God Among Men

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"One passes to the realisation that our own age is also a 'period' and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. These are likeliest to lurk in the widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them" (C.S. Lewis, 'Surprised by Joy')

Prologue

It might have been no more than a paradigm postcard; those cloud shadows cast by shoppers' roving hands.

Behind you, beyond the empty plain, the broken walls of Troy have vanished, charred and overturned. Creeping grasses cover their foundations, and probing roots have torn apart the altars where Priam once stood to sacrifice. No more are the battlements where Hector paced to glare defiance at the might of Greece, and shepherds now graze their flocks over the ruins of the palace where Helen dwelt.

Close at hand, lining the shore, the burial mounds stand stark and grim against the early sky, a smooth and spotless blue, already filled with a brightness denied to the airs of northern shores. Many are the barrows along the beach, some still planted with weather-battered spears in attitudes of grim and lonely defiance. For here, on the mellow golden shore, the black fleets of Agamemnon had rested, their banners fluttering and breaking in the breeze from the Aegean. Here lie heroes whose fame will never die – cast your gaze along the tombs, look upon the resting places of Ajax and Patroclus, or the tallest of all, where the bones of Achilles lie hidden, deep in unending sleep. But now the beach is quiet, and the land beyond is peaceful in its cloak of grass, the distant hills shrouded in the silver-green sheet of olive or the dim blur of the watchful cypress. Only the sigh of the waters can be heard, as the sea, upon whose breast the dreams of the western world

were born, lifts gently upon the strand, only to withdraw in a foaming whisper over the smooth sand.

Step into the rise and fall of the sea, to feel the silken touch of the waves. Glowing in the morning light of Helios' sun chariot, the Aegean slumbers on the shores of the Troad, stretching as an unbroken coverlet across the gulf to Greece. The hues of the sky are reflected in the deep, its pearly turquoise stained here and there by submarine currents of wine dark waters. Glittering, the sunlight gleams on its polished face, streaming from the east to cast your shadow though the crystal onto the shifting sands, shot through with the ever-moving golden web sprayed by the shifting surface.

Follow the sunlight flowing over the sea, the sea where sailed the lords of Mycenae, through which the Argo forged on her quest for the Golden Fleece, the sea whose storms and wiles turned Odysseus from his course and kept him from his kingdom. And see, rising as a dim cloudbank on the horizon, the shadow of the land of Greece.

The land where sweeping sun-steeped bays curve into the sea; where jutting headlands are themselves but pedestals for mighty monuments of marble and the craft of human hands; a patchwork of limpid shade and brilliant light, bathed by the shrill of cicadas. This is the land where heroes dwelt, where men were born who strove with gods in those distant days of song and story when the Immortals still strode the earth and roamed the mountain forests, the tumbling glens and the shimmering valleys to play their parts in the lives of men.

A shadow, shady fingers outspread, stains the glazed façade, drifting low over the sea and blotting the shore from sight, till the hand itself appears, descending

from other skies and alien shores, to flip over the scene and slap a stamp to its reverse. It is only then that the eye is drawn, startled by the blinding whiteness, to the myriad words that cluster, jostling, to the surface of the postcard. But there is time only to make out one brief word, "Olympus", before a greater darkness descends over the gentian and the gold, and the world tumbles into the night, slotted with a hundred other suns into rustling oblivion.

As you draw closer to the dazzling shore, you may gaze into the remote distance and see, perhaps, a glimpse of the cloud-twisted Mount Olympus; see the stern shadows of its mighty flanks rising forbiddingly from the Thessalian plains, the everlasting snow on its seven-fold peaks burning in the early light from the sun -chariot. See the softly silent cedar groves clustering along its ghylls and fissures, where the goat-legged Pan sometimes stalks, playing wistful tunes on his haunting pipes. High above Olympus rides the City of the Gods, whence they are fated to descend once more before the drab scroll of history unrolls over the tapestry of legend, before the names of the Olympians pass from the lips of humankind.

Part One

"We defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow."
(William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet' Act V Scene II)

Chapter One

Knocked to his knees before the temple of Zeus, Agon the priest swore at sacrifice, the sacrificial goat in particular, and hoped the god wasn't listening. The diminutive goat responsible for both his genuflection and his ill temper tugged gleefully at the tether still gripped in his hand. It was all very well, thought Agon, for the goat herds to congratulate themselves on their selective breeding programmes, boosting yields of milk and meat, but he really wished they'd taken up his idea of producing a goat that actually wanted to be slaughtered. You'd have thought the gods would have been quite keen on the idea too, but no. So the goatherds happily grew fat on their higher yields, while Agon grew progressively more bruised as he sacrificed for their well-being. Behind him, the small white goat that had been butting him assiduously, in between moments of motionless protest, gathered itself together for another assault on his ample posterior.

Unusually, the temple was not empty. Once his eyes, blasted by the white glare of Helios, had emerged from the soft gloom cast upon them by the cool colonnades, he made out the shape of a large man sitting close beside the votive statue of Zeus, which loomed in the

distance, his ambrosial locks grazing the roof of the shrine. Agon nodded to him.
“Hello there…I should be sacrificing outside, I know, but I’m sure the god won’t mind if I do it in here. It’s so hot today…”
“I’m sure the god will understand,” the man assured him.
“And I usually make such a hideous mess of it too,” mourned Agon. “No one seems very bothered about the worship, do they, but they’ll all come along to watch Agon get kicked in the shins and drop a basin of blood all over himself…Honestly, I’m surprised the god keeps me on the payroll.”
“Perhaps he enjoys watching too,” suggested the stranger.
Agon smiled. “Yes - I always reckoned it must be really tedious, being immortal and all,” he said, as he prepared the altar with its groove to carry the blood into the holy fire flickering at the statue’s feet, and unsheathed his sacrificial knife. It became swiftly apparent to the goat that open hostilities were soon to be declared, and it made its conscientious objection to the coming violence abundantly clear. Having received a number of well-placed kicks, a collection of choice bites and a very neat butt between the eyes, Agon toppled backwards onto the altar, leaving the victorious goat to make its escape into the blinding afternoon.

He rubbed his throbbing forehead, and looked up to see the stranger standing over him, framed against the light. So brightly did it outline his form that the priest seemed to see a circlet of light shimmer about his temples, where the sunlight plated his hair. “So you have lost your sacrifice,” he said ponderously.

Agon found himself frozen, unable to respond. It occurred to him that losing the sacrifice had not, on reflection, been the sensible thing to do.

"In the old days," went on the stranger, "I might have taken your presence on the altar as an invitation to continue." He reached for Agon's discarded blade and turned it thoughtfully, as though twisting it into flesh. "But I've never really been that keen on human sacrifice."

Agon indicated breathlessly that he did not approve of human sacrifice either, especially if it was his own.

"No, I thought you wouldn't," said the man. "A little biased, I must say, but I can forgive you that. But to be honest, you're the only priest I actually find amusing anymore. So I suggest you get out there and go for a run after your goat. The more butts the better, and you'll get extra points if he bites you."

Agon shot up from the altar with an alacrity completely out of proportion with his size. The man watched his silhouetted form dwindle in the bright distance, then stretched languidly, shaking his arms. With a soft rattle of pinions, feathers exploded from his skin as his shoulders hunched and his face swept forward into the cruel hoop of his beak. Unfolded wings raked the temple walls as the eagle rose effortlessly through the roof, with remarkably little damage to the tiles.

Zeus watched from the temple roof as the man sped in pursuit of the goat. He half hoped Agon wouldn't catch it, but the priest now had a significant score with the animal, and seeing him settle it was likely to be entertaining. The eagle's golden collar ruffled almost imperceptibly as an owl came to rest behind it, perching above the pediment, after whispering through the

clinging airs as smoothly as a spoon sinking through golden syrup. “This would do wonders for your reputation,” murmured the owl. “The Cloud Gatherer and Compeller of Storms gripped by the age old struggle of goat and man.”

“Oh, hello Athene,” rasped the eagle. “Come on, it’s fairly harmless fun, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure the goat would agree.”

“It’s not as if it’s particularly one-sided,” protested Zeus. “I make sure of that – we breed the goats specially.”

“I’d have thought you’d have grown up a bit by now,” sniffed Athene.

“Surely I’m allowed to watch a little sport at the weekend?”

“Oh yes? And when did this particular weekend start, the end of the Trojan War?” Athene twisted her head around in avian disapproval, and slipped soundlessly away, making northward for Olympus.

Through the crisp air, borne on the shoulders of Zephyrus, echoed a thin shriek of anguish, such as it is possible to elicit from overweight priests if one is provided with short but serviceable horns.

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Homer, greatest of poets, understood the Immortals. He saw that it is all very well for the everlasting gods to sit brooding upon the highest of Olympus’ many peaks, variously marshalling the clouds or weighing in their golden scales the lives of men, gazing down on insignificant mortals as they make petitions, scatter grain and slit the throats of animals before laying the rich folds of fat upon the flames as sacrifices to the inscrutable powers that rule human destinies, but there must be another side to their existence. Poseidon the

Earth-shaker cannot be forever stirring the sea with his trident, nor Zeus raising storm clouds and shaking Olympus as he bows his sable brows, letting the ambrosial locks roll forward on his divine head. For Homer saw the gods as they must surely see themselves, trapped in an endless immortality from which there is no relief. Some thinkers believe that the gods weary and grow bored in their immortality. The Greek gods had foreseen this danger and had taken every necessary step to avoid it.

Though Athene herself has long vanished into the unblemished sky, dissolving into distance like a grain of salt fallen into the shifting sea, a watcher's eyes, straining with the remote distance to follow the goddess towards Olympus, might find before them the city of heaven, hanging above the holy mountain. Let the eye coast in upon the city's eastern side, over the cloud-plateau where its temples cluster, gazing upon sights seldom seen by mortals. Ignore for the moment the shimmering, icy colonnades and pearly-pinnacled towers and crenellations, and focus instead on a bower, facing eastwards. Voices on the horizons of hearing echo through its marbled corridors.

"Apollo, if you'd caught your husband playing fast and lose with a cow out in the open air, I shudder to imagine the state *you'd* be in," lashed out Hera. Dancing fires smouldered in the charcoal depths of her eyes as Apollo receded before the Queen of the Gods.

"I don't have a husband," he pointed out, not entirely unreasonably. "I don't even have a wife." Hera's peacock scuttled out of his way, vainly attempting to hide the bald ravages recently wrought by the enraged Hera on his desecrated behind.

“I didn’t ask you to tell me about your marital problems,” spat Hera. “I wanted to talk about mine.”
“Of course, of course,” mumbled Apollo. “I won’t mention them again.” If Hera wanted to achieve real change in her marriage, he thought, there might be more productive ways to go about it. Such as actually talking to her husband, however dangerous that might be for universal stability considering her present mood. Asia Minor had suffered three earthquakes and a violent storm of frogs during the afternoon, which Apollo thought was rather hypocritical considering Hera’s sponsorship of the animal rights groups who were trying to reduce excessive divine interference with the natural world. He wondered how the groups would have taken Zeus’ latest divine interference with the cow.
“It’s not as if I’m not used to him galloping around Greece like a rutting bull,” began Hera
“Very like a rutting bull, from what you’ve been saying,” said Apollo. A glance of utter loathing pinned him to the wall, shivering musically between the strings of his lyre.
“It’s the idea of him being so desperate to avoid me that he’s prepared to sink to species swapping,” the goddess continued sweetly, now assured of his complete attention. “Inachus insisted the cow was actually a nymph – as if that would help. Zeus denied it, but you know what a pathological liar he is. I’ve set Argus to watch the animal anyway, just in case.”
“In case of what?” said Apollo sulkily. The passage of the glance of loathing had ruffled the plated gold of his hair, and had torn an unpleasant hole in his immaculate robe. “In case of an immortal Minotaur or something?”
Hera spun round. With measured steps, she moved towards Apollo, holding herself erect. Her hair,

previously in disarray, settled around her head, still and poised, funnelling the fury of her hypnotic eyes directly at the god. Apollo realised he had just witnessed the lighting flash and should now be counting for the thunder.

"Apollo, Zeus cannot slander me again. For longer than the lifetime of mankind, he has walked on my back, and yours, and all the Olympians'. I shall not stand for it much longer. If he continues, if he indulges in any more animal husbandry…I hope I can count on you when the time comes, Apollo."

"You can't rebel against him," whispered Apollo, feverishly shielding his thoughts lest Zeus should perceive them. "Poseidon and I spent ten years labouring at Troy building walls just for thinking that…"

Hera smiled. The scarlet of her lips spread mirthless across her pale face like blood soaking into satin.

"I have no intention of just *rebelling* against him," she said. "If I set myself against Zeus, only one of us shall endure. Considering the endurance practice I've had during our marriage, I should say the odds are currently in my favour."

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Aphrodite's work provided her with more entertainment than she could decently assimilate during her time off. Passing through her untiring hands like coloured strips of gauze bearing the shifting images of their characters, the innumerable love lives of all the things that lived and drew breath slipped onto the floor in a disorganised heap of tangled copulation. Scuttling across her desk were scores of tiny human shapes, variously embracing, coupling or squirming behind little velour curtains, which Aphrodite sometimes erected to

preserve their modesty. When they had finished, she would press them flat and fold them discreetly into files, clipping together those souls who were engaged in fluid exchange, and slipping impenetrable dividers between those who decided they should just be good friends. Mistakenly putting couples in the wrong piles often caused her much unjustifiable hilarity.

Behind the glass wall running the length of her office, Eros her son laboured in the Mirrorsphere, among the negative reflections of mortals and Immortals who lived in the world of light. He fluttered naked from soul to soul as they came into being, snipping minute fragments from their nascent edges, which he bottled and passed into the growing jars when he blundered blindly back into heaven. There they would feed and water the new souls like bonsai mortals, as they grew into minute replicas of their parent spirits, mirroring their every move through sympathetic resonance. Once mature, the Psychograms could be inflated to stroll over Aphrodite's desk, or pressed flat for filing, when they exhibited glowing images of their owners' more colourful misdemeanours.

The Mirrorsphere was all that remained in the world of the primaeval Chaos whence all that now existed had sprung. Given over to Aphrodite as her domain, it enabled her to move from soul to soul without the annoyance of the intervening world, to spy upon souls as they came into being or passed away, and to cause a degree of trouble into the bargain.

Gods and mortals, daemons and monsters; all that lived and loved passed under her watchful eyes. Either rolled flat into a mobile image, or reconstituted into perambulating miniatures, the snapshots of their essences had greatly simplified her labours.

Her untidiness did frequently result in cases disappearing completely, their lovers left without guidance and destined to drift apart, but for the most part the Goddess of Love meticulously reviewed each tryst, each love poem, and every longing glance. A selection of the very best longing glances were pinned, faded and peeling, to the wall above her altar. Although some of the other images she was privileged enough to see might have been rather more amusing, Aphrodite retained enough consideration for individual privacy to keep her other collection of favourites hidden in a drawer.

Habitually, as she had done for eons, she saved the delicate gossamer Psychograms bearing the latest developments in Zeus and Hera's relationship till last. Rarely in the history of reproduction had any two individuals offered her such relentless and torrid pleasure.

With parted lips and avid eyes, Aphrodite watched swift re-enactments of their recent encounters, particularly relishing the expression of poised malevolence on Hera's face as she interrupted her husband's cattle breeding experiment. Aphrodite was only slightly disappointed to find that the cow was, after all, a disguised river nymph called Io, but reflected that the employment of non-accredited bovine performers did little to mar the overall effect.

It was while she was thus engrossed that an intriguing thought struck her, one not entirely unmotivated by the flustering vision of Zeus deployed in doing what he did best, which, by all accounts, he did very well. Coupled with the sight of Hera's rage, and the current state of Aphrodite's own comparative celibacy, the thought grew more persistent and

correspondingly more persuasive. The goddess smiled to herself. An opportunity to pour oil on Hera's troubled flames would be certain to enliven her summer.

The enmity between the sensuous Aphrodite and the regal Hera was of long standing, accepted as a matter of course by all in Olympus. No one, least of all the two goddesses themselves, knew where it had begun, although it seemed to have been already well advanced by the time that Aphrodite first emerged from the foam on the shores of Cyprus. The two had unwillingly come to a temporary truce for want of a topic of disagreement, though both were seeking to open up another phase in what had become a highly enjoyable and entertaining feud. Neither had appeared to notice the ten-year Trojan War, the destruction of a great empire or the tottering of the Mycenaean world, which were little annoyances and unavoidable irritants clouding the otherwise undiluted bliss of divine rivalry.

Aphrodite tucked wayward strands of saffron-golden hair behind her ears as she rose in a trembling flurry of diaphanous silk and sensual scent. Coyly, she laid an affected hand on her palpitating breast, and giggled. After generations of directing private lives, surely no one could condemn her for intervening directly once in a while? She was sure Hera would understand.

Aphrodite would ensure she made things abundantly clear to the other goddess when delivering her detailed report of the therapy she would recommend and personally administer to Zeus. There would be no need to give Hera too many details, or any details at all if she

dropped the right hints. The Queen of the Gods was so suspicious even on her better days that Aphrodite would be able to enrage her without giving her too much potentially damaging evidence. She shivered with delicious anticipation.

With Eros in tow, she swept out of her office, filled with the blissful sense of the diligent worker who has just discovered how to pave her straight and narrow with layers of good intentions.

The abandoned transparent sheets fluttered around the foot of the altar. Rising up through the shifting pile pushed an intangible trickle of dense cloud, erupting slowly though the sheaf like a hibernating creature waking from sleep below its soporific leaves. Pouring onto the floor, the cloud solidified into the goddesses of Strife and Revenge, Eris and Nemesis, who crawled under the altar to confer over their eavesdropping on Aphrodite's unguarded thoughts. The Goddess of Love was a marvellous source for potential quarrels for the other two to stir up on Earth, though it had become increasingly difficult to break into her paperwork. Eris and Nemesis had circumvented the problem by disguising themselves as a loving couple, with the result that their Psychograms spent a good deal of time passing through Aphrodite's hands. Things might prove difficult if Aphrodite ever thought to offer the lovers a helping hand in person, but the two goddesses had agreed that they would resort to a blazing row if this happened and terminate their relationship immediately. Considering their functions, it was not entirely surprising that this marriage of convenience had proved the longest relationship either of the goddesses had experienced.

Eris' own beauty, golden, bronzed, sleek and voluptuous, all but rivalled Aphrodite's. Her loveliness provided a perpetually effective means for her to cause Strife among mortal couples – she would appear, parade in a provocative manner, and settle back to watch the inevitable backlash once the young man's eyes shifted from her form back to the furious eyes of his partner. But even Eris carried herself carefully in the presence of Nemesis, whose fanatical devotion to her function bordered on the fundamentalist. In Eris' opinion, the other goddess was altogether too religious about the execution of her duties.

They emerged from their hiding place with elation.

"I can't believe it – she's going to get in there with Zeus," said Eris, as though the keeper of a great of a salacious secret that she was doing her best to spread around.

"It's not the first time she's thought of it," said Nemesis. "Time for her comeuppance, I reckon."

"It won't come to much if she just drops a few hints to Hera though, will it?" asked Eris. "Hera will be wild, but won't be able to prove anything."

Nemesis nodded. "It's nothing short of our duty to interfere…"

"We can't let Aphrodite upset a happy marriage like this."

"Purely out of concern for her feelings, we ought to let Hera know *exactly* what goes on."

"If we find their files…"

Eris rummaged through a pile of pending souls, causing havoc to a number of stable relationships on earth, provoking three incestuous couplings and twelve adulteries. Nemesis eventually located the Olympians' Psychograms in a tatty box file in a drawer of the altar.

“All we have to do is steal Aphrodite’s,” she said righteously. “Then we can let Hera watch what she gets up to.”

Eris prudently pocketed the Psychogram. If nothing else, it should provide entertaining and stimulating viewing. She hugged herself in thrilling expectation of the fury she would cause as the two goddesses squirmed back into the crumpled sheets of their souls and emerged far away, beyond the caresses of Aphrodite.

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Long and circuitous was the route that took Zeus back to Olympus. First he visited Mycenae to acknowledge an important sacrifice with an ear-shattering clap of thunder from a clear sky, then halted at Corinth, where he sent a vast eagle swooping low on the right side of a seer who was desperately looking for some kind of portent that would enable him to make a half-decent prophecy. A supplicant in his temple at Megara had a chilling sense of an unseen divine presence, and last of all Zeus treated himself to an ethereal manifestation. On their way from one high pasture to the next in the Pindos mountains, a group of terrified shepherds saw with fear-stricken wonder a gigantic brooding shadow standing with one foot on either side of an immeasurably deep ravine. Robed in storm-darkened thunderclouds swirling round it to an unimaginable height, its brows of awful majesty were crowned with the flicker of lightning and thunderbolts flashed in its outstretched hand. But when the shepherds had found the courage to look up once more, the vision was gone. Only a distant murmur of angry thunder gave any hint that it had ever been there.

Zeus knew the fine line between a good apparition and a bad one. Perhaps the shepherds would swear that

they had seen the Thunderer, but few were likely to believe them. Eventually they might themselves admit that it had only been a storm cloud passing over the mountains, although there would always be the nagging thought in mortal minds that it was something more. By such well-executed touches are the wheels of belief kept well oiled.

Zeus approached Olympus cautiously, and now halted in the running airs above the City of the Gods. It lay, vast and sprawling, at a slight slant to the surface of the earth, which placed it in a plane of reality invisible to mortal eyes. High above it all towered Zeus' own colossal palace, ringed by a colonnade of mighty pillars so gigantic that it seemed a miracle they did not buckle beneath its gargantuan weight. Its flat roof was the site of the Olympic Court, where rings of seats like an amphitheatre faced the eleven thrones of the Olympians, above which rose the Air Throne itself. Supported on pillars of cloud and four interlinked thunderbolts, its burnished golden seat, embossed with scenes celebrating the triumph of the gods over the forces of Chaos, soared above the Court, encircled with a perpetual shimmer of glorious light. From the throne Zeus could survey the whole of the known world and even parts of the unknown world that he wasn't supposed to know about.

Opposite the thrones, in a wide opening between two banks of seats, was the Gate of Heaven. Zeus had thoughtfully designed it so that whoever entered Olympus would find themselves facing the imperious Air Throne, a constant reminder of his sovereignty and power. But this was no time for vain self-adulation, for Athene's promptings had reminded him that he had wasted enough time and must see to his duties.

Effortlessly, he cut through the cloying airs, heading down towards his palace.

Once washed, clothed and fortified with a small goblet of wine, he made for a door of dark wood on the far side of his bedchamber, opposite the main door. Although it seemed to be but a few paces away, he only reached it after several minutes of strenuous walking. Zeus was a traditionalist in many ways, and maintained that even if he did have to perform interdimentional leaps in his bedroom, there was no need to advertise it. Walking was just as good a means of doing it as was a molecular deconstruction unit. Mortals would not like the idea, he said. It would spoil their myths.

The door creaked traditionally as it opened. This creak forebodes arcane and occult wonders that lie beyond the enchanted portal, it said. Hephaestus had worked hard on that creak for several days to give it a suitable timbre and a proper degree of eeriness. Zeus shut the door, and stepped out of the world, into a place that was the last bastion of the primal Chaos, which still curled in voluminous waves of nothingness about the firmament of reality. Thin threads of curved space-time drifted through the distance. Here there was no concept of true space. Somewhere nearby, in the convoluted corridors of ill-made dimension, the Three Fates spun the Tapestry of History. Zeus called it his Office.

The gods knew it was important to maintain an aura of mystery and romance about their methods of working, for the truth about their operations was mundane, often sordid and naturally of no interest at all to the public, who were protected from it at all costs, a proud tradition nobly perpetuated, where the guardians of society sensibly ensure that nothing of any importance is ever revealed to anyone.

And so this particular region of Chaos was very well ordered, more so than the mythographers believe. They are keen to represent chaotic cataclysms seething in unbroken darkness beyond the rim of the world, which may well exist elsewhere, but not here. They would have been disappointed to see the long narrow walkway of white marble flanked by two waist-high banks of mosaic tiles that stretched from the doorway. Above these banks were endlessly changing screens of liquid-silver firmament, ever-moving images running across their iridescent faces. Briskly, Zeus strode along the walkway, halting in places to peer critically at the screens. Occasionally he pressed one of the small mosaic buttons, which would beep. After about fifty yards the pathway opened into a huge circular area. A soaring dome of transparent sky hovered above it, through which the darkness of the Chaos beyond filtered in. Even bigger screens and banks of tiles ringed this arena, but its centre point was a high throne, from which all the panels could be seen. As normal space did not strictly apply here – and its laws could be adjusted by pressing a few tiles – when he occupied the throne he could also reach any tile he chose.

Zeus sat down, and gave the throne an experimental swivel. Most of the clutter that seemed to grow unbidden from his fingertips was stowed neatly on shelves below the control panel, flanked by a neat row of jars brimming with a silver fluid. When he looked into their depths, their twisted perspective tugged at his eyeballs, drawing the line of his sight far into the jars, as though the deeps of the sky winked within them. They were filled with Infinite Space, which Hephaestus had developed in his laboratories under Mount Etna. Applied to walls and floors, the drying silver fluid

would warp the three dimensions like rubber. Apart from a few teething problems – several servants in the Palace had been irretrievably lost when trying to sweep the wainscoting during the test phase – it had at least meant that Zeus was never plagued by a shortage of space while building the Office.

At his side was a table, the only small trace he had left on the vast impersonal structure. On it stood a framed tapestrograph of his wife. The air was still, but a deep hum droned through it, almost felt rather than heard.

This was his real achievement, in all his millennia as King of Gods and men. Compared to this, Olympus was a goat shed. The city might look very pretty and so on, but its practical purposes were practically nil. Here was the seat of the real divine empire. Yes, the poets know that Zeus is all seeing and all knowing, but had they ever considered the practical difficulties? Like every god of his stature, Zeus had some skill in dispensing with his eyes. Once you remembered that what you actually saw was merely the foreground of reality's enormous painted canvas, it became easier to focus the second sight on smaller things in the background where the shades grew dimmer. But such focusing took practice, and you had to be fairly clear about what you were looking for. In Zeus' case, his second sight was so accustomed to isolating females in their late teens that he frequently struggled to see anything else.

Zeus and Hephaestus had worked for years on this project. They had bent space and time, constructing a causality funnel so that every event taking place in the Universe found itself irrevocably drawn towards the receptors, in much the same way that Zeus attracted women. Now all he had to do was press tiles while the

world moved into the future under his careful guidance and control. Far more convenient in every way than the old Air Throne, which was really superfluous. He still sat up there from time to time and out of a sense of duty to the myths, but he infinitely preferred working here. Besides, it was less windy.

Long ago, when he had first emerged victorious after the battles with his father Cronos and the Titans, he had realised the danger posed by large gods of, in his opinion, mediocre intelligence, who might have thought it amusing to cast him off the Air Throne if left to amuse themselves.

So he had found them useful employments. Ares had become the god of war, seeing as the incessant fighting of mortals would always fill his time. Poseidon had taken the sea and Hades the Underworld. His sister Hera, perhaps unwisely, he had married. Zeus did find their continual droning about the great devolution of power rather laughable. Of course, what was really important was that they were all busy, all inundated by prayers and sacrifices, so that they felt important and never realised that he stood behind them pressing the buttons. Keep the old traditions and trappings of mythology, for they were a good blind and easier to believe than the truth. In this he had been honestly surprised by the capacity of mortal imaginations to accept and elaborate quite ridiculous stories, such as the sun being drawn by horses driven by Helios. Strictly speaking it was, but no one ever mentioned that its course had been mathematically plotted by Zeus and that the horses and Helios were, unknown to Helios, quite unnecessary. Image is everything and appearance always more important than reality. Apart from his wife, a noble solitude was, he reflected, his only real problem,

for he could share the difficulties of running the cosmos with no one besides the old Titan Prometheus and Athene. As long as he felt most people were fairly happy and divine unemployment low, he would remain firmly on the throne.

"You Have Sacrifices," flashed up on the screen. He pressed a tile marked "Save". Swivelling round, he reached for the tile "Hermes" and tapped in "Voice Over Conferencing".

The screen became washed with a delicate delphinium blue. A few wisps of cirrocumulus trailed in one corner as the image of a young god came into focus. He wore a pointed cap, and boots sporting two pairs of enormous wings, which were flapping frantically and striking him painfully, to judge by his expression. "Hello, Zeus," he said in rather a high voice.

"Hello, Hermes," Zeus replied. " You all right?"

"It's these blasted boots," snapped the Messenger of the Gods, slapping one of the huge wings. "The wings won't stop growing. I've tried clipping them, but it's no good. Like having a goose strapped to each foot."

As he spoke his left boot emitted a clucking noise, momentarily folding its wings and causing Hermes to lurch in the air. A large egg fell from his heel and plummeted out of sight. "You see?" he protested. "They're ridiculous. Why do I have to keep on wearing them?"

"I'm sure the mortals would be most disappointed if you didn't. Hermes has to have a pointy hat and boots with wings, even if they are somewhat larger than usual. Where is your wand, by the way?"

"Never mind," muttered Hermes. "What do you want now?"

“ Well,” said Zeus, “you know how I was, ah, seeing Io…”

“Rather more than seeing her from what I gathered. Last time I spoke to her she said you…”

Zeus cut in hurriedly. “I was out walking with her the other day and Hera came past and… I was forced to change her into a cow.”

“Can’t say she’d have enjoyed that much. Fearful temper she’s got.”

“Not Hera, Io. And I’d be grateful if you stopped laughing. Yes, it was more embarrassing for me than her. So the poor girl’s still in bovine form and Hera has commanded Argus of the hundred eyes to watch her. I want you to go and lure Argus away from her, or kill him if necessary. I can’t risk Hera finding out that she’s actually a nymph. She fusses enough about adultery with mortals. If I get everything done today, I’ll come down to see how you’re getting on, and take over from there.”

“ Fine, fine,” said Hermes, grinning broadly. “ Honestly, the king of Olympus with a cow!” A pensive expression came over his face. “ You’ll have to come up with a pretty good cock and bull story if Hera does get to hear about the nymph.”

Zeus pointedly switched off his screen.

He settled to work with his “Requests” file. It contained nothing terribly unusual, apart from a long, rambling and slightly irritated thought whose patterns he recognised, as he did the peremptory nature of the complaint that he didn’t spend enough time with the thinker, in the thinker’s opinion.

Breaking suddenly from the confines of the office, the mind of Zeus tore free from his body at illimitable speed, racing more swiftly then Boreas the North wind

across the wrinkled face of Greece. For the thought and the prayer had arisen from Melitta, the mortal daughter of an Athenian landowner, who had become friendlier with Zeus than his wife might have allowed.

As the divine eye bore down upon the plains of Attica, he saw her ahead, at supper with her father on the terrace before their house. Her face, gathered into a quizzical frown, relaxed and opened as she laughed. Her lips, and her father's, moved in silent altercation, as the mind of Zeus hung invisible in the air beside them, deaf to their words, but content only to see her.

The lens of his second sight circled around the girl, and a gentle smile rested on the lips of the god, seated in Olympus far away. He did not often watch her without her knowledge, but the sight of her gave him more pleasure than he would care to confess, and made him long to follow his eyes to Attica and her home.

Zeus reflected for a moment. Some of his liaisons were genuinely for professional reasons – or mostly professional reasons, and it was, he reflected, no one else's business if he did tend to pick pretty girls –but Melitta was different, in a way that he hadn't yet investigated through the Fates. No god was entirely omniscient, especially about his own future. Delphic oracles were of no use, for they all knew that Apollo got his prophecies from a dog-eared old scroll called "Is there an Occult?" His predictions operated on the principle that if you told people what might happen they usually made it happen themselves. This lack of reliability meant that the gods had to visit the Fates for a glimpse of the future. Even this was awkward, since they were hard to find and often recalcitrant, and the Scroll of Years, wherein all history was inscribed, was frequently unwilling to fast-forward. Some things Zeus

could perceive himself through his own power, but had had no success with regard to the girl. He would see her, he promised himself, as soon as he had settled the Io affair.

At present, other concerns occupied him. Routine matters passed quickly beneath his racing fingers. Ocean currents, rainfall, cloud systems and wind patterns were all adjusted and set for the following days. A meteorologist would have been most pleased to hack into Zeus' system, despite the potential liver-loss involved. Zeus' tendency to unleash hungry buzzards on transgressors had never been forgotten.

Zeus frowned as he read "Memoranda". Artemis' feast day, when he would have to endure a drunken invasion of gods, was due to take place this week. Today, however, he reckoned he had done enough to salve his conscience for a few days – and, more importantly, give him leave to escape from Olympus after Artemis' despicable feast. Zeus had discovered long ago that the only way he was able to play a gracious host was by being determinedly absent during the guests' invasion. The last thing he did before leaving was prudently to erase the "Zeus – Search" mechanism and run a small programme, a blocking device, which would disrupt any god's attempt to perceive him with divine vision or second sight. It was a useful toy, frequently used by Zeus on his trips away from home. As it rendered him all but invisible to Immortals unless he was actually in full view, it had helped to prevent marital breakdown many times in the past.

