. Clearly Zeus was stronger than he had thought. Chronos, as Zeus had divined, had no stomach for another unbearable war against this enemy and the thought of spending more time in Tartarus was, well, not his best option to say the least. He had not expected an army led by Athena or Ares at his gates in real opposition. Neither had he thought to confront the Pantheon again so soon, believing them to be too dispersed. It was typical of Zeus to have arranged it both ways - to condemn this race as heartily as he did himself - but to fight for their freedom to choose without interference. With his own forces still securely locked in Tartarus the mere holding of Time did not give him enough leverage to win a new war.

'So the Great Zeus will as usual have his cake and eat it?' Chronos all but spat.

'Even you cannot stop Time moving, dear brother. You can hold it and must continue to do so; a beginning was needed and this you made. Why not glorify that? It is no mean achievement. But even your greatest crimes to stop life continuing could not prevent its forward march. Why persuade a vulnerable Hades to achieve what is not possible nor desirable. Reflect, my brother, there are other ways. The doors of Elysium can be opened and you too may re-enter the real world again, have your proper place, but only as part of a forward motion. Primacy is no use any more in these times. No one has all power, not Zeus, not Yahweh, no single mortal. The future is no longer about power but co-operation and learning, wisdom not force, reality not illusion. Gaia will not be regenerated through the coercion or direction of any one being, god or mortal.'

Chronos allowed his mind to browse through his history and compared it with his present situation. Was Themis bringing the reconciliation he had once hoped for and had been rejected. He had certainly gone too far before and had been justly punished. He had unjustly not been forgiven and while he trusted Themis to deliver proper judgement; forgiveness from her would not do, he had to have it from Zeus himself. From his own usurping child! The idea appalled him still and Themis knew it, while Ares felt this antipathy so strongly he was all for entering Elysium at that moment and starting a new war all by himself. Themis stilled his fierceness and continued her discourse,

'Oh such is the pride of gods! You are more like humankind than you think. You deserve no more or less than they! Remember Zeus stopped your awful career. Think of Gaia still populated by your monsters. Would they not have devoured her as you devoured your progeny? Wherefore were you better than the creation of Zeus and Prometheus? Wherefore are you greater than Yahweh who too would have the All in his grasp? '

Chronos in the presence of his long distant sister, saw himself as the vanquished entity he was. He was desperate to find a judgement at her hands which would justify his actions. He fired his last argument.

'But sister, consider, can it be that the Pantheon thinks in truth that this last race will redeem itself in time? Zeus has cut their timelines, or will do so soon. Look at them, are they truly nearer their salvation? Will they not inevitably perish after 2012? Are not our Hadean substitutes more beautiful? More accomplished. Even your Alexander is captivated by them and thus fails in his impossible task. Does not my Barboncito rule a Fourthworld of incomparable serenity, knowledge and ease? Already Gaia feels all might be well. What we do soothes and restores. You are all promises and deliver nothing but harm. Know our Mother likes you not. Her decay is allowed to go on as before while your mortals argue about the survival of their fittest. They must change their very natures to accommodate us as they ought. They must act on what they know and feel, each one, individually, deeply, honestly, without the trappings of their destructive culture which you and Yahweh have so much encouraged. It cannot be done in time. It simply cannot and you all know it to be so.'

He had emptied his mind and contemplated the wall of argument he had erected. There was right in this he thought, Themis must accept he spoke truly. He had an effective deliverance for Gaia, which was more than the Pantheon could manage - had ever managed - with or without Yahweh.

'In fairness, I accept this reasoning,' Themis responded.

Ares and Athena registered a strong sense of concern - could it be that Titan to Titan, Themis had a stronger relationship than she had with the Pantheon? They had fought the war against this powerful race and had won at great cost. The passage of time of itself was of no concern to such as these. The war was undimmed in the freshness of recall. Was Themis to be trusted - could a Titan ever be? The Titaness hushed their anxiety, repeated her comment and continued.

'It is true they must change their very natures. It is this we work to do in time. The race is closely run as you well know, but is hindered by you and Hades and the success of Fourthworld. (Which, by the way I always believed to be your work. Chronos acknowledged this recognition courteously.) We come to persuade you to work for, not against us. To hold Fourthworld in abeyance at least until we have proved Gaia can be saved by living mortals.'

Chronos was astonished by the sheer audacity of the suggestion.

'And lose the edge we have fought for so hard! If we do not so, what will you do? We are more than half-way to our ends. I cannot see how you together can stop us now, short of all out war. Even so, there is no certainty, a war between such as we will affect the actions of humankind in these days. What is more, even if I agreed. Hades would not!'

'Why should you not agree? If the result is the same your alliance has nothing to lose. As you say you are more than half-way there, I do not ask you to reverse the achievements of Fourthworld, there is example there for mortals as remembrance, Alexander is not all wrong in this. I ask merely a stay until we have had our chance. What have you to lose?'

Chronos grinned widely, and Athena turned her gaze from so wide and awful a gape, remembering.

'You of all beings ask this of Me! Have I not smarted from defeat for so long,'

He made as if to shake his skein again, but thought better of it, angered as he was, but not enough to act rashly, he had a certain advantage, it was admitted by his enemies. The possibility of regaining lost Power was what he stood to lose. But he was wise enough to accept a bird in the hand. They could not succeed, he would wait until then, afterwards there would be no opposition.

'I will wait until you fail!' Once more the open mouthed grin made all who felt it shudder.

'We need more than your inaction!' snapped Themis. 'I come not here to plead with a failed tyrant, I came to redeem Gaia our Mother in the right way and need your help not the mere abstinence of your hand! I repeat, if Gaia is reprieved do you not win? Power you can never have. Should Zeus quit the camp, he will see you are locked in Tartarus before he goes. Power you will never have again. Believe it! We need you as a part of the general good, for us, not against. Help us help Gaia. There is no other choice but Tartarus.'

'Is this just!' protested Chronos. 'This is no choice!'

'Talk not to me of Justice - miscreant! I know what is just punishment for the work you wrought in ages past!'

She spoke then more softly, but with an irony born of long disappointment which was not lost on him, nor on her warlike companions.

'It's an offer you cannot refuse my brother. You burned your boats aeons ago. Be glad you are not still in Tartarus. Be happy you can be of use. You may yet be forgiven. This is the best offer you will get. Power you may never wrest even from a distant Zeus. All must help in the transformation of the nature of mortals if they are to do their work in time. You will help us. There is no other way for you or for them. Come Brother, fix well your skein, embed it Firmly, it will hold fast here. Come with us into the Now.'

'And Hades, what of him. I cannot abandon him and come with you.'

'Your loyalty becomes you, brother, there may be hope for you yet.' Themis had kept her best for last. She dropped her bombshell. 'Know that Hades is already in the halls of Zeus.' She waited for his reaction. It was her turn to grin, but with a much more pleasant effect. 'Come!'