The door creaked shut behind him. On the quiet silver screens the life of the world flashed and flickered.

*

Hera sat in her boudoir in her husband's palace, seething with violent anger. She and Zeus were a good example of why brothers and sisters should not marry. In her eyes her husband was an idle arrogant layabout who indulged much too frequently in wine and women. In her husband's eyes Hera was a straight-laced retentive who had no idea how to govern gods or mortals and took everything far too seriously, especially his fornication.

From the city below her window a murmur rose; Hera saw the lanes of shade and rivers of light along its distant streets, pools and soft-edged coins of slanting sunrays spilled on flagstones, the ceaseless flow of gods, slow and eddying, to kafeineion, tavern, garden or house. From a wine shop somewhere beneath came the first faint strum of a lyre.

Hera's lip lifted in a sneer of dissatisfaction. Below her lay the disordered world of Olympus, one in which her husband revelled and that she had grown to hate if only for the reason that it was beyond her control. She knew Zeus was too powerful for her to overcome, too mighty alone even for all the Olympians, that rebellion had been tried before and had failed. Yet looking upon the seething, purposeless multitudes in the city she came to realise that if she were to have the benefit of all their strength, she might build a world surpassing her most hidden desires. A world where she might take her centuries-delayed revenge, where she might do more and sate her thirst for pattern and method, to give shape to the spinning vortex of Olympus and the world. A little longer she gazed through the lens of her tears, thinking that something quite interesting could be built of these unconnected parts if only one took the trouble.

Her ordered mind was offended by all those purposeless immortalities being squandered fruitlessly on disparate entertainments such as talking, drinking, singing and playing music in between fulfilling functions and answering prayers. If people must have fun, she reasoned, let it take place at given times for a given duration, and let its supply be strictly regulated. The colossal expenditure of divine energy in the city struck her as being like a waterfall – tremendously powerful, possibly goodly to look upon from a particular standpoint, but utterly useless. Whereas if a device existed to convert this energy into something worthwhile…

Likewise, she needed to devise a means of steering the populace whither she wished them to turn. Still better if she could use a harness that tickled them in pleasant places. If she was only able to control the supply of desires and their means of satisfaction as well…or create new desires, other pleasures, delicacies undreamed of and still remain the controller of the means of gratification, then the people of Olympus would be in her hands a weapon more potent than Zeus' thunderbolt. If rulers are not strong enough to dominate the masses, they must at least be able to move them. And with the ability to do this comes the most lasting form of power – for who will rebel against one whom they see as their benefactor, who gives them all they thirst for? She could free them in body to enslave them in soul and mind to an idea they would love and so be unable to elude, enslave them in such a way as none of them would dream of. And she saw, with perfect clarity and ice-edged sharpness, the way to proceed: so simple, along the pattern already followed by many mortals, and in an area that was her own special preserve. So simple

she almost laughed through her tears and her fantastical idea.

She would give him grace this time, and spare him from her rage if only to reflect on this revelation. If he strayed again, she would make him curse the day he first glanced at another woman, and first took up the thunderbolt to subdue the Immortals.

Yet her immortal mind was all unguarded at this sudden inspiration.

Far older than the Olympian gods, more ancient than their dwelling above the holy mountain, arisen before the sun, before the sea was parted from the land, other gods had walked the world and sailed in the chaos of the skies. Ancient gods, perhaps mere embodiments of voiceless forces still present within their conquering children, forces which, unphysical, could not be chained in Tartarus with Titan or with Giant, but only overcome by each immortal soul in turn, by the mind that drove the thunderbolt rather than the lightning strike itself. And ever seeking a pathway back into the world, they roam from thought to thought; sometimes dimly reappearing, as our unconscious drives and half-forgotten wishes occasionally rise near the surface of ourselves. Swimming close to the border of the human mind, these primeval urges may strive to reappear, struggle to break free from the prisons where a thousand generations have cast them; but fail, and recede once more, leaving only a quiver of incomprehension, a gnawing at the mind's seat, or a shiver in the spine that we cannot explain. Even now, perhaps, such an ancient impulse stirred through Hera's soul; stirred, and settled once more to sleep.

Chapter Two

As surely as inescapable Time, the dreaded feast overwhelmed both Zeus and his household, though the concentration of Dionysus' unprecedentedly potent cocktails had not, he discovered, been any kinder to the guests. Regrettably, Zeus had found himself unable to avoid an emergency call from the other side of Olympus, rendering him absent for the duration of the event. Returning to his palace only once the revellers had departed, he slammed the swinging front door, having first taken a certain gloomy pleasure in kicking a sleeping demigod from the threshold and gauging by the number of thuds that he had fallen down the entire flight of steps.

Zeus woke in the early morning, heavy with indolent lassitude. For a while he lay quiet in the bed, as he let the silky cloud ripple around him, watching its thunderbolt pillars glitter and the sky canopy above slowly flush with light as the day dawned. He looked at Hera, lying beside him. Her long jet-black lashes stroked her pale cheeks and the soft stream of her breath held open the cruel line of her mouth. Let her sleep – it would allow him to get safely away.

Finding a tablet he scribbled a note to Hera, letting her know he was taking a couple of days' leave. After the occurrences of the past few weeks he thought it unwise to spend too much time with his wife, and his prime urge was to vacate the palace quickly. At present he had as much desire to meet another god as would a philosopher who has successfully marketed a foolproof theory of atheism.

Once above Olympus, Zeus waved a greeting to the distant Helios; and paused to gaze at the world. Various early morning sacrifices were streaming into heaven. The spirit forms of grain and fluid libations were drawn aloft on vibrating sliver wings, with one or two goats, looking faintly surprised, whether at their sudden death or at the incongruous wings that sprouted from their shoulders he could not tell. There was also a chicken, contending valiantly with the heavenly wings, which were overriding the commands of its more familiar organs of propulsion. Unnumbered Prayers fluttered behind the sacrifices in a flowing wave like the flicker of sunlight on a stream of endlessly moving water. He could see the faces of those closest to him; beatific smiles on the rosy prayers of thanks, those offered up by the worried or troubled were grey and lined, some darkened with a stain of such hopeless fear, blotched black across their cheeks, that even the god trembled. Together, they streamed towards the invisible funnels of the Worship Works, which handled and distributed incoming sacrifices and prayers, huddled behind the palaces at the centre of the city. Some of the sacrifices were for him, but the "sort/acknowledge" facility in the Office would see to them. The Office, to Zeus' regret, had dispensed of the need for a secretary, who would otherwise, he mused, have been female, of course, and beautiful. And preferably immortal, in the event of Hera arranging a lamentably fatal accident for her.

But with both Io and Melitta to visit, he would have had scant time for a secretary this morning. He supposed she would soon have been languishing in a sea of opened mail, unassailed by her superior, which would no doubt have given her great cause for regret.

Zeus rotated in the air till he was facing Nemea, organised himself into a reclining position on the cushion of air and set off at a moderate pace. Behind him, another white shape sped high in his wake, concealed by the eye of the sun. And even further behind, yet still within the perimeters of vision, a second smaller dot rose from the city of the gods and turned in pursuit of the speck on the pale sky. Nemesis had no intention of letting Aphrodite and Zeus vanish innocently into the empyrean. A sleepless Eris waited in the city behind her, with the Psychogram held in trembling hands. Not to use it would prove cruelly disappointing.

Hera's breath shuddered through her parting lips as she woke into the cold silence of the palace.

*

Despite his misgivings, it did not prove hard for Zeus to locate Hermes and Argus. Falling gracefully through the yielding airs, weaving in his descent towards the yellowed sward hedged by a tangle of olive and rimmed by a trickling tributary, the King of the Gods saw Hermes clearly, poorly disguised as a shepherd in what appeared to be the previous century's fashions. His flute lay discarded beside him, and the untethered Io nuzzled the back of his neck gently as Zeus came to rest before them.

"I'm sorry, Zeus," said Hermes, not looking up from the polishing of his sword blade. "The bastard wouldn't fall asleep. I did try to point out it would have been easier for all concerned if he'd kept a few more of his eyes shut while I made off with the cow, but he didn't seem capable of taking the hint."

Zeus moved slowly over to the huddled from of the giant Argus. Unseeing, his glistening eyes raked the

heavens, dozens and dozens of pupils facing the sun in unblinking reproach.

"I'm sorry too…" said Zeus. "I didn't really want you to kill him." He knelt down, and began to close the giant's eyes. When Hera found his body, she would set his hundred eyes in the tail of her beloved peacock, whence they would glare at his killers for eternity.

Zeus cursed himself under his breath. Argus had been no friend of his, especially after he had eaten an entire village of artisans of whom Zeus had been especially fond, but the god had no particular desire for his death. He should have resorted to bribery instead, he reflected. There were any number of once-in–a-lifetime experiences he could have offered Argus besides the one Hermes had given him.

"And Zeus," said Hermes as he pulled on one feathered boot and pursued the other, which was flapping determinedly around a tree, "the next time you get yourself into a hole, feel free to extricate yourself from it without my help." He grabbed the boot and pinned its struggling wings together.

"Rather unfair, don't you feel?" asked Zeus. "I wouldn't like to be in your boots if Hera finds out you killed Argus. Not that I'd like to be in your boots anyway," he continued pensively, watching Hermes' struggles.

"Funny," grinned Hermes, his teeth clenched. Standing up, he adjusted his cap and picked up his staff. "Well, I must be going."

They shook hands. "Many thanks, Hermes."

"No problem, really," he replied. "Good luck with the cow. I hope you'll be very happy, though personally, I've never found they give me the horn."

Before Zeus could grasp him, he leapt into the air, wings beating manically, and swept away.

Io was grazing absent-mindedly near the tangled ungainly form of the beheaded Argus. Zeus picked up her halter. Not knowing exactly how to proceed, he tickled her under the chin and scratched her behind the ears, which she seemed to enjoy. “Io?” he said experimentally. The cow nodded. At least she still seemed to know her name. Zeus went on to explain at length how he thought she would be safest in Egypt, and so was to see her on her way to the Bosphorous. From then on, he promised, he would keep an eye on her from Olympus, though it was better if she remained a cow for the time being.

While Zeus was speaking, the cow had retained that peculiar expression of absolute vacuity of which only a bovine is capable. During his address, she had nodded repeatedly with a knowledgeable air while vigorously waving her ears. Zeus had been hopeful that this signified her assent and understanding; but this nodding continued for some time after he had finished, and he perceived to his disappointment that it had simply been in reaction to a small fly that had been orbiting her horns.

When they paused in mid afternoon, Io drifted off in search of whatever edible flora graced the sun-baked soil, and Zeus dozed in the warmth. The shrill of cicadas and slight shifting of scattered trees were the only sounds. Just as Morpheus, the God of Dreams, seemed about to enfold him, a low voice wafted toward the god. It paddled gently through the air on honeyed wings till, grasping the convolutions of his ears, it trickled inside, burrowing deeper to locate his mind and heart.

Faint misgivings stirred within him. He was not, by action and reputation, the kind of god to shy away from scents and low voices, but some hibernating vestige of a long-forgotten sense of self-preservation struggled desperately to wake from its interminable slumber. Opening his eyes, he peered apprehensively around the bole of the tree where he had been dozing, and was struck by a wave of scent strong enough to constitute an assault. Wordless, his mouth worked in an attempt at speech.

For the dry grass behind him flamed at her coming, flamed with a gentle, delicate gold and was not consumed; a daffodil glow that encased the naked goddess, flowing from the airy mantle of her windblown hair. The Goddess of Love paused in her advance, and a wicked smile twisted her immaculate lips. Zeus heard a rustle in the olive above him. A naked boy was bounding from branch to branch, crashing into the trunk and tearing through the leaves. By the time Zeus realised who he was, saw the bandage across his eyes and the gleam of the bow in his hand, it was too late. The fat child loosed off a golden shaft into Zeus' heart, and he felt the inescapable sickness spread over him like the netting of a nightmare. Fighting the tyranny of his testosterone, he turned to flee, blinded by his stupidity and terror at the thought of what adultery with an Olympian might mean, but he found Aphrodite before him, blocking his way.

"Aphrodite, what the hell are you doing, why are you here?"

The goddess laughed. "Really, Zeus, I'd have thought you could work that one out."

“No, Aphrodite, I can’t do this. I have problems…” he mouthed desperately. “Look, my wife will absolutely kill me. You don’t understand…”

“Oh, is that why Hera is always in such a bad mood? *Poor* Zeus! I’m sure I can help. Eros has invented this *wonderful* new pill.” She gave another silvery laugh and moved closer to him.

In despair Zeus closed his eyes. Adultery with mortals or nubile nymphs was excusable – though Hera was perhaps not of this opinion – but Aphrodite was another matter. She was Hephaestus’ wife and Ares’ lover, both of whom were fiercely possessive. Despite his unenviable reputation, he felt obliged to undergo some kind of pretence that he was keeping it up.

Suddenly several pieces fell into place. Aphrodite plus Hera equalled endless squabbling. “Aphrodite,” he said sternly, trying to keep his eyes fixed firmly on her face. “You are doing this to annoy Hera, aren’t you?”

She giggled. “How did you guess?” Her voice lowered. “But don’t you think it would be *fun* as well?”

He gazed deep into Aphrodite’s melting orbs, fringed by the most perfect of lashes, sweet and imploring. A wind of Olympus caressed her golden hair. Damn the goddess. She knew what she was doing, knew that not even the gods were proof against the power of her magic girdle of Love and Desire which had conquered him once before when used by Hera in the Trojan War. How dare she work her mumbo-jumbo on him? He resolutely told himself he was not going to take one more step forward. His thoughts were punctuated by his rhythmic steps forward. Another minute and he would be powerless.

Perhaps under other circumstances Zeus would have resisted for longer. Perhaps he would not. Who can tell?

For mortals may not make judgements about the gods, or call them to account for their sins.

*

Eris crouched below the palace, in the gloom of ancient stone and basement corridors, the air filled with the metallic smells of damp running on foundation rock. Before her hovered an image of Nemesis, the delight on her face barely lessened by the distance between them and the wavering surface of her projected phantom. “It is time,” whispered the Goddess of Revenge. “Look at their images…find Hera quickly.”

“Not too quickly, I hope?” asked Eris archly. “I thought Zeus was better than that.” Opening the flattened Psychogram, she found enough visible on Aphrodite’s scroll to delight the most impassioned voyeur.

Eris scuttled up through the palace, the sheet cradled carefully in clawed hands. Through courtyard and megaron, searching bedchamber and boudoir, till at last she found the Queen of the Gods beside a western window, gazing out over the city. To her slight amazement, glancing again at the sheet’s moving images, it was not too late. Although she tried to suppress any finer feeling for any other living thing, Eris found herself unable to overcome her slight sense of admiration at Zeus’ prowess.

Hera whirled from the window, fury etched into her face. But her reprimand fell unvoiced from her lips, and her rage cut more livid into her features, when Eris thrust the Psychogram of Aphrodite and her husband under her nose.

The goddesses watched for some time in a silence that eventually became a little more than uncomfortable.

“Well, what d’you think?” asked Eris, who could barely retrain herself from hopping from foot to foot in her excitement. “You haven’t said anything.”
“You can hardly expect me to be pleased with you.”
“I don’t,” said Eris, smirking. “I want you to be furious.”
Hera smiled. “No, I am not furious, Eris,” she said. A leaden stillness overlaid her words, and suddenly the Goddess of Strife herself fell back before the sight of Hera’s eyes. “You have given me the greatest gift I could have desired. And you shall be my witness in the Olympic Court when we try Zeus for his crimes and cast him down from his Throne.”
“Oh no, I didn’t mean to go that far,” said Eris, taken aback. “I just wanted to needle you a bit, that’s all.”
“Really?” asked Hera, gracing Eris once again with her ghastly smile. “Have you ever seen me irritated?”
Eris’ found her mouth too dry to reply.
“If not,” said Hera, “I’m perfectly happy for you to stay and watch.”

The Goddess of Strife edged speechless away, and found herself close to the door, where she turned and ran. When her hurried feet had vanished, Hera turned and hurled the Psychogram with all her force towards the window, shattering the crystal pane. The moving image on the delicate sheet sizzled, flickered and froze.

The shower of adamant shards from the window spiralled earthwards and suddenly burst into meteoric white flame, fanned by the fires of her fury. All over Greece men and women gazed northwards to Olympus as the long-tailed star fell from heaven, searing the afternoon sky. Soothsayers prophesied, seers voiced dire warnings, but most of the children of Hellas, embittered and soured by ten years of war, gave no heed to these

warnings and merely looked upon the marvel for what it was - a wonder and a thing of terrible beauty.

Hera's pet peacock huddled in fear near the roof beams. Never had he seen her so angry. He'd already lost one bunch of tail feathers and had no intention of returning to her. His mistress found she was weeping. Hera sat down, squeezing her eyelids tightly shut against her angry tears. She was not going to cry, not going to give him the satisfaction of her grief even though he might never perceive it. A cold stream of calculating fury was running through her, so powerful she almost felt afraid. This was the final affront to her dignity, of all the millennia of ill treatment and neglect, the shameless display of his infidelity in her face. She dismissed Aphrodite – the Goddess of Love was an ephemeral distraction in the way of the greater prize: Zeus the king of gods and men, Zeus the fornicator, Zeus the adulterer. Her eyes smouldered in the gloom. All trivial disputes and quarrels were set aside, for this struck far deeper. He had taken his last chance, pushed her one step too far. Now his time of reckoning had come.

But she could not restrain the hot stream of impotent rage that forced its way between her lids. For as she shook in anger at the memory of the hated face, the quizzical twist of the lip that she always imagined was lifted in amusement at her expense, she knew that he was beyond any harm she could do him. Beyond revenge, untouchable in his power. Free to treat her as he always did, and always would. Unless she took the boldest step of all, and made actual those things she had hitherto only dared to imagine.

Driven by the frozen torrent of her rage, Hera remained motionless, but sent out across Olympus a

divine summons to powerful to ignore, too wrathful to disobey.

*

"Aphrodite," said Zeus in strangled tones. There was no immediate reply. "Aphrodite, please stop. My wife will kill me…or take advantage of the fact that she can't." His mind shrank from the possibilities open to her.

"Aah, poor little Zeus," she said as she stood up. She ran a finger delicately down his cheek. "Oh well, it was just beginning to get interesting. Some other time, perhaps. You could be throwing away the chance of an immortality. And I was just beginning to feel an unprofessional interest in you!" She grinned mischievously. "I expect Hera will get to hear of it at any rate – that's the main thing."

Zeus gave a strangled cry. Aphrodite laughed, and fluttered her golden lashes at him. "Don't worry, I shan't tell her – yet." She giggled. "I can understand why all these mortal women love you so much, though. Were I male, I should be very proud."

" Thank you, Aphrodite," he breathed. " It's nothing personal, you know, just my wife…"

"Oh, nothing personal on my side either," she said. "I was just using you," she giggled again, "as a tool."

"Most amusing," he replied. "Perhaps it might be an idea if we parted. In case we're seen together, or anything…"

" Yes, that would be terrible, wouldn't it?" she said sympathetically. "Might ruin your reputation. Well, I shan't see you for a while - I'm off to Cyprus with Eros for a few days in the sun. But next time, of course…" She swept into the air with a dazzling smile and was gone.

Zeus leaned weakly against the cow, which gave him a reproachful look. Gods, what had he let the infernal woman do? It was not often that he felt inclined to pray, but he earnestly beseeched whatever power it is who watches over wayward gods that Hera never had word of his behaviour. As long as Aphrodite restricted herself to dropping only the most subtle of hints… At any rate, it would be some time before he would be able to look her in the eye again. The goddess herself, who had no shame and found other people's embarrassment tremendously funny, would no doubt make an especial effort to look him in the eye and have a good giggle as she did so. He hoped that would be the end of the matter. He was also slightly annoyed at being used as an instrument to irritate his wife – he thought he performed that function perfectly well without any help from anyone else. Hades had no fury like a woman scorned, they said, which he knew was pretty much true, as any woman who looked in the slightest like any of Hades' mildest Furies was in serious need of a plastic surgeon, but Zeus concurred with the inference. He felt an overwhelming sense of relief that things had not, quite literally, got out of hand; and a correspondingly urgent desire to immerse himself in an innocent pleasure with which his wife could not find fault.

As a troubled Zeus pressed on towards the nearest establishment that provided fortifying alcoholic drinks, the air trembled suddenly. An immortal was approaching from behind him; whoever it was thundered overhead without slackening pace. It was Nemesis – he saw her plainly, long streams of jet hair whipping around her cruel, lean face. She gave him a cheery wave. Zeus waved back, disconcerted, as she vanished in her northward speed. So there had been

immortals around. The pit of his stomach began to develop an unpleasant sense of distance from the rest of his body. Something happened to those who were overtaken by Nemesis. But he was unable to recall what it was.

*

Eris fled from Olympus, heading far out into the northern mountains, pursued by the terrifying memory of Hera's eyes. Later that afternoon, the Queen of the Gods met with Apollo and Dionysus, and a group of satyrs shuffled their hooves before her as she gave them pointed and pertinent instructions. None of the satyrs understood what they had been told to do; but Hera demanded obedience, not comprehension.

Apollo lingered behind after their tapping hooves had dwindled away down the corridor. "You've already set it all in motion?" he asked doubtfully. Hera nodded.

"With money I can give the People freedom. I can give them independence, financial emancipation, freedom from the Titan Poverty and the daemon Recession; yet still enslave them to the ideology of money, to the spirit of Economic Growth, to Economy and the means whereby money is obtained. All this, I shall control, and with it, I shall have dominion at the same time over their minds and over Zeus himself. Even he cannot stand alone against the demigods united. He has spurned me for the last time."

"I'd be careful about capitalising those terms," warned Apollo. "We don't want them to personify."

Hera ignored this. "I've been suggesting to Zeus that he institute a monetary system for decades now, but he's always been stubbornly opposed to it. Insistent, perversely, on maintaining an antiquated, feudal, old-fashioned and outdated system where everyone is

neglected and maltreated, myself in particular. He was always too busy with childish things – like causing the great and glorious War of Troy, which everyone will have forgotten in a few years, or pandering to the tantrums of people like Heracles and Achilles. And as for all the absurd stories he has sown on Earth, encouraging them by floods and storms and dreams! I'll be surprised if anything of value is handed down from Ancient Greece apart from a welter of useless mythology. He never thought to establish Olympus or Earth on a healthy economic footing. To do that he would have to create money, which he unwisely left to me."

"I'm not sure whether your ideas sound healthy," considered Apollo. "Especially for you, as soon as Zeus hears of it."

"They're more than adequate for what I have in mind," she told him. "I need the demigods behind me to stand any chance at all of deposing Zeus. What better way to make them love me than to persuade them that I could fulfil their deepest longings? The more you give people, the more power you have over them. It is only if they lose everything that people become free – and I want to ensure that doesn't happen."

"So you want me to lie to Olympus for you - to free them from Zeus by enslaving them to themselves?" asked Apollo. Doubt flashed in his golden eyes. "I don't know what the Muses would think of that…what of music and poetry, the important things… will they survive?"

"Can't you do anything without consulting your harem of prima donnas?" spat Hera. "As if you can expect them to agree about a single thing. Melpomene pontificating to Calliope that conflict lies at the heart of

all drama and proceeding to prove it for the next six months." She smiled, with an effort. "Of course music and poetry will survive. People will pay you to produce them."

Apollo brightened. Hera's shadow leapt up behind her, strengthened and hardened by his light. Then a frown veiled his face. "Doesn't that mean I'll have to produce what the people like rather than what I want?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And if our likes differ?"

"You'll have to decide whether you can afford expensive tastes," said Hera archly. "There is little sense in not training children from an early age in how they are to help the economy when they're grown up. And, more importantly, how to help me."

"Mayn't spend on what they want to?"

"Yes," conceded Hera. "But only if their desires coincide with our wishes. What I must do, you see, is to make their unnecessary desires seem necessary. As for you, I'm afraid that you're going to have to work a lot faster in the future. No messing about for days with cantatas. I'll want a song done every ten minutes and I don't care if it shows as long as people buy them."

She rose and paced the smooth white plain of the floor. Paused, to run a finger across the black sheen of her silhouette on a red ceramic vase; again to rest her delicate hands on the green marble windowsill, framed by the fluorescent highlight of Helios.

"Apollo, what do you see when you look at children?"

Apollo looked surprised. "Youth, I suppose," he said. "New life, the regeneration of the old through the blossoming of the young. The Age of Innocence, when taste and sight and smell are keener, Time is slow or never present, when the world is vaster then it will ever

be again, a garden is vaster than the world but neither so vast as your imagination."

Hera sniffed. "Yes, I thought you would," she said. "Typical of your lamentable attitudes. Apollo, when I look at children I see money. A lot of it. And through clever manipulation of the young in the guise of a movement for freedom, a continuation of its supply for the entirety of their existence – which if they are immortal is no mean thing – far in excess of what they need to spend."

The God of Music breathed in sharply. It was clear that this callous conception of childhood offended his poetic sensibilities. "What do you want me to do for you, Hera?" he asked coldly.

She whirled on him. Black against the window and the daffodil-metallic sky, her voice low and throbbing. "Apollo, I hate Zeus. I have hated him since his first infidelity. And all these millennia I have had to live with him in the knowledge that there was nothing I could do. But now I have seen that there is. You hate him too. So do we all. So now that we have a chance, one lonely chance, let us not throw it away. Not only a chance to get rid of him, but to make something of Olympus. Something that shall echo down the generations so long as economists walk the earth and men sing of their deeds."

The god was silent.

" I want you to sing for me, Apollo. To set up a music industry, to advertise."

"You mean to lie."

She made an impatient gesture. The air trembled with her barely controlled fury. "It's not important if what we tell the people is a lie," she hissed. "What matters is that they believe it. By the time their faith in it fades, it will

have been replaced by another lie as believable as the first."

"And what will I get from all this?"

Hera mentioned a fee. She spoke of contracts, agents and signings. She spoke with eloquence and all the artistry of a bard. Despite his misgivings, the fantasies she spun for him overwhelmed his ears, and he was filled with a desire for the future of freedom and creation unfettered by their feudal overlord. Seemingly inspired by the very Muses who were wont to serve only him, Hera smiled inwardly as he wavered, acquiesced, and finally departed in a shimmer of evangelical inspiration.

That night, Hera placed a small tablet in an ivory casket and sealed it in a shell of adamant. Into the tablet were inscribed the many lines of Apollo's contract. The words writhed and pulsed on the clay, searing golden veins into its surface as they strove to escape. Hera knew the power that the clay struggled to contain, for it held the evidence of her first triumph – the soul of an Immortal. And somewhere close by, on that border between the vanished and the real, something watched her through the gloom, reached out to touch this frail bridge back into the world it desired.

Chapter Three

The citadel, pockmarked with palaces, drenched the West Side of the city in early morning shadow as Helios vainly attempted to peer over the silhouetted temples of the Olympians. Lines of low whitewashed buildings stretched languidly along the Olympic river, shops and tavernas mingling with the homes of the lesser gods.

Enipeus the river god paused outside the corner shop at the end of his road, having dragged himself sluggishly from his stream bed, which he shared with a group of young willow dryads who drooped themselves over him at night, much to his hidden delight. He yawned, still fogged with sleep, and waited by the newsstand for the hoarding of that morning's *Helios* to activate. At present, he was faced by a flattened oblong of pale clay, leaning smooth and featureless against the shop wall. As he watched, images began to extrude from its surface, headlines sank sharply into the clay, and articles scurried over its surface, pressed by the remote stylus of the tablet's head office. Enipeus scanned the headlines, snorted in well-rehearsed disgust, and went into the shop in search of his morning's stimulant.

In the Olympic hierarchy Enipeus stood as close to the Olympians as was safe for a demigod. His river, swollen most of the year unlike most Greek streams, was enough evidence of his prowess. Most mornings he stumbled into the shop, rummaging for his Function Record, and slapped it onto the counter to be served without a second thought. The Function Records, launched when Olympus had still been a collection of huts huddled together above the holy mountain, were no

more than thin strips of clay, filled with the latest details of a god's recent efforts in answering prayers, fulfilling functions and satisfying worshippers. Enipeus' records were good enough to provide him with just enough of Dionysus' energizing drinks to make his immortality bearable.

But on this morning, a lengthy queue jostled inside the shop. Disgruntled voices grumbled, and several younger, more impetuous mountain streams cursed volubly at a doddery ash nymph who had been propping up the counter for far too long.

By the time Enipeus was due to be served his horns were ruddy with frustration and minor tributaries had burst out all over his weed-covered body. "What in hell is going on this morning?" he demanded, flicking his Function Record onto the counter.

"Sorry sir," apologised the satyr at the serving desk, wiping his forehead with his beard, "it's the new Auric Exchange Programme. I'm afraid these aren't valid anymore." He gestured at the indignant Function Record.

"What?" Enipeus exploded like a breaking dam. "I've been waiting here for half a bloody hour and you tell me I can't buy a sodding drink? Whose bright idea was this?" Those behind him in the queue seemed to back up his observations. The satyr trotted worriedly back and forth, eyeing the rivers and mountains pressing into his shop. The last thing he needed was an angry range of hills deciding to take up a little earth moving on his property.

"Didn't you see the tablet outside?" he flailed.

"Yes – I thought that was some more Olympian rubbish. Didn't believe it. You don't want to believe what it says in *The Helios*."

“Well, I got all these tablets to fill in from Hera’s Financial office yesterday,” said the satyr apologetically. “So did all the shopkeepers. I’ve got to get you all to register for the programme. Apparently we’ll no longer be able to exchange things directly in return for doing our functions…. you have to provide central government with evidence, like the Function Record, and they’ll pay you this stuff instead.” He scattered a handful of flattened gold discs over the counter.

His audience peered at them critically. “They don’t look very useful,” said a mountain. “What happens if you want a drink or something – d’you melt them?”

“No,” explained the satyr. “You swap them for one.”

Enipeus gave another snort. “More Olympian rubbish, we were right,” he scoffed. “Did they ask us first? Ho, no. I’ll give it a week before they reconsider.”

“Yes, remember the PrayerShare scheme? Great success that was,” said a tributary behind him.

“Or Select before they Sacrifice…”

“That was quite fun for a while,” admitted Enipeus. “But it’s a pity so many gods chose mortals instead of goats.”

“Well,” said the satyr, “this is their latest scheme to ‘boost divine revitalisation of Olympus’, see? And we’ve got no choice about signing up, ‘cos you won’t be able to get anything otherwise.”

“So they’re blackmailing us. Typical really,” grumbled Enipeus as he unwillingly picked up a stylus and began to fill in the relevant tablet.

“They do reckon it’ll create more jobs in Olympus,” volunteered the satyr.

“Oh yeah? Washing up for the Olympians and serving them at parties, things like that?”

The satyr lowered his voice. “Hera’s come up with a three-year plan for urban regeneration,” he said. “She’s holding a meeting soon, to talk about massive construction programmes, using the Continent-building Mountains and the Geoforming Rivers. But it’s still very hush hush.”
“Thanks for passing that on, then.”
“And it’ll revolutionise Olympic society.”
“Like all their other fancy plans. When was the last time one of Hera’s ideas came off?” asked Enipeus. He frowned. “Why are you so keen on singing their praises anyway? They paying you, or something?”
The satyr took his completed form, and issued him with a bag filled with gold discs. Finally equipped with his long-awaited drink, Enipeus lingered outside, reading the *Helios* report with more care. The leading article had much to say on the pre-existing and outdated feudality of Olympic society, the rigid strata of class and category that kept gods chained in a single position or function. Hera wanted to unfetter the lesser gods, the tablet claimed, to free them from the niches where their fates had condemned them. “And what’s she getting in return?” Enipeus demanded from an equally suspicious River Alpheios. “She won’t be doing this out of her bloody bleeding heart. ‘Planning for a flexible and modern society’ my arse.”
“She says it’ll mean we can all move between classes.”
Enipeus laughed. “Well, she may say that, but you can be damned sure she won’t be moving from hers.”

*

At Hera’s command, Apollo built a gigantic music machine on the West side of the city. At one end of the production line various Words, struggling and squirming like obese snakes, were fed into its viscera.

“Love” was frequently pushed into the supply tubes, along with “baby”, “yeah”, “ooh”, “missing” and “mine”. In later days of the Theocratic Republic of Olympus, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Vocabulary was to impose punitive fines on the Music Machine, but in the dawn of the free age it was able to exploit the unwilling Words as much as it wished. Into the second tube were poured numerous musical notes, which, when combined at random with arbitrarily selected Words, were disgorged from the bowels of the Machine in the form of a new Song. All that remained for the God of Music was to select a Performer from the endless racks where they were placed after being bolted together by teams of satyrs. This he would animate briefly, and tack the Song to its breast. Together the two would go forth to the markets of the West Side and the defenceless ears of the people. The release of a Song was a terrifying occurrence.