Chronos was amazed. He gazed around, checked anxiously for the presence of Hades in Erebus, scrutinized the whole of the Underworld in an instant. Sadly he then shook his huge, grizzled mane, fixed his skein and shaking his head in stunned disbelief. Very slowly, he came. Was that a tear of anger or of shame that slid from his eye unnoticed by all but Themis - and was it exaltation that made her raise her fine head thus?

## Chapter 11

The tiny island of Ios sat Firm, anchored, motionless riding the ever swelling sea. By the summer of 2012 oceans everywhere had drowned many islands and coastlines of low-lying countries. The waters of the Mediterranean had risen hugely and the remaining islands were now unpopulated, apart from those few stalwarts who would not leave their homes. UNPEX everywhere cleared people to high ground, but wisely forced no one to go who would not. Things were difficult enough for everyone without creating more martyrs. Nevertheless serious mistakes had been made. JNO had seen them coming but was unable to intervene in time. The swamping of the Thames barrier in London, although a catastrophe, actually made less headlines world-wide, than the clearly deliberate massacre of flood-refugees at crossing-points in the Mediterranean. For when the London Tube was drowned, JNO personnel had been able to give adequate public warning even though Fourthworld personnel had falsely persuaded the authorities their barrier would work. By comparison Brindisi, Alexandria, and the appalling massacre of the innocents at Gibraltar, was a deliberate and visible slaughter shown live on the TV screens of the world. It was something that JNO had been unable to forestall, try as it might.

Aghast, millions of viewers watched thousands of people dying in real time, whose only crime was to have lived at sea-level. They watched as before their very eyes, men, women and children, whole families, were mown down by machine gun fire, killed by their own UNPEX guardians. This was done on their behalf and in their name. Agonisingly and paradoxically, many were glad at one level that these ravaging hordes were more or less kept at bay. But in their hearts there was an impossible torment. Was it simply a matter of 'them or us'? Were we not also them? Had right and wrong, preservation and death, become mere choices of the moment? In the minds of all, the semblance of morality or even mere orderliness was inexorably breaking down. It slowly began to dawn that the race was in a mental panic. Was there really nothing to hold on to? No gods, no God, no morality, no fixed place, no fixed thing, nothing but themselves? What were they? What fixed point of truth did they have? How was this crisis to be managed?

Lynn Farrell and Frank Colwyn ensured the world saw and knew the facts of the 'mistakes' which repelled by brute force, the poor of the southern nations and of North Africa armed and dangerous, though they were, from invading the European main continent by sheer force of numbers, in thousands of rickety air and sea craft. Swollen by masses of migrants from the Far East and the Ganges Basin and other inundated countries of the Eurasian landmass, the massed attack by the migrants had no chance against the well organised forces of UNPEX. These were early battles of what promised to be a desperate war. The McManus press rightly showed UNPEX was finally and cynically saving the rich world at the expense of the poor. The battle lines were finally made public. Loins were girded on both sides. It was among the poor that Fourthworld had successfully wrecked JNO's efforts at neutralising the worst effects of exploitation of people and resources. These were countries of few choices and governments were unable to cope once JNO was seriously undermined. Thereafter not even Fourthworld could reverse the downward pitch of despair, which to give Barboncito his due, he tried to offset, by offering solutions in forms as various as religious cults, low-level technological development, restructuring of loans, shifts in monocultures. But there was no time in the face of Gaia's sickness. Despair won the day. He gave in and let things find what level they would and was satisfied that many deaths in this world, swelled the numbers in the Underworld, and that many of the wretched, dying, innocents, would find a more fitting existence in Elysium. Once the Hadean Alliance had ascended to its rightful place, all wrongs of this kind would be righted. By the time he discovered his own betrayal by Hades himself it was too late for a change of strategy. He would have to go it alone or give it up. After not too long a deliberation with himself he usurped the vacant throne of the Underworld and left Hades and Chronos to go where they would.

By the beginning of 2012 Barboncito had cracked all GAIANET's codes and HIGO was working for him too. Fourthworld's infiltration in UNPEX was a permanent and unyielding component in the sabotage of JNO's efforts. By the time Hades and Chronos were Firmly in Zeus' camp, Fourthworld's momentum in the Now was unstoppable. Paradoxically once the Hadean authority was in the present, there was no control over



Barboncito and his brethren from the Underworld. A circumstance, although predictable, no one, not even Zeus, Hera or Persephone, had seriously considered. Nobody had expected Barboncito to go on as he did. Extraordinarily, neither Chronos nor Hades had thought their presence in the Now would affect their continuing direct control over Fourthworld. Every one of 'Them' had assumed as a matter of course that Barboncito could be constrained by command. Not until Chronos and Hades impotently gave a direct order to Barboncito to cease activities, did any of 'Them' realise what they had unwittingly unleashed and left behind. A puzzled, but restrained almost-panic, occurred in the Pantheon and Penny was severely rattled by a loss of equilibrium and certainty in Lucina. Its main effect was to make Penny even more alone than before, if that were possible.

On his return to JNO on Ios, Alexander initially spent more time with Marina than with his mother. Soon after it was agreed they should search for Barboncito and try to stop him. Penny hardly saw him at all. They had spent only a short time on Ios after their return and de-briefing and were now, no one knew where, scouring the globe and even the Underworld for Barboncito's hide-away as they were in no doubt he searched for theirs. There was so much frantic activity that the experiences of Alexander and Marina were absorbed into it without too much attempt at analysis. The world of 'Them' and that of JNO were now so mixed up that nothing was a surprise any longer. Work to save the populations of the planet was the overarching priority for all on the island. Penny and Ric in particular maintained a kind of continuous ambivalence to the relationship of JNO and 'Them' but agreed to think about it only if they survived. Ric worked intensively with Hep on the mind-reader, they now called Mimix. Miniaturisation turned out to be more difficult than first thought. Penny was kept fully engaged by countering the activities of Fourthworld with no time for anything else. Her hard work however, did not stop her feeling severely battered emotionally. Penny and Barboncito were using the same information. Each knew the other's moves or could guess them well enough to act fast when the opportunity arose. It was like a cosmic game of snooker with equally matched players. Once one player had a run they could out-play the other until someone made a minor fault which let the other in with a chance.

Penny had gains in the Americas and Russia, Barboncito had a good run in the Mediterranean at Gibraltar, and also in Australasia. She kept the Amazon Basin working for JNO thanks to Jose Condamine. Others of the Advisory group fought Fourthworld in their own ways through their networks, using HIGO. Everyone in JNO who knew, hoped Ric and Hep's breakthrough would restore their advantage. Overall the knowledge that Fourthworld was beating them was severely dispiriting. More than once they found people that they thought were on their side had shifted allegiance or were playing a double game. Only Lynn Farrell and SYDCOM seemed to have things working well. Fourthworld never got its hands on the key levers of the media. Alexander put it down to the backward way Fourthworld thought of technology. Despite Barboncito's own undoubted ability with computers, the people he recruited or the shades who came from his Underworld, were generally uninterested or were still learning to manage such gadgets.