A jostling group of demigods surged around the stage where the Performer pranced in the West Side. Their shrieks all but drowned her own. The Song, low and sinuous, raced over their heads, darting fierce glances into their unseeing eyes. A river god frowned cynically. “That’s not her song, of course,” he said to his companion.

“No?”

“Quite true. Those aren’t her clothes either, and naturally that isn’t her real name.”

The Song had detected a cynic, and delaying its progress, began to creep closer. Its spindly legs curled beneath it. Narrow eyes remained motionless as it prepared to pounce.

“And d’you know what’s really clever?” asked the cynic. “That’s not even her real body.”

The Song leapt. Propelled by the jerky springs of its limbs, it landed on his shoulder and sank its fangs into his ear. Undiluted synthetic music poured along the venom channels into the demigod's brain.

"Even so," he reflected, " it has a certain something, doesn't it? I might buy it after all."

*

The God of Wine, Dionysus, had never thought of himself as a mercenary god, although considering his devotion to his art, he was not often capable of self-reflection. But when Apollo mentioned to him the vast contract he had been awarded, and the enormous dramatic potential that lay in advertising, Dionysus began to reflect that his dramatic festivals of tragedy and dances were perhaps lacking a little vim. He called in to have tea with Hera, at her very kind invitation. And very soon, Dionysus' name squirmed in letters of golden fire in the ivory casket beside Apollo's contract.

On the West side of the city, at his command, a gigantic arena was rising, encircled by ever-rising banks of seats. They faced a sliver of fluid firmament, so thin that, viewed side on, it was entirely invisible, but which towered far above the seats themselves, an enormous square scraping the sky. Across its face, directed by Dionysus, strode the phantoms he had created to pace its surface, shadows as deep as the screen on which they walked. In a shimmering dazzle of ephemera they spiralled from nothing into nothing, watched by a bemused collection of the demigods who used to act in Dionysus' sacred plays and productions. Behind them, the first of the people of Olympus to witness this entertainment had already begun to gather. Some of them bought small home replicas of the screen from satyrs set up in booths nearby.

While Zeus devoted his considerable talents to the full enjoyment of his time in Nemea, these developments in Olympus might have caused him some concern had his mind been less occupied with repressed guilt, sunshine, and the problems of communicating in bovine.

*

The sun-chariot's horses paced ever higher up the steeps of heaven. Billowing fiery manes tossed over their sleek muscled necks and their ceaselessly galloping hooves struck sparks from the fabric of the firmament. Behind them the enormous white-hot disc of the sun was yoked by strands of flame to the chariot forged of solid gold. Helios peered over the side, rocking it slightly. He was a large, pleasant-looking Titan, with a broad face and golden-yellow beard and hair, but, although he was by most standards a very decent god, few of the other deities knew him at all well, seeing as his aeons spent alone in the sky had led him to develop chronic, painful shyness. Apart from his faithful retinue of pretty heliads in his palace at the Gates of Dawn he rarely spoke to another god. He did, however, see practically everything that went on down below on Mother Earth and even in Olympus, where there seemed to be a remarkable concentration of divine magnetism in one of the palaces or gardens on the eastern side. He leaned slightly further out to see better, the reins slack in his hands, and was only recalled to his duty when the chariot lurched unpleasantly. Stealing a glance at the burnished gold of the sun behind him, he settled back in his seat. He had not forgotten the disturbing incident when his son Phaethon had borrowed the sun chariot and mounted an aerial attack on Africa. If anything serious had happened, it would

have meant Tartarus for Helios, probably with a feathered companion whose taste for divine entrails was insatiable. Only a well-placed thunderbolt from Zeus had removed the driver and saved his father, though the consequences for Phaethon had been a little too permanent for the boy's liking.

The colonnade of Hera's pleasure garden overflowed with deities. Over half of the twelve Olympians were present. Hera herself sat back in the shade, cautiously imbibing a cold drink. She knew that it was not the best of days for a council of the gods, but she needed to move swiftly while Zeus was away. The night had done nothing to cool her anger or the dull pain in her head that only whetted her fury. She knew she had the ability to follow the path she had chosen, but also that the next few hours would be crucial, for she had to win the other deities over in this tiny breathing space.

The subdued level of noise indicated that those of the company who had attended Artemis' feast were sharing similar sufferings. Gods moved carefully and slowly, some more so than others. Had one had cause to examine them, an interesting trend would have emerged – the more time a god had spent in the company of Silenus and other followers of Dionysus the more slowly and carefully did he move, the grimmer and paler his face. The Olympians, it seemed, were only now beginning to recover from the aftermath. It was rumoured that during the trials of his latest beverage, Dionysus had spent four days unconscious and the remainder of the week convinced that he was a flowerpot. In the light of these disturbing revelations, it had been recommended to the guests that they monitor

themselves carefully over the following days for any sign of ceramic confusion.

Athene sat alone, lofty and stately, still holding her aegis while she tickled her somnolent, unresponsive owl, under its beak. Her robe was spotlessly white, yet without the marble perfection of so many deities'. Most noticeable were her eyes, deep and strangely ambivalent. Looking into them was like gazing into an immeasurably profound and shadowy well, only to be surprised by phosphorescence glowing up from the waters far beneath.

Ares the War God, pale but undaunted, was playing a game of "Mortal Quest" with Artemis. Despite her undoubted beauty of raven hair and spotless skin, there was something not quite normal in the eyes of the Goddess of the Hunt, an uncanny expression that provoked slight unease. It spoke of the terrors of the hunt, the unrelenting pursuit beneath dark skies, of death in the lonely mountains and the triumph of the huntress beneath the cold moon. Hera let her eyes linger on the pair – so unconsciously brimming with untapped cruelty and boundless power, screwed up like springs to send helpless mortals scattering over their board as they unwound. Mortals, or gods, she thought to herself, watching them play, finding an amusing irony in their innocent game when she thought of the sport she was to have with them.

As Ares attacked, the heavy golden dice, jewel-encrusted, landed with four skulls uppermost, whereupon he sat back with a triumphant sneer. One of the two men in Thrace, who were unaware of their starring role in a divine entertainment, aimed a curling strike at the head of his opponent.

Artemis hurriedly threw the dice. Four shields smiled up at Ares, echoing the jeer on her lips. Below, Calecephalos' sword swept up in answer, Helios' shafts streaming from its blade in its speed. Mellothanatos' weapon clanged into it, sending vibrations deep into his chest.

"My turn to attack," said Artemis. She threw three skulls. Biting his lip, Ares tossed the dice in defence, but no shields came his way.

Calecephalos struggled up from his kneeling position. Dust and sweat intermingled on his exhausted body, but now streaks of moisture ran down his face clearing lanes through the grime. Wounded, his left arm was eaten by an acid pain as the crimson blood raced merrily from the open gash to leap from his fingers and be lost forever in the trampled, dusty earth. Mellothanatos raised his sword for another blow. Calecephalos launched himself forward, the sword rigid before him, wrist locked. Like a red-gold fish it swam inquisitively through the air, seeming to hover for a second of frozen time by the other's abdomen before it plunged inside.

Mellothanatos felt no pain at first, only the smooth merciless coldness as the bitter blade sank in, deeper and deeper. Burning waves of blood collected around its tip. His sword fell from his grasp; he clasped the gaping wound, trying to squeeze its slippery edges together, to hold in his blood, to hold in his life. His hands were wet and sticky. Then the fiery hammer blow of pain struck him; he writhed, kicked, and beat the ground. Twice more Calecephalos stabbed. The deep ruby fluid spurted, welled up and seeped out, drenching the once white tunic. Slow tears ran down his face as he tuned his eyes to heaven. Zeus, have mercy. He was not ready to

die. He had a wife, children, this was his farm. He did not want to leave.

But Zeus did not hear him. Slowly the liquid of life flowed away, more and more slowly. His blood and his life fled through the same wounds; his eyes chilled in death and the darkness came down over his sight.

Calecephalos stood breathing heavily over the body of his dead adversary. He hadn't really wanted to kill him – it had been in self-defence. Hades, would the jury believe that? Would the old line, "It was decreed by the gods that I should kill him?" do any good? He had an uncomfortable suspicion that the hard-headed businessmen who made up the jury wouldn't be taken in by that one. Not that it wasn't patently stupid, but it was worth a try. But honestly, who would believe nowadays that the gods played games with the lives of men?

*

Ares was putting away the board. "Good game, "he said. "I nearly had your one at the end. How about another try tomorrow? Perhaps we could have a go at something more exciting, like Battleships."

"I'd like that," said Artemis. "Earth's rather dull at the moment, now the Aeolian migrations have quietened down. Partly why I came along today. Any idea what's going on? It seems a little odd."

A small table trotted past, bearing various soothing drinks. It was pursued by a slowly widening wake of demigods, who cleared it of its load.

"Not much," said Ares. "Hera did say something to me about it during your feast, but I can't remember exactly what." He did not care to admit that most of the night was an uncomfortable blank.

Another table passed them, now laden with drinks of a mildly intoxicating nature. It was similarly relieved of

their weight. Through a door at the side entered two personifications, Eloquence and Deception. Unnoticed by the other gods, they stood together at the back, sharing a drink.

"Look, Hera's going to speak now. I reckon she must feel frightful – see her face? Not very happy this morning."

An expectant quasi-silence had fallen as Hera rose. She beckoned Ares over to her. Briefly, she let her gaze sweep round the deities. Artemis and Athene, Apollo, Dionysus, a disgruntled look upon his face, complemented by what would become two magnificent black eyes. Hephaestus had apprehended him earlier and explained his displeasure at the former's experiment by non-verbal means. There was the vast form of Heracles, looming over even the huge Poseidon. The God of the Sea was in green evening dress, stained with wine but complete with the Ocean Crown, his enormous shaggy head and beard tangled and matted. Green eyes flared, illuminating his hooked nose. One hand clutched a wine flagon; the other bore his trident, which had a sausage impaled on each prong. He seemed to be leaning against the empty air beside him, where sat his brother Hades, Lord of the Underworld. Hades, for reasons known only to himself, had become so fond of the Helmet of Darkness wrought for him by Hephaestus, that he refused to contemplate removing it. As a result, he remained perpetually invisible, much to the continual disconcertion of his wife Persephone.

Three of the winds were present, Boreas, Auster and Zephyrus, immensely tall figures enveloped in shifting robes that were still for no single moment, their long hair and beards, silvery-white, ever-moving as though caressed by a soft breeze. Hephaestus himself sat close

by, accompanied by the gigantic shadowy shapes of Force and Violence. The host of the lesser gods, goddesses, nymphs and dryads were collected in the farther reaches of the colonnade, behind the semi-circle of Olympians.

Now total silence held the company. With their keener-than-mortal sense the immortals could feel that something unsettling was in the air, something unprecedented was about to take place. The look in Hera's eyes was enough to reveal it – the fixed, terrifying expression of furious, incomprehensible folly masquerading in sanity's clothing.

Several tables scurried through the ranks of the gods. Unconsciously, gods and demigods deprived them of their brimming glasses. Through the door at the side there entered Understanding and Bewilderment, who moved to the back where they were greeted by Eloquence and Deception. Then the four separated and, drinks in hand, began to mingle with the other guests.

Only when she was convinced of their attention did Hera speak.

"You are fools - blind, purposeless fools," she said, her voice soft and dangerously low.

"What the hell do you mean?" began Poseidon angrily, but he fell silent as he met the full force of Hera's gaze. She had what she wanted – their undivided focus and a swell of anger she could divert to her own purpose. Her mind flickered: thoughts flowed at matchless speed through the passages of her brain, intertwining, colliding, creating fresh and brilliant patterns.

It has often been remarked how little there really is in the universe, as though the Creator had been content with only a few endlessly adaptable designs. So it is with speeches. Their raw strands float around the

cosmos, ready to pounce into the mouth at the least provocation. Some, as a result of natural selection, will thrive and grow stronger, as they are delivered more frequently. The words that now fell almost unbidden from Hera's lips were of this breed. They had been uttered in innumerable different forms since the first primordial clutch of bacteria, when oppressed by a larger bacterium, had been ordered to stand up for their rights.

*

No man has ever found his way to the place where the three Fates labour. Where they spin their web cannot be described with respect to here or there, nor found anywhere upon the surface of the Earth. But it is present.

Their chamber is dark, so dark that anyone who entered therein would have to peel the blackness from themselves when they emerged, so dark that any light taken within would gutter and choke. Yet the Fates can see everything their unceasing hands bring forth. And it is silent, silent as no place known to mankind. But it is a silence so powerful that it would burst the eardrums of anyone who had the courage to listen.

In the silent darkness the Fates toil on. First stands Clotho – hers is the task of drawing the shifting cosmic fabric of space-time that coils about them into threads. Countless billions sift through her worn hands. Empires twine around her fingers, cities pull sharply from her nails. Beggars flow with kings towards the Tapestry. Some threads she has held almost as long as the world has been; the golden strands of Immortals, the thick, heavy twine of Mother Earth herself. New filaments float constantly towards her ready hands. They curl and stream to Lacathis where she sits before the Loom,

weaving history together. Every single living strand spirals into the web, up, down, and in, deeper and deeper. Each little life weaving on and on, till the great picture shifts towards Atropos, who stands with her mighty shears, ready to cut.

Beside Clotho lies the Scroll of Years on which the whole of history is inscribed. The words run over its surface as swiftly as Lacathis weaves. Clotho calls out the pattern to be created, and orders Atropos which threads to cut.

Watch Clotho as she bends over the Scroll, drawing the skein of lives through withered hands. See, if your mind can pierce the unlight, the wisps of hair straggling from her ancient skull as she glares down with eyes in which no pupils are set. See the aged crone start suddenly.

"Gosh!" she said, " Wasn't expecting *that.*"

Lacathis looked up, her hands still moving on the web faster than the human eye can focus. "What?" she asked.

"Take a look at this," said Clotho, passing the Scroll over for her sisters to see.

"Oh! Yes, you do have a point."

Clotho teased the thickest gold thread in her hands, the thread of Zeus, ruler of the heavens and the earth. What she had been instructed to do had only happened twice before in the life of the Tapestry, and she was of the opinion that this time at least it was unnecessary. As time went on, she became increasingly convinced that whoever had written the Scroll had an unpleasant, if not a positively warped, imagination.

She picked up a small pot of what looked like black paint, labelled, "Divinity Negator." As an artistic touch, cobwebs and dust had been attached to it, though no

spider would have survived to spin its webs there. With a brush, Clotho dabbed some of the fluid onto the thread, and it ran like liquid darkness away from her fingers into the void where all threads had their origins. Soon the night-coated strand would be swept into the Tapestry. History was about to be woven.

*

"I call you fools," said Hera, "because for a hundred thousand years you have laboured unresisting beneath the tyrant Zeus. For eons have you been content with your field, your stream, your river, your trees, your mountains, while here in Olympus one god has held supreme power over us all. One god has worn the Olympic Crown. One god has ruled you and the world that is all you know. One god has decreed what and who you will be. The self-styled king of gods and men."

A web of tables moved in a complicated, choreographic dance among the listeners. Unconsciously, the gods drank, stared in bewilderment, and drank again. Persuasion had joined their number, and moved sedately from deity to deity, wearing a tie and tails, offering tall glasses, whose contents only served to rend apart the ears of the audience, leaving them defenceless to the merciless attack of Hera's words. Bribery, portly and jovial, smiled and nodded in agreement. Personifications intertwined as the Queen of Olympus spoke: so swiftly that their very outlines blurred and grew indistinct, that their effects intermingled and unified.

" Do you wish to live out your immortality under an outdated, totalitarian regime? If our ruler deserved his power…but Zeus has disgraced both his kingship and Olympus itself. This I shall prove to you finally, and beyond all doubt. You all know of his fornications and

adulteries, of the violence of his early years, of his punishments for those who defy him…A king such as this? Or a new dawn, in which we realise that all gods are equal and where, together, we may live and work towards a new future. Only together can we overcome the tyrant – and our time is short."

When the fathers of the free press reflected on the power of their creation, and the menace of propaganda, they agonised over how to distinguish good from evil, how to educate their readers to defend them from the menace of untruth or unreason. Yet they never saw that what they should have feared was not untruth but unimportance; and blind to man's endless capacity for distractions they could not comprehend that schooling to recognise what did not matter was of more importance than teaching what was not true.

*

Understanding slumped against a Doric pillar; her eyes overcome by wine as heavy sleep descended upon her reason. Eloquence and Deception met briefly on their way round the gathering, touched glasses, and parted again.

"So choose – whether to live in dumb subjugation under the tyrant, or to be bold, and cast off the shackles of a bygone age, to face the future in a new Olympus."

Athene refused the glass in Persuasion's outstretched hand, and did not see that the Personification altered, as he looked away, his face twisting into Coercion. Hera's voice drummed on, in a hypnotising harangue, *"He has committed adultery with Aphrodite, with a fellow Olympian. Where is he now? With her. I shall show you whatever evidence you need to realise the truth. Is this, this, the kind of king you desire?"*

The People, Athene knew, couldn't resist this kind of bait for long, from Hera least of all. She was now striding among them, her movements controlled, but charged with a frenetic energy they could not fail to feel. *"Under my government, I pledge an end to Olympian control, to offer every god the chance of a rewarding immortality and a fulfilling function, where retirement is to be enjoyed, not feared. A genuinely different alternative"*

Everyone claimed they were bringing something new to the game, thought Athene. The players might change, but the broken rules remained the same, sharping, cheating and fiddling the books. She couldn't reach within Hera's mind, but hovering just outside it, fighting off the forces of the Personifications, she could see a blurred reflection of the forces the elder goddess commanded. She could see distractions used as instruments of policy, could see the bribes of freedom, equality, opportunity, modernity, the new ideal, and the alternative solution, which clustered before the real foot soldiers of the revolution - repetition, suppression of truth, and the arousal of passions.

"The future of the gods lies not on Earth but in heaven. Here, with social progress, a heavenly paradise can be created, if we establish a world in which reason reigns. Long ago we needed a king. But the millennia have changed all that. For too long now have the lesser gods been oppressed or ignored. At last the time has come to give them a say, for they too are equal to we Olympians…"

Words, inducing the inability to perceive one's own manipulation, control, exploitation and indoctrination. Athene scowled at Hera, her mind slip-sliding out of the ineluctable grasp of Eloquence. The Personification

smiled sweetly down at her, and moved away, content in her conquest of the other gods. She held a tall glass in her hand. Deception caught sight of her across the bower, and the two began to move together. Athene struggled up, fighting against the weight of words and willing minds, for she knew she must not let them meet.

But the web was nearly complete. In the city, the new shoppers moved like arterial blood driven by the cardiac surge of the markets. Diligence removed the veil concealing her face, and Athene, who alone of the gods still retained the gift of perception, saw that she was, in fact, Obsession. Confusion and Conviction halted, facing each other, blocking her path. Athene fought her way past them, as though wading through deep water. Hera's voice came to her from an immense distance. Eloquence and Deception stepped gracefully forwards, tripping daintily through the opening crowd of deities.

Athene strove to fill her mind with thoughts of liberty, freedom, individuality, literature, art, music, time, speech and song…the useless things…but found them drowned by a cataclysm of longing for socially orientated behaviour, team work, group loyalty and group thinking. She reeled against a pillar, helpless against the onslaught, feeling herself slipping into the new age, into psychological captivity in the realm of freedom. She was powerless to stop it.

"Now we may stand shoulder to shoulder in a new dawn; the dawn of the Theocratic Republic of Olympus!" And Hera fell silent, her web fully woven.

Standing together in the centre, Eloquence toasted Deception.

Their glasses met.

Tink.

Chapter Four

Poseidon stirred like the sea's surface swelled by an upsurge of pluming water. As if waking from a dream he shook his shaggy head and cleared his throat loudly. Rubbing his blurred eyes with flat-ended fingers, he stretched unctuously, striving to throw off the weight of the Personifications and Hera's words. She had done well, she thought, to spin a snare strong enough to hold his Olympian mind even for such a short time. But she should not have expected the effects to last for long. Had there been a heaven above them to which she might have raised her eyes, Hera would have done so.

"Pretty speech," he admitted. "Bit long, mind. My uncle always used to tell me that the shorter a speech was the more it'd be remembered. His favourite was just one word – he fell off the podium just before he started speaking, yelling 'Bugger'. Famed for years after that…"

" I am not the least interested in avuncular orations," Hera informed him. " And if by 'uncle' you mean the Titan Kairos, I doubt whether any of his speeches were more sophisticated or intelligent than the one you have kindly recited."

"Rebellion," mused Poseidon. A ripple of words ran through the audience. "I do have this vague memory, you know, of the last time we tried anything like that. Apollo and I ended up doing penal servitude building walls at Troy for damned mortals."

"The bits you built weren't up to much," said Apollo. "Look what the Greeks did to that part near the Scaean Gate."

“ I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Poseidon loftily. “The dumb Trojans took the Horse in through the wall you built for them.”

“ *I* didn’t build the bloody gateway.”

“Are you trying to say I did? Well, let me…”

“Silence,” said Hera, which fell, surprisingly. Silence and Poseidon seldom coexisted for any length of time.

Athene shifted uneasily in her seat, shaking the confusion from her blurred eyes. She was slumped in a spare chair beside a pillar. For the first time, Hera’s voice gave an indication that its owner was losing control. “We shall drag him through the courts and banish him to Tartarus,” she shrilled. “I caught him not so long ago with a *cow*. Do we want every farmer on Earth to be forced to mount an armed guard over his livestock as well as his daughters, to defend them from the appetites of the king of Olympus? We shall have no more of this king of gods and men rubbish. Don’t you agree, Ares?”

The god of war jumped. “Yes…listen to her,” he said. Thinking that he had perhaps not shown enough enthusiasm, he added, “Yes…yes.” There didn’t seem much choice but to agree.

Raucous cheers of support came from the satyrs and demigods at the back. They were beginning to understand – Zeus was having an affair with Aphrodite and Hera was entertainingly displeased. An anti – royalist chant swelled from a corner. Unmarked and unmissed, the Personifications faded slowly into the air, shimmered and were gone.

Hera’s mind reached out and caressed the thoughts of her audience. Hephaestus’, hot and slow burning, his ever-latent anger at his father now aroused, Athene’s, cold and unmoving, tense with disapproval. Hera’s

searching neurones probed the demigods' minds, delving deeper into brains that usually moved with geological slowness, with the speed of a growing sapling, or the tumble of water from the deep glens of windblown hills. Hera would have prayed, but she had never been terribly religious, and one of the disadvantages of godhead is that one has no one to pray to apart from other gods, who would most probably laugh and tell the neighbours.

*

Clotho, Lacathis and Atropos were bent avidly over the giant web. Hurriedly, not wishing to miss any of the action, Clotho took a swift glance at the Scroll to check the stage directions. " Zeus – remain with cow. Demigods, satyrs, naiads, dryads, - cheer. Olympians agree, except Athene and Heracles."

As she spoke the fate of the next few seconds became reality under the ever-shifting hands of Lacathis. Clotho resisted the temptation to scroll forward only with a mighty effort of will. Neither the gods nor the Fates themselves know what decision will be made. Only the Scroll.

Slowly the seconds creep across its face. Who is the author? The Fates have never asked. Some believe that, along with other great epics, it can claim multiple authorship, whilst the Unitarian school argues against his hypothesis. But the mighty bureaucracy that is the Universe trundles on regardless, each cog wheeling faultlessly in its groove, and the enigma over who is planning it shows no sign of being solved, until the words, "The End" appear before Clotho's eyes.

*

Athene rose unsteadily to her feet, urgently desiring to leave and clear her thoughts. Close by, Heracles

caught her eye and stood in sympathy. “Hera,” said Athene, “I’d advise getting a little feedback on your policies before you submit them to Zeus for consideration.” She flushed at the ribald laughter from the satyrs behind her. “He might not find them entirely to his liking.”

“No,” agreed Hera. “That was the intention, as a matter of fact. Why do *you* fear this change?”

“I’m not afraid of change,” she replied. “Only doubtful of its cause and reasons.”

“Whoever said that the means should justify the end?” Finally, the salt-white glitter of her teeth showed between her bowed lips. “The time for our words has passed as well. If you will not join us, Athene, I have no intention of delaying you any further.”

“Oh, you aren’t,” said Athene. “I’m very glad I came.”

“And you, Heracles?” asked the Queen of the Gods. Heracles found himself the subject of a bristling barrage of hostile stares. In the silence he wavered, confusion and sadness moving together over his face. Eventually he spoke. “No,” he said. “I will not rebel against the king.”

The fresh silence was broken by Hera’s laugh. “And why not, Heracles?” asked Hades’ voice.

“He is my father,” said Heracles simply.

“He’s also the father of half of Olympus,” pointed out Poseidon. “That’s part of the problem.”

“I don’t agree,” said Heracles stubbornly.

“Be quiet, Heracles,” said Hades. “In case you can’t count, I believe you’re outnumbered.”

As Heracles and Athene turned to leave, Hera raised her voice. “Now, people of Olympus, now is the time for your voice to be heard, for you to exercise the power of choice for the first time in our history. Only together

can we triumph. Already, we have come too far to withdraw. If you favour the choice of freedom, the choice to be whatever you wish in a heaven of opportunity and achievement, the choice to be rewarded for your labours with an appropriate salary, which only a theocratic system can provide, raise your hands now. Let us be what we can only be after we have claimed our destiny for ourselves. Let us blow away the old order, and arise with the new from its ashes, into the dawn of the Theocratic Republic of Olympus!"

She raised both arms in a studied gesture of republican zeal, which she hoped might also restrain the more excitable elements of her audience from doing irreparable damage to her furnishings. Much as he wished to embrace the satyrs as dedicated members of her following, she would find it hard to forgive them were they to tear her upholstery with their hooves. "Before we proceed to the Palace," she said, "we must elect a President to lead our movement against the tyrant king – to fight for us should he defy the will of the Court."

"What's a president?" asked Poseidon with interest

"Like a king, only one we elect."

"One of us, you mean?"

"I suppose so."

There was a noticeable shifting of position among the visible male gods. Poseidon tightened his grip on his trident, shifting it into a more serviceable position; Apollo dropped his bow from his shoulder to begin polishing it nonchalantly.

Poseidon cleared his throat. "Don't like to push myself forward," he said, "but seeing as I am the eldest present and also have considerable experience with running the Ocean…"

“I like that,” said Hades’ voice. “I’m older than you, and the ocean seems to do very well flowing around without any help from you.”

Poseidon glared at the other arm of the throne. “You trying to be funny?” he growled.

“Poor chap, look at him,” said Hades’ voice from behind him. “Threatening the empty air now. Can’t have a nutter like that in charge – he’ll be talking to trees next, and there’s no knowing where that’ll lead to.”

“No one’s going to fight,” said Hera. “In such a heavenly crisis I think it legitimate to form a coalition government. We may not have long before Zeus returns, and it’s all important that we’re ready when he does.” She gestured with a snowy arm at the interweaving crowd before them. “And unless any of you others particularly wish to go head to head with Zeus, I should suggest Ares,” – the impressionable, irrational, controllable Ares, she reflected – “as the most suitable candidate for President.”

Only the rustle of aggressive male breathing greeted her words.

“All you have to do is raise your hands if you agree,” she wheedled, half-regretting she had allowed the Personifications to slip away so soon. Ares, unaware of his impending office, blinked dazedly. Hera glared at the unresponsive Olympians, and turned to the milling People before her – the wispy dryads, stolid mountain gods, horned rivers and excitable, furry satyrs, whom she noted had committed unforgivable ravages on the curtains. “Our only hope now is unity,” she said. “Unless we have the resolve to finish what we have begun, then it will be Tartarus for you all, merely for listening to my words. If we are to unite at all, I suggest that doing so behind Ares is as good a place as any.”

She gestured at the mighty War God, towering over the other deities, surrounded by a pool of complaining Olympians.

With a tremor in the sky a miasma of personification twined through the strands of the air, and something else besides, that she had not summoned, invisible and undetected. A mountain god flinched at the attack. Such deities are not renowned for their intellectual gifts, and his mind, accustomed to the pace of glacier or tree-root, soil-creep or tectonic movements, struggled to comprehend what he was being asked to do. Earth crumbled from his furrowed forehead as he rubbed granite-hard fingers into the confused wells of his eyes and hunched the steep slopes of his obsidian shoulders with inarticulate deliberation. Now the nameless power eroding his mind achieved what an eon of ice and storm could not. Dazed and almost unaware of his own motion, he raised his hand.

Then another did likewise, another, followed by a whole host. There were uproarious cries from the less well-disciplined members of the audience, quashing the complaints of the Olympians with an anti-Zeus chant. Ares, perceiving that they all appeared to be cheering him, allowed himself a bemused smile.

"I can't *believe,*" said an affronted Poseidon, "that I've been overlooked in a leadership contest *again.* It was bad enough being trumped by my little brother, but this…"

"Perhaps the electorate are trying to let you in on a little secret," commented Hades. "I shouldn't fret, Poseidon – it does so spoil your complexion. Do you really fancy being at the front of the queue for thunderbolts when Zeus hears about this afternoon?"

“No, that’s true,” said Poseidon, brightening. “It should be fun watching him and Ares sort things out.” He subjected his nephew Ares to an exhaustive and predatory examination, as though scanning him for weak spots where a thunderbolt might do most damage.

Uncontrollable, the crowd pushed against the War God. As Hera was lifted shoulder-high, she sensed the moment had come. Without delay, they must reach the Court and break into Zeus’ armoury, if they were to have even the faintest chance of success.

“To the Palace!” she cried. “For liberty and freedom! Storm the Palace!”

*

Athene and Heracles hurried out through the vestibule, into the shaded colonnade facing the street.

“I wish Hera would stop doing things like this,” said a mournful Heracles. “It makes me regret having been made a god.”

“At least you had a bit of mortality first,” said Athene. “The rest of us got churned out and handed a five-thousand year plan by the management.”

“And a lot of fun being mortal was,” grumbled Heracles. “Did I get asked if I wanted to be deified? No invitation, no warning – just waking up naked with something written on my face and a crowd of drunken Immortals dancing round me…” Heracles toyed listlessly with his club. “When they talk about deification on earth, they don’t tell you what a circus it is up here.”

“It’d be bad publicity,” said Athene. “And it’s thanks to generations of cover up work,” she added. “Zeus keeps the rest of them quiet.”

“He’s not doing too well today, is he?”

“Just wait till he turns up,” warned Athene. “You weren’t here the last time something like this happened. Now I wonder where Prometheus has got to? I’m pretty sure he was invited.”

The deities concentrated, scanning Olympus for the other god. At they did so, a tall, spare Titan stepped up beside them, pausing on his way into Hera’s bower. It was Prometheus, the co-creator and benefactor of mankind. One of the only Titans who had not fought against the Olympians, who in the morning of the world had helped to set Zeus upon the Air Throne and establish his rule, who had rebelled against the king he had made, who had been tortured, freed and forgiven. Dark, taciturn and gifted with a mind as incisive and clinical as no other. Running a distracted hand through his floppy grey hair, he waited patiently for them to finish.

“You’re looking for someone, I presume?” he asked eventually.

“Mmm,” replied Athene. “Prometheus. He’s late.”

“Many congratulations,” said the Titan. “I had no idea I was in so much demand.”

“I shouldn’t get your hopes up, Prometheus,” said Athene, turning to him. “Hera only puts up with you for the sparring.”

Prometheus nodded to Heracles, smiling vaguely. “What seems to be the problem now?” he asked gently. “I tried to have a look on my way in from the Western Islands, but it doesn’t make very clear reading.”

“You’ve missed most of the good bits,” said Heracles gloomily.

Prometheus nodded sagely. “That often happens,” he said happily. “Still, missing the important parts may not be as bad as it seems…”

As Athene skimmed through the substance of Hera's argument, he reflected that Zeus himself had often missed the important parts. It had been the subject of their first disagreement, but also the time when their roles were defined and their friendship cemented, to endure beyond even the Caucasus and the vultures…

*

The ravaged surface of Olympus steamed intermittently, a razed patch of tumbled stone reeling above the mountain, hardly large enough, it seemed, to have contained the Gods and the Titans who had fought for it. Now the Titans lay imprisoned in the wells of Tartarus, and the victors lounged between their billowing tents, hunched beneath canvas pediments and tent poles swaying in the wind. From the boiling sky Zeus drew down fresh thunderbolts for his Cyclopes to hammer into wearable fashion accessories, while his allies licked their wounds, or, in the case of his brothers and sisters who had been imprisoned in Cronos' stomach, desperately tried not to.

Far beneath them, on the plains of Thessaly, Prometheus led a deputation of mortals towards the holy mountain. He had fashioned them out of clay, and Zeus had breathed life into them – still filled with the arrogant fire of his new deity, the parents of our race glared at the faces of the gods and were unafraid, not least because they had witnessed the fairly thorough hammering the gods had taken at the hands of the older, larger gods, until Zeus made his spectacular entrance, guided by Prometheus. The old Titan was finding him a challenging pupil. Staying on top of him was more challenging than taming an enraged bull elephant inspired with reproductive zeal.

The god who materialised before the mortal ambassadors would not have been recognised as Zeus by Classical Greece. No beard yet clung to his cheeks, and his vast shoulders, though twisted with muscle, had not attained the unmatchable bulk of his maturity. He hugged Prometheus with extravagant vigour, towering above the seated mortals. The Titan wheezed as various distant bones within him were ground into close proximity. "Greetings, Prometheus, Keeper of mankind," said Zeus. "How fare the children of Earth?"
"Not bad, considering," said Prometheus. "They're here to see you, as promised."
"All of them?"
"Yes."

Zeus surveyed the mortals, impassive, grimy and surly before him. The light from the Olympic Crown about his brows brushed their upturned faces. "All…fifteen of them," he said slowly.
"Yes, that's right," said Prometheus brightly. "Fifteen."
"What happened to the rest?"
"As you've no doubt noticed, we are in the process of recovering from the longest cosmic war in the history of the Universe," explained Prometheus gently. "During which a lot of the Earth was blasted into cinders. These people are the survivors." He frowned horribly at Zeus, who fielded the hint – his first - and clutched it to his chest. "Excellent! Survivors," he said cheerfully. "Very enterprising…" He sat down on a boulder before them, peering into their faces with an innocent, childlike fascination. For long moments he could not comprehend that they lived and breathed, thought and chose…that his will had entered them and lost itself in the drives of their desires. The miracle of their creation left him silent.

Prometheus cleared his throat. “If we can come back to the agenda…”
“Of course,” said Zeus. “You said something about sacrifice?”
“Well, our predecessors had an arrangement with your father…” began a thickset man.
“That he wouldn’t eat them as long as they sacrificed to him,” finished his wife.
“Very sensible really,” said Prometheus. Zeus nodded.
“You should have let my family in on that one,” he said.
“Cronos liked the sacrifices,” insisted the man,” and we were wondering whether you would too – in return for something.”
“What?” roared Zeus. “You ask me, the king of Gods and Men, for a boon?”
“You’ll only be king of gods if you’re not careful,” pointed out the woman. “You haven’t really left much arable land down here for cultivation.”
“They have a point, Zeus,” said Prometheus. The King of the Gods nodded reflectively.
“So what are you after? You worship us, we sort the world out for you?”
“And yourselves,” said the man. “It isn’t much to crow about at the moment, after all.”
“Let’s have a sacrifice then – see what they’re like,” said Zeus. “You can keep half of the animal if you’re pushed for food,” he added, in a moment of rash generosity. Prometheus smiled into his beard.

The resultant sacrifice of an underfed, reluctant bullock, whose struggling spirit was forced from its body by the ethereal worship of the collected mortals, and borne to Zeus on their translucent prayers, sank into his breast in an intoxicating, bubbling explosion. He gasped with delight, and smiled down on them as they

prepared to cast the animal's physical remains on the fire he had kindled before them.
"Which half do you want, Zeus?" asked Prometheus. The mortals, trembling with newly aroused hunger, waited in silence.

Zeus had not watched the dismemberment of the corpse. Now he looked from the rich fold of fat piled high and succulent on his left, to the dry inedible skin on his right…and his hunger overcame him. "We'll take this lot," he said, pointing to his left. "Let this serve as precedent for all time." The thunder rolled in ratification.
"Good choice," said Prometheus mischievously, as he lifted the bullock's skin to reveal its heavy dark meat glistening beneath, upon which the ravenous mortals fell. Zeus kicked away the fat on the other pile, finding nothing but stripped bones beneath. "You bastard," he whispered to Prometheus. "You utter bastard. Why couldn't you have told me?"
"I thought they needed it more," said Prometheus.

Zeus looked at their creations, all fifteen of them, roasting meat on brittle twigs in the fire. "You're probably right," he said ruefully. "Just don't rub it in – I might lose my temper."
"Don't worry, I won't," promised Prometheus. "Are you ready to start work on the northern plains tomorrow?"
"I think so…it'll be nice to get away with you. The rest of them up there," Zeus gestured towards the tiny disk of what would become Olympus above them, "never stop quarrelling. Must be because of all the cramping in dad's stomach."
"Most likely."

Zeus turned to leave. “Oh, before you go Prometheus,” he said, “could you make sure the fire’s put out? I don’t think I want them to get hold of it quite yet.”

*

Prometheus maintained his silence after Athene’s resume just long enough for it to become uncomfortable. He spoke first. “I don’t really think it will work,” he said gently. “Perhaps it might be a good thing if we tell them to wrap this meeting up and go for a drink before Zeus hears of it. He might not take it as well as I have.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that’s a bad thing,” said Athene. “There are quite a few gods in there who could do with a little short sharp correction. You weren’t here early enough to see the Personifications. There were dozens of them, mixing themselves into a cocktail for Hera. If we hadn’t been careful we’d have been swamped as well. I don’t like it when Olympians shove people around like that. And have you seen what’s been going on in the West Side? All sorts of shops are springing up, chains and groups and superstores, more every day. It’s something unnatural. Not divine. And although it’s to do with Hera I don’t think she’s causing it.”

“We cannot know the nature of the economic beast, and we rouse it at our peril,” said Prometheus seriously. “I don’t suppose, by any remote chance, that she’s awakened…the forces that were before the Titans…but that’s ludicrous. Zeus would have sensed it long ago.”

“If he’d had any spare time between women,” said Heracles. Prometheus sighed.

“What has he been up to now?” he inquired.

Athene told him. “Stupid, stupid god,” said the Titan. “What the hell was he thinking of? Aphrodite? And Hera’s not making this up?”

“She claims she’s got proof,” said Athene.
“Really,” said Prometheus, “sometimes I wonder whether Zeus would have got this job if it wasn’t for his father.”
“If he’s not careful, Aphrodite’s going to erupt in his face,” warned Athene. “And he’s not available for comment, apparently.”
“They’re all going to go absolutely mad,” agreed Prometheus. “Not that they usually need much of an excuse. I reckon finding Zeus and getting him back here as soon as we can is the most sensible thing to calm them down.”

The three deities concentrated for a moment. From behind them came a distant seismic rumour. Heracles broke their silence. “I can’t seem to see him,” he said. “How about you?”
Prometheus cursed violently. “I know what he’s done – something in the Office.” Casting a frantic look over his shoulder, for the shouts were growing louder and various nearby deities seemed to be wandering in the direction of the noise, he said: “ We must get to the Palace and unscramble it. Otherwise there’s going to be one hell of a mess.”

*

The riotous crowd burst from Hera’s bower onto the street. Few of the gods had much idea of what had happened, but since whatever it was appeared to be fun they had no desire to miss out. Other, bemused deities looked nervously from their houses along the glittering marble street, only to be swept into the crowd to chant slogans they didn’t understand. Poseidon, with Hera astride his shoulders, headed the rush. Troad View was

a long, straight road, at the end of which reared an enormous statue of Zeus, imperiously wielding a thunderbolt. Poseidon halted. When he opened his palms, a large, somewhat surprised Triton plopped onto the white flagstones before him. He swore, and kicked the Triton, who vanished. And then a huge swirl of emerald, snow-flecked water curled from between his hands, capped and crested with wild foam. Barely-visible sea horses galloped madly along the ridges of the waves as the torrent thundered down the road. Rising like the tidal wave of Thera it engulfed the statue, which like many in Olympus was partially animate, but the cascade of seawater pouring into its mouth drowned its shout of anger. Its thunderbolt fizzled and went out. With a terrible cracking of tortured stone the huge structure wobbled, and toppled down from its pedestal. Force and Violence waded forward, waist deep, and smashed its footstool with iron-shod feet. As they pounded the still-protesting statue to dust, Poseidon closed his hands and the water vanished.

The tide of deities poured on through the city of the gods. Dionysus leapt and twirled, waving his thrysus. Ivy raced away from his flickering feet, to coil like smoke about the houses that they passed. An element of his bacchic madness infected his followers – cries for Liberty and Freedom echoed through the streets and alleyways as their ghostly forms personified at the head of the parade. Soon every street thronged with frenzied gods and wild, half naked Maenads. The city was shaken by the tremble of tumbling statuary. With the head of one of Zeus' statues impaled on his trident, Poseidon raced up the stairway to the palace. Beside him went the invisible form of Hades, Hera now straddling both their shoulders. Hephaestus hobbled

desperately to keep up; Apollo and Artemis whirled together in a complicated dance. Overhead the winds blew madly. A ribbon of abuse poured from the statue's mouth, merging into a terrified scream as Poseidon swung it at the end of the trident, using it as a club with which to effect his entry. Behind him the crowd seethed and jostled. Though the doors stubbornly refused to open, telling Poseidon in pointed tones that his presence would not be welcome within, they grudgingly complied after a prolonged beating. They were promptly torn from their hinges as the mob roared in. Poseidon's horses, springing from the ether before him, led the charge. The thunder of sea foam, the crash of hooves and equine screams mingled with the splintering of wood while the mighty seahorses pounded over the fragments of the gilded, scented cedar portals. Oceanic fire twisted around their spumy fetlocks, eerily flowing from wide-open eyes.

Stretched over the scented wood of the doors was a delicate covering of the purest gold, beaten and moulded into four panels. The first depicted Zeus' conflict with the Titans, the second his battle with Cronos his father, and the third the gargantuan struggle with the monster Typhon, in which the gods had been all but overcome. Lastly was pictured his battle with the Giants in their attempt to scale Olympus. Hephaestus had poured all his divine artistry into the making of those doors – the images wrought upon their burnished face shifted and breathed with a grace denied to the humbler creations of flesh and blood they showed. And yet the terror and wonder of those adversaries remained in the reflected, hammered gold, so finely smoothed as to reveal the very beads of sweat upon gleaming brows or the flash of thunderbolts in their fearful eyes. Four

panels of gold as a memorial to the mighty conflicts by which peace was brought to Olympus; four panels whose likeness would never again be seen even by the immortal gods. For the countless feet trampled over them, spurning the living metal and flattening even the dents left by the blows of Poseidon.

*

The one blemish, in the eyes of the mob, on an otherwise highly enjoyable invasion had been when Dionysus had offered someone a drink. The gods were in a dangerous mood, and unfortunately for Dionysus they had been in the great hall at the time, where many had lost both their memories and their dignity, with which they were equally anxious to be reunited. So they had employed the services of the Wine God in their work of destruction. The remains of the hall's new doors bore the distinctive mark of his head, and Apollo later swore that he had seen the impression of his face in one of the panels, which the other Olympians rather scoffed at, but was seized upon by the daily news tablet, *The Helios*, as evidence of a divine manifestation in the palace. The instrument of destruction himself lay proudly unconscious under a pile of once-expensive timber, whose shattered nature bore witness to the efficacy with which he had been wielded; and also, had he been able to think, of the potency of his vintage. Dionysus would at least be able to be pleased with himself when he woke up. While he had been considered the comforter of mankind and the means by which the animal could become divine, it had not hitherto been clear that the process also worked the other way.

Wild rumours filled the city of the gods. Nothing was clearly understood apart from the fact that everyone

was looting Zeus' palace, so many others went along to join in. Sooner or later, however, they stumbled onto one of the black marble disks dotted around the floor of the palace, which transported them to the roof of the building, to the vast arena before the Air Throne. The Olympians had been there for some time already, after having ransacked the armoury. Hera wanted to be prepared for the next stage of her design, and the Throne was the most likely place she would have to face him.

There comes a point in every illicit party when the rioting fades briefly as someone poses the awkward question about the time of the parents' return. So now in Olympus, someone asked," When is Zeus getting back?"

Apollo paused in his strumming. "Has anyone considered what we're going to do when he does?" he inquired, looking pointedly at Hera. A slow silence settled over the arena, now filled with gods of all kinds, demigods, nymphs, satyrs and various personifications, plus several interested tourists from the north, who sported horned helmets and enormous unruly beards. Under the impression that it was all some kind of elaborate modern play demanding audience participation, they had established themselves and their axes comfortably in the front row of seats.

"We'll blow him out of the sky!" said Ares excitedly. About his frame were slung dozens of fresh thunderbolts, making him jangle with a cowbell ring as he walked. Zeus' helmet rested on his head, while he wore an Agamemnon's hoard in golden armour.

"Perhaps not as a first resort," considered Hera.

"Can't we just tell him to bugger off and that we don't need him any more?" suggested Poseidon.

“One feels he might have a different point of view,” said Apollo, running his hand thoughtfully over his lyre strings.

“I don’t recall him asking Cronos to abdicate,” said Hera.

“Didn’t he do unpleasant things to his genitals?” asked Poseidon with interest.

“That was Ouranos.”

“Oh,” said Poseidon in disappointment. “But didn’t Cronos cut his bollocks off?”

“I don’t think he asked his permission first.”

“Would have been damned stupid if he had,” said Hades. “If one of my kids asked if he could castrate me I’d rush him straight off to a doctor.”

“So we’re not going to ask him before we castrate him?” asked Hephaestus with puzzlement.

“We shall try him – and fight him, together, if he refuses to comply,” said Hera loudly, firmly, and hopefully forcefully enough to drive thoughts of genitals from their heads, always a difficult task when faced with a predominately male audience.

*

Breaking into the palace via the kitchens, Athene, Prometheus and Heracles burst into Zeus’ bedroom as thumps began to echo from the front door. Heracles hesitated with an angry look on his face. “Shall I go and talk to them?” he said ponderously. Drawing himself up to his full height, he struck his head on the roof.

“Don’t do anything rash,” said Athene, dragging him after her. “Isn’t it rather unfair for you to take on the whole of Olympus?”

“I suppose so,” agreed Heracles. “I do outnumber them by several hundred to one.”

"You can stand at this door and explain to anyone who wants to come in that they need special qualifications to do so," called Prometheus, as he jogged towards the door on the far side of the room, remaining, as far as they could see, in one place. The others followed him.

"What do they have to be, then?" asked Heracles.

"Dead or unconscious for preference. If anyone objects, I'll settle for dismembered."

Prometheus flung open the door. In the Office urgent alarm chimes punctuated a deep hum. Far ahead, near the throne, flashed a red light. "What on Earth is the fool doing?" moaned Prometheus. "He can't be focusing on Olympus at all."

Heracles remained determinedly by the door, seemingly unperturbed by the unusual sights confronting him. Athene hurried up to Prometheus where he sat in the throne, hammering at various tiles. Glancing at the doorkeeper, he said: "Good fellow, Heracles."

"Yes – dependable. Solid."

"Especially in the cranium. Oh Hades, what has that damned god done?"

Access Denied flashed onto the screen ahead. "*Voice recognition negative*," stated pleasant female tones. *Preparing to detonate operating couch. Five...four…*"

Prometheus hurriedly leapt from the throne, whereupon the voice fell silent. After proceeding to kick the banks of buttons, he leaned down, breathing deeply. "I'm too old for this," he said. "The Titans and Giants were supposed to be trouble, but they never say anything about the bloody gods, do they?"

"About shooting themselves in the feet?"

"Or in the head."

“Why are you so bothered, anyway?” asked Athene. “As I recall, you spent quite a long time in what you might call an uncompromising position thanks to Zeus.”

“Why have you decided to needle Hera?” he retorted. “You and she were always very friendly during the Trojan War.”

“This is different,” said Athene. “ Something’s wrong. What she said was reasonable and understandable, in a way. I can believe in the idea - not in Hera. She’s up to something peculiar, and I can’t place it. I like to know where I am with Hera.”

“Separated by half a continent’s not a bad option.”

“Zeus’ll sort it out when he comes back,” she said uneasily, as though unsure of her own conviction.

“When,” he repeated. “Why he has to disappear like this at crucial moments I can’t imagine.”

“I don’t understand him very well myself,” she confessed. “After all, he is my father, but with his kind of job one couldn’t expect to get to know him terribly.”

Prometheus gave a bitter laugh. “If you hadn’t been his daughter you’d have probably got to know him a lot better, with that body.”

Athene flushed. “ Of course, the root cause of this is Hera’s millennium of sexual frustration,” she said.

“And what about yours, my lovely?” said the Titan slyly.

“I am perfectly happy with Sophocles, thank you.”

“Sophocles?”

“My owl.”

“What in the name of goodness do you do with your owl, or don’t I want to know?”

“We converse, Prometheus. You may be a god of generation, but you must understand that not everything needs to be so wretchedly reproductive.”

"You should have had a word about that in Zeus' ear," he remarked. "Shall we relieve poor Heracles at the door? It might be wise to remain here for a little, especially if that collection of maniacs finds the armoury. If Zeus doesn't make an appearance soon, we'll have to think of something else. He is going to be particularly wild, I imagine. These silly children. What will they say when Daddy gets home?"

*

In Ancient Greece, an important part of Zeus' function was the care he took of vagabonds and beggars on Earth. More precisely, he took care that people on Earth were nice to them, plying them with meat and drink whenever they arrived at their doors. Thus it was that when Zeus reached the next village and tied up his cow beside the bar beneath the trees, he went and sat with a large group of men in the dust some distance away. The harassed bar man immediately approached with wine. The bar, Zeus noticed, was unoccupied. He had overlooked the fact that were a Greek given the choice between sitting at a bar for a fee or crouching in the dust for free, very often he will choose, quite voluntarily, to take up the harsh life of a beggar when he visits the tavern.

"There you go," said the bar man savagely, handing Zeus the brimming cup. "Shout when you want more." He glared at the solemn circle of well-dressed Greeks, sitting primly on the floor sipping their wine. "You're bastards," he said feelingly. "Do you know I haven't sold a drop of wine for years?" he announced to the nearby trees. "Oh no. But every evening there's a massive crowd of bloody beggars squatting there expecting damned drinks." He gestured wildly at the

nearest vagabond. “I know you’re not a beggar, Draco. You own the farm on the other side of town.”

“No I don’t,” said Draco calmly. “I lost it in a bet.”

“You still live there.”

“The woman who owns it uses me in the fields as a slave.”

“ You’re married to her, for gods’ sakes!”

“Does that make any difference?”

Zeus watched with interest, gulping his wine. He hadn’t intended the entire population of the country to renounce all their property and take up the path of poverty every day, but the system seemed to work, as it cost the barman very little to make his wine, and provided free entertainment for the other paupers.

Several other beggars arrived during the course of the afternoon. Some were dressed carefully in rags, but many wore jewels and other adornments, which seemed to present no impediment to their claiming free drink under the divine act. The bar man was kept busy refilling drinks for the mendicants and beggars, and as the evening drew on he amused himself by cooking them kebabs at the request of a few of the more well-dressed paupers, muttering to himself in his beard.

The potent wine flowed to Zeus’ head; the long days of sunshine that had swelled the smooth grapes only to be distilled into this liquid warmth filled the red fluid and soothed his worried mind. His fears faded, the shock of his encounter with Aphrodite was lost in the comfort of the wine. Zeus slept.

He awoke drowsily some time later. The sky was darkened, but the glowing remains of the embers cast a flickering net of orange light under the trees. The orchestra of crickets had taken over from the cicadas that played during the day, and a fully rounded moon

peered down through the open lattice of leaves above him. It was only now that he turned his mind incuriously toward Olympus, where he realised he should have looked long before; saw, and saw that it was not good.

As he untethered Io, his hands shook with a breathless anger, more at Hera's arrogant rashness that inspired by any fear that she might succeed. They had attempted to unseat him before, and failed – now he felt, rising like the rage of a territorial animal, the fury that had fuelled him in the battles of his past, a wrath it was not wise to incur. He must reach Olympus as soon as possible, to correct the folly of their plans.

He patted Io on the flank and attempted to explain to her what he must do. She should keep to the plan, and make for the Bosphorous. Her father Inachus would join her soon, and hide with her in Egypt. For the moment, Zeus had unavoidable commitments in heaven that must not be delayed, and transgressors awaited him whose reprimands were long overdue.

*

When Prometheus, Athene and Heracles emerged from Zeus' bedroom, they were met by a palace filled with splintered chaos. The residence was empty of all but the wreckage as they picked their way towards the nearest black circle. "Perhaps it will be best if we feign acquiescence for now," suggested Prometheus. "Zeus will be back before we know it, and then it'll be birds and barbecues all round." He sighed, clearly troubled by pertinent memories, and strode onto the stone. The invisible daemons surrounding the stone responsible for their transport to the Court scurried to dematerialise them and ferry their essences into the air, for swift reconstitution on the sister stone above.

In the Court on the roof, Ares was growing bored. The Air Throne was quite comfortable, he found, and commanded a relatively pleasant view, but everyone else was talking now, which as a god of action he found somewhat dull. Especially when he had such beauties to play with. Sure that the other Olympians wouldn't notice just one, he stealthily drew a thunderbolt from his bandolier.

It had a grip of polished gold, enabling the wielder to brandish it majestically with no danger from the spikes. Into the handle was embedded a safety catch, with three settings. Ares stroked the bristled length lovingly, letting his hands linger seductively on the electrum-tinted feathers curling at its end, clicked the switch to *detonate*, and threw.

A tremendous sucking roar, the Olympians dragged off their feet into the vacuum, the mighty sonic boom as the riven surfaces of air collided again. The searing bolt of untamed energy zigzagged from his hand to slam into the marble flagstones just beyond the sable circle. A thousand cracks streamed from the scorched stone as the thunder rolled overhead.

"Cor," said Ares. The empty cartridge clattered from his hand.

Prometheus rose slowly to his feet. Such was the imperiousness of his expression that the gods were able to restrain their laughter, although the long bald streak left by the thunderbolt along the middle of his head did look rather amusing. "Good afternoon, Ares," he said dryly, "though I can think of more conventional ways of welcoming people."

Poseidon suggested a vote of no confidence in a president who was liable to hurl thunderbolts without provocation, but was swiftly quelled by Artemis, who

pointed out that such a vote might in fact be considered as sufficient provocation for anything, especially when considering its author.

Hera's smile when greeting Prometheus did little to conceal her expression of extreme distaste. "I'm terribly sorry you missed the meeting," she said. "It would have been delightful to have you there."

"Oh, I'm really sorry I missed it too," he enthused. "I'd have been fascinated to see how you persuaded so many gods to write off their futures." An uneasy murmur form the milling demigods greeted his words. Hera sighed. "Prometheus, they have done just the opposite," she said. "They have seized their futures."

"With you to offer them a helping hand," he mused. "So thoughtful of you, so very altruistic…how long have you left yourself to get away, incidentally? I don't recall Zeus being too keen on rebels."

"I think you'll find that everything has been seen to," said Hera, a faint air of smugness blossoming around her. "Ares is ready with his thunderbolts, the People are gathered here to demand their rights from the usurper, and the economics of Olympus are primed to support my vision of a new heaven and a new Earth."

"Gods help us," said Prometheus. He grinned at Hera. "Well, I suppose there's no harm in hanging around to see how you get on?"

"As long as you're all very quiet and don't criticise anything," said Hera. "I hate it when you criticise things."

"Yes, lots of people have told me that."

"Perhaps you should listen to majority opinion."

"Oh, I don't know," considered the Titan. "I'd only ever vote for a party that stood no chance of winning an

election, you see. They'd probably be the only decent people running."

*

If Zeus had any intention of defending his kingdom, he displayed lamentably little dedication in doing so, as the day dimmed and darkened without so much as a whisper of punitive thunder.

To dissipate the erosive, indefinable dread that overlay the Olympic Court as they waited for a vengeful supreme god who failed to appear, Hera instructed Apollo to keep the crowd entertained. Above all, she knew she must preserve their buoyant mood, or she would lose them in the inevitable onslaught of Zeus' rage.

As Apollo strutted, gyrating with bent knees and wiggling pelvis, the surges of maddened nymphs were restrained with difficulty by the mountain god police, who were most useful and effective when employed as living bollards.

Flying with all his strength, Zeus swept towards the billows of cloud over the mountain, close to the speed of sound. The city of the gods glittered, enlaced in wisps of night mist. He knew they'd be waiting for him on the top, so without slowing his pace he swung under the cloud blanket, close to the humped summit of the mountain. Angling his flight sharply upwards at the last possible moment, he halted abruptly in mid air. Here he hung directly beneath the city, on the border of human vision.

Looking around furiously, he saw what he sought – a couple of steps protruding from the cloud. His feet pounded on the stairway as he raced upwards. Emerging in the cellars of his palace, the secret stairs had never

been used before, but now discharged their purpose faithfully.

Had Zeus been angry before, his wrath at the sight of his house persuaded him otherwise. Each time he thought he had reached the pinnacle of rage, the sky opened above him revealing endless new vistas of fury to which he could soar. In a cold mixture of undiluted fury he strode into the great hall and paused under the air vent in the ceiling, breathing heavily. Sounds of music and screams drifted down to him.

*

During Apollo's performance, Ares remarked, "He's good, isn't he?" to whomever was leaning on the back of the Air Throne.

"Yes," they replied. "Good pair of lungs on him."

Ares frowned suddenly and began to think – a dangerous undertaking. He could see that none of the Olympians had left their seats, and although his subconscious told him it had registered the voice before, he didn't find himself inclined to agree with it. Slowly he turned round.

"Oh," he said.

"Good word," said Zeus encouragingly. "Just the word I myself should use were I in your position. Which, if I might be so bold as to point it out, is in my throne." The Olympic crown suddenly glowed more brightly on his brow.

"Oh," repeated Ares. The God of War was a hard and stubborn fighter, but he never felt entirely at his ease in the presence of his father at the best of times. The current situation did not, in his estimation, qualify as one of the most comfortable moments in their relationship.

"It might be an idea to get out of my throne," said Zeus.

Ares looked around desperately. No one else had noticed anything.

"Oh," he said

"I meant, before I blow you out of it."

The sky opened above Olympus and the funnel of wind exploded on the Air Throne, sucking the energy out of every intermolecular bond, leaving reality oscillating dangerously. But in a second the thunder faded, the vibrations ceased. Ares sprawled in a dazed heap of thunderbolts at Artemis' feet. He had taken the wise step of leaping out of the Air Throne as quickly as possible, while those in its immediate vicinity had been crushed into their seats by the blast. There was silence.

"Hello everybody," said Zeus from the Air Throne. "Playtime is over now." There came no reply. "Come on, isn't someone going to try to explain?" He began to feign great interest in the fingernails of his left hand. "Don't any of you have anything to say for yourselves?" Hera stood. "No," she said.

Zeus' gaze swivelled.

The impact of their meeting wills clashed like a microcosm of the birth and death of a small universe, implacable hatred meeting unrelenting anger.

"I see," said Zeus.

"We are to try you for your crimes," said Hera levelly. "In a fair trial, which you never gave Cronos. Monarchy in Olympus has had its day, Zeus. And so have you."

He looked into her eyes, deep as the sky with its shifting constellations, and saw the reason why. With a superior laugh, he said, "Go on then. Try me. I'll wait till you've finished." He crossed his legs and leant back in the throne.

The atmosphere relaxed slightly and the audience of gods shuffled in their seats again. Dionysus, swathed in

bandages, had now joined the Olympians, sitting sullenly between Poseidon and Hephaestus.

"Who're the judge and jury, by the way?" asked Zeus disinterestedly. "You're going to find it hard to try me by my peers."

Addressing the crowd, Hera didn't answer directly. "It is for you, as the citizens of the Theocratic Republic, to pass judgement on your tyrant, to decide whether to cast him into Tartarus as he cast his father, or merely to exile him from Olympus."

"You do realise that if I hadn't thrown Cronos into Tartarus none of this would be here?"

"There is a saying about means and ends you might want to bear in mind."

The response of the crowd was less exuberant than earlier in the day. It is one thing to malign the headmaster when he is out of the room, but when he turns up with a cane in his hand one tends to have rather less to say. Among the audience the feeling was current that the spectator on the throne, being only mildly amused, would only wait till they became tiresome before removing them all. In addition, a number of them were aware they had made rather a mess of his house. Not that those present had assisted in any way of course – only watching the actions of the Olympians in horror – nor had they broken into the treasure chambers or the armoury. In fact, the list of what they had not done was very extensive.

Hera, impervious to the trembling of her followers, declared the Court open and prepared to read the charges against Zeus, erstwhile king of Heaven.

"And father of too many gods and men to mention," interposed Poseidon.

"Illegitimate for the most part," came Hades' voice

“Who the hell are you calling illegitimate?” said Apollo angrily. “We all know you’re a bastard, Hades. As if Cronos and Rhea were married…”

“They were.”

“Got the certificate?”

“Shut up and let her get on with it,” admonished Zeus. “I’m getting bored. And impatient.”

“You, as the citizens of the Theocratic Republic, are to vote on whether, in your opinion, the defendant is guilty. The charges are as follows: Firstly, his unlawful exercise of power over lesser deities. Secondly, his oppression of same. Thirdly, his maintenance of an untheocratic hereditary system of government denying you deities the freedom that should be yours by birth. Fourthly, his use of force to maintain his rule. Fifthly, his discrimination against women-”

“I do not discriminate against women,” shouted Zeus hotly.

“You do,” replied Hera. “You only have affairs with the pretty ones.”

“Why should I have an affair with one remotely resembling yourself?”

“You married me.”

“Yes,” agreed Zeus equably. “Seems to have been rather a mistake on my part, doesn’t it?”

“Lastly,” cried Hera, “comes the most devastating charge of all, which we intend to use as final exemplification of character type, providing conclusive evidence of the veracity of the other charges – his adultery with a fellow Olympian, none other than Aphrodite!”

Spontaneous cheers broke out from some of the satyrs at this news, for Aphrodite had long been regarded as being on the list of restricted substances. Had Zeus’

reputation been in any doubt before, his prowess was now firmly assured. The satyrs fell silent when it became clear that such a reaction was not desired, and maintained very proper expressions of righteous disapproval.

Furiously, Zeus leapt to his feet. “I did not commit adultery with her…she was the one…”

“Yes, I’m sure,” shouted Hephaestus, jumping up in front of him. “She’s my wife, you damned fornicator.”

“And she’s my lover,” cried Ares, rising unsteadily to his feet. Zeus punched Hephaestus in the face. As he reeled backwards Poseidon sprang forward to pin Zeus’ arms behind him, only to be hurled backwards as Zeus turned on him. A shower of decorative sparks flowered around Zeus’ fist as it connected with the sea-god’s chin. Poseidon collapsed.

“To those charges we shall now add brawling in court,” said Hera.

Zeus returned to the throne. “I’ll give you another minute or so,” he warned, “and then the curtain comes down on this play acting.”

On Hera’s signal, a small square of material materialised in the hand of each demigod surrounding them. “Examine, all of you, this last piece of evidence, should you require it. Then we shall put it to the vote.”

“I hope she’s relaxed the censorship laws,” whispered Prometheus to Athene. The reproductions of Aphrodite’s Psychogram were clearly proving popular.

“Now, to vote,” began Hera.

“One moment,” said Zeus.

The king of gods and men rose from his throne.

*

The deities of the Ancient Greeks were not for the most part friendly or benign. Instead they embodied the

implacable forces against which a man must strive for all the days of his life, possessing the power to uplift or condemn humanity as they chose. They were worshipped not out of a sense of good or evil but through the fear of what life would be like without their help or in the face of their anger. Nor did any man expect good to come from a god by his own will – for they owed nothing to man, not even what mortals surrendered in sacrifice. The terrible powers beyond our understanding were not rational or moral, merely following some divine law that led the peoples of Greece always to fear their retribution and live their lives under the shadow of the gods, ever attempting to propitiate the unfathomable deities and enlist their support in the unending battle of existence.

Or at least that was what men thought. Zeus had attempted to break the mould. True, his rule had begun in violence, and he had decreed long ago that man might only learn through suffering. But life cannot have only one face, and he had filled it with mingled tragedy and triumph – and had seen that in the tragedy the meaning of the triumph is found; that to see this is in some small way to reach beyond the monotony of the mundane. For eons beyond the count of man he had held his reign in Olympus as fairly as he had thought possible, cared for the children of Earth, as had no other. Perhaps he had let few interfere with his toil – let them remain with their own concerns. An eternity of labour lay in the maintenance of one stream, in the erosion of the beds, the banks, the sustenance of life within its waters, the bubbles glinting in the sunlight on its surface. Each had his place, however humble. For without the humble the proud cease to exist.

Never before had he realised the full extent of Hera's bitter, vitriolic detestation. And suddenly he felt remorse as well as anger; for he saw that such hatred was only born and nurtured by long years of accumulation. His child, through his efforts alone had it grown and swelled within his wife to break from her in this terrible birth. This, the most dangerous of the attempts at the seat of his power.

"You have forgotten the speech for the defence," he said. " Hera, can we not let a matter that is only of our concern be fought between you and I? Don't jeopardise all we have laboured so long to create and protect. Is this not aroused by my actions against you alone?"

The silence was heavy and expectant. "Yes," said Hera. Time slowed. For a moment, perhaps, Lacathis' hands stilled on the Tapestry. "But what I have said to the gods of Olympus is true whatever the reason. Never have you recognised their equality as gods, whether powerful or not. To rule alone was your only desire – and with what right? No other than that you were the greatest of Cronos' sons."