Penny had sectioned off the now crowded island into different spheres of activity. Farrell, Colwyn, Morii and Terekowa worked from a well equipped studio high on the blind side of the sea facing inland. Condamine, Krajowa, Mo and Ulybin, worked on international commerce and lived in several of the white houses on the seaward side, and had the best views. Kanapi, Khumalo, Etchart, Botham and Petersohnn worked on UNPEX people-movement and control from a newly built complex in Psathi on the other side of the island. Ric, Hep and Karl Khan had a workshop hidden in the centre between two rocky hills, where they worked day and night on Mimix. All were linked by underground and communicated physically by a series of little electric rail-cars. They met at the beginning and end of every day in a specially made subterranean chamber at the point where the rail-cars met. No rail-car journey lasted longer than five minutes. Each group had its support staff occupying the various white houses and windmills. From the sea or air nothing different was visible. It ran on well tried Markham lines, invisible but highly active.

Hera, Zeus, Mnemosyne, Themis, Athena, Prometheus, Chronos and Hades and sundry others, spent nearly all their time in the New York Penthouse. Zeus as usual, preferred to be at a material as well as spiritual distance from JNO's activities on Ios, especially in view of the difficulties he was having with his newly returned

relatives. The Advisory and the Pantheic groups maintained contact through Penny's links with Lucina; who came as usual at her personal whim, to some of the morning or evening meetings in the underground chamber. She said nothing directly about her problems in the Pantheon but her defences were sufficiently low for the now attuned group members to detect changes in her demeanour. 'They' were in trouble and everyone in the group knew it. By contrast the work among mortals had begun to pick up since the metamorphosis of Chronos, and the kidnapping of Hades.

It was a while before the realisation dawned that without the direct involvement of the Chrono/Hadean alliance Barboncito, although out of control, had lost the main power source of his driving energy - a fortunate by-product for the Pantheon. Using his numerical superiority, he continued to sabotage JNO plans through Fourthworld Networks. However, gradually on Ios there began a feeling they were beginning to make some gains and that the tide might be turning. Lyle Etchart's group observed the shift first. It was Doris Botham's keenness of observation which made her point out the first real alteration in the pattern of events in the early autumn of 2012.

HIGO had divided the globe into spheres of human mass movement since the unusual weather patterns began. Doris' group now daily checked on resettlement activity and the interventions made by local, regional and global authorities. They knew of course Fourthworld had the same information. The critical factor was the strength and resourcefulness of their own different networks - until now Barboncito's people had wielded the greatest influence through the exercise of hard persuasion. In the aftermath of the Mediterranean massacres, some fifty thousand would-be immigrants with JNO's help had scrabbled ashore to be put into camps all along the coast by UNPEX Peace Forces in what had been high-rise tourist hotels. Doris, among her other duties, had been closely monitoring UNPEX activity using her own networks to influence possible outcomes in this critical zone. In October 2012, shortly after the freeing of Chronos, she found her efforts at resettlement were beginning to root, having initially been obstructed. Rioting in the hotel blocks slowed, and UNPEX reprisals for disobedience faded as she was able to replace Fourth-world's personnel in UNPEX with her own. For some time the UNPEX world had seemed overrun with people influenced by Fourthworld's ideology and methods. In the evening discussion on the 18th September 2012 Doris explained her discovery. They were all very tired and it showed. Doris had lost some of her famous calm, and was little prone to agitation.

'I was doing what I always do, and had been doing hopelessly for the last god knows how long - getting Fourthworld types sacked or otherwise eliminated by fair means or foul and replacing them with JNO trained or influenced people. Suddenly it was working. I traced through the recruitment files and found the head of the Eurasia Branch had changed allegiance, supposedly shocked by the Gibraltar slaughter. I got a couple of my people in the UN to investigate and found one of Etchart's people had spent a week officially checking their finances, after which everything changed. What's cooking Lyle? I thought we were on the same team lovely boy!'

Etchart squirmed a little, and apologised in his slightly absent minded way for his failure to communicate, which irritated the little lady most particularly.

'Sorry! Ah! Umm - that's real interesting - Doris. See here, er, soon as I heard Alexander and Marina had gone after Fourthworld I thought I'd, er, try an experiment. I didn't say anything, thought I'd wait till - you know - I got a result. You know we've had a hard time getting into the higher reaches of UNPEX lately, well one way in was via the inspection role of the World Bank. My little team invited the head Eurasia man to dinner and well, suggested he had been finagling the..er..books and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Ha!'

'You might have said,' Doris gave him one of her deadly-sweet smiles. He blushed, embarrassed.

'Sorry Doris, it was a long shot, didn't expect such results so soon!'

'It's about time we got some. If things don't shift very fast we'll soon be on the wrong side of the deadline!'

Kanapi spoke to no one in particular. He voiced what they were always thinking. Here they were in mid September, three months to go and... There was a long silence.

'Jeez! - Come on you guys!' chipped in Condamine. 'What Doris says is great news! So what if Lyle was a bit slow in letting on. We've all been busking it a bit lately. This is a change in the pattern, however it happened. Penny you see more of Lucina then we do, is this the real breakthrough we've been waiting for or just a one off?' All eyes fell on Penny.

'Look,' she responded. 'You've all seen Lucina for yourselves. Things are going hard with her and we've got our own problems here. I think we'd best leave the two things separated. Let's find any corroborating influences elsewhere on the networks for indications for or against a breakthrough.'

'Okay, good, good', said Petershonn. 'I too have been experimenting. Sorry Doris, I know, same team eh! But we talk now isn't it? Better now than not. Maybe after this we get going good again eh?'

'Okay, okay!' Doris sighed heavily. 'Sorry, I'm tired and ratty, it's been a hard road for all of us. I say truce, so spill it Johann!'

'Well, I too have good success on the student front. In the last ten year's or so, graduates from JNO supported universities and colleges in many third-world countries have been getting jobs in UNPEX and other UN bodies. Many regional administrations have our graduates in post and they help each other. Remember we have been going longer than Fourthworld. What we sowed we are now reaping. We have better networks I think than they. Is good, eh?'

'It's excellent!' exclaimed Penny. 'The whole idea is brilliant. This means the best young people of this generation are in our networks by now and it's great news to hear it's feeding through.'

'We had ten years on Fourthworld, thank God,' said Chieko Terekowa. 'I think it's the most crucial thing. GRADE aid in grants, endowments, fees and the rest is paying off. I always knew it would. It just seemed that what with the weather changes and the rest of it we allowed our eye to stray off that particular ball to watch the things of the moment and forgot this more subtle and deeper influence.'

'You think it was Johann's work which had affected the personnel changes in the Eurasia thing then?' Asked Doris.

'That and your and Lyle's work too,' replied Chieko. 'We always forget the power of the networks. They have a life of their own and operate without us doing anything directly. It's different for Fourthworld, Barboncito has to have control over everything, the authority chains are pretty weak by the time they get to him. Sheer force is not enough to get obedience in a truly consistent way. I know it's hard to stick with that belief when sheer power seems to get things done faster. But in Fourthworld the content of what they do is different. It is qualitatively less effective than our slower, more authentically human approach.'