He addressed the crowd. "Have you not been happy under my rule? Have we not built Olympus up in peace? Remember, I cast down the Giants, Typhon and the Titans, monsters of oppression…"

"Only to become one yourself. "

As Hera watched her husband's perplexed, rather sad face, a tiny germ of remorse sprang up in the soil of her anger. It rose, put out leaves and pushed down roots, rising in her till inevitably the poison of her hatred poured upon it in a dissolving torrent. Why feel remorse or sorrow? He had never shown any himself, never a vestige of concern. Why forgo this victory she had awaited for all these millennia?

“ I want them to vote,” she said.
“Get on with it, then,” he said, staring at the sky. “As if it’ll make any difference.”
“Examine the piece of evidence you each hold,” cried Hera. “ Use it to determine whether you count Zeus guilty of these charges. Raise your hands if you count him guilty – of the charge of adultery, if none of the others. His fate shall be the same however you condemn him.”

Zeus remained silent; a massive and shadowed form crouched on his throne, swathed in cloud. Light flickered on his brow. Yet in a nightmare of terror at his aspect, the lesser gods went on with their farce, and continued their folly despite the certain knowledge of their doom.

The Olympians looked at the waving sea of hands with disbelief. “ I think,” said Hera in a self-satisfied voice, “that is how one spells ‘Guilty’.”

Zeus rose slowly from his throne. “ I declare this verdict null,” he said. “You led them to this conclusion.”
“It was not I that led them thither,” she answered him.
Without speaking, Zeus advanced purposefully towards his wife. In sudden fear she started backwards. At this sign a group of satyrs, specially primed of such a contingency, lifted their voices and began to shout, “Down with the king! Freedom…Liberty!” It was echoed by another group on the other side. More and more took up the chant till the whole arena was filled with the deafening roar of their voices.

The king of Olympus stood motionless in the middle. He looked from side to side – everywhere he saw hatred and mockery in their eyes. There was no hope among

the Olympians. Beleaguered in a sea of clamour, he found someone plucking at his elbow.

He looked down. Crouching obsequiously at his feet was a grey, wizened shape with lank white hair and spindle limbs. A wide leering mouth opened in the wrinkled face and jeering eyes peered up at him. His heart contracted, for it was the God of Fear.

Zeus swept into the air. The mountain and the city of the gods shook with his anger. Reason had tried and failed – only one way now remained for him to retain his power. Louder than the turmoils of a volcanic eruption his voice roared over Olympus, and silence fell. Alighting in the centre of the arena, he glared at Hera. "Down with the king, you say?" he cried, as he tried to ignore the grotesque shape of Fear shambling towards him. "We do not fall that easily. If it is your wish to depose me, then I demand the rights of the Sacred King."

"What're they?" whispered Heracles.

"They used to be performed on Earth," Athene whispered in return. "The king fights a series of challengers till one of them overcomes him. If none of them do, he remains. But whoever conquers him is the next king."

Zeus stood arrogantly before the height of the Air Throne. Most of the male gods avidly contemplated the floor or the cloud formations above. "Do you want single combat or not?" asked Hera scathingly. Zeus threw back his head in laughter. "Single combat?" he crowed. "I'll take you all on, and kick you out of heaven into the bargain."

"We have all your thunderbolts," said Poseidon.

"Oh, really?" asked Zeus. With a languid hand, he reached before him, and a rending sound accompanied

the stripping of the air molecules' electron shells, letting the atomic particles spiral around his hand in swiftly orbiting bands about his fist, glowing with light. "I hate to disappoint you, but Hephaestus only makes the casing."

There came a rush and the trample of desperate feet as the demigods stampeded in escape. Zeus swung on them, and they complied with his injunction to be seated. It is not wise to disobey an angry god armed with a thunderbolt. " I do hope you won't accuse me of using fear to keep people in order," he enquired politely.

Clotho, reading the scroll intently, raised her hand. Only an inch of the thick golden strand remained unused in the web before it became black as night. Lacathis worked feverishly. Clotho's hand came down. "Now!" she said.

The blackened thread swept into the Tapestry.

Zeus' hand closed on air as he reached for another thunderbolt. On a subsequent wave, no flicker of electricity gathered around his fingers. Puzzled, he halted his advance, snapped his fingers, to be met with nothing. The eyebrow, then. Waggling his eyebrows desperately, he leapt into the air, intending to soar above the gods, but landed abruptly.

And an icy fear began to sleet through his brain as the first terrible realisation crept upon him. Down upon the second sight of his divine vision descended a paralysis, a numbing sheet of blindness and incomprehension. Like the darkening sky, he saw the world as he knew it slowly lose its colours; felt knowledge and surety bleed away like fluid from a fissured vessel, saw the sweep of his perception muddied, veiled and tunnelled till at last all he could perceive lay around him, and for the first time he looked

up to see as a mortal sees, confined to the space of the present and the limits of his physicality, blind to the endlessness of time and dimension that hitherto he had always known. Wisdom, divinity, godhead, omnipotence, the power to command and control – all shrouded or removed by the dull miasma that crouched ever closer around his head. But most of all the blindness…

He remembered, all those eons ago, when Cronos had lost his divine power, remembered the terror in his eyes and despair in his cry as he had struck him down. He jumped again, and again, and noticed the silence.

In a horrified haze Zeus realised that every incredulous face in that entire assemblage was turned towards him, so many, more than he could guess. It occurred to him that perhaps, despite his tendencies in that area, it had been unwise to make so many enemies. But it seemed unlikely that he was to have an opportunity to rectify the problem.

“ I think I shall opt for single combat after all,” he croaked, hoping no one could see the wild fear in his eyes, or smell its bitter sting.

He could dismiss the demigods, none of whom would so much as dare to face him. Instead he turned towards the great gods with as much of a swagger as he could muster, hoping to keep the tremble out of his knees. With head tilted backwards he looked scornfully at each. Heracles held his gaze for a moment, and then stepped back. “ No,” he said, “ I will not fight the king.” Zeus had begun to feel more cheerful till he saw whom Hera was urging forward.

Ares, wearing Zeus’ golden armour, bearing his thunderbolts, nearly as vast as Heracles and quite possibly the only immortal who might stand any chance

of retaining a few limbs after a disagreement with him. Ares, his son, and so the final element in the pattern, for which the Universe held its breath.

And Zeus looked at the sky, knowing he was doomed. The long years of triumph ended here, after a downward spiral of adultery, jealousy and deceit. He had wrought this end for himself; the combined efforts of Aphrodite and Hera were but the final touch. This was the way of the world, where father fell to son in a ceaseless cycle. As Ouranos fell to Cronos and he to Zeus, so now Zeus saw his doom and gazed into its face. The theft of his divinity became suddenly explicable, for it was the time of his passing.

But then his anger overcame his acceptance. "Very well, Ares," he said. The God of War came forward. "If he beats me," went on Zeus, " then I submit to the will of your Theocratic Republic. But if I win, then the republic is dissolved and I am King once more."

Hera inclined her head. "Back to back in the centre, both of you. At twenty paces you may turn and begin."

The demigods were silent once again, clustered in their seats as the two gods walked to the middle of the arena; Zeus tall and proud, his white tunic clinging closely to his mighty frame, Ares covered by an unwieldy mass of metal and bandoliers of thunderbolts, even taller then his father. The Olympians took their seats again beneath the cloudy height of the Air Throne.

Slowly Hera counted twenty paces. Even before the last number had left her lips, Ares was spinning round faster than the eye could focus, a screaming bolt of live electricity hissing from his hand. It crackled with a drumbeat of thunder through the air.

But Zeus had hurled himself to the floor as Ares had swivelled. The thunderbolt earthed itself in the bank of

seats opposite, hurling away senseless demigods. Zeus bounded up and twisted aside as a second thunderbolt blistered past, burning the skin on his back. He threw himself forward. Two thunderbolts down – Ares would have to rearm.

His hands whipped backwards to his sides, drawing fresh thunderbolts from their sheaths. Zeus' eyes, focused like a hunting animal's, did not swerve from his face. He had only one thunderbolt and no intention of wasting it. Two paces from Ares, he threw.

The arena buckled and shook beneath their feet. Ares was tumbled backwards by the blast as the hot air echoed and the broken shards of armour spun from his shoulder. Zeus was upon him. His foot swung, catching Ares in the stomach, and as he doubled up, both fists arced into his face. Zeus punched him again and again, desperately. His left hand closed on the casing of a thunderbolt, which he dragged from the bandolier.

Ares fist thudded into his midriff. Gasping for air, Zeus collapsed on the floor, and snarled with pain as Ares' foot caught him in the kidney. Rolling over, he had only just enough time to stagger up before a thunderbolt slammed into the flagstone. Circling cloud coiled up around them.

Ares was virtually unhurt. The breastplate had taken the force of the thunderbolt, and had paid handsomely for it. He drew another two, and strode through the steam towards Zeus. Cheers seemed to filter through from without, but for the two gods, the arena was their universe.

The War God's eyes locked like range finders on Zeus. As his hand drew back, Zeus somersaulted, wincing when the roaring bolt grazed his feet. He

thumped into the war god's face heel first – even Ares would find that a bit of a mouthful.

Ares crashed with a clatter to the floor, but in the same movement he rolled, grabbing Zeus' ankle to swing him in a wide arc, smashing him into the flagstones. Zeus dragged himself up, and let fly his thunderbolt at Ares' head though the mists.

The helmet exploded in a riven shower of melted gold. Ares rose like an avenging Titan from the dissipating smoke. His fist shot out, catching Zeus on the chin and hurling him out of the clouds of their conflict into the open space before the thrones. The Olympic Crown, already dislodged, clanged from his head and rolled unsteadily in concentric circles as his body thudded into the floor. Ares picked him up, one hand beneath his neck, the other on a leg. With all his force he cast him towards the high columns of the Gate.

The cheers sounded frozen, artificial, as he spiralled slowly in the air. All his breath was knocked out of him when he pounded into the flagstones. Curled up in pain, he could only watch as Ares strode forward, the other Olympians pushing at his heels. He saw Hera, bearing the transparent flicker of the Olympic Crown in her hands. For the first time since the fall of Cronos, Zeus felt the wind play through his uncovered hair.

He saw the thunderbolt in Ares' hand; saw the cruel light glinting on its jagged shards and spikes, the vivid electricity pulsing through its translucent golden sides. He heard the click of the catch, but the fallen god never saw it thrown.

Celestial storms drifted slowly before his glazed eyes, where his body span, suspended in deepest space. Even as he began to enjoy the sensation, one eye slid reluctantly back into the real world, dragging the rest of

him protesting with it – the screaming brain he vainly tried to press into the cold marble floor, cooler in the gloom of the gate. Then he looked up into the speckled sky.

Dimly he became aware of a darker shape blocking out a swathe of midnight blue. Through pain-sodden eyes, Zeus blearily peered at a face shadowed against the heavens, seeking vainly for any sign of remorse. Around him crowded an eager rabble of gods and goddesses, who but lately had shrunk in fear of Zeus' anger. Jeers and shouts came faintly to his ears.

This is it, he thought. Give no quarter, and all that. This was no time to play fair, if he didn't want to spend the rest of his immortality with some brainless bird eating various sensitive parts of his anatomy. Ares stood with one foot on either side of Zeus' fallen body in his triumph, gazing around with that silly grin of his. Stupid boy – never trust a man on the ground.

Zeus' foot shot upwards. Ares' high shriek echoed over Olympus. Thunderbolts flew from his hands as he clasped them between his legs. In slow motion Zeus saw the golden strands of electricity outlined against the sky. Rolling and rolling, he came to his knees on the very brink of the roof. He was at the gate, the pillars either side of him. Far, far below him, the folds of Olympus and its craggy, tree dusted range opened dizzily.

He jumped. At the same moment the thunderbolts shattered the air with the combined force of their colossal detonations. The roof heaved and cracked. Gods were flung in all directions; the Olympians hurled in a spiral away from the epicentre of the explosion. In the gateway, the two mighty pillars tottered, livid cracks coursing through their marble, till with a rumble they cascaded down in a shower of splintered stone, hurling

the arch they supported into the middle of the blackened arena.

Zeus was flung far out by the blast. As he turned gently in the air, he swung helpless over the wrinkled mountains and into the airs above the Thessalian Plains. The rush of wind deafened him as he hurtled down towards the earth.

Part Two

"If you're a customer, well, that's when you get the *really* big smile, as the businessman carefully takes up his position directly behind you, unzips his flies, and prepares to service the account…whoever coined the phrase 'Let the buyer beware' was probably bleeding from the asshole." (George Carlin, Entertainer.)

Chapter Five

There were few witnesses of the supreme god's fall from heaven. No doubt a number of people saw a dark speck plummet from the sky like a hunting eagle, but few remembered it. Many more will have felt the slight tremor of the earth and attributed it to the anger of a god, not to the impact made by one travelling at terminal velocity.

The wind swirled the column of dust over the foothills. Granules settled on leaves and scurried along the grassy paths between the trees. A huge sunken crater had been blasted in the plain. Here in northern Thessaly few people lived and little grew except the indomitable tufty grass that will screw a living from the most parched of soils, but even the grasses had been torn from the earth – only the fine, eddying dust filled the scattered basin. Rocks, odd fragments of bushes and shredded thorn had been scattered in a wide circle beneath the folded hills, the first hummocks leading to the mighty peaks of the Olympic range.

Zeus opened his eyes. Dust gritted on his eyelids and coated his lips. Though his body shivered with an inordinate amount of pain, he found himself somewhat

disinterested. He lay for a long time without moving, as there seemed little point in getting up. The knowledge of his continued immortality was hardly a consolation, though he supposed that were he not deathless there would have been little chance of his survival, and he'd now be an artistic pattern on the ground.

Now he saw how he had overcome his father in the morning of the world. Once Cronos had parted with his divinity, all that remained was his bloodlust and immortality. But such a thing could never happen to the god who had been decreed the eternal…Zeus was the king and father of gods and men. Rolling up onto one agonised elbow, he took a handful of the pale dust he lay on. Were he still able to change it, he would know there had been some mistake, but it was some time before he had the courage to try.

Stubbornly, the dust remained dust. Zeus flung it away and lay down. Strange – he'd have thought he would have felt devastated or wretchedly sad, and yet he felt… nothing. Except sore.

So the Fates had caught up with him. He'd been a fool to think he could evade them forever, and must now share the doom of his father and his father before him. Suddenly he brightened as it occurred to him that for the time being he was still moderately free, a luxury in which Cronos and Ouranos had not participated. With difficulty he struggled up and stood on shaky legs. Though he appeared to be trapped immutably in his mortal form, at least they hadn't got him yet.

Beyond the tentative foothills of the Olympic range the mountains really got going and took up a creditable assault on the sky, in mockery of their smaller brethren nearer the plain. To a mortal eye, the sky above Mount Olympus itself would have seemed clear, but Zeus

could just make out the cloud plateau of the city of the gods.

Making his way unsteadily to the edge of the crater, he took stock of his situation. Being over seven feet tall was a plus, he supposed. Possessions; one tunic, scorched and very dusty, many bruises, cuts and burns. An irrational desire to laugh began to rise in him. You would have though this sort of thing didn't happen to gods. Mortals wrote poems where the gods showed their displeasure with those who were too successful, little knowing that the same rules seemed to apply further up the scale as well.

It occurred to Zeus that a number of gods in Olympus would be a great deal happier were he in Tartarus rather than Thessaly. With this inspiring thought in mind, he considered what few options remained open to him. Only the Fates could tell whether his divine power had deserted him permanently. More pressing than anything else was the urge to get as far from Olympus as quickly as he could. Whatever the differences between gods and men, neither takes kindly to being kicked in the genitals.

Zeus set off. He had no idea where he was going, or what he would do when he got there. But for the present, the most important direction was Away.

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The Olympic Court steamed in disarray. As will happen at even the most carefully organised party, the fireworks had gone slightly wrong. A gang of mountain gods had been ordered to repair the damage while the Olympians, who had taken the full force of the explosions, were being treated in Asclepius' medical bays. Strangely enough, the mountain gods sat idly near the Air Throne. They had understood little of what had

taken place on the previous day, but had no wish to obey their orders, and distinctly recalled hearing phrases uttered on the subject of pay. At first, they had bowed their boulder-strewn shoulders to the buckled marble flooring, shifting it irresistibly back into place with the tectonic force of their vast backs and thighs, but on making the association between work and pay had decided to call a halt to construction.

"Nice view, hey?" ventured one.

"Yeah," said another.

"This is fun, isn't it?" said a third.

The second, who was a mountain god of limited vocabulary, said, "Yeah."

The brow of the first speaker furrowed. Deep ravines and ghylls fissured the earthy surface of his forehead. "We're all equal now, right?" he asked.

The second god responded in a vein broadly similar to his previous utterances.

"How come we wasn't yesterday?"

The third brightened. "That's 'cos we was oppressed yesterday."

The first god said ah, so they weren't oppressed now then, to which the third replied no, they were not. Furthermore, he assured his hearers, they were now at liberty to do as they pleased and would have to perform no work for which they did not receive adequate remuneration. Like for example, they could sit up here like the posh gods until they got paid. The first said this was a bit of all right, wasn't it, and his audience agreed that he had put his finger on it. A pause ensued in this hitherto sparkling exchange of views.

"You know," said the second god, breaking his profound silence, " the funny thing is, I never noticed I was oppressed till the others said we were."

Later in the day, the deities' reveries were rudely interrupted by Ares, who violently threw them out of his seat, which, it transpired, they were not permitted to occupy. Admittedly, he had wanted to clear room for the first official meeting of the new government, and his disposition had been little improved by the extensive surgery to his genitals that Asclepius had performed, but the mountain gods felt that their new status warranted a little more respect. It was only after a prolonged altercation that they agreed to leave. Moving ponderously over the Court, like rolling hills shifting against the horizon as a watcher changes position, they left the government in a poor mood to begin the meeting.

The first day of the Theocratic Republic had not itself begun auspiciously. It had also begun rather late, as Helios had stayed in bed for the first time since the creation of the world, resulting in an embarrassing scene at the Gates of Dawn when he discovered that the sun had left without him and was making its way, unguided, up the dome of heaven, albeit rather late itself. Some time elapsed before he was able to catch it.

Flooding into Olympus came a deluge of anxious prayers and sacrifices. Were it not for the failsafe systems operated by the Office and the Worship Works, the majority would have gone answered and unheard, for the gods to whom they were directed seemed suddenly to have found before them previously unimagined vistas of immortal entertainment. As though following a pattern preordained, a stencil imposed on their lives, they found themselves in cycles of purchase, spectating or eddied by streams of other gods, all branded with that peculiar mask of aggression and vacuity that graces the features of shoppers. Unasked, a

myriad more shops had extruded overnight, crawling like a colourful cancer along the winding streets of the West Side, straightening them as they went. Of these, by far the majority seemed for some reason to associate themselves with female attire, and were thus thronged with dryads, naiads, and weedy river goddesses, many of whom had trimmed their horns so as to fit into the slinkier dresses. To an observer, it would have seemed that a male deity came free of charge with a purchase from such a boutique, seeing as each shop collected an interesting selection of males, who remained milling listlessly round the entrances, till they attached themselves to emerging females.

As yet formless themselves and indeterminate, those powers that gave shape and being to what drove the lesser gods, to the forces that preyed upon their minds, invading their consciousness and the fabric of their lives, lay watchful over the West side, comfortable, content and undetected.

*

Olympians, bandaged and bruised, and assuaged with unguents and nectar, assembled in swirls of light, dimming the sunshine on the roof of the palace. Hera, after attempting to keep order and reluctantly letting it go, was relieved when she received a moderately sensible question when she opened the floor.

"Do we all have to have different functions now?" fretted Apollo.

"Worried about the Muses, are we?" said Poseidon with a lecherous grin. "You should be, boy. I'm gunning for your job, and those girls aren't going to…"

"Let you anywhere near them, I imagine," sniffed Artemis. "If you were the last god alive…"

“Oh, you’re just repressed,” replied her uncle cheerfully. “Denial, it’s called.”
“I think it best if we keep our functions,” stated Hera. “Poseidon, could you pay attention? To something other that Artemis’ chest, that is.”
“It’s a lot more gripping than politics,” he protested.
“Am I wrong in supposing that we are to draw up new laws to protect the rights of women from harassment by males?” asked Artemis. “Particularly large, unpleasant looking males smelling of fish.”
Hera, for hers was a warrior spirit, continued valiantly, in a manner to throw Homer into rhapsodies. “I propose, however, to alter the names of our functions, as the start of the modernising process. For we must really clear away the cobwebs and show our people that we truly have a young, vibrant heaven up here. As an example, can I hear votes from the floor as to Ares’ title?”
“How about ‘god of war’?” suggested Prometheus.
“I said something new,” admonished Hera.
Prometheus muttered unintelligible curses about modernism into his beard while the other Olympians indulged in thought, a delicate undertaking for most of them at the best of times. Poseidon’s suggestion of ‘Stupid dolt who chucks thunderbolts around without telling people first’ was, despite its undeniable attraction, eventually rejected in favour of Hera’s proposal. They voted on it, to the accompanied complaints of most of the male deities, who found the process tedious.

“Now, Ares, you are officially ‘Deity to Superintend Hostile and Offensive Humano-Divine Interactions’.”
“Gosh!” he said. “And I can’t even spell ‘Ares’! ”

After Poseidon reluctantly accepted the epithet of ‘Deity to Control and Regulate Systems Oceanic and

Marine, and the Inhabitants Thereof', and Hera took the title of First Minister to the President, Ares declared Zeus officially deposed and the People's Republic instituted into perpetuity. It was perhaps a little disappointing that none of the People were present to witness the inception of their age of freedom, but an important bladder match, the call of the West Side stores, and the visual delights offered on a continual basis by Dionysus' screens had intruded on their time. Besides, no one had invited them.

"In our efficient running of the state," continued Hera, "I believe we should form ourselves into a closed body, taking a title that implies the invisible and indispensable nature of our work, while serving to closet us from disturbing influences, such as lesser gods. Or Poseidon," she added, looking at him regretfully. She seldom had much cause to thank her husband, and at this instance, she was filled with an unsisterly speculation that had Zeus overlooked Poseidon's presence in Cronos' stomach when he had rescued them all, her life would have been much brighter as a result.

"What about Wardrobe?" suggested Apollo. "They're very important, and they have doors you can shut."

"Yours may have," said Hades bitterly. "Mine always comes open and spills things everywhere. Faulty workmanship, no doubt."

"Are you suggesting I can't build wardrobes?" snapped Hephaestus.

"Did I say you made it?" said an injured Hades. "I don't recall doing so. Now, to my mind that would suggest a sense of paranoid predisposition on your part to regard yourself as a maker of faulty wardrobes."

"Will you shut up?" shouted Hera.

“Wardrobe is fine,” said Ares loudly. His conception of his duties, he found, seemed to be crystallising. One shouted loudly and repressed disputatious deities. “We shall all be Wardrobe ministers, and this shall be the place of Wardrobe meetings.”
“Do we have to have meetings?” complained Hades. “ Some of us have duties to see to.”
“We shall institute a salary system to compensate,” said Hera. “For the lesser gods, it is already in place.”
“Who did that?”
“I did.”
“Oh, ok. You mean they now get paid?”
“Yes. It is a system of control. Through the devolution of an element of freedom, we increase our hold on them while making it simultaneously harder to isolate. And if they want to obsess about their wages, then it leaves us free to get on with running things.”
“Seems pretty silly to me. You mean if there was a god of bowel movements, we’d have to pay him for crap?”
“Nothing unusual there,” replied Hera. “Mortals do that with politicians all the time.”
“What are we going to do about Zeus, more importantly?” asked Artemis. Instinctively, she looked to Hera.
“We shall find him,” she said calmly, struggling to master the rage within that would not subside, with the cocky, irrepressible enemy who had not only evaded her but seemed to be sticking out his tongue at her as well, “pursue him to the ends of the earth, beyond the Pillars of Heracles and below Tartarus, if need be. I shall not rest nor be satisfied till he lies confined with his father in everlasting agony. And remember – that as long as he is free and walks the earth, we are in constant danger.

At any moment he may regain his strength and destroy what we have created. He will show scant mercy to us."
The impulse of veracity within her strove with her will, but proved wanting. Her only hope, she knew, of the vengeance she so bitterly desired lay in the ignorance of the Olympians, their blindness to the truth she had discovered.

Once more, she stood in mind in the liquid darkness before the Fates, whither she had ventured on her discovery of his flight. Clotho kindly offered her tea, which she prudently refused. The Fates' efforts to attain normality were notorious, both in extent and their spectacular lack of success. But they revealed to her what she had not thought to discover. "I do not fully comprehend the Scroll," confessed Clotho. "Its meaning is obscure…but know, Hera, that the day of Zeus has passed. A gap has opened in reality, as it did in the fall of Ouranos and Cronos after him. Here lies the danger, for the cycle is not yet complete. Zeus walks the earth, free. Powerless, admittedly, in the guise of a mortal man, but he rules his own destiny. Until Zeus is bound, Fate is undecided, his successor will not be determined, and a tatter lies in the fabric of the world. Guard against what may try to enter in, Queen of the Gods. Already, you may see the handiwork of a deity older than you at work in the heavens."
"What do you mean?"
"The powers of levelling and monetary control, Hera. Argurion and Ploutokratia are seeking to return. And unchecked, they may overcome you."
"I know what I am doing. These forces are working at my command."
But she had not liked that quiet smile of the other goddess, the gentle shake of her head.

“Can you not tell me where I may find Zeus?”
Clotho smiled. “Now, that would be cheating, wouldn’t it?”

Her only hope lay in convincing the others of his danger to them, for otherwise, she knew, they would do no more than forget. “I think it prudent now to introduce you to the means by which Zeus has concealed himself from us,” she began. “He has altered reality so as to render himself imperceptible, but I hope we shall be able to reverse this process. This has priority for the moment – at our next meeting we can draft our constitution and decide how to begin the modernising process.”
“What does need modernising, just out of interest?” asked Poseidon.
“That’s a silly question! Practically everything, of course.”
“Why?”
“Because the existing systems in Olympus are outdated and only retained for sentimental reasons.”
“Like monarchy and rule by Olympians, for example?”
“Exactly. See how we have already modernised our governmental process! Now, in its stead, we have something genuinely different, which gives everyone a fair chance to live how they choose.”
“As long as it fits in with what we want,” said Ares. “Where are you taking us, Hera?”
“I don’t believe any of you besides Hephaestus and Prometheus… Hephaestus! How dare you sleep at a Wardrobe meeting?”
“Me?” said a suddenly wide-awake Hephaestus. “Me, sleeping? Preposterous. I simply concentrate better with my eyes slightly shut. Lets me get in touch with my spiritual side.”

“I am taking you to the Office,” said Hera firmly, before another fight ensued. “Where Zeus used to work.”

“A harem, is it?” asked Artemis with interest.

*

The plains of Thessaly may look picturesque, with their backdrop of dim mountains, or in the soft faded colours of a romantic painting. Zeus by now was beginning to think Tartarus would have been a better option. There, at least one got to lie down.

He had been travelling without a pause for nearly twenty-four hours. Far behind him, the tree-coated slopes and folds of the foothills had fallen into the faint blue haze on the northern horizon, while above the hard dome of heaven glowed a deep, gentian blue. Low hills bulked in the distance to east and west, sprinkled thickly with the deep green of cypress and the paler streaks of grass and heather. Ahead, the tumbled plain was bright in the late spring sun, barely decent under a thin veil of sparse grass and scattered tufts of myrtle. Earlier in the day, he had passed through a patchwork of small fields and olive groves huddled close to the stony river Peneios. Here he had appropriated a donkey tied up in the shade of one of the gnarled and twisted olives, as whoever had ridden it from the nearby village was engaged in clearing stones from their fields and clearly didn’t require its services any longer. At the time it had seemed a good find, since it seemed likely to save his feet and he reasoned he would be able to eat it if he grew desperate. Unfortunately, once he had progressed about ten miles southwards, he had fallen asleep on its neck, whereupon it had conscientiously turned round and returned to its point of origin. Zeus had been forced to beat it quite severely as he galloped away again, followed by the indignant owner hurling stones and

imprecations, as he appeared to be of the opinion that its services had not, in fact, been dispensed with.

Ahead was the river, curving westwards, flowing sluggishly and reluctantly in the sun. Trees gathered thickly along its banks. Greener lay the land before him, and on the stream's far side was strewn the village of Larissa. Its chequered fields surrounded it, while here and there on either side of the river opened vine and olive, darker among the ripening corn.

Depression, unlike the injured farmer, had finally caught up with Zeus and was doing its best to persuade him it had been worth the wait. It was a crippling, dull, all-enveloping dejection that shut down all mental facilities, hunching predatory over his head, sucking on his will and purpose. In its grip he had plodded the lonely miles of northern Thessaly, through the night of crickets and unheeding stars, wishing with every step that he could lie down and not have to move again. Each pace he took was a mental effort far greater than the physical. There seemed very little point in bothering any more. He meant nothing and had nothing to do apart from heading south.

He found himself becoming fond of the donkey, a quiet, docile animal that took little heed of his weight. As it ambled on, he spent some time contemplating each individual hair on its neck with scientific determination, only moving onto the next with reluctance. It was comforting, he found. It gave some meaning to his journey – at least, if nothing else, he would be an expert on donkey hairs by the time he got wherever he was going.

Olympus he tried to keep out of his mind. Earlier the images of the frosted palaces climbing on its airy heights had sprung into his head, but he had been able to

regard it quite dispassionately. It was only when he thought of the Office that he began to cry. Never in a thousand years had the king of gods and men shed tears. But he supposed he wasn't a king any more, and was no longer sure if he was even a god. Whether they caught him or not seemed to matter little. All that concerned him was to keep moving - and not to lose count.

Such was his concentration that when the donkey perambulated him into the shade of the olives and paused on the stony bank to drink, Zeus did not notice the man immediately. When he had dismounted and drunk, he looked up to find he was being watched.

The man was seated on the grass with his back in the curve of an olive trunk and looked as though he had been travelling for some time. His tunic and cloak were ragged, stained with dust and sweat; a tangled mane of hair hung greasily on his brow and shoulders, while his great dust-matted beard reached halfway down his chest. Muscles bulged beneath his clothes. In one hand, laid on the grass beside him, he clutched a pole, about twelve feet in length. Man and god regarded each other in silence for a while. Eventually the man spoke.

"I would get up and clasp your knees," he said, "but I'm rather tired, so I do hope you won't mind if I don't bother. I can do the other stuff, though: O stranger, are you some god or a mortal man? If you are one of the gods who live in the wide heavens, it is of Hephaestus that your limp, sweat and filthy appearance most remind me. Never have I set eyes upon a man or woman like you. Only in Delos have I seen the like, the greenhorn recruit my soldiers initiated, when my travels took me there."

There was a pause. "That means 'hello'," explained the man.

“Oh, hello,” said Zeus cautiously. The expression on the man’s face was one of wild desperation, and it was possible to imagine him putting the pole to any number of inventive and painful uses.

“Sit down here,” said the man, shifting his pole to his shoulder. “Here, have some wine. You look a wreck.”

Zeus complied, rather taken aback. He tried to perceive who the man was, but on being met by the wall of blindness that encircled his divinity, he accepted the wine with a word of thanks and a crushing sense of his own uselessness.

A little later the man said, “Well, go on then.”

“Go on what?”

“Ask me what I have on my shoulder.”

Zeus examined the pole. One end was dark with grime as though it had been gripped by many unhygienic hands, the other flattened into a broad blade. As he began to reply the man interrupted. “No! I know exactly what you were thinking. You were thinking, ‘ this thing looks mightily like a winnowing fan to me’ and you were going to say, ‘Mister, why’ve you got a great big winnowing fan on your shoulder?’ That’s right, isn’t it? I could just read your mind.”

“I wasn’t actually,” said Zeus, looking at the pole critically. “In fact, it looks a lot like an oar to me.”

“Oh bugger, not another one,” said the man disconsolately, throwing down the oar. “Couldn’t you just take the hint and call it a bloody winnowing fan? I’ve been carting the thing around for nearly a year now and not one single bloke has remarked how much it looks like one of those fan things. Yes,” he went on bitterly, “it’s fine for Teiresias to say, ‘Find some people who know not the sea and you’ll be able to plant your oar there and go home.’ How can you live in

Greece and not have seen the sea? Not every bugger's blind like him. Are you *sure* it doesn't look like a winnowing fan?" He leapt up, seized the oar and began to make winnowing motions with it. "Look, you could toss the chaff like this…"

"I'm afraid I don't know what a winnowing fan looks like," said Zeus. "But I'm sure you could buy one if you really wanted."

"I don't want a damned winnowing fan," said the man savagely. "I've had winnowing fans up to here. Why couldn't that third rate prophet have said I could go home when someone called it an oar? Hundreds of people have come up to me and asked, ' Why have you got an oar on your shoulder? We're miles from the sea.' Hah! I showed 'em!" From his expression it was eminently clear what had been revealed.