'You mean it's a tortoise and hare thing?' asked Myanthi.

'In a way, but I wouldn't use that metaphor. It's more than a matter of cunning or speed alone. It's about something more, well I used the word 'authentic'. To me it means more true to our species as individual to individual.'

'Sorry love, don't follow,' said Doris.

'I'm not being very clear, I know. I'm just thinking it out for myself actually, so don't expect me to get it right straight away. Ric, anyone, help me out if I get stuck with the right words. It's like, you know, things as an

individual which you feel are right and true, but which a lot of the time seem really stupid when you say them out loud...'

'Like what?' smiled Piotre Ulybin, interrupting, and as someone who had survived the Great Russian experiment thought he knew only too well.

'Like when as a small child you can't understand why people are starving when you have enough food, and when adults say - That's how it is - and even when you know how it is later, and you know how hard it is to change the realities. That childish truth stays just as strong. So the child-like innocence about the truth of things kind of stays with you despite the fact you can explain it away and the explanations are deemed satisfactory or immutable in the scheme of things.

'So?' questioned Doris.

'So, it niggles subliminally. Sticks in the throat of the intelligence so to speak, it's a lie that can only be exposed between individuals. I mean when people round a dinner table get on to politics they often agree with the authentic voices in themselves, but the practicalities of changing things and their own powerlessness gets in the way of any possible action and so they go along sometimes positively or often merely passively, with things they know somewhere inside them they cannot, should not, possibly agree to.'

'Sometimes people do act on what they know,' said Ric. 'Why else are we here?'

'But see how few we are,' said Karl Kahn.

'Not so,' intervened Myanthi. 'Chieko spoke of the networks. We are many. Our problem is both simple and impossible at the same time. What I mean is we do communicate in what Chieko calls is our authentic voice, through teaching JNO values. What we cannot do, what is both necessary and important in the time-scale left is the critical need to communicate personally, directly with everyone and develop the critical mass of informed understanding about the state of the world and the way we must, change human behaviour from its dominant competitive, and exploitative culture to a co-operative inter-dependent one in the three months we have left! It's already taken over ten years for us to begin to achieve the critical mass Johann talked about - if Doris is right about the tide turning - and I think she is. In the time that's needed to change a culture, that's fast work. But in time for the deadline well.....I don't know. I don't see how we can do it.'

'We have one chance,' said Ric quietly. 'One real chance and also one hope. Our one chance is the Mimix machine, and our hope is the slowing of Barboncito to give the machine its greatest chance.'

'I think it would be best if you spelled out what you mean in some detail,' said Penny. 'There's two or three different ideas being discussed here, some are simply practical and others are more abstract and will take some getting to grips with.'

'Right!' Doris chipped in. 'It seems to me sometimes that each of us is in different places in our heads at the same time. We give the appearance of being together, we act in partnership on the surface, but that doesn't always mean we are in the same place exactly - in our minds I mean. For example I really knew that Lyle was doing his own thing as I and all of you have been doing theirs, but I kind of forgot. There's no time to spend ages communicating when we have to things to do. Of course we need to have meetings like this to co-ordinate, but often we only talk about 'things' that are happening and rarely about what we really feel or mean by the things we say and paradoxically, the things we do as well. We assume a kind of rapport which I'm not always sure really exists if we all laid our private thoughts down for examination.'

'I think you will find it's a problem of the use of language,' said Mo Chu in his pedantic way. 'You may know of course, the reason we Chinese decided on the use of characters rather than letters as a mode of ecriture is so

people can communicate in writing without the need for translation. By way of illustration, the character for a dog is the same in Mandarin and Cantonese, while the sound is quite different. I illustrate thus to show the vehicular nature of language and its symbolism. Symbols are useful short-hand vehicles and can of course be employed in very complex communications but, and I emphasise the 'but', they are only a part of the whole communication. Not only do we translate the symbols individually, and therefore we each have slightly different interpretations, but we understand the symbols differently also. So to maintain the dog illustration, when one says dog; a Chinese may think of a delicacy to eat with noodles, while a Westerner may think of a cuddly companion to walk in the park, or as a defecating nuisance to be done away with. I of course exaggerate to make my point. I am certainly fond of dogs.'

'Sure, sure Chu, but where's all this leading?' asked Condamine. 'Penny you got us all goin' on this.'

'I suppose I did, and given the tone of the conversation I'd better try and explain what I mean.'

Before she could continue, Ric stood up and waved her to be silent.

'Everyone is right. Human communication is always a cacophony of misunderstandings masquerading as communication. It's is one of the main reasons we are in the mess we are, and I mean us here and now as well as the world in general. If there's one thing we have in common as a species it's the fact that each one of us is ultimately alone in our own private world. Whereas in the public world we are usually afraid to admit of the loneliness, uncertainty and basic vulnerability we each feel at the bottom of ourselves. While in private we can weep for ourselves and the things we do to each other and the world; in public this would be seen as weakness, folly, or insanity. In public most people hold back their inner thoughts, mostly out of fear of being misunderstood or from an inability to say what they mean. That's why Barboncito's 'isms are so popular, they give us the answers we need and speak these things for us without each of us having to be publicly responsible for anything. The bizarre thing is how much we really have in common as a feeling, thinking species. The great mistake is that although we have recognised our vulnerability and weakness as a species, we have placed this outside ourselves. Not however in a public place where it can be seen and managed, but in a private one. Essentially each person does one of two things. They give up their vulnerable selves into the hands of a divine to keep on their behalf. Or, alternatively, they deny this vulnerability and refute the divine. Both ways are ultimately unsatisfactory, for in Chieko's term they are not authentic. The only authentic reality in communication is the immediate and totally empathetic understanding of ourselves, one to another without the need to interpret symbols of language, religious explanations of human nature, or any other more 'scientifically' defined behaviours.'

'He stopped for a moment to let his words sink in. Since no one interjected he continued.

'There is a reason for this sermon for which I apologise, but which I hope more than anything will be made clear to you in a few moments. Firstly I want you to remain silent and consider the experience you all had of Lucina that time at the Advisory Group meeting. Then, I think you will realise there was no doubt in any mind about the meaning of the communication she made with each of you. You will also recall that her communication was different in slight ways for each person. There was no extraneous material whatever to interfere with the connections. What happened then was what I have since come to know as a mind-mix. That's right, Mimix is the name of our new machine and only myself Karl and Penny, and of course Hep, knows what it means to experience such a thing. Before we go any further I want them to describe a Mimix experience to you. Penny Please?'

'Does this mean you are...?'

'Just tell them Penny, the rest will be made clear soon.

'Ric, I think it's probably one of those things it's harder to describe than to experience. It's like nothing else I

ever went through other than that encounter with Lucina you just mentioned'. She thought for a moment and continued 'Well, and please chip in Karl if I get it wrong, it's a bit like you were minding your own business, and suddenly you become aware of another person in your mind. Like you knew absolutely for certain you were alone in your house and someone else had somehow got in and was with you.'

Karl Kahn broke in. 'That's a good comparison, it's as if the person who was in there with you knows all about you, your house, your family everything, and somehow you don't mind because you know the same about them. If they were to lie, you'd know, and vice-versa. There's no hiding place, and no need for one. The main thing you know is that both of you are equally open to the other and therefore equally vulnerable.'

'That right,' said Penny. 'The equality comes from the vulnerability itself. Your mutual nakedness or weakness becomes the thing that strengthens the relationship you can't avoid having. It's the greatest of all human paradoxes, the fact that our individual vulnerability is our greatest strength and it's the very thing we are most afraid of!'

'So,' said Ric. 'What happens in the mutual vulnerability of the mind-mix?'

'Your fears,' Karl replied. 'Are cancelled out. The need for personal space to hide disappears and a kind of wonderful species commonality takes over. It's like being born again, free of the personal barrier, free in public like free in private.'

'Private thoughts made public?' queried Chu.

'It makes them real for the first time. It was Hannah Arendt, who said private thoughts spoken publicly make them real,' said Penny 'In the Mimix they're so liberating you feel somehow helplessly imprisoned in yourself when you come out of it.'

'That's right,' said Karl. 'You feel bereft, alone, like you've lost the truest of friends or a lover.'

'Thanks,' said Ric. 'I am now going to try an experiment which has to work if we are to use the chance I spoke of just now.'

He brought out from under the table a medium sized cardboard box which he placed in front of him. He drew from it what appeared to be an oversized wrist-watch. A small, curved oval, it was about three centimetres wide, four long, and about three millimetres thick. It had elasticised metal straps at each end with which it appeared to fit pretty comfortably on the lower forearm.

'Voilà...,Mimix!' exclaimed Ric, not without a degree of satisfaction.

'It's ready?' asked Penny with emphasis.

'Yes, it works well enough and we have finally made it small enough to be easily portable.'

'How's it powered?' asked Lyle Etchart.

'Ah! That's possibly a slight problem. To avoid the need for bulky batteries, we've powered it by light. It doesn't need much to make it go but it won't work for very long in pitch-blackness.'

'It's got a small back up cell,' Karl Khan added. 'But it only stores enough energy for a maximum of five minutes in the dark. It'll work in street-lights for example, or near a candle, any light source actually - just, but it wouldn't work, say, down a mine.'

'Ah! So we'd better not spend a lot of time in an unlit mine should we?' Doris quipped. She was unconvinced by gadgetry, preferring the strength of her mind to achieve her will.

'No Doris we'd better not,' said Ric. 'But what we are saying is it's not infallible. There are circumstances when you might want to use it, in a dark room for example, where you want to communicate silently with someone without being observed. Just remember it won't work in the dark for long that's all.'

'Okay, okay, dish 'em out, Ric, we're all dying to give it a go.' Jose Condamine held out his wrist.

'Alright, but there's a couple of other points you should know about. Penny, Karl and I, and of course Hep, have tried it. The effects are immediate but more importantly, and I can't stress this enough - they are permanent. It's like the apple of the tree of knowledge, once bitten into there's no going back. The minute you're switched on you're in a different world altogether and there's no going back - not ever.' He looked at Doris as he spoke. 'It's not compulsory, We've talked it over, and we've decided to give you the option of refusing to use it.'

'Count me out,' said Doris. 'The last thing I want to do is get close to the thoughts of anyone else, and I certainly don't want anyone getting close to any of mine. I want my privacy thank you. I get where I do precisely because no one can read my thoughts.'

'That's what I mean,' said Ric. 'But the other and converse point I want to emphasise, is that without using Mimix you are also excluded. It doesn't matter now, while there are so few. The whole point is to proliferate them as far and wide as possible. We reckon more people will want them than don't. If we can get them disseminated fast enough, and you should know Hep has got factories in all the decent weather pattern spheres churning them out as we speak. We have from now until October at the latest to get about three billion out. Fortunately Hep's found a way of making them quickly and cheaply.'

'Hang on a bit Ric,' it was all going a bit fast for Bill Kanapi. 'Just let me check out I've got all this right - Mimix is not just something for us in JNO to use, as a way of getting advantage over Fourthworld. You actually want everyone to have it?'

'Absolutely!'

'I get it,' said Doris. 'Very clever. Penny you tell us, you've used it?'

Penny smiled, there was no putting anything over on this lady.

'Like I already said,' she responded. 'Mimix is like nothing else. It's the main chance JNO has got to reach our goal in time. We have to flood the world with these things as soon as possible. I doubt that even you Doris, will be able to hold out against having one once they are universal. Sure some people will refuse, Doris is quite at liberty to do so if she wishes, but she will find herself in a minority and becoming more and more excluded. The point is, and I'm sure you're all ahead of me already like Doris here, the point is we have to do what Chieko said and make authentic contact with each other, everyone, all the time and soon. This gizmo will do it if we can get it out fast enough. It will answer Myanthi's question about changing the culture and getting to a critical mass at the same time and in the time scale - just about.'

'So? - let's get at it, like now!' Condamine, almost shouted in his eagerness.

'Wait,' said Lynne Farrell. 'Nobody should get linked up until we are all totally sure of what we are doing. I haven't used the thing, but I think I have an inkling what Penny and Karl mean. If its effects are so radical, we must be on top of the thing before we go into it. Eh Jose?'

'Okay, okay, sure thing Lynne, but we are goin' to use it ain't we, so what's the point of hanging around? Can't see the point of waiting.'

'We must know ourselves first, I am in agreement with Lynne,' said Chu. 'I want all the story told in detail as far as it can be before I choose to change the nature of my relationship with the rest of the world, even if it only begins with you good people whom I trust.'

Ric nodded and said. 'I think it would be best if first Karl and I explain the details of the machine and how it works, then Lynne and her media group can get to grips with it. Thereafter we are literally in the lap of the gods.'

It was another three days before they all agreed to be strapped up with a Mimix set and another week by the time they were used to handling it. Doris overcame her objections after a short observation of the effect on the others and as predicted, was unable to stand being the odd one out.



## Chapter 12

While the mortal subsidiary of JNO was getting its act together on Ios, the senior partners at Olympic-HQ in the hidden New York penthouse suite were engaged in a scene of a different kind. The Twelve, enlarged by two, found that becoming the 'Fourteen' had turned out to be something that had been seriously ill considered by everyone. They had worked hard at doing the thing but were poorly prepared for the aftermath. There had been a grave failure of anticipation. Firstly, none of the children of Chronos would have anything to do with their father. Though infuriating, this had been predictable and it was realised too late that someone should have handled it better in advance. Revulsion ran deep and flowed full laden. Whatever Chronos said or did. Whatever he might say or do. He could not, as Demeter said with feeling - do anything right for being wrong. Whether the loathing derived entirely from direct experience of spending time in so abhorrent a stomach or equally, or even more probably, from an revulsion of the nature of the deed itself. Had he not nearly succeeded in cutting them off from their potential and maintaining his Earth in a Chaos of monsters and other ill-refined beings? Mortals in their beauty and even now, in their foolishness - still offered better possibilities for the future than he. Even in the current crisis, they had not messed up Creation as much as he had done before them. Were it not for the importance of having the skein of time inexorably fixed by him as part of the New Trinity, he would have instantly been re-banished.