"Why do you want someone to call it a winnowing fan?"

"So that I can go home and stay there," said the man gloomily. "As soon as someone calls it a winnowing fan I can plant this shapely oar in the earth and make ceremonial offerings to the Immortal gods who live in the broad heavens, all of them in due precedence, and then go home in peace. Well," he continued with passion, " they can say that Olympian Zeus assigns good fortune to men, good and bad as he likes, but I haven't seen a single piece of good fortune since my twelfth birthday. Gods! Bollocks to the lot of them, and I don't care who hears!"

Normally Zeus would have been somewhat annoyed on hearing this blasphemy, but as the sentiment expressed by the man more or less concurred with his own, he let it pass. A faint memory was stirring in him, for long ago he felt he might have seen this man's face

and been interested in his career. From the past he heard his own voice suggesting to the immortal gods that in the absence of Poseidon they should lead him home. He knew him now, the wisest man alive, who had been unfailingly generous in his offerings to the Immortals. Athene's favourite, whom he had thought was safely at home in Ithaca, and had indeed been so when he had turned his divine gaze away to other things.

"You…you're not Odysseus, are you?" he asked.

The man looked slightly put out. " I don't usually advertise the fact," he said. "Either I'm the son of Castor from Crete or a slave belonging to Dmetor son of Iasus, or a bloke called Nobody, but since you appear to be well informed, yes, I am Odysseus the master of stratagems, he of the far famed ill fortune. And I wish I wasn't."

Zeus stared. Never before had he come face to face with this man over whom he had kept guard all these years and for whom he had a strange affection.

"Greetings, Odysseus," he said. "I've known of you for a long time, but I never thought I'd meet you. What are you doing up here? I thought I'd got you home to Ithaca this time last year."

Odysseus looked shrewdly at him. "Teiresias told me that Poseidon would only be placated if I carried out this winnowing fan lark," he said. "So I had to set off again after a couple of weeks. Telemachus is in charge back home, with Penelope. Apparently Poseidon is still miffed that I blinded his son Polyphemus."

"Poseidon's a complete turd," said Zeus feelingly. "So are all the other gods."

"Hey, one minute," warned Odysseus. "*I* had an excuse to swear at them, having been on the road for twenty-one years and had about as much bad luck as you can.

Gods have a nasty habit of only listening when you're rude about them. Who are you anyway? Why this interest in my career? What d'you mean you got me home? That was by the grace of Athene and Zeus."

"Yes," said Zeus. "I'm Zeus, you see."

"Oh, of course," said Odysseus. "How silly of me to miss it. Did I mention Hades often asks me to cover for him at the weekends? Not up to par as a story, I fear. Whenever I lie about my identity, I produce a concocted genealogy and complex family history, a list of all my imaginary misfortunes and tell my supposed life story in hexameters for the next hundred and fifty lines. I'm very sorry, but an unauthenticated story like that just won't do."

Zeus considered. "I could tell you about your distinguishing marks," he hazarded.

"There are none apart from the scar on my leg, which I received years ago from the white tusk of a boar when on a visit to Autolycus and his sons. Everyone knows about that."

"I could tell you about your wife's distinguishing marks," said Zeus slyly. Odysseus paled beneath his coating of grime.

"No!" he said. "Not the…"

"Yes. The mole."

"Where? Which one do you mean?"

Zeus told him. Odysseus buried his face in his hands. "Either my wife has not been as faithful as is supposed – which, considering my current run of good fortune would not actually surprise me, seeing as this is the only disaster that has not befallen me – or you are an immortal god. Who did you say you were?"

Zeus did not reply for a moment. This was a mortal before him – how could he bring himself to confide his

shame to a mere son of earth? But alone of mortal men Odysseus might understand. In his loneliness and blindness he needed to tell someone. Suddenly he broke down and wept as Odysseus had done in the palace of Alcinous. The man patted him on the back of the hand. "There, there," he said. "Tell uncle about it. Do not, for some crafty reason of your own, withhold the answers to the questions I may ask. Frankness is better. What's wrong? I thought you looked as though you had had a rough time."

So Zeus told him. Throughout his monologue Odysseus showed no hint of surprise, which was slightly disappointing for the narrator.

"So I've been beaten up, kicked out of heaven and have nothing to do apart from run and nowhere to go," he ended. There was a short silence. "You don't seem very surprised."

"No," agreed Odysseus, looking up at the dappled roof above them where the cornflower sky flickered through the filigree of leaves, "but seeing as my life has consisted mainly of meeting Lotus-eaters or one-eyed giant monsters, that is, in between my trips to the Underworld or dodging mad singing women and Scyllas or Charibides, you can't really expect me to be, can you? It's quite refreshing to fall in with someone who hasn't actually tried to eat me." He looked long and hard at his interlocutor. "Though it's difficult to believe that I'm sitting here chatting to the king of gods and men."

"Yes," concurred Zeus. "I can't believe it either."

The two non-believers fell silent again till the man shook his head, to remark that it was a bad idea to stay away from home. Zeus agreed. You never knew what the wife would get up to in your absence, continued

Odysseus, to which Zeus added that you bloody well did not. Odysseus suggested his problem had been the opposite of the god's, as his wife had been too fond of him. "So she kept those suitors hanging around my palace, saying no to them all. If she'd had an affair with just one, it wouldn't have been as bad. I could have killed him neatly and quickly, no questions asked. But now I've got a hundred and fifty families all demanding compensation."

After further conversation, it emerged that Zeus had no immediate plans, in which adversity he was joined by Odysseus, who appeared to have none either. Apart, perhaps, from heading to Delphi, either to ask the gods what he should do next, or more probably to lose his temper and insult them, thus possibly ending his problems on the holy mountain. "Why don't you come too?" he asked.

Zeus considered. He had no desire to spoil any illusions Odysseus might still entertain as to the value of Delphic prophecies, and as has been discovered, he had no other pressing engagements to see to. Nothing that he couldn't alter, anyhow.

"Why not?" he said. Man and god shook hands.

*

The gods' progress through the palace turned out to be eventful. In the green-blue shadow unrolled over the courtyard garden, Poseidon found a number of demigods relaxing by a bonfire, thoughtfully heaped with furniture which the palace's owner wouldn't be needing again, certainly not after it had been carbonised. Poseidon, investigating the ornamental pond, successfully pronged several large fish with his trident, which he insisted on grilling. While impatient swirls of goddesses waited for his culinary activities to conclude,

Hermes burst in upon a bucking and untamed wave of Winged Boots. Having crashed into Prometheus and Athene, he mentioned that it was high time they were off, to which Prometheus said yes, it was, wasn't it. Athene said they thought the rest of the Olympians could manage without their help for the time being. The two slipped away, unnoticed in the smoke and stench of burning fish.

The Wardrobe Ministers, having been introduced to the Office, were moving from screen to screen with exclamations of excitement. Poseidon and Hades had already discovered one displaying a girl in her bedroom; both had been most vexed when the picture had changed after she had removed nothing more than her sandals. Heracles lurked by the door while Hephaestus bustled around, telling what he imagined was a fascinated audience how he had made this piece just so, and, yes, the glazed tiles had been his idea. Dionysus, reunited with his peers, had received an electric shock after fiddling with some buttons and was taking refuge in a drink. Apollo, Hera, Ares, Artemis and Athene gathered around the throne.

"This is where he operates everything," explained Hera. "I think he's put some sort of block on our being able to locate him, which he's done before…usually for adulterous reasons. Its result is that no god can perceive him, or even focus on him properly. Well Ares, continue."

"With what?" asked the champion of the gods, who had been admiring his imposing frame in the reflection from a screen.

"With unscrambling it, of course."

"How do I do that?"

"I believe you can press tiles if you want to."

Ares settled into the throne. With those thoughts on what had taken place the last time anyone had attempted this kept very firmly to herself, Athene moved carefully backwards.

Ares' voice was drowned in an excited exclamation from Poseidon. "Hades, check this out! It's us!"

"Where'm I?" complained Hades indignantly.

"What does 'detonate' mean?" said Ares plaintively.

They carried the smoking body of the President out of the Office and laid him on Zeus' bed. Hera, furious and blackened, sat at its foot with Artemis and Apollo. In the Office, thin films of Chaos seeped through the cracks in the screens closest to the throne. Warning lights flashed with urgent beeps. Several systems had been knocked out by the blast, and self-repair was slow and difficult.

"What a nasty place to put an explosive," said Poseidon sympathetically.

"In the throne, you mean?" asked a dazed Apollo.

"No, under Ares," he answered with glee. "That's two direct hits in two days. Things always come in threes, you know. We'll probably find the bed is rigged to explode if too many people lie on it at once."

"That's unlikely, I feel," commented Hades. "After all, it is Zeus' bed."

"Perhaps the blocking mechanism has been damaged," suggested Athene. Then hopefully Prometheus would get to Zeus before they did, as long as Hermes had some idea of where he was.

To the disappointment of the Ministers, the mechanism still appeared to be firmly in place. Instead a number of mundane problems materialised on Earth. The shocked inhabitants of Crete found that all their drains began to malfunction simultaneously, in the

apparent suspension of the law of gravity in the sewer regions. A bewildered natural philosopher in Arabia was stoned to death when the total eclipse he had predicted failed to take place, and those housebreakers who had intended to perpetrate crimes during the minutes of darkness were all apprehended, mostly by each other. And in a remote island off the north-western coast of continental Europe, torrential rain began to fall without a pause. It has never been clear whether this final problem was ever corrected or not.

Chapter Six

"It's been a marvellous day so far," said Apollo bitterly. "First we get woken up late and greeted by a range of obstructive mountains, then we get blown up for sitting in chairs and fiddling with buttons."

"I didn't notice you telling Ares to move," said his sister.

"I couldn't immediately remember what 'detonate' meant."

"It's one of those words that you might not have the opportunity to remember if it's not at the forefront of your mind," commented Athene.

"Well, there's nothing like learning by experience."

"I was quite impressed by that little set up," commented Poseidon loftily. "Wouldn't say no to something like that in the Ocean."

"Zeus designed it," said Hephaestus," but I built it with him. Then he went and programmed it all on his own."

"So you don't know how to get into the system?" asked Hera. "Otherwise we won't be able to use the machine – to find him, or for anything else."

"Haven't got a clue, I'm afraid," confessed Hephaestus. "But I could have a go."

"Ares just did," remarked Hades. "You saw what a resounding success he was."

Ares made his first contribution to the conversation in the form of a groan. He had not been feeling terribly well that morning as it was, and now blackened by smoke and lacerated by flying splinters of glass, he did not look very prepossessing.

"If none if us can see where Zeus is," said Apollo thoughtfully, "perhaps the mortals could help us."

“Why d’you want to involve them?” protested Poseidon. “Not clean, they aren’t.”
“ I do not feel you are in much of a position to comment on others’ personal hygiene,” said Hades.
“Speak for yourself! I wash every day.”
“My point exactly. In your bloody ocean, full of defecating fish.”
“Don’t know what you’re talking about. They wash every day, too. Never come out of the water, not for anything.”
“Quite. The authorities fine parents who let their children behave like that in swimming pools.”
“I was thinking,” went on Apollo manfully, “that I could announce what has happened at Delphi, and in a few days we’d have every mortal on earth looking for him.”

The others considered. Those who were not engaged in a lively discussion on the social mores of members of the Pisces family thought it an intriguing idea. “I’ll issue a summons from the Oracle,” said Apollo. “Probably be best if we wait a couple of days, though. A lot of people are on their way already, because of the Helios business this morning.”
“That will give me some time to devote myself to further reform,” said Hera, an evangelical gleam in her eye. “I should like to pay the Underworld a visit, Hades.”
“Pleasure, pleasure,” said Hades. “I’ll have Persephone get the racks ready.”
“I didn’t mean as a participant.”
“Oh.”
“One last thing - I do have one lead,” added Hera. Athene held her breath. “I think Zeus has a new girl somewhere on earth – where, I do not yet know. But she

might be possible to find. And could someone tell Aphrodite to come back from that nudist colony where she's sunning herself in Cyprus? I want words with that woman."

"Don't be too harsh on her," urged Heracles.

"I shan't. I want to thank her." Hera smoothed her brow with a restless hand. Her mention of Aphrodite sparkled on a faint memory of something that might light her path to Zeus…a furtive recollection lurking in the recesses of her mind. But rounding on the memory, she found it slipping from her. No matter. She was sure to recall it fully before long.

The gods, with a limping Ares in tow, left the bedroom. Scurrying nymphs, under the direction of Ganymede, were busy removing traces of the previous day's excitement. Together, the Olympians came into the sunlight on the threshold, framed by the twisted ruins of the doors at the head of the stairway, looking over the blinding white street. Lesser gods went about their business, moving blurs above their shadows on the dust. Over the lintel of the palace door now hung a sign saying "Central Bank - Wage Distribution Centre." Had any of the Olympians been listening, they might have picked up a slight change in the texture of reality, as though some slumbering personality were stirring from sleep. For a moment, a faint metallic clinking sounded in the distance.

*

Olympic society had always been complex, cosmopolitan and hierarchical. A city whose inhabitants range from hairy goat-legged drunkards to lithe willowy dryads and nymphs, with large river gods sporting dangerous horns and any numbers of oddly shaped mountain, plain and hill gods in between, can't hope to

find much to give its citizens a sense of communality. Hitherto, the only equal opportunities open to the gods of Olympus were that they stood a very equal, very real chance of being thumped by the Olympians if they stepped out of line.

All over Olympus a gradual intellectual upheaval was gathering. In taverns, under trees, in gardens, palaces and bowers, gods were congregating. The more intelligent gods talked. Furtive glances were exchanged. New ideas were discussed. Liberty was understandable – thus the wage and the shops, music, leisure activities beyond their imaginings, new addictions they now had the means to satisfy. Fraternity was simple, as most gods were related to Zeus in some way. But equality was more interesting.

Some contention had arisen as to the justice of the wage. The river Enipeus, who tended to flow all year, declared it was scandalous for him to receive the same wage as a smaller stream that only bothered to fill up in the rainy season. He had nothing against equality of salary in *principle*, but he thought the stream should be paid only in proportion to the percentage of Enipeus' total task that he performed. At this Enipeus became angry and hit someone, protesting that it was an infringement of his rights. Rights, it seemed, could be used as weapons, and were much better in a crowd than a handily-swung wine jar. But was it only as a group that the People mattered? Olympus had always encouraged individualism – not that it really had any choice. A seven -foot river god with his growth of weed and branching horns is startlingly different from a dryad. Was there no difference between this unique individual and that unique individual?

Only a tiny handful of gods asked these questions or thought these thoughts. Most deities found themselves well pleased with the way things were turning out. Power had been given up to the people, who seemed quite keen to take it on, they were to get paid, and now had some influence over the unassailable Olympians. The hierarchical structure had been replaced by a lowerarchical one. If individualism and real freedom were in the balance, who really cared? It was the money that mattered.

*

"Odysseus, how have you been able to stand living like this for so long?" asked Zeus, hunched morosely over his wine cup, into which he poured a blank stare.

Odysseus shrugged. "Resignation, I suppose."

"Hah! They didn't give me a chance to resign. Just booted me out."

"You get used to it after a while," commented Odysseus. " I find that if you set out expecting life is going to do all it can to screw things up for you, sometimes you get a pleasant surprise if it doesn't. I was quite shocked when I finally got home, even if I did have leave again almost immediately."

"I would apologise for that…but I didn't know," said Zeus. "I've always thought, you know, it's been my guiding principle, that mankind would learn through suffering; could reach a higher understanding of why they're on earth. Not to make money, to oppress or be oppressed. But that it would enable them to be something they might not otherwise have been. I thought an achievement was all the nobler if there was no reward. Don't people learn from suffering at all?"

Odysseus stretched out his legs. He was in expansive mood. In the early evening the two had

reached the village of Krannon and were now reclining with the other beggars and outcasts in the tree-dotted orchard of the town publican, who was serving wine with an air of passive defeatism.

"You should have tried out mortality before you came up with that as a game plan," he remarked.

"Don't you learn anything?" asked Zeus, deflated.

"Oh, you do learn from suffering," agreed Odysseus. "You learn that most gods and men are utter jerks. Look at me – every time I meet someone I have to trot out the old line, ' the list of woes the gods have sent me is long,' and then spend the next five hours reciting them in hexameters. Have you any idea how hard it is to come up with an impromptu hexameter? Well," he admitted, as Zeus raised an eyebrow, "I suppose I did memorise a few here and there…but the point's valid. What does it all show you? That we're playthings of the gods, and most of them – apart from you and Athene – don't keep the bloody rules. The thing is," he continued, warming to his theme, "that people either look for the wrong things in life or expect too much of the right stuff. My view is that life is supposed to be crap. If it isn't, something's going wrong somewhere. Optimism's the greatest problem facing humanity. It ought to be banned. You've heard the old twaddle, 'Walk towards the sun, and the shadow of your troubles will fall behind you.' They don't remind you that the sun'll also shine right into your eyes, blinding you completely so you can't see where you're going and have a high chance of tripping over or walking into things. Now if I were in charge, I'd make people deliberately seek for failure. Failure's easy. If only we could make failure our ultimate goal, then we might stand some chance of living successful lives."

“Thanks for the tip,” said Zeus. “I’ll bear it in mind if I ever get back to Olympus. Really, I’m the wrong bloke to speak to about it now. But I could give you Ares’ address if you like.”

“Don’t get bitter now,” admonished Odysseus, gesturing for more wine. Being an expert beggar, he was well versed in the ways of the wine merchants. “Think of what you’ve gained – though that is a dangerously optimistic way of looking at things.”

“Gained, did you say?”

“You now have no responsibilities, no duties, no business worries and no work,” said Odysseus. “You are now a god of leisure.”

“But I enjoyed my work,” said Zeus. “I really did. And I tried my best and everything. Now they’ve kicked me out without a thank you, I’ve no divinity left, and they haven’t even got a king instead, just some lousy president, who’s my brain dead loaf of a son.”

“If it’s any consolation, my entire career as king of Ithaca has been spent away from home, suffering harsh agonies and woes without number, which translates as being variously shipwrecked, knocked about, spat on, made a fool of and chased by all manner of unpleasant and hungry things,” said Odysseus. “Being a king’s not an easy job. The only people who think it is are those who aren’t.”

“They’re all bastards,” said Zeus.

“Truly you have eloquence and speak with all the artistry of a bard,” agreed Odysseus. “They are all bastards. I had a whole bunch of parents, relatives and friends of suitors trying to knock me off the throne after I’d dealt with them. ‘What terrible harm has this man done the Achaeans!’ they said. ‘Let us make a move and avenge ourselves on the murderer of our sons and

brothers.' I bet they just wanted to try out the crown for themselves. It's strange, you know, how the most ardent democrat will suddenly become a monarchist when he's within scent of a crown."

Two dark shapes moved in the gentle shadows of the olive groves, making for the congregation of quietly talking beggars. The wine merchant regarded them despondently from behind his deserted bar. They halted uncertainly on the fringe of light cast by the hissing fire nearby.

Odysseus brightened at the prospect of fresh victims to accost with his oar. He called to the barman; now vainly skulking behind a tree in the manner of one who has no wine to give away. "Barman, it is unseemly and unlike your usual ways to let strangers stand far from your hearth, while the beggars around you must wait patiently for your lead. Sir, mix some more wine so we can make a fresh libation, to Zeus the Thunderer, patron of suppliants, who deserve respect."

The wretched man abandoned hope and arose to serve more wine. Libations were poured, principally down throats. "Do not forget the strangers," admonished Odysseus, "for they are under the protection of Zeus."

"Were," that gentleman corrected him. "I don't know how current Olympic policy stands."

Odysseus motioned the strangers, both tall and massively built, to sit beside him. They sported enormous moustaches and shaven heads. Great cloaks of sheepskin wrapped their shoulders.

"Greetings," said one.

"Much thanks for your kindness," said the other.

"No problem at all," said Odysseus magnanimously. "Are you on your way somewhere?"

"Delphi," replied the second.

“From the far north.”
“On a mission.”
“To consult the oracle.”
“About…”
“What d’you mean, ‘about’?”
“You’re meant to finish, aren’t you?”
“No I am not. Yani, you’ve missed out a whole line of script, you incompetent goatherd.”
“Who are you calling a goatherd, Dimitri? Everyone knows what you do with yours.”
“We’re going to Delphi as well,” supplied Odysseus, tactfully interrupting. “What are you asking the oracle?”
“Our king wants us to take the auspices to see whether he should commit adultery with his wife’s cousin.”
“ Take it from me, it’s a bad plan,” said Zeus.
“He wants us to keep it a secret,” said Yani.
Odysseus cleared his throat. By now Zeus knew the questioning routine well. “Where exactly do you live?”
“Far in the north. In the…”
“…mountains.”
“West of…”
“Macedonia.”
“Do you, by any chance, know anything of the sea?” inquired Odysseus.
“We know nothing of the sea,” said Yani, frowning.
“Nor do we use salt for our food,” supplied Dimitri.
“What? You don’t? Not at all? Are you sure?”
“You see, we live in the mountains, far from the sea,” explained Yani.
“Yes,” agreed Dimitri. “Crimson-painted ships and the long oars that serve those ships as wings are quite beyond our experience.”

Odysseus turned manically to Zeus. “Look!” he squeaked. “These are the boys! At last!” He lifted up his oar. “D’you know what this is?”

The two examined it reflectively.

“It reminds me of something,” mused Yani.

“Me too,” said Dimitri. “Can’t remember what, though.”

“Never mind, it’ll come back to you. Have some more wine,” said Odysseus generously. While the two drank, he emitted low whoops of triumph. “I’ve found them at last! All I have to do is follow them till one of them asks why I’ve got a winnowing fan on my shoulder, then I can go home!”

“You seem to be in a dangerously optimistic mood,” said Zeus. “Remember what you were saying earlier. You don’t want the goddess Fortune to hear you celebrating this early. She might get annoyed with you.”

“Oh, bugger Fortune,” said Odysseus.

“I did,” said Zeus dryly. “That’s one of the reasons I’m here.”

*

In the vaults beneath Zeus’ palace, far below its foundations, taking the place of the cloud on which the city was built there crouched a space so mind bogglingly huge that Zeus had provided a small phial filled with very strong liquor by the door. On its consumption, it was hoped that visitors would only notice the fact that their legs wished to walk in different directions and that the floor was very hard, not that they couldn’t see the walls. This was his treasury, built up since the first awakenings of man’s consciousness, and filled beyond the imaginings of a thousand dragons’ hoards.

Things had changed. The Republic had confiscated his enormous wealth, and under Hera, this place had become the central deposit of the Olympic Bank. Running like veins through the golden lifeblood of an eon's offerings, a spider's web of tiny chariots clattered and scurried into the darkness, pouring in and out of the vastness. Hera was most pleased at the success of her Instant Credit Transfer system. Pedalled by small daemons, the chariots raced along the little tracks now laid throughout the city. Along the way, small lockers opened underneath the innumerable divine residences, each labelled with a god's name. Other daemons perched on the chariots, dispensing wages, and collecting taxes left for them in the deposit boxes. An infection deep beneath the surface, money poured invisibly through the very fabric of the divine world, at the easy fingertips of every Olympic god.

Into Olympus, drawn by the glitter and the wonder, the opportunities and entertainments, thundered a swell of demigods. Over the earth, dryads quit their tress and naiads their wells, satyrs left their bacchic dances on the forsaken hills and tritons fled the wine dark seas. Mountain and hill, forest, river and stream, flooded into heaven, leaving behind them an empty world. Now their rivers flowed through habit, the corn and silver olive grew as if by chance. For the gods' work could be done from a distance, and Olympus was where they ought to be.

And briefly there did flower a fantasia of creation, pride and freedom that would remain forever unparalleled, that for a moment could transcend the confines in which the Theocratic Republic strove to contain it. Hera did not mind. From the Olympic Court she watched them as they exalted in what they thought

was freedom, unaware of the shadow cast barely visible over her shoulder.

The newly repaired gates of cloud swung between the burning golden pillars of the Olympic gateway. Ahead of their gleaming chariot the transparent sky-horses tossed their windy manes as they reared and paced. Rolled back by the dutiful Hours, the gates stood wide till the chariot had passed through, then thundered closed again. A dazzling arc of reflected light breathed through the sky as Ares and Hera circled on their way to the Underworld.

*

"No, " Prometheus said crossly, "I don't have a clue where he is. Neither does Hermes. We've tried all his usual dives – Dodona, Olympia, Mycenae, Troy, Crete, Gardens of Hesperides, Gates of Dawn, and I can carry on if you're not too bored."

"Perhaps he's not going to come back," said Athene.

"I'm beginning to think so as well. Not only because we can't find him. There's something worse as well."

"What's that?"

"You remember when Zeus agreed Heracles could release me? Partly so that I'd keep the secret of what could overthrow him. Themis made the prophecy, remember?"

"Well?"

" Themis was my mother," reminded Prometheus. "She told me what the weapon that an immortal son of Thetis would wield against his father. She called it Consumption, which is something that seems to kill poets as well, especially if they have pale faces and long dark hair."

"Oh, I see."

“And I went to see the Fates when I came back. They told me that Zeus has fallen as Cronos and Ouranos did, being superseded by his son, but that the circle is incomplete, since he escaped. They refuse to be any more lucid than that. But they did say that Hera had been to them and they’d told her the same thing. Why hasn’t she told the other gods that Zeus is powerless?”

“He isn’t a threat that way,” said Athene. “The others would never bother to go after him if they thought he wasn’t a threat. And I can’t imagine Hera wants him to get away without a little gloating. So you mean to say that Zeus isn’t coming back and wouldn’t be much use if he did?”

Prometheus nodded. “Perhaps I should just agree to modernize,” he said sadly. “But I can’t help feeling that what we have here isn’t theocracy. And Hera isn’t the only brain behind it. She’s meddling with things she doesn’t understand.”

“I’m rather enjoying it though,” confessed Athene with a guilty expression.

“Do you realize why?”

“I think because I wanted his power all along.”

“Remember, you’re just enjoying yourself in a narrow oligarchy where the electorate has little or no control, saving the occasional right to choose their masters.” He gave voice to a grunting noise that Athene interpreted as expressing displeasure. “I’m morally opposed to the concept of equality. It’s a way of comparing yourself to other people. I can’t help feeling that it was better when we didn’t worry about our standing in relation to others and got on with being what we were. Moaning about your rights shows an excessive interest in your own self-importance.”

"Is it uncharitable of part of me to hope Zeus doesn't come back?"

"I'd have thought giving him a few helpful hints about the temperature of the water he was in would have been more sensible than divine war and Tartarus. Zeus represents more than what he actually is."

"Everything's going reasonably well for the moment. All we can do is hold on as long as we can. Something's bound to turn up sooner or later."

"Yes," said Prometheus. "Something bad."

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The golden chariot had reached the furthest parts of the deep flowing River of Ocean, where the Cimmerians live, wrapped in mist and fog, Here, the bright sun cannot look down upon them with his rays, either when he climbs the starry heavens or when he turns back from heaven to earth again. Perhaps this is why he didn't realize that with pragmatic determination the Cimmerians had moved house long ago, and now reclined on sunny beaches in the Balearic Isles.

Beyond Ocean lay a grey, filmy area, known imaginatively as "Beyond". The chariot wheels crunched on dark gravelly soil as the mists closed around it – only the brightness of the Immortals lit the way for the horses. There was silence. Not a passive silence, a mere absence of noise, but a live, moist and active silence, which seemed rather put out that it was being disturbed. Its wet folds draped themselves clammily around the gods.

"I've never been to the wide gated House of Hades before," said Ares apprehensively. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"Of course it isn't safe," said Hera, flicking the reins. "Mortals would die rather than come down here." The

chariot gave a sudden lurch, at which she looked back with a curse. “Some fool had dug a hole back there – as long and as wide as a man’s forearm,” she said. “To bury himself in, I suppose.”

The mists grew blacker as the President and his First Minister progressed further from the edge of the world. Now the chariot was a tiny universe enclosed on all sides by walls of cloud. Any noise was immediately absorbed and stifled by the hostile silence that followed them as swiftly as it might. Ares thought he could hear it breathing – or was it gurgling?

As they emerged from the mists and came out into the dark light of the Underworld, he exhaled with relief. A river boiled before them. It was black. The sky above was a deep black, sprinkled with stars that he didn’t immediately notice because of their dark hue. The grass along the river was, surprisingly, grey. In the distance on the far bank, a huge black wall towered into the sky, presenting a gate to the visitors that seemed to fit in well with the general colour scheme.

“We cross, do we?” asked Ares.

“No, we sit here,” said Hera.

“Oh…till what?”

Hera gave an exasperated snort and clicked her fingers, beckoning to something on their right. On looking round, Ares saw a decrepit punt that rolled lazily in the sluggish waters of the river, which sloshed oozily over its gunwales. In it sat an aged man, huge and wrinkled. His hair was white; rather a colour clash in that place, and his filthy garments seemed to have decomposed to such an extent that they formed part of his person. A curious smoking reed drooped from his black lips. His teeth, clasped firmly upon it, were black as well, although Ares had no wish to discover whether this was

in keeping with his surroundings or for other more unsavoury reasons. A copy of *The Helios* was occupying his full attention when the chariot halted beside him. He looked up, annoyed. “Well, give me some bloody warning, will yer?” he growled.

Having carefully put away the newstablet, he cleared his throat and intoned in deep sepulchral notes, “The River Styx.”

“Does it?” asked Ares sympathetically. “Perhaps if you got out and pushed…”

The man gave him a look of withering contempt. Ares tried again to be diplomatic. “Can we go to Hell?” he asked.

“I was about to suggest the same meself,” said the man.

“Charon,” said Hera in regal tones, “you are addressing two Olympic Immortals.”

Charon cackled. “Just you come along into my boat, lady, and I’ll try unaddressing you instead. Leave the chariot – at yer own risk. Any damage to owner is none of me business either. One obol please.”

Hera paid him. “Don’t worry, he’s always like this,” she said to Ares. “He has a kind of divine dispensation to be foul.”

The punt lurched dangerously as Ares lowered himself gingerly into it. Black water, almost too viscous to flow, seeped around his feet. “Don’t fall in now,” warned Charon as he pushed off. “There’s things in that water.”

As if to illustrate his point a long, slimy and sinuous back raised a few feet of its length above the surface of the water quite close to the boat, pink and slightly thicker than a man’s waist. With a ‘gloop’ it disappeared again. Ares sat without moving. Even breathing had become a hazardous undertaking. With

the gunwales now almost submerged, only the water's peculiar cohesive properties seemed to prevent them going under.

The craft beached with another violent jolt, nearly precipitating Ares into the river, which had become increasingly fouler as they neared the nether shore.

"Have a nice day," said Charon, contriving to make it very clear that he hoped they wouldn't. He punted slowly away.

"If this is the sort of service everyone gets I'm not surprised you want to modernise," said Ares. "It's horrible down here, and all wet, and why is there no deputation to meet us?"

Above them the impenetrable walls of the House of Hades loomed into the everlasting darkness of the sky. The degree at which they leant towards the river had been carefully calculated by Hephaestus so as to ensure that they loomed to their best possible advantage and that the new arrival in Hades was suitably intimidated. Twenty yards from the banks of the Styx was the Gate. Its doors, being a delicate shade of black, were unprepossessing. Beyond lay only shadow. Across the lintel someone had carved *Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter - Here. Everything else is for Cerberus.* A small box labelled *Hope* was attached to the gatepost under the inscription.

Hera waved an exasperated finger at the inscription. "That's going to be the first thing to disappear," she said imperiously. "For a start, it's only in one language, and I think it gives quite the wrong impression. People are depressed enough about being dead without having to worry about putting their hope in a box. I think all this melodrama's quite out of keeping with the image that

we're trying to project of Olympus as a young, vibrant community."

It was only as Ares stepped over the threshold that he remembered the Hound of Hell, this being partly because the Hound of Hell appeared in front of him. Cerberus stretched luxuriantly. Fibrous muscles coiled and writhed beneath a skin covered by what seemed to be a cross between scales and fur. He stood taller than Hera, the snakes of his manes thrashing wildly as though cruelly tied by their tails to his heads.

Many poets have spoken at length about the horrors of the Hound of Hell. Poisons drool like vomit from his putrescent maws, we are told; his dagger-like teeth rend any victim with ease and artistic flair. It would not have been as bad if he had barked. As it was, Ares found the lazy superiority in its eyes and its laconic grins rather too human too be pleasant. The dog lowered one head and casually began to pick his teeth with a sliver of bone. "You've got several options," said one of the other heads. "Most of them involve recoiling in terror, screaming with fear or fainting in horror. You could try baiting me with drugged meat, but I think that one's been done before. Golden boughs are also supposed to be good." All the snakes on his heads now swivelled, standing erect to gaze at the gods. "I'm quite fond of a bit of calf, if there's any going," remarked the middle head. Ares tightened his grip on a thunderbolt. "Get out of my way," he grated, and clicked off the safety catch.