They also realised too late, that of course the Pantheon was out of the habit of communication with Hades. The whole of their organisational structure and their operating methods were based on his being in the Underworld. Added to which, for Hades himself, the aeons of distance combined with his manner of coming thence, left the King of the Underworld out of his element. He was also somewhat less than happy being the kidnapper, kidnapped. Also Barboncito was alone and free to come and go in Hades' abandoned realm, and also in Zeus'. Not to mention Hecate, and that reprobate Pan. Others may be roaming wherever, without his control. To cap it all, his ears still rang with the cry of the betrayed from Alexander's hordes. Oh yes, he certainly resented that youth and his handsome black woman. He had had Alexander by the short hairs, had neatly turned him and would have turned all of JNO until Marina came into Hades - or was it the Harpies who were on the wrong side - they who brooked no authority from anyone, but who listened to Hecate and heeded to her advice - often; once too often!

Thus he thought and sulked and smarted.

Zeus forced to keep control of this unhappy brother made sure Themis did the same for Chronos. One to each was fair. Only their extraordinary strength prevented a very serious family rumpus which might all too easily have scuppered Zeus' main plan.

Zeus was very put-out with himself and thus with everyone else. Hera too, was at her wit's end. She rounded on her husband whom she still felt saw the whole thing as a game, a play, an amusement - and who, as usual left her to do all the work with 'her mortals' as he called them. Hephaestus, fortunately kept his faith with his mother. Prometheus of course maintained his constancy, and watched over Alexander and Marina in their quest for Barboncito.

Thus it was, that nobody thought much of the homecoming of either of the ex-rulers of the Underworld. As for the erstwhile rulers themselves, not only did they feel alien but they were not even on Olympus but in an outlandish and non-recognisable city. True, they were high up, but they gazed down upon nothing like they had known on their last visit in the world. Thirdly...Fifthly...Hundrethly...They nagged Zeus silly with their constant whining and he was reminded all too clearly why they were banished in the first place.

To find a way to transform all this crabby bad temper, and in an to attempt to achieve something more positive, Hera suggested Zeus and Themis should go a-walking with Chronos and Hades. A proper family outing. To get to know what was going on, find out what was really what. This walk took them far afield indeed. Where did they not go? The whole Earth was meticulously visited in their togetherness. Gaia smiled

upon them. Reunited, her family again spread their presence and gave her hope. Time, hand in hand with Justice, all the Power of the past and the current Kingly Reign, closely arm in arm with all her 'pasts', Her 'is's and - her 'might-be's. Her future, was beginning to seem brighter. She still felt uncertainty. There was still an absence of Her full potential, something yearned for but nonetheless missing. It was there somewhere, just beyond Her reach. She sensed too, a future in which Yahweh may even now not permit His mighty hand to be defiled by Her loam. Her desire. Her female secretions. Her warm-damp places. So She was glad Her children visited Her thus and She smiled on Zeus. She perceived Hades' discomfiture and admonished him as a mother would, and he wriggled, like a child. They soared in a mind meld of historic significance; She was impressed. Zeus was still the strong one. Was he not melded with Yahweh? She was persuaded of a possible future if only Prometheus' mortals could properly use these combined strengths, running indivisibly in each of them. So She hoped and Zeus smiled on Her in his turn. Hope flowed from Her rivers, ran down her mountainsides, shimmied Her plates, ran currents in Her seas, wafted wetly from Her skies.

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Hephaestos sat by his master, who smiling, leaned benignly on his throne. Gaia was happier. His plan could yet be done. Hades and Chronos, if not altogether convinced, were at last quiet and less surly. Hera, and her JNO were hard at work. Barboncito was pursued.

'You have made the thing?' enquired Zeus.

'Aye, Great One,' said Hephaestos.

'You will see it works for all?'

'Aye, Master,' said Hephaestos.

'Is it a hard thing to have done?'

'No my Lord. But it is without power. The thing is quite empty. I must link it to the Chronosphere.'

'Ah ha!'

'I need Your Grace to give me leave.'

'Ah! Hmmm! So you do my fine Sir. So you do. You can do with it what is needed?'

'I can.'

Zeus, leaned back. Hep waited. The moment had arrived. So simply stated. It could be done. Such vast consequences, such a magnificent gift and such a loss to the givers. The greatest gift the gods could give - Themselves! - Like that - given. Zeus never doubted the scientific powers of his askew nephew. But was it really the time? Was it actually now? Once relinquished there was no return of the 'sphere to the exclusivity of the gods. This was the point of no return. Was it truly now? Even so great a god can be forgiven for the merest hesitation at such a time. He had already given all he owned and some he did not, to Yahweh as the price of this deal. But had required of Him a recognition of his own earthiness by so doing. The New Trinity existed, despite the muttering of Hades and the detached indifference of Yahweh. As long as it held so the Earthly Chronosphere was able to be given, the timelines relinquished. But, he thought to himself, 2012 was an arbitrary date, it could, after all, be later or even not at all. The choice was his. Come, come, he said to himself resolutely, enough of this. You become like that boy. Such doubts become you not. It is as I have said - it is done let us on with it!

'And of Barboncito, where is my boy and his woman?'

'Ah My Lord, this is not for me to know. You must ask Hera. Or you must use the 'sphere to summon your child.'

'He still has the net I gave him?'

'He would be foolish to have lost my net,' grinned Hep, reminding Zeus unnecessarily, by whom the object had been made.

'Ha! - You make things well. You realise if I give them the 'sphere, they will have access to all that we know. All that I know! All you know! All that His Oneship knows!'

As far as Hep was concerned this was part of the original plan. He couldn't help wondering why Zeus was being so reticent about the handing-over of the 'sphere.

'Wonder not my twisty giant,' said Zeus rising from his throne and beginning to pace in a way that made Hephaestos uncomfortable. 'I find myself up against my own planning. I ought to know by now not to set arbitrary deadlines. I have set myself a game-plan which I have passed to others and it has left my control. Stupid, stupid...' He muttered as he paced, appearing to ignore Hep's presence. 'Why pick a date? I could have done it any time. Said nothing to anyone, merely willed it when I was ready. But no, not I, I had to be grand, make the large gesture! Tell me,' he addressed Hep again. 'If I give the Chronosphere to them now how will it work?'

Hep told him as simply as possible and as far as he knew. When he had finished, Zeus clasped him warmly to his heart, a difficult thing to accomplish given Hep's bulk.

'Do it then, just do it, I leave it to you. Do it!' and he almost ran out of the chamber. He went at speed to Olympus itself.

Where else should he go to witness his achievement? This conjoining of all the elements of Time.

There, alone, in his own and proper place, he made his arrangements. First he saw that Hephaestos finished his work. Then he summoned nymphs who came and went bearing wondrous gifts for kings of gods. Food for gods. Pleasures for gods. They came loaded down with fine decorations, folderol's and baubles of every kind. The Divine Residence had been sorely neglected. Then he summonsed the other Eleven, plus the recently arrived two. The Fourteen held court in fresh, lustrous, splendour. Much clamour was heard on the Chronosphere, though thanks to Hep little was intelligible to other listeners. They spoke and argued long and loud. Zeus was, for once, serene. The Eleven, plus two, talked until they could say no more. Round and round they went. On and on they argued until eventually utterly exhausted, they one by one eventually fell silent until there was no activity on the Earthly Chronosphere. A thing that had never, ever, happened before.

Never, since the Creation, had they all been thus quieted. It was an appalling moment. This sudden, unexpected and terrible void. An alien stillness supplanted the formerly active, noisy, endlessly fascinating Chronosphere of the many gods of Gaia. It was truly a cutting off of the timelines. But without warning. That was the thing. They had known it was coming sometime - but now? Like this? The very heartbeat of the gods, the constant thrum of their timelines - was ceased. All was silence. A fell black-hole of nothing, pulling into itself the vastness of its aeons. The world held its breath, and held it, kept holding, for too, too, too long a time. It was insupportable. Every immortal felt the dread absence as the end of their contact with creation itself. There was no past, no present, no future.

NO TIME!

NOTHING!

NO IMMORTALS!

THEMSELVES ALONE!

Time breathed its last, the ultimate disjunction. The gods unbuckled the cord to humankind. Cut! Like prisoners abruptly thrown from captivity, they knew not where to go. Their work with mortals at an end! From that moment each might have their own story to tell anew. The world, however, had shifted its conceptual axis. Time for mortals, must begin again and theirs was the future. In any case there would nevermore be an Earth where the thoughts of gods of any kind were relevant or influential.

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For Hera it was the end of her work. There was nothing more for her at JNO. The future of humankind was beyond her powers. Hep had done his work. Zeus had forged his Trinity. She wanted to be near her man. Share the last experience. Drink from the divine cup to the dregs.

'Alas you cannot.' Zeus clasped his spouse to his grand bosom. 'If I could my little cuckoo...If only I could. Things are not as they were. I am no longer one only. I am three. You cannot stay with me and be as before. You may go where you will. You may stay with mortals but without power, or else bind indivisibly with us, my cuckoo; if you choose not to remain part of them. I will be found in new timelines - as one part of the New Trinity. Gaia now depends on this last race in these final moments of their time. You can stay as part of them or live without Gaia and without humankind. The Trinity will form new gods for other forms of life on different and distant timelines.'

This was The Defining Moment for Hera and the other gods. To stay with mortals and be absorbed by them in the hope they had done enough and Gaia would be saved, or to leave this earth as part of the New Trinity for new worlds to merge with different intelligent forms of life. They were faced for the first time with the circularity of the ultimate reality of 'chicken and egg'. Was it they who created humankind, or vice-versa? Could they exist as they were elsewhere? Did their validity exist in each mortal as thoughts and ideas, or had they to be redefined, among other intelligences far off in the Firmament? To go or to stay? How best to survive? To survive at all? What questions! What new thoughts for Earthy gods! They who just were - now must make choices for themselves. They could no longer stay unchanged. The New Trinity had seen to that. Past, present and future all one! Being was for mortals only - is that it? Is this what it all came down to? Mortals had to decide all alone what being meant - without gods - and if they got it wrong? All would soon be known, as the redefined timelines of humankind were all but played out.

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From Olympus - refurbished as of old, Zeus now summoned gods who would follow the New Trinity and he particularly relished the presence of his father Chronos, his brother Hades and the coming of his erstwhile rival Yahweh and his Son to his shimmering halls.

Huge thunderclouds gathered above the mountain and cut them off from prying eyes as they made plans. Great gaudy displays of lightening deterred travellers from too close a contact. Mists rose from the damp earth covering the ground in billowing vapours. Cut off from the Earth no mortals could evermore penetrate Olympus. Alexander alone of mortals, heard Zeus's call, as did all the gods of all time. Many trembled in their various fastnesses - made wondering and fearful by this mind-bending turn of events.

## Chapter 13.

Alexander heard Zeus' Defining Moment through the net moulded to his shoulders. December 2012 had just three revolutions left on the axis of the Earth.

Barboncito's trace was everywhere, making him difficult to track - he moved at amazing speed so long as Fourthworld thrived through the sickness of Gaia. The signs that may have marked the beginning of the recovery seen by Doris Botham were not widely noticed. Marina and Alexander in their travels watched in dismay as everywhere, they saw how the new leader of Tartarus loosed his acolytes to roam where they could do their best work. They joined with terrorists, religious fundamentalists, cultists, shallow-ecologists, politicians, aesthetes, new agers, born-againers, holy-rollers, bureaucrats, with all the 'ists' and all the 'isms'. They conjoined in Fourthworld to deny the Fifth its hold on Gaia and haul the world back into the dead past.

Europa's mother culture in defence of freedom and democracy, could only prescribe bloody war, sabotage, invasion, and repression of every kind in the name of progress and stability. Gaia closed her eyes the better to gather her strength, and reposed only in minute snatches. In these interludes, Barboncito's crew entrenched themselves ever deeper in UNPEX and the other administrative bodies of the world. Each sigh from Gaia whether earthquake, flood, or weather change, threw JNO out of gear and increased the followers of Fourthworld. Hadeans in contradiction of their proper place in the Underworld, led mortals to their own brand of immortality. There was heroism, there was subtlety and there was cunning, there was downright madness. The throngs at Charon Crossing multiplied. So the past and present mingled, indivisibly, as yet without the leaven of creative possibilities from an unpredictable future.

Despite prognostications from myriads of experts - nobody outside JNO knew what was really happening. The strengthened bridgehead of stability JNO was beginning to develop, struggled in the almost incoherent babble of UNPEX and its networks. Barboncito also knew what was afoot. GAIANET showed him how JNO's grip had subtly strengthened. The outrageous defections of Hades and Chronos had made him redouble his work in anticipation of the loss of strength he felt slowly flowing from him. To compensate he had reached deep into Hades and he dredged yet more outpouring from the many Sipapu's of the world. Thus weakened in power but strengthened in numbers, he worked all the harder, but preoccupied, he failed to perceive the Defining Moment.

For Alexander the moment of the loss of the gods was a terrible wrench to his psyche, a bereavement accompanied by a such a depth of grief in his heart that it stopped him in his tracks.

Barboncito also felt the loss, but unlike his counterpart had no countervailing sense of the infinite future. He saw with horror that mortals were truly godless, at long last. Freed from the ability to offload guilt. They were the only beings responsible for the Earth and everything in it. Free to reject him!