The two Immortals fought their way on through the resultant smoke and the remains of an indignant Cerberus. He shook an affronted paw at them as he tried to reattach it to his leg.

"I don't think that was really necessary," admonished Hera. "The poor dog was only teasing."

Ares dropped the smouldering cartridge. “I hate snakes,” he said.

On either side of the way, various Diseases and Plagues were playing cards and gave them bored looks from the greasy torpid gloom. An unpleasant smell coiled around them, wrapping itself over the narrow road that led straight down into more darkness.

Persephone stood waiting for them at the crossroads. Worried and harassed, she greeted them with a brief “Hello!” running a hand through her untidy blonde hair. “I’m terribly sorry, but you can’t see Hades.”

“I know,” said Hera.

“I mean he’s in bed.”

“I sympathise. My husband was always in someone else’s.”

Persephone smiled shyly. “Sorry this isn’t a very formal welcome,” she said. “We’re very busy at the mo, we’ve just had a big delivery.” She wore a shapeless overall, which had once been white but had been dyed an apologetic and not very successful black. “What would you like to see first, you know?” she asked. To their right stood a gateway marked ‘Tartarus’, while on the other side hung a sign pointing to ‘Elysium’. Without waiting for their answer, Persephone hurried them over to ‘Tartarus’.

“Let’s show you the bad boys first,” she said. Drawing them into an alcove, she added apologetically, “I forced Hades to install a lift, you know, because it’s so far to walk. It’s twice as far…”

“Yes, I know,” interrupted Hera. “Below the earth as the sky is above it. Come on, I’m in a hurry.”

Persephone looked hurt. The three crushed themselves into the tiny space and plummeted away.

When the lift eased to a halt, they emerged into a domed atrium and queued for a short while, for Hera to observe the punishment mechanism in progress. Ahead of them in the line, escorted by a dutiful giant, was a struggling river god, who had been arrested while illegally attempting to divert smaller tributaries into his stream without the permission of the higher Watertable Geoformation Council. Beside the new stone portal marked "Minor Offences", a young demigod with slicked hair was sitting at a desk, idly playing with a toy rack whose occupant released realistic screams. He picked up a stylus. "Morning," he said, "Offence?" Words appeared on the clay tablet before him, detailing the river's nocturnal digging efforts, his illicit silting of his rivals' slip-off slopes, and his sabotage of a protected river cliff. "Silly beggar," he said to the river god. "Take him that way, please. Twenty-four hours of treatment 19(a) (i)."

"You've got different treatments now?" asked the giant. "That's new. Last time I was down here you only had one."

"Well, they're all the same, actually," said the demigod. "It's just to boost our public image. I think it's so important to give people the sense that they're experiencing something specially tailored for them, isn't it?"

He snapped his fingers. A large, disgruntled-looking vulture flopped from a perch behind him, where sat dozens of sleeping birds. It waddled over to the river god, examining him critically, and prodding his stomach with an experimental claw. "Hmm, fairly meaty," it croaked as they moved off into the shadows under the "Minor Offences" archway. "You wouldn't believe the rubbish we get down here sometimes," it went on to the

speechless river god as he was handed over to an even larger giant waiting beside a flat rock swinging a hammer. “Honestly, with the last bloke I had I couldn’t even find his blasted liver. Had to settle for the spleen instead, though I’ll be in trouble if that gets back to the management…”

“Could you shut up, please?” whispered the river god. “This is my liver…”

“Don’t worry, they always grow back,” the bird reassured him, as the second giant positioned the god on the rock, selecting bronze pegs with which to attach him. “It’s so that we can go on eating them, see?”

Hera stepped up to the desk, peering through the archway at the giants and the river god, making notes. The awkward-looking demigod jumped violently, and vainly tried to stuff his toy rack into his pocket and line up his birds neatly on their branch. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to brush up on reception,” she said. “And the colour scheme here is quite dreadful.”

“I always liked monochrome,” said Persephone defensively.

“So far we’ve had an unhelpful boatman, incompetent staff, unhygienic surroundings and the sort of dog that should have been skinned for a hearthrug long ago,” said Hera critically. “The Underworld must sharpen up its act, you know. If we got everyone wearing a brightly coloured uniform, now, with name badges and ‘Have a nice Stay’ on their hats, that would be a huge leap forwards.”

“This is supposed to be Hell!”

“No reason to leave it disorganised.”

Hera knew that the more she could destroy of the old the less likely it would be ever to revive. This was not a case for pruning, but uprooting. Rid of all traces of

Zeus, the new system would really take off. Besides, it would be more her. You know.

"No one here treats me with the respect I deserve," grumbled Ares. "That vulture was positively rude."

"What d'you expect?" asked Persephone. "I'm a bloody queen, and it's nothing but slog, slog, slog all day. Let's just have a quick peek at the old timers, then we'll move on."

She took them from 'Minor Offences' into the deeper regions of the cavern, far beyond the reach of the burning corpses that illuminated reception. Stone doors swung open at the foot of a winding staircase as they approached. "How disgusting," said Hera on gazing into the bowels of hell. She was something of a conservative in many ways, and still maintained that there were some bodily functions that should be kept firmly under wraps and conducted in private, no matter what public opinion stated. It was quite horrible to see them taking place in public – especially those concerned with the fate of one's food.

The giant Tityos sprawled over the dark grass. Two enormous vultures, wings outspread like moving clouds, crouched over his body, doing very unpleasant things to what looked like wet ropes coiling out of his stomach, things that Ares and Hera were quite willing to continue regarding as wet ropes rather than anything else. Ares walked over to Tityos' head. The giant wore a bored yet pensive frown. Ares grinned, raising his hand in an all-encompassing wave. When this failed to elicit the expected reaction he cleared his throat before saying "Hi! I'm Ares, President of the Theocratic Republic of Olympus!"

"That's nice," said Tityos. "But why do you think I care?"

Ares began to explain about modernisation, the rights of gods for adequate remuneration, freedom of expression and action, the infringements of divine rights in the Underworld and the dawn of a bright new future in Olympus, but he could tell that Tityos wasn't really listening. The giant watched disinterestedly as the vultures delved into his abdomen. Like many such people, Ares was too interested in what he had to say for him to ponder whether it meant anything to his audience.

"Are you all right?" asked the god, by way of changing the subject.

"Oh, absolutely," said Tityos. "I'm having a hell of a time. You try having two short-sighted birds trying to get hold of your liver through the rest of your damned insides."

Thus rebuffed, Ares stalked away with Hera. They saw Sisyphus, endlessly toiling up his hill, head bowed to the dusty ground as he drove his merciless stone upwards, only to have it tumble down again as he reached the summit. The daughters of Danaius waved on their way to fill their bottomless water pot; Ixion rotated, strapped to his perpetually turning wheel; Tantalus hastily reached for the grapes above his head and dipped his chin towards the surface of the water as he saw them approach.

"All these tortures seem so terribly dated," said Hera pettishly. "And pointless as well. Now, if we could get Sisyphus to run a generator or something, and the Danaids to do irrigation work, perhaps we'd have taken the first steps towards providing them with a socially orientated punishment."

"But they've always done these things…they like them!"

"I thought this was supposed to be hell."
"Yes, not a place of endless torment. And what will the mortals say? How shall we instil fear into them? It doesn't seem very bloody scary to say, 'Oh, yes, Sisyphus, he was the one condemned to generating electricity for all eternity.' These things are meant to be pointless – it's what gives them meaning."
"Well, of course, if you don't agree, you could always move to a different department," said Hera.
When the three had gone, Tityos sat up and cleared the mass of wet ropes away from his stomach. The vultures nestled on his shoulders, nibbling his ears. He shouted over to Sisyphus, now sitting on his stone flirting with the giggling Danaids, to Tantalus and Ixion, eating grapes and using the wheel as a roundabout. They drifted over. "Did you hear that?" asked Tityos. "That big rockhead of a god said something about our being paid compensation to be down here. Can you imagine!"
Sisyphus, who was supposed to have cheated Death twice, nodded with interest. "Yes, I did." He glanced round at the other tormented souls. "If we play this one right, we could be in for a nice little earner."
"We don't want any of those reforms. Don't sound like much fun."
The others agreed. "No," said Sisyphus firmly, pillowing his head against one of the voluminous vultures as the prettiest Danaid popped grapes into his mouth, "We mustn't forget that we are here to be punished for our vile crimes on earth."
With gloomy determination Persephone rushed Ares and Hera round the rest of the sights. They stood beside the deep shaft at the bottom of which Cronos, the Titans and the Giants were detained. Realistic shrieks and groans echoed from its depths. Various phantoms

paraded for them; tired Gorgons, worn Harpies, and Furies whose minds were clearly not on their job. They beheld Lethe; the river of forgetfulness on whose opposite bank Hades had opened a development of homes called 'Elysian Fields'. The souls there seemed perfectly happy, possibly because they had no memories whatsoever about their lives on earth and how incredibly pointless it had been. This was perhaps a considerable advantage considering that their present forms of recreation seemed to consist either of watching the ripples in the river or counting the bubbles – activities exceeded in their excitement levels only by something really gripping like turning out for a referendum. In a manner calculated to endear her to the proprietors, Hera continued to make notes on her tablet, frowning critically, in much the same way that welfare officers make themselves so popular in our own century. They left Persephone close to tears.

"Have they gone?" came Hades' voice.

"Yes, at last. Where are you?"

"Under the bed," said the king of the Underworld. "Bloody visitors! They should be banned. Next time they come poking their noses in here I'll give them the number five treatment."

"What's that?"

"Dunno… I'll decide when they get here. No point in stifling your creativity with a load of tedious strictures, is there?"

It was not long before Hades received a five hundred ton tablet from Olympus, delivered by a courier giant, describing the lists of changes that were to be wrought upon his kingdom – or more properly, department – by edict of the Wardrobe of the Theocratic Republic. For a short while, the Underworld crawled

with unusual and novel swear words, which scurried around till they discovered suitable crevices in which to lurk in the stifling, swirling darkness. It seemed, however, that there was no alternative but to obey, for if he failed to comply the bill stated that funding would be redirected, the Underworld closed, and he himself would have the opportunity to savour some of his most inventive amusements.

"All right, I give in," he stormed. "I'll paint the damned place orange, give all my Furies pretty uniforms – though how the hell we're going to get suits with eight arms I don't know…I'll have a bloody receptionist and chain poor Cerberus up and put the Titans onto Community Service…Community Service? Have they completely lost it? Poor bloody community…And I'll give Charon a new boat. But I adamantly refuse to bath him."

"Yes – remember the last time we tried?"

"I'd never seen water flowing up the sides and onto the floor before. There wasn't any left by the time he got in."

Hades fell into a mournful silence. He crouched on the Throne of Darkness, wreathed in Clouds of Darkness and surrounded by the Mists of Darkness. Minos and Rhadamanthus, the Judges of the Dead, hovered uncertainly in front of him. "Why do they have to do this?" Hades complained bitterly. "Hell won't be hell without all this, this carefully developed, artistically created melodrama. Surely mortals get enough damned bureaucracy on earth, for gods' sakes? The last thing they want to find after they're dead is some grinning numbskull saying, 'Hi, I'm Sharon, will you please step this way?' Yes, it's going to look bloody great down here when it's all shiny corridors and bright arc lamps,

courtesy of Sisyphus and Ixion, our live-in generators. I tried to give mortals something to instil mortal terror. They want to be scared of hell. These reforms are needlessly cruel, ignoring people's individual desires, swamping them under a tide of big brother posturing. It's cruel."

"What do you mean?" asked Persephone." Is it really going to be worse for them?"

"Can you imagine spending eternity in a waiting room smelling of disinfectant?"

"If you put it like that…nearly as bad as someone called Jayne continually asking if she can help."

"I'm telling you," said Hades feelingly, with a note of doom in his voice, "if these reforms go through, Hell is going to be bloody uninhabitable. You mark my words."

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The Wardrobe, closed to the public, was fading from the forefront of Olympic minds. Instead, many were focusing on disturbing little changes popping up in the city. Like a cancer in the blood the essence of change shifted from cell to cell, dominating their cytoplasm and suggesting career changes for their DNA. Unseen and unfelt, it crept beneath the city's smooth unblemished skin – only in places did pustular eruptions give some indication of the boiling turmoil within.

It had been decided to declare a city-wide sale, at which, quite naturally, it had proved to be impossible to buy anything owing to the imponderable masses of other gods who stood in one's way and occupied the most interesting shops like the foam of a cushion. But the residents of Olympus were still discovering good shopping protocol, and presumed that the word "sale" meant no more than a social invitation to a mingled gathering of fellow citizens. None of them, as yet, had

really discovered how best to lose their temper when trying to leave a department store when weighed down by three children, your wife's latest chrome kitchen acquisition and a small old lady who has become attached to your shopping bag. The clothing industry, however, was booming. Inexplicably, there appeared to be less variation between the gods than before, as an Olympic uniform seemed to have been declared.

There were still the vast mountain gods and the weedy horned heads of the rivers, still delicate dryads and smooth skinned water nymphs, but virtually every stitch of clothing worn was new, garish and bright. And every piece bore a name emblazoned on the breast in fluorescent colours. When these clothes had first become available, this had puzzled the deities, especially those of them who were not literate and had assumed they were buying unique personalised merchandise. It was only after a number of fights had broken out between gods who claimed their names appeared on clothes being worn by others that the matter was resolved. The designers of the contentious garments had admitted ownership of the names. When closely questioned by suspicious customers, who thought that this was perhaps a cunning ruse for the designer to exert some kind of arcane power over the wearer, the shopkeepers were unable to come up with an adequate explanation beyond assuring them that the designers maintained no hold whatsoever over the wearers' minds. Perhaps the letters are decorations, they suggested; see how beautiful is the curve of the letter 'C', and how sinuous the delicate bend of the capital 'S', quite apart from the martial nobility of the letter 'K'. On being informed that words, on the whole, are fine on paper or when spoken, but have very little

aesthetic value in themselves, especially considering the atrocity of the designers' handwriting, the store managers looked to their management teams for an answer. Finally they had come up with a series of brilliantly devastating arguments, which had seen clothing sales rocket throughout the city. The letters and words of these names, they said, form mystic charms, which, when read by another, have a number of irresistible effects on them. The reader is immediately impressed by the wearer's sophistication and panache, their sex appeal and joie-de-vivre, and furthermore, the unique combination of letters is so magical that, after a single reading, they artificially exaggerate the wearer's bank balance, which in turn leads to near-instant sexual gratification. In many ways, they made mere conversation all but superfluous, in the assurance of acceptance, friendship and sex that they offered. After this, the West Side was immovably packed with brawling gods intent on spending their savings, and now every respectable chest in Olympus bore, in three-foot letters, the name of a satyr who was unfortunately unable to give interviews as he was engaged in extensions to his treasure vault. What none of the managers had said, however, was whether the charms would still work when everyone had one.

Ares hunched on the cloudy heights of the Air Throne. Contorted so as to exude what he thought was an air of brooding power and majesty, his features rather bore more resemblance to those of one whose intestinal tract is about to exude something unpleasant. Olympus lay below him; the air and earth were under his feet. Somewhere below, Zeus hid imperceptible and untraceable. But he had ceased to feature significantly in Ares' plans. Now that he looked more closely at the

city, he saw numerous anomalies and discrepancies that would be totally out of place on a battlefield. The citizens of Olympus would have to be brought to heel, or at least underneath it. There was no place for individuals in an army. The only good individual is one identical to a hundred thousand others.

Hera stood behind him, her features effortlessly exuding power and majesty, for she had been practicing for some time and the opportunity was too good to waste. In the city cast at her feet, she watched the latest intrusions into her minions' lives with satisfaction; saw all those multitudes of fragmented rays refocusing into a single beam of pure white, shining into a future where she reigned supreme. Ares and the delightfully submissive Wardrobe would be her tools – submissive but for a couple of members, of course, members who, before the great work of reformation could near completion, would have to be assigned to other posts. Preferably to posts that were fixed into pyres of flammable wood and drenched in oil.

For the diversity of souls posed a far greater threat, she saw, than Zeus ever would. Only minds working in unison could ever suit her vision of a new Olympus, and minds left to themselves rarely agreed with their neighbours. Some gentle coercion of ideas was necessary, some great system wherein every mind was guided to fitting conclusions. It was necessary for the proper functioning of democracy, of course. A billion votes count for nothing if cast for a billion candidates. Only by showing the electorate the way could the republic hope to retain its power and justify its actions. As its greatest flaw lay in its accountability to the masses, the masses must be forcibly encouraged to approve its every decision. But the process had needed

to begin with little changes, inches along the path to total conformity of thought and belief.

Chapter Seven

In summer the rivers of Greece tended to become extremely dry. Thus it had become a tradition, solemnly enacted each year since they had first flowed, for the rivers to gather in Olympus to lubricate themselves in compensation for their desiccated homes on earth. The ceremony involved grave processions along the Olympic river and a ritual bathe in its waters, though these proceedings were always rather rushed so as to get on with the serious business of the conference. This involved drinking many drinks and starting many fights while reminiscing on what they had got up to the previous year, when they had consumed many drinks and possibly had a fight or two along the way.

The river gods, their horns already wreathed in weed and vine, were surfacing from the Olympic stream. One of their number had passed out on the way and lay unconscious on the riverbed, a seraphic smile on his face. Since the river gods generally invited everyone to have a drink with them afterwards, unusually populous crowds of onlookers nonchalantly roamed the banks. Dionysus was busy at a stall, accompanied by a few satyrs, setting out numerous amphorae. With a surreptitious glance at the crowd, he added something to one of the jars.

The swim had been completed, the solemn chants had solemnly been chanted, and the holy monkey skin ritually punched by each god. Originally its place had been held by a pig's bladder, symbolising the means by which Zeus would restore the rivers to life, but this had been lost during a football match some centuries before.

Now they were ready to move on to the really serious business of the evening.

In primitive societies it is commonly held that to offer a god alcohol during times of drought induces him to produce the desired water. Very well, one might object, but would those very same people actually go dancing about in it if they really thought that's where it comes from? The river gods' view was more pragmatic. Offer a god alcohol, and after he has finished drinking and brawling, he will be your lifelong friend. The singing and brawling was well under weigh when the mountain gods arrived. On every head was a nodding horsehair plume; emblazoned on every breast were the words, 'Olympic Police Department'.

Kithairon passed a wearied hand over his brow, causing a minor avalanche of flaky scree to tumble past his eyes and settle on the gentle slopes of his mossy shoulders, rolling gently down to fuse seamlessly with the massy muscle of his arms. Though he was generally on fairly good terms with the rivers, he preferred them to stay comfortably in their valleys, giving him uninterrupted views of the rest of his range. Flooded rivers were apt to gnaw impulsively at one's feet, leading to painful landslips if they weren't properly controlled.

His helmet perched unsteadily on the rocky upper slopes of his head. Nothing had caused more resentment among the mountains, he discovered, than the helmets and plumes. The mountain gods were competitive enough about height as it was, and barely had the tectonic disputes been settled and relative height been determined - apart from the volcanoes', of course, who were the subject of general and undisguised envy – than the Wardrobe introduced armour. The reformed

Olympic Police Department had been so occupied with resolving internal disputes about the relative heights of their helmets that there had been no opportunity to practice their policing.

The river Eurotas gave a drunken cheer at their appearance and ran at the nearest officer with the air of one who intends to hit his destination very hard when he reaches it. To his consternation the mountain god grabbed his wrist, twisting it painfully and briskly behind him. Two more moving mountains approached, and seized him by the shoulders. As the noise subsided, various disgruntled rivers formed a confluence around them.

"What're you up to?" yelled Peneios at Mount Kithairon, who seemed to be in charge. "You're supposed to join in, not break it up."

Kithairon shifted uneasily. "It is our job to break it up," he mumbled. "We are the Police."

"What about last year?" shouted Alpheios. "I seem to recall you broke it up with rather a large club. We had the bruises for ages."

"It is not the same now."

"Really. And what about our civil rights to the liberty of fighting?"

Mount Parnassus nodded. "It is a moral problem," he stated earnestly, looking at the circle of inebriated river gods that was slowly pooling around them.

"Always been quite keen on moral problems myself," said the river Acheron. "Thinking of patenting my own solution to them at the moment – along the lines of, 'Take one amphora, alcoholic liquid, full of…"

Kithairon stood motionless, holding Eurotas. As the mountain and the river on earth were separated from each other by several hundred miles, interesting things

were happening below, as the earth vainly buckled and tried to pass off the fact that the Eurotas' source now rose in the Attic hills with a tortuous shrug of its mountain ranges.

"We asked to be paid to do our jobs," said Kithairon. "And now they have given us more jobs, which we have to do because we are being paid." He took a deep breath, during the course of which his mountain grew several inches. "The police force has been reformed," he said.

Enipeus took a draught of wine to facilitate the working of his brain. Having hung his amphora on one of his horns, he elbowed his way through the crowd.

"Let go of Eurotas, old chap," he said. "Mountains are supposed to let rivers have a run for their money." Kithairon let go.

"Now. Look here. All these good fellows want is a bit of a scuffle. Nothing wrong with that, is there? For all our sakes, it's tradition. The ceremony's only half over without it. Symbolises the eternal struggle of earth and water, drought and flood, y'know. Look at them all, submissively waiting for a little punch up – we can't send them home disappointed. Besides, what about all the cosmic disturbances that'll follow if tradition and ritual are interfered with?"

"I do not think," said Kithairon, "that the Wardrobe cares very much about tradition."

The crowd made noises of disapproval. Rapidly, it was becoming clear that tradition would shortly fulfil itself despite the efforts of the O.P.D, or possibly because of them.

"We are to keep the peace," said Mount Ithome. The brazen-coated ridges of his shoulders shifted like metallic landslides. "And arrest those who do not."

“Quite so,” agreed Enipeus gravely. “But your job isn’t to smother our civil rights. So I think we should all collaborate in keeping the peace as far away from here as possible. If it ventures down here, it’ll get very badly damaged.”

As the mountain gods gave the impression of thought, Enipeus came to a sudden decision. “Tell you what,” he said. “If you were trying to arrest me, right, and then I resisted arrest, you’d have to resort to force in order to restrain me, right?”

“Yes,” ventured Kithairon, the valleys of his face contorting into ravines with the ferocity of his thought.

“Then we can all have our little get together and you’d have done your job.”

Everyone cheered. Kithairon smiled, and exhaled with relief.

“So,” said Enipeus, “here’s you trying to arrest me, bending forward just so, very good, your head inclined just like this, jaw pointing over here, please…yes, thank you, that’s fine. And then here’s me resisting arrest about to hit you very hard just there…”

He removed the amphora from his horn and swung it experimentally.

Consumption of wine had ended. The fight had been duly fought. Unconscious bodies littering the river and the promenade bore witness that both had taken place. In addition one or two houses had been burned to the ground, a number of perfectly innocent citizens had found themselves deprived of their clothes and strapped to flagpoles wearing traffic cones on their heads, and many people had been sick. The rivers would be replenished; tradition had been fulfilled. The mountain gods had collapsed in their new police station, their armour scratched and dented. Kithairon snored, a

dreamy smile on his face, a chip on the point of his jaw. Enipeus lay nearby, burbling happily in his sleep. One horn was broken, both eyes were blackened, and someone had torn out half of his beard. It had been a good night.

*

Hera wavered for a second outside Aphrodite's office, as though unsure of herself for the first time, but her desire for the Psychogram she needed drove her to continue. In her sleeplessness, she had recalled the flickering image of Aphrodite that had driven her finally to action, and reflected that the likelihood of Zeus avoiding extra-marital sub-navel activity while he was on earth was extremely slight. If, then, she could lay her hands on his Psychogram…

So far, she had wormed her way unnoticed into the apartment of the Goddess of Love, and penetrated her outer defences with unaccustomed ease. The leonine bronze doorknob smiled up at her with inviting feline teeth.

Within, filmy dust scurried over the disporting Psychograms on the desk. Whenever Aphrodite left them unattended, disastrous consequences followed on Earth. Already, forty-five marriages had broken down, eighty young men had been caught cheating and one couple on the verge of divorce found they were unable to complete the process. The Goddess of Love would find much to amuse her when she returned.

Flattened Psychograms would crumple together, rise swiftly into perfect miniatures of their owners, and sprint across the desk from one pile to another, tiny shoulders furtively hunched, and on Earth, another happy adulterous relationship would begin.

The desk cleared hurriedly as the door handle began to turn. With a livid snarl, the bronze lion animated and lunged at the interloper, metallic teeth grazing her forearm. But a single glance from Hera's dispassionate eyes froze it into inactivity. It recoiled unctuously in defeat, looking the other way. If it couldn't summon up the courage to bite her, its affronted back seemed to say, then it would have to pretend that she wasn't there.

Hera stepped into the rustling room, her eyes wandering across the endless corridors of files twining away into the distance, scanning the constantly moving shimmer of souls that sidled, almost imperceptibly, from shelf to shelf and slunk across the desk, creeping from drawer to drawer. She took care to walk several inches from the ground, so as to leave no trace of her passing in the silvery dust coating the floor. Her gaze settled on the desk, as her breath tightened suddenly in her chest, thrilling with the thought that she might be but paces away from finding him. In her long hours of sleeplessness, she had realised that even though Zeus might be invisible to their mortal eyes, the fragment of his spirit that dwelt within these walls might show her, blindingly, where he had sought refuge. The possibility of getting her hands on her husband filled her with an unnatural lust. Rare were the occasions when she desired him so badly. Hera found that being in a state of perpetual longing for someone she despised was disrupting her impeccable self-image.

Smoothly, gently, she glided forward, her reflection in the long glass wall keeping even pace with her…she thought. Till on the periphery of her vision she saw it falter, pause, and approach the glass from the other side, staring intently at her from the unimaginable vacuum it inhabited on the other side.

Hera wheeled on the pale shadow, pulling up sharply in front of the glass, where the steam of her breath faded and vanished. She saw dim shapes moving in the thick shadows beyond, and her own reflection, pallid and riven with cold white flame, streaming from her gaping eyes, pressed close against the glass. She tossed her head, undaunted, and saw that it was no more than her own negative, the phantom image of her own soul mirroring her living form in the world of light. Hera's lips tightened as she resumed her progress towards Aphrodite's desk. Psychograms scuttled out of the grasp of her approaching hands.

Apart from one. A satyr-shaped mannequin crouched on the far corner. Through its prismatic eyes, the distant Goddess of Love watched Hera with offended incredulity as she sailed into her sanctum. Aphrodite, staved of carnal relief, was intimately engaged with the young goat-legged demigod, to whom she was dispensing thoughtful and sweaty instruction. The satyr, eagerly anxious to please, took her sharp intake of breath as an encouraging sign and redoubled his efforts.

Hera rifled through the shifting leaves with distaste, shuddering at their slippery film between her fingers. Demigods, nymphs, satyrs, dryads…no Olympians were here. She shifted round to the other side of the desk, and her eyes fell on the sealed drawers.

Aphrodite, whose attention had been focused on the antics of the other goddess, jack-knifing her sight through the soul of the satyr out into her distant office, found that the antics of the woebegone demigod himself had all but stilled into inactivity. The sweat upon his youthful face had dried, and misery oozed instead through his pores. It was as he suspected – he had been

a fool to think he could satisfy the Goddess of Love. Aphrodite, for she was at heart a kindly goddess, perceived his unhappiness, and tearing her attention away from the violation of her privacy, returned with vigour to the other business in hand. The satyr found his confidence watered lavishly by her efforts.

Thus it was that Aphrodite did not see Hera force open the drawer where the fragments of the Olympians' souls were kept, and did not perceive the other goddess leaf through the pulsing sheaf that struggled to contain the elements of the divines therein. She passed over Artemis' pale sheet, pushed Athene's pink fluttering tissue aside. Beneath it was the throbbing heart of Poseidon's insatiable and frequently indulged desire, covering Hera's own image, glowing with the cool blues of shadow on snow.

Aphrodite only glanced up again through the satyr's eyes as Hera found what she sought. Peering over the edge of the desk, into the open drawer, the satyr saw her fingers fasten on the Psychogram of Zeus. It was strangely blank…but she hoped that if he loved or lay with a woman, its filaments would glow and writhe into the representation of his soul, and would lay it open to guidance – or to Hera's gaze.

Thrown into jerky motion by the oscillations of the satyr, her back rubbing the pine-needled soil, Aphrodite felt a sickness enter her stomach, that was not entirely related to the unpleasant motions taking place at her nether end. She had not thought to turn her mind towards Olympus since her playful encounter with Zeus, but she did not like the thought of Hera in her office and liked the thought of Hera controlling Psychograms even less. Considering the mess Hera had made of her own love life, Aphrodite did not think it responsible to allow

her to play with other people's. And she was taken even more strongly by the knowledge that for whatever reason, she must not let Hera toy with Zeus' soul.
She looked down the length of her body at the perspiring satyr, and gave him an encouraging wave. "Um…Eleutheros?" she called. "Very well done so far, I'm really impressed. There is one think I'd really like to do to you though…"
"Just ask!" panted the satyr.
"Could I borrow you for a second?"

Without waiting for a response, Aphrodite dematerialised in his grasp, coiling round his flailing body. She pressed herself into his open mouth, sinking in, feeling the weight of his unaccustomed body, the lightness of his soul, and its corresponding fragment endless miles away.

"Hey, Hera!" shouted the tiny satyr on the desk. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

With a terrible jolt, lancing down her spine into her guilty stomach, the Queen of the Gods jerked upright, scattering forgotten Olympians from a numb hand. Hera did not hesitate. The satyr's soul, somersaulted by the wary Aphrodite, barely twisted out of the path of her descending fist. The desktop shattered beneath the blow, spilling adulterous souls into a lascivious tangle on the floor.

Aphrodite leapt for a cabinet, swinging herself out of range. Far away, the satyr lay insensible, his eyes half closed, as the goddess shuttled desperately around his unfamiliar soul. Hera, her hand clasped on Zeus' Psychogram, swung slowly toward the tiny, helpless shape. "Aphrodite," she said coolly, "if that's you in there, I'd like to let you know that we have now moved beyond your tiresome little games. However, just for old

times' sake…" She opened her hand, and a blast of winter chill coiled from her fingers, freezing the souls in its path. Aphrodite hurled herself to the floor and rolled aside. Hera's reflection in the long glass of the walls swept after her, swirling vortices of gossamer souls in her wake. Her foot slammed down beside the scurrying Psychogram, sending cracks spraying through the marble floor.

Panicking, Aphrodite scuttled for cover. The vast form of the goddess lurching behind her blotted out her calmer thoughts. All she knew was that she could not let Hera leave with the Psychogram she held. And she could only think of one, disastrous, means of stopping her.

High on the wall behind the desk was a lever. A lever that wound the dark glass back into the roof, leaving her office exposed to the Mirrorsphere. She would lose everything, all her souls, all her records, into the darkness where only she and Eros could venture. She had cleaned out the office before, but only after bolting everything down. This might be total…but she sensed that letting Hera get away might be worse.

Not that losing anything was very much of an option, she shot back to herself, as she was less that three inches high and the lever was five feet from the floor. Impossibly high – she thought, till Hera's foot caught her in a dull black implosion of pain and hurled her into the wall. Bleary-eyed, she had the wits to reposition herself, and just enough strength to guide her flight when the foot hurtled down again, as she knew it would. She landed on the lever, stamping it down, and fell off, landing wetly beneath it.

The glass rose soundlessly. But far from soundless was the hurricane of souls that exploded from the

endless racks and shelves, howling in freefall towards the abyss from which they came. All the desk drawers slammed open, striking Hera simultaneously and knocking her to her knees. Streaming like a breaking dam, Psychograms hurtled into the blackness, blinding her in their rush to escape. Driven into the floor by the whirlwind of their passing, Hera was blinded by their fury and deafened by the thunder of their wings, sucked slowly and inevitably, despite the strength of her clinging fingers, towards the void where their parent souls waited, hungry for their wayward children. The desk exploded, hurling its fragments over her, and the shattered floor rose up as she tried to grasp it, peeling away like the skin of a fruit to reveal the sable vacuum beneath. Above her, the lamps on the roof flickered, before the light was sucked out of them and streamed into the night.

But Hera's hands were upon the threshold of the door that led back from the imploding room into Olympus. In her left hand she clutched the last remaining Psychogram, a fragment of Zeus' soul, which would lead her to him.

The doorway trembled upon the brink of dissolving into unreality, its outlines shimmering in the suction of the blast from beyond. As Hera dragged herself through, the brass doorknocker opened its injured jaws and seized the Psychogram, disappearing into nothingness oblivious to her shriek of fury, as the doorway closed in upon itself and was smoothed away, leaving nothing more than an unremarkable section of corridor.

Aphrodite breathed out of the satyr, rematerialising in a shaken heap at his feet. Her eyes were wet with tears. She was filled with the desire to find out what in the name of all the holies was going on in Heaven, to

sooth her hideous sense of foreboding. And filled with horror at what she had done…after all their years of work and planning, to end it at a stroke, on no more than an intuition. At least she'd never have to catch up with her filing now, she consoled herself. And perhaps there was no harm in returning to manipulating people manually for a change.