Barboncito wilted under the crushing weight of his own loss, his followers out of place, as the Underworld itself faded like mist in the strong, warm, morning sun. Hades in the world had weakened him, but he still had resources. He had hoped that with Chronos in the world they would fight on together to establish his past in their present. But Chronos had given up and was not available to him, and Barboncito knew that alone, he could not hold the ascendancy of the Underworld in the consciousness of the living. Before his eyes his Hadeans gradually dissolved. Trapped on the wrong side of the Sipapu he too faded into the past and ceased to be. He nonetheless slipped proudly into the remembrance of his people where he belonged for all time.

Mingled with the pain of his loss, Alexander wondered if Ric and Hep had succeeded with Mimix? This last effort from JNO to give mortals the chance to use their new freedom and make them as truly and gloriously great as the lost gods. He had estimated the inevitable coming of the Defining Moment, but had expected it later, on the stroke of midnight 2012. He wryly noted this last inconsistency of Zeus. Immediately he missed the sense of his father and felt the uselessness of the net around his shoulders, its mass increasing moment by

moment, weighing heavily as it became simple gold. Alone within himself for the first time since its acquisition, his loss was now so deep he could not just ignore it and go on. He would never see Prometheus again. Never sit with Zeus, Hera nor his beloved Nemmi. Would Thea still be available? Even the infuriating Pan was gone. Hep, there was no Hep to guide him, no giant arm on which to lean!

At the moment of the silent void of the gods, Alexander and Marina were in a fourtrack racing across the Egyptian desert towards the Mediterranean gulf that had been the Nile flood-plain. High in the hills of the inlet of the drowned Valley of the Kings, was an ancient Sipapu where they thought to find Barboncito in his last efforts to empty Hades. Marina, sensing a change in him, glanced across at Alexander and, at the Defining Moment, saw him clutch his shoulders and bow his head. She made an emergency stop, skidding to a halt in a cloud of dust and sand.

From the moment of her recovery from her adventure in Hades she had kept her wary eye on him. Her experience in Hades was something she could only characterise as a dream in sub-space. She had no clear memory of those events. All she knew from Lucina on Ios was that the Concordat flight to San Francisco had hit unexpected turbulence and she had been evacuated automatically by a new seat-ejector safety system. She had lost consciousness and was one of only thirty-five survivors found in the sea. She had been in a coma for weeks and brought to Ios by Penny. She recovered soon after Alexander's return from his mission to Arizona. This explained his knowledge of the work of Barboncito. She had accepted this explanation having none other. As soon as she was fit they set off to find and stop him. The other-world experience was just a highly significant dream remembered for its impact and importance; and which operated powerfully on her from deep in her unconscious mind. She was also still bothered by the otherness of Alexander as 'Them' which had affected her from the very moment of their meeting.

She watched him slumped in his seat, staring sightlessly ahead and was full of thoughts, questions, she would not - would not... If asked she would have said her primary interest in him was purely professional and it was that alone which had drawn her to stay with him. Not since her conversation with Ric in the grounds of Markham, had she given any consideration to what his being one of 'Them' meant to her. The need for action then as now, in the pursuit of Barboncito, overrode personal matters. Nevertheless she could not prevent unbidden thoughts prompting questions which she had suppressed as irrelevant to their task.

She recalled the pair of gadgets Ric had given her before they left Ios; to be used only on a signal from Ric, or in exceptional circumstances, when without Ric's signal, it might or might not work. Placed on the wrist, he said, it would aid communication and clarify her thoughts. He had also told her it was untried, and so might have unforeseen and maybe even alarming consequences. Needing as much security as possible in her life Marina did not trust anything other than the tried and tested. Nevertheless her thoughts bothered her more than she liked. Like water under pressure, they leaked out from her control. She touched her belt bag where she had put the devices.

'Are you alright?' she asked. 'What's the matter? Are you ill?' was all she would allow herself to say. It was not normally in her nature to be over concerned with the feelings of others. He did not reply and remained motionless as if in a trance. Marina was surprised by the force of her uninvited thoughts. Alexander, paid her no attention and as if in a dream, he struggled in the confines of the car to remove his light jacket and shirt. She was astonished to see a gold mesh kind of shawl, which fitted round his shoulders like a second skin. Peeling it off, he folded it mechanically into a small package, the size of a handkerchief, and placed it in the glove compartment. She was amazed at the fineness of it. It was of the purest gold, beautifully wrought, it must be worth a fortune, and he was discarding it as if it no longer had value.

'What in the name of all that's holy is that you've taken off! It's time you came clean with me. We've enough on our plate without you having sudden heebie-jeebies in the middle of the desert'.

Alexander turned his head slowly and searched his face as if he were seeing her for the first time, astonished to

find her there.

'Okay, okay, that's it! said Marina. 'I've had it! I want to know it all. I've been living inside this crazy dream for the past God knows how long, and I've checked you out and your family and you're weird, the lot of you, DNA weird. Ric tells me it's all to do with Greek gods and that's the origin of the other Firm. Well all I know is that there is another Firm, that's a fact and we're all working on that knowledge and that Barboncito who I know is real because I fucked him like I fucked you, so I know you're as real as him, if as weird. I know I get different feelings from you than I did from him. I know the world's gone barmy and might be coming to an end if we don't stop Barboncito from hacking his way to world power - but what I don't know and can't make any sense of is....is....what's the significance! So what's the big deal if you two, and Thea and Lucina and Ljeschi have different DNA patterns from the rest of humanity! So what if you are somehow descended from people who the Greeks made into gods if that's how it was then, I don't know anything about that. Maybe Greek gods once had, maybe they still have, some kind of influence on us today, but so what! Why the hell is it so important....and why are you staring at me like that?'

He was torn apart by the loss of that half of him which had given him purpose. Desperate for the return of the 'sphere which had been turned off so abruptly, he also was acutely aware of a brand new reality facing him and the real people in JNO. His mother, Ric and the others. He also knew he was so in love with the face determinedly confronting him. Stranded between his loss and what he could see had been gained, he did not know whether to laugh or cry. Tears rolled down his face as massive relief, vast waves of hope, great wastes of loss, washed through him back and forth. The huge waters of his emotion dashed against the dam of his mind, until he thought he would break into pieces. Marina, her resolve of years, breached by his torrent of feeling, clasped his head in her bosom and wailed with him. She extracted the Mimix wrapped in her belt-bag and without withdrawing from him, she strapped them in place. They would see what they would see. Was this the abyss into which they would fall, or would they, equally, gloriously, fly into a splendid future?

Alone in the endless desert, wrapped by a timeless remembrance of a race of people striving for immortality, they marked the Defining Moment as true lovers. They were mortals with a world to win. Complete in their mutual vulnerability, open to the world, they heard the buzzing of a new human 'sphere. She to discover it, he to teach the world. For the first time she felt open and joined with the universe, he revelled in new understanding. He was sure he felt the presence of Thea and Nemmi, of Hera and Pan.

Of Zeus there was nothing, but was not that a bright new star he saw in the Firmament...travelling...travelling.

THE END

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