The satyr shook himself dizzily, looking incapable of manipulating either himself or anyone else for some considerable length of time. He had heard stories about the earth moving when you lost your virginity, but no one had ever mentioned anything about the rest of the Universe misbehaving at the same time. As his eyes swam back into focus, he saw Aphrodite bending down anxiously above him.

"Was that good for you too?" she asked.

*

Already, a change had come over Wardrobe meetings. Poseidon and Hades were now frequently absent, - the latter because his dignity had suffered an enormous affront, the former because he was too lazy. Today only a handful of ministers were there. However, the Minutes, the children of the Hours, had been enlisted to take notes and give resumes of previous meetings – they clustered, ticking softly, behind the thrones.

Athene felt the strain beginning to tell. Over the past few days, she and Prometheus had attempted to halt the irresistible force of the combined will of Hera and Ares, in their plans for corporate conglomeration, as they witnessed the ritual public consumption of the first shop holders by the developers of the first retail chains. To ingest them in full view was unseemly, they had protested, especially when the rest of the citizen body

had been encouraged to treat the event as a day out, at which they had raised ever louder cheers as the corporate bodies of the triumphant satyrs and river gods swelled before their eyes, while they stuffed still-protesting entrepreneurs into their enlarging mouths. Let us admit defeat, they had agreed in the end, but we still insist that the spicy sauce was in very bad taste indeed.

Olympus had witnessed regulated and restricted mandatory periods of public drunkenness, which made the job of tidying it up much easier; there had been times and places laid down for fornication and petty crime, while these attitudes were readily inculcated in the consciousness through the six hourly slots of Community Vision, broadcast on the portable theatres sold by Dionysus' satyrs, intended to boost Olympic solidarity and group feeling, as well as contributing to prevent conversation. Hades was forced to create a section of the Underworld especially for those gods who persisted in protests against such community-orientated behaviour. Prometheus and Athene objected that free indulgence in fornication, public drunkenness and petty crimes were all but prerequisites for godhead and that the citizens were in danger of losing valuable elements of their cultural heritage. In reply, Hera subjected them to a lengthy and earnest lecture on the way in which excessive freedom actually impinged on the freedom of others, and how the People needed to be restrained in order for true freedom, on which the Theocratic Republic had a monopoly and which it had been created to supply, could reach out to all. The more one was restricted, Hera assured them, the freer one became, seeing as in the act of choosing one is automatically manipulated by forces beyond one's control, such as advertising. "Or the police," suggested Prometheus

helpfully. Hera ignored him, consoling herself with the thought that the infrastructure for the new state was now all but complete. Soon she would be able to concentrate wholly on the adjustment of the People's thought, or lack thereof. "I hear the river gods are showing an alarming tendency to revert to type," she remarked, leafing through her tablets.

"They are rather set in their ways," protested Athene. "Channel vision, and so on. It's in their nature not to go with the flow."

"This annual festival," sniffed Hera. "It smells of superstition to me."

"Begging your pardon," came the subterranean rumble that usually indicated Heracles' engagement in the activity of speech, "but what it usually smells of is…"

"What I mean," cut in the goddess, "is that it cannot be allowed to continue. I gather a number of river gods attempted to resist arrest. Whoever heard of such a thing? One would expect self-respecting republican citizens to arrest themselves before submitting to that."

"I gather a number of the rivers beat themselves up," supplied Prometheus. "Surely that counts as helping the police?"

"They claim it's traditional," mused Hera. "And they've been heard making very impertinent queries as to our suitability to run the Olympic State. With this in view, and so as to curb those dangerous and destabilising tendencies I perceive emerging among certain members of our society, I propose that we outlaw the Question, and order the immediate arrest and confinement of the Interrogatives. Only if we remove the Ability to Disbelieve from our citizens can we be assured of the proper functioning of our society. I trust I have your votes?" It appeared that, with three exceptions, she did.

*

On the night that the Question became illegal carefully coordinated raids broke in upon the peace of the Interrogatives. Without warning, daemons and mountain gods swooped on their abodes to carry them into Tartarus. Guerrilla hills swung in glassy devastation through the handless clock face behind which When slept, unaware of his peril, and as he awoke he barely had time to scream out "What's going on here?" before the word was removed from the vocabulary.

They apprehended What in a pink field where he entertained a number of blue elephants on skis, while listening to a lutenist from Paris, who was being played by a Fury. When the mountain gods leapt onto him from behind, the chains they twisted round his neck choked his breath away, but one could not ask Where, as she was simultaneously apprehended at home. There she dwelt within a mosaic that covered her floor, a fluid map that displayed in glittering tiles all the regions of the world – a mosaic of flowing rivers, seething oceans and ever swirling weather systems. Broken up by hammers and mattocks and imprisoned in a sack, Where materialised into the darkness of a prison whence she could not escape.

For a time Which and Who evaded their pursuers, since at every turn and alleyway of the chase they would bifurcate, leaving those on their heels with a terrible dilemma over which was the real felon. But their luck ran out in Trojan View, a long straight street without turnings or intersections, where at last the police ran them down, bore him to the ground, and sealed them in a case of chains.

How was absent from his home when they burst through his windows. Following his trail to the Museum

of Technological Achievement And Mechanical Mysteries, they discovered him reading a newstablet in the lavatory, whence he was ignominiously dragged.

The night had all but passed, and hope with it, before the arrest of Why was made. Found neither at home nor in any of his usual haunts, the OPD had begun to wonder whether he had got wind of the pursuit and made his escape. But a patrol stumbled upon him as the milk of the rising day began to seep into the east, in the wild land to the Trojan side of Hera's bower. There he sat beneath a silver olive in the form of a child, his back nestled into its coils, an empty wine cup in his hands. He made no protest as they took him away, and said no word to his captors or to the stern face of Hera in the hard morning but his own name, endlessly repeated in tones of puzzlement and reproach. When they were herded to Tartarus his face was copious with tears.

*

Later that day, the weekly Presidential Presentation got duly underway. Olympus came to a virtual standstill during the process, as the President and those of his Wardrobe who could be bothered or coerced to accompany him floated over the city on a small cloud to receive the adulation of the People. It was also an opportunity for the President to announce special reforms, and for the People to ask him Questions, though it was hoped that recent measures would restrict their activities in this area. Neither the President nor the People were wont to understand the Answers that Hera instructed him to give, but this was unimportant in that the true function of the proceedings was to assure the citizens that their ruler was in touch with the grassroots.

Athene, Prometheus and Heracles escaped to the steamy dwelling place of an ever-more mournful

Dionysus, who had foolishly sold the controlling interests in his distillery and vineyards and was regretting his lack of involvement in Olympic insobriety. He was, he told them sadly, beginning to think of packing up his Olympic operations and heading North to Asgard, where they really understood drinking.

A fanfare of tuneless trumpets announced the descent of the President from the Air Throne. Resignedly the rabble of Olympus laid down their occupations, looked up from their gardens, and quit the malls, preparing to be the People. It was unwise to do otherwise. On the occasion of his first Presentation, the President had accidentally dropped a holster full of thunderbolts on to a party that had contrived to continue during his orbit of the city. No one could have been more apologetic than he – an official day of remembrance had been declared, and the survivors had been taken away on a special holiday at governmental expense. It had not been remarked upon that their holiday seemed still ongoing.

The cloud floated slowly and regally over the city. Reclining upon it were Ares and Hera, noble and distant expressions on their faces, as befits those who carry the responsibilities of Theocratic Republics. Motionless crowds below turned a plethora of faces towards them, alight with carefully studied expressions of awe and admiration. Impressionable nymphs gasped at the virility of the President, satyrs, mountain and river gods gazed with undisguised envy at his musculature. Demigods of the forests and the airs gave him their open admiration. The cloud came to rest in the central court of the city, whereupon all those present prostrated themselves. “Hail, o giver of freedom, o liberator, o Champion of the brotherhood and sisterhood of the

gods!" they cried. "O hail to the enforcer of equality!" Ares cleared his throat. "We, the giver of freedom, the liberator, the champion of fraternity and enforcer of equality, give you greeting!" His voice carried all over the city. Before he spoke, he consulted the tablet Hera had prepared for him, written very carefully in capitals, using only very short words. He let the people know that the rivers' misguided zeal was frowned upon as archaic, outdated and unsupportive of the economy, leaving the People to draw their own conclusions.

Permission to ask questions was granted for a few seconds. Directly beneath them a small river god got to his feet. Almost as broad as he was tall, he bore an expression of undisguised belligerence. "Yes, I got a question," he said.

"Pray continue," said Hera, with a gracious inclination of her head.

The river god opened his mouth…he began to ask *the nature of their activities* but could not recall the necessary means to do so, he struggled to ask *the reason for the state of Olympic Society*, but the phrase eluded him, and he floundered helplessly in fighting to ask *whether there would ever be a time for the demigods to rule alongside the Olympians*...But the Interrogatives writhed in their chains in distant Tartarus, and could not come to his aid. Eventually, he stammered, "Would the honourable President agree that we do not see enough of him?"

Hera smiled in self-congratulation. Well might they try to question her without those meddlesome words.

"My schedule," said Ares, with a studied sigh, "is a busy one."

The river god, suitably recovered, continued. "Me and my mates, see, we've been thinking. And we reckon

that you Wardrobe ministers have too much power, see? So we reckon there ought to be a bunch of ordinary guys to, like, hold you back from changing everything and telling us how to live, see?"

The gods in his immediate vicinity shuffled backwards quickly and put their fingers in their ears. Ares disappeared from view. During his absence, there came the sound of hurried whispering. On his reappearance, he surprisingly said, "I, the President, believe this suggestion to be good and worthwhile. There shall be a new chamber of the Wardrobe, to limit the power of the first. I and my Ministers shall proceed to choose the members of this chamber." There was a pause. "You can go now."

The cloud circled back towards the palace. Hera called Kithairon on closed circuit telepathy. "Head of OPD?" she asked.

"Yes, your majesty?" came his ponderous voice in answer.

"Could you pick up an insurgent river god in Central Square? He's been fomenting rebellion and treason against the state."

"The usual charges, then?"

"Yes. So do the usual with him, will you?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

Ares' voice penetrated even into Dionysus' house, echoing through his sitting room. It was a curious hotchpotch of his functions, resembling a sacred theatre at floor level, with the requisite tiers of seats and holy altars doubling as tables, while the curvature of the walls, which rose funnel-like to the tiny hole high in the ceiling, gave one the impression of sitting at the bottom of a gigantic amphora. Dionysus himself stared gloomily into his wine, in which he was unsuccessfully

trying to find solace. “Another festival federated,” he complained. “At this rate I might as well become teetotal and concentrate on the acting. What are they doing to the art of drinking? Did you hear that last week they made the wearing of vine leaves illegal because they may offend dryads during festivals?”

“It’s rather like banning clothes because they’re reversely associated with nudity,” said Athene.

“And have you noticed that he’s pinched my title? I used to be called the freedom giver. I’ve a good mind to spike his damned drink,” said Dionysus maliciously.

“Alcohol is so important to them because it *is* a liberator,” pointed out Prometheus. “Therefore they need to control it. Once released from them intellectually, the people are in some ways less easy to manipulate. Besides, whenever any one up here drinks anything, wherever they are, there’s going to be a fight. And no one’s ever managed to control the demigods when they’re doing that.”

All this passed over Dionysus’ head, or possibly through it. “All I want to do is to be in charge of drinking again,” he moaned. “I’m worrying so much about it I’m neglecting my remaining feast days, the Maenads are looking for alternative employment, and I completely missed the last three dramatic festivals in Greece.”

“Make people pay for it too,” suggested Athene. “Undercut their prices.”

“Pay?” he squealed. “Lower myself to their level? How could you suggest something so perfectly horrible as making people pay for pleasure? I haven’t heard anything as foul since one of my girls told me she’d…um…well…made someone pay for pleasure, in

fact. What would heaven come to if *everyone* had to pay to get drunk?"

"They usually pay for it the next morning anyway, as far as I can see," said Prometheus. "But remember that by putting a price on it, Hera's made it more desirable. The higher something's price, the more likely you are to find some idiot who'll buy it off you."

"I thought the republic was going to be different," mourned Dionysus, imbued with the perennial post-election gloom of the voter. "It was quite fun to begin with, the salaries, the parties, but now Ares and Hera are acting as though I deliberately make people ill."

"Hades isn't too happy about things either," commented Athene. "Without you, Hera doesn't have much of the vote behind her. If you vote with us, we can start making rules of our own. If we can't overcome her system, at least we might force it to work for us."

Prometheus was quiet. In his mind's eye he saw a Titan, stretched out on sharp rocks in the desolate mountains. As the wind strummed across a pair of mighty wings, a shadow fell over his face. In the youth of the world, as he rode the untamed stallion that was Zeus, he had been granted a glimpse of what would destroy the king of the gods. He could have acquiesced to Zeus' demands for revelation, could have saved himself suffering and torment. But with insight that defied self-preservation, he realised that he had been given a chance to save the things he loved from a god who might otherwise become a monster. Unpredictable in its violence, Zeus' wrath was unleashed upon him…

"Why won't you tell me, Prometheus?" cried Zeus. He looked petulant, puzzled and betrayed, like a child finding his father has been playing away from home. His balled fist smashed into the stone beside

Prometheus' head, smearing blood heedless across his knuckles. "Just tell me and I'll let you go. I'll forget the fire-stealing, everything else. Please tell me."

"I can't tell you yet. I only wish I could," said Prometheus, working his swollen tongue around his sticky mouth. It was perfectly true – he really did wish he could tell Zeus. The prospect of having his perpetually regenerating liver devoured every day for eternity by an eagle was not an attractive one.

But to hear the King of Gods and Men beg him for the answer provided him with enough of a hopeful glimmer to hold fast. "Tell me what I need to fear!" roared Zeus. He towered above the stone where Prometheus lay bound with brazen fetters, the Caucasus Mountains shrinking before him as clouds tore down from the riven skies to wreathe his brows. The thunderbolts glowed eerily about his waist. But the god slumped to his knees before the rock, shrinking rapidly in his return to mortal size. Craning his neck, Prometheus saw bright tears oozing from his eyes, only to be dashed aside by the god's furious hand. Into the Titan came a crazy, delirious desire to let out a bray of raucous laughter. What in hell's name was he doing, trying to blackmail the ruler of the Universe?

It's for his own sake, he told himself. He's just too powerful for his own good. Without the threat of this fear he'll be even worse than his father. And the consequences of that will be unimaginable.

Tell him, then, said the part of his mind that most feared the intrusive attentions of the eagle. He found the part in question was a pretty sizeable portion.

No*, said the tiny fragment of his psyche that he wholeheartedly detested, the part that always got him into trouble, whose mental teeth would need to be prized*

apart after its death of it ever decided to bite into an idea. You can't let everything down. I can't let you.

Why the hell not? *The more representative sections of his mental democracy lined up in righteous indignation against the traitor.*

He'll try to terminate the opposition if he knows what it is. If he's got to watch the way he acts, ever so slightly, then there'll be room for doubt. Room for second chances. Room for mercy. He'll refine himself in ways I couldn't hope to imagine if I just told him what to do.

Mercy even for us?

Even for us. You know that too. When Heracles frees us. You're the sacrifice, Prometheus. Without this, it's all over.

I wish there was another way.

So do I. But there isn't. The sweat, blood and tears have to come from someone.

I wish it wasn't me.

Zeus rose to his feet. Now only fury etched itself into his face. Thunder boomed in the heavens. "If you refuse to tell me, Prometheus," he said, "then you leave me with no choice. I don't want to do this…"

"Believe me, I don't want you to do it either," said Prometheus. "And it's a lot closer to home for me."

The shadow of the eagle passed over them. For a long moment Zeus looked down at the fallen Titan, the only father to him who could have deserved that epithet. Prometheus looked back, his eyes brimming with tears, trying vainly to settle the massive chess game whirring in his mind, in the awful knowledge that some convoluted destiny of divine nature had left this as the only means of salvation for Zeus, the only sacrifice that might save him from the beckoning monster within him.

Let him be racked by fear, Prometheus told himself. Let him always ask, how do I know that I am not wrong?

As Zeus turned away, and the eagle wheeled overhead, Prometheus hoped that the first thing Zeus would reconsider would be his punishment.

And now here was another king-making opportunity, though he feared that Ares and Hera were already beyond his help. But it had come upon him unexpectedly, beyond his sphere, and he was unprepared. Especially to undergo his fate again. Prometheus was the eternal modifier, the upholder of reason over passion, of the mind that made the animal human, furthermore the only god who could do so. And sometimes he really, really wondered why.

"That's very astute, actually," he said in a pocket of silence that seemed to have opened for him to fill. "You know, give unto others a taste of what they give to you." Athene and Dionysus looked at him quizzically. "I don't quite…" began Athene.

"If you had a Panathenaic present from someone you didn't like, you ought to give it back to them on their next festival day. That way they'd know just how you felt."

"D'you think so?" she asked. "It's strange you should mention that, but most people seem to go to some trouble deliberately choosing presents they know I wouldn't like. I've got a whole room full of them at home. Do you think I should give them all back?"

"Well…"

"I don't know whether I'd be able to remember who gave what, come to think of it," she mused. "I'm pretty sure Poseidon gave me the wind-up model of himself disembowelling a Triton, and there was that lump of stone that Hades told me was a paperweight from

Argos, which I'm sure I saw some urchins kicking around outside the palace…" Her voice trailed away. "Prometheus, why did you start talking about presents?"

"We were just talking about turning theocracy against Ares and Hera, weren't we?"

"Ah, that makes it so much clearer," said Athene gratefully. "I must say, the connection's immediately apparent. Besides, that was ten minutes ago. Dionysus and I, in your apparent absence, have been engaged in a most absorbing conversation about the relative merits of purple grapes and maroon grapes."

"Perhaps," suggested Dionysus, "he means we are to bribe them out of office?"

"I'm sure that at the time I meant something topical and relevant," said Prometheus defensively. "But you've contrived to drive it from my head."

"Try and stay in the present, old chap," encouraged Dionysus. "Have some wine, it helps the memory."

It is also of some use in cushioning the nerves. Thus it was fortunate that Dionysus had been generous when the door opened a short while later and Aphrodite breezed in. Prometheus shot to his feet. "Aphrodite!" he yelled. "You tart!"

She giggled. "Prometheus!" she shrilled. "You rude boy!"

Possibly in emulation of one of their host's finer wines, Prometheus developed a subtle shade of puce. Aphrodite kissed him on the cheek, waved to Athene and smiled at Dionysus as she sat down prettily in a cascade of lace and sashes. A trailing piece of airy silk pulled the amphora from the table. After replacing it with a brief flick of his eyes, Dionysus proceeded to arrange his body into that position from which it is

possible to look askance at someone, who in this instance happened to be Aphrodite.

"Everyone's so quiet today," she remarked, after a silence of about five minutes. "Has something gone wrong while I've been away?"

Prometheus exploded. "No, nothing's gone *wrong*," he said. "Not wrong. We're having a hell of a time. You know that creek where people get stuck? Well, you can forget about us not having a paddle, we haven't even got a boat. Wrong?" He laughed, in the manner that is frequently called mirthless. "I don't think that quite describes the current situation. This is a very long and deep creek. And if you hadn't gone flashing your femininity around we wouldn't be in it."

"That's most unfair, Prometheus," said Aphrodite sharply. "I had the misfortune to be the last in a series of infidelities. I'm afraid the culpability is principally his."

Athene raised her eyebrows. Hearing Aphrodite use polysyllabic words was an unusual occurrence. One tended to forget she had a brain as well as a body, though whenever she tried to persuade her admirers that she was more than a pretty face, they assumed this meant she had great legs as well. "You can't blame me for performing my function," she went on, "any more than you can blame Apollo for singing, you for being a meddler, or Dionysus for play acting and making people drunk."

"That's what they are doing," said Athene.

"It's not quite playacting," came Dionysus' anxious voice, "it's actually quite an important part of the Dionysiac ritual…"

"Yes, I thought I might have some fun helping with Hera's reformation programme," said Aphrodite innocently.

“There are some things it’s already too late to change,” said Athene. “We have laid down a set of parameters outside which it is becoming impossible to operate. For example, we cannot use force to impose our judgements.”

“Have you felt it too then?” asked Prometheus.

“ Yes,” said Athene. “They have wakened Ploutokratia.”

“Is that bad?” asked Aphrodite.

“Perhaps she’s hung over,” suggested Dionysus. Prometheus shook his head. “It is as I feared at the beginning. She is too strong for us now.”

“Who…”

“Like a glutinous mist her power has pervaded the depths of every mind, reordering thought and binding their wills to hers.”

“If someone would perhaps like to tell me…”

“Fruitlessly we struggle in her chains. From here the only progression can be through uniformity of thought and action, irresistible steps in the levelling process that shall only end when she has absorbed every soul into her own…”

“Look Prometheus, I haven’t got a clue…”

So Athene told them.

Before there was formed earth or sea, before the canopy of the sky reared overhead, Nature presented the same aspect the world over, a shapeless, uncoordinated mass, whose ill-assorted elements were indiscriminately heaped together in one place. It was Chaos, the wellspring of the world, original and unknowable, and before the birth of Time who was called Cronos, endless duration passed.

But in the depths of Chaos, children arose from their churning parent. There came Night and Erebus, Love

and Strife, Ouranos the sky and Gaia the earth. But over all the shapeless uncoordinated mass, Ploutokratia ruled through her son Argurion, and saw that it was good, for she waxed fat on devouring the nascent creations of her siblings. Then, her name was Isodoxe, and she was fairly happy till other children of Chaos discovered reproduction as well, and began to populate the universe.

In the manner of local populations, Isodoxe experienced some mild annoyance with the invading colonists. But for them it became one long spiral of diversity and discrepancy, both of which tore at the roots of her heart. Too momentous for her to reverse, there were soon Titans hopping up and declaring themselves kings of gods and men, and being soundly abused by other Titans for suggesting it, where shortly before there had been neither species nor anywhere for the offending Titans to claim. Isodoxe weakened, and faded meekly into the shadows in the face of all this teeming, irrepressible variety.

Until she had found a means of entry into the minds of living creatures. She discovered that, when conditions were right, and the bubbling dish of life at precisely the right temperature, the minds of the living were apt to sink into exaggerated caricatures of thought. It was here that she struck, sidling unnoticed into their habits and beliefs.

For she is a consumer of souls, and feeds upon the very things that give us life. She can neither make nor bring into being, can only mar and mould. Her power lies in corruption, in her ability to infect minds with desire, and to unify and subdue their owners and the society they comprise. Under her rule, all mind-sets are merged – into an adoration of her might and a slavish

belief in her glory. Under her spell, the infected will sacrifice everything in Argurion's name, will give their souls, their minds, their bodies and more; their very nature as gods. They will forget themselves and those they loved in the belief that only Argurion has worth, and only Ploutokratia dominion.

So Isodoxe acquired her new name and insinuated her way back into the consciousness of the world, manifesting hand in hand with her son – called Dhosh in the East, Lukre in the far north, but known in Greece as Argurion. Ploutokratia had no desire but to return the world to the state of faceless homogeneity it had known before the day of the gods had dawned, feeding in relentless consumption on all that grew and lived and breathed. And now it seemed that Olympus itself had fallen into her grasp. The struggling machine of the Universe had ground to stillness, straining against the titanic force that strove to turn it around and head it back along the road whence it had come.

"And there are now rules," finished Athene, "which I don't think we have to power to break."

"Something like this happened a long time ago in a remote part of Asia," said Prometheus. " By the time the people decided they didn't like it, they found they were unable to overthrow the government by undemocratic means. Mentally incapable of it. Because she only arises in a society that has tasted freedom. This is what makes her so insidiously powerful. Like a virus or a daemon, once you let them in you have to do what they dictate."

"I had an aunt like that once," commented Dionysus. "Semele's sister. Very difficult to get on with."

"If we tried, we'd simply be crushed by the commercial machine, the most ruthless, insidious system of thought

ever evolved. Gods! Give me a bloody tyrant any day. You at least know where you are with them."

"Dead, quite frequently," pointed out Aphrodite.

"At least they're honest about it. Couldn't stand someone trying to bump me off behind my back. And you can't pretend that this system here's anything more than a closed semi-elected oligarchy. True democracy might be worse, because it gives power to the wrong people."

"Do you mean the people, by any chance?"

"Absolutely. What does Kithairon know about ruling? But he know a hell of a lot about being a mountain."

"Not a terribly taxing job, by all accounts," interjected Dionysus.

"The trouble with an open system is that all the people who run for office are egotistical megalomaniacs," enthused Prometheus, who showed no signs of falling from his hobbyhorse, despite the best efforts of the God of Wine. "The greatest disadvantage of democracy is that the people we elect are politicians."

"It is *too* delightful to sit here listening to your theorising," said Aphrodite. "I wish I were intelligent enough to hold forth for so long; only I haven't noticed you mentioning what you want to do about it."

"What are we going to do?" asked Prometheus. He leapt up with a martial salute, fervour trembling in his voice. "We are going to take the bull by the horns. If Ploutokratia has awoken, she will perceive our every thought. There is only one way to defeat entropy, and that is by overdose. We're going to give them so much democracy they'll be hungover."

"Well, they're not going to get hungover on my wine," said Dionysus gloomily. "It's going to vinegar in these stockpiles."

“We’re going to give it to her where it hurts,” persisted Prometheus.
“Where’s that?” said Dionysus with interest.
“What d’you mean?”
“Where does it hurt her? I thought you might know something the rest of us don’t.”
“It’s just an expression,” said Prometheus testily.
Dionysus nodded sagely. “Ah, I thought you meant you were going to hit her weak spot.”
“ I must say this theocracy seems terribly boring,” said Aphrodite. “I’d have thought Hera would be able to find a more exciting way of being bossy and annoying.”
“Those two words have been banned,” Athene informed her. “So have ‘stupid’, ‘moronic’ and ‘fruit loop’. They have been replaced by ‘differentially intelligent’ instead.”
“With Aphrodite’s vote, we should be able to sway the majority in the Wardrobe,” said Prometheus. He continued to enthuse as Aphrodite arose in a whirlwind of silk and left the bemused Dionysus with Athene, going through the sliding doors to join Heracles on the balcony.

“Prometheus’ talk seems unhealthy,” she remarked. Heracles responded to the effect that perhaps it did, and intimated in addition that he wasn’t entirely sure what was going on. He seemed to be of the opinion that although Zeus had annoyed his numerous relatives, as was his wont, his return might possibly be a Good Thing. Zeus always knew what to do.
“Heracles, I think I may be able to find him,” said Aphrodite earnestly. She took his enormous hand, and reached up to pull his distant head towards her, looking into his troubled puppy eyes. “But I don’t want anyone but you to know. If things become really bad, Heracles,

look for me and I will show you where he is. But not until there is nothing else to be done, you understand? Can you do this for me?"

Heracles nodded. "I feel that everyone is using everyone else against each other," he said. "Like a troupe of monkeys. It's a free for all, and I think even Athene and Prometheus are now trying to see what they can get out of it for themselves."

Aphrodite kissed him on the cheek. "Don't trust anyone, Heracles," she said. "Don't let anyone use you for something you can't understand. I don't know what to believe myself – that Ploutokratia story sounded most implausible. But if I know Zeus as well as I think I do, I have a way to find him that only I can use. Goodbye for now – but remember what I said. Look for me when the time comes."

Heracles watched her flutter into the empyrean like a ruffle of angel wings. "But can I trust you?" he asked.

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Opposite the empty curve of Aphrodite's Bay, deep in the water pooling like azure mercury about its skirts, crouches a domed rock. Legend tells that as the testicles of Ouranos fell into Ocean, sliced from the Sky's body by Cronos, his rebel son, white foam gathered about the severed organs. From this spume, Legend insists, the matchless body of Aphrodite had arisen and drew breath, the last sister of Cronos. Drawn in a vast shell by Tritons and Sea-nymphs, the ancient goddess had surfed on a wave of scent and chiffon-wreathed beauty, to land here on the shores of Cyprus, where she had begun her dedicated work of showing people a good time.

In addition to her duties, Aphrodite had taken pains to track down Legend and sue him for gross libel. It was tacitly understood among males of all species that it was

best not to mention testicles in front of her, unless of course she was intimately involved with yours. Otherwise you might find yourself in the same boat as Ouranos. Or not, as the case may be.

Over time, Aphrodite had carved out the interior of the Rock and made it her home, while ensuring that its windows remained invisible to mortal eyes. She looked forward to the time when she would be able to gaze out on the bronzed specimens of perfect manhood who would one day sun themselves on the sands of her bay. She would have been bitterly disappointed to see the pink elephantine specimens of manhood that eventually wound up there.

It was only here that Aphrodite could relax from the endless charade of being the Goddess of Love, a role that required one to behave like Helen of Troy crossed with a lascivious adult entertainer. Not that Aphrodite didn't enjoy her function, of course, but she felt the least she deserved were a few undisturbed moments when she could slop around in baggy trousers, and eat biscuits on the sofa with her cat. She often felt that few people understood the effort involved in looking effortless all the time.

Despite liberal helpings of tea, a small cat, which had bitten her and escaped onto the roof terrace, and a large chocolate biscuit that would haunt her for days, Aphrodite could not settle. Unaccustomed feelings of guilt and sadness squirmed inside her, performing complex alchemical dances under the skin of her perfect stomach. Even the appearance on the beach of a specimen who might easily have been male and, with a little work, could have been set well on the way to bronze, failed to soothe her. Her responsibility for events underway in Olympus weighed upon her like the

memory of a rash affair. Despite their intentions, which were possibly very good indeed, Aphrodite found it difficult to trust Prometheus and Athene. She was pretty sure they were both virgins, for goodness' sake. She instinctively mistrusted anyone too circumscribed to let other people see them naked. You knew where you were with someone when you had laughed at each other's wobbly bits.

So Zeus was all but invisible to the Immortals, and desperately needed to be found. Aphrodite had known about his disruptor programme for eons, of course, seeing as she had usually been involved on the previous occasions of its employment. Not that the girls in question ever needed much prodding, of course. The blocking mechanism had proved itself against the inquisitive mind of Hera over the millennia, and with a healthy respect for her enemy Aphrodite acknowledged that for her to attempt decoding it where Hera had failed would be as fruitful as trying to break into a safe with a piece of stilton cheese.

But there were other ways, ways closed to any other deity. Aphrodite helped herself to another biscuit, dripping with melting chocolate, to calm her nerves. They were ways she should not even begin to contemplate, for she knew too well that they had an alarming tendency to morph from ways into dead ends, or more often, bottomless pits. Only once before had she attempted to follow them, and she had come back bodiless, broken and, most horrific, all but chastened. It had been some days before she was fit to make love again.

She considered her options. Despite all appearances and years of salacious publicity, Aphrodite was a kind-hearted goddess, and the thought that her needling of

Hera might provoke unpleasant reactions chilled her. They couldn't perceive Zeus directly, they said, only by his incidental qualities or actions. No other deity could know as well as she what went on between his ears, or, for that matter, in his breast or between his thighs. It was simply a question of having the courage to go.

Aphrodite fell asleep still worrying. Throughout the night she was troubled by an enormous, perambulating Biscuit, loaded feet-thick with caramel and chocolate. It kept trying to open gooey eyes in its melting face, but the caramel gummed them shut. It could not stop the awful mouth, though, panting with steaming breath and lolling open to reveal the horrible chocolate fudge inside, damp and vaporous. It was desperately trying to find her…it was hungry and wanted something to dip in its tea. She awoke with relief into a reality more fearful than the one she had left.

It would do her no good to think any more; she must act. If Prometheus knew what he was talking about, she probably wouldn't have the leisure to if she didn't do so soon.

"Eros!" she called.

Into the morning room, looking out over the sun-plated sea, there echoed a series of soft thuds as Eros made his way down the passage. When the door slumped open, he buzzed in, collided with the chandelier, and bounced off three walls before locating the sofa, mostly by accident. In the process, he loosed off the golden shaft resting on his bowstring. It lanced out of the window, and caused great surprise to a large dog on the beach in the distance, which suddenly became enraptured with its master's leg and immediately proceeded to show it. By a strange twist of Fate on the threads of the Tapestry, this characteristic

was regrettably inherited by its descendents; and by another twist so outrageous that one suspects direct narrative intervention, its particular strain eventually became universal. Eros panted as the Grandsire of all Canines happily rubbed its genitalia all over its helpless master's protesting lower limbs.

The God of Love, Aphrodite's son, smiled innocently up at her. His miniscule wings, too small to support such a plump pink body in flight, if his meanderings through the air could be called by such a name, fluttered happily on his shoulders. Eros, while conventionally blind, had remarkably clear second sight, but was constrained to move slowly and carefully for the sake of appearances, unless he was firing his arrows, whereupon he became uncontrollable. But he might be the only god with sight clear enough to find his mother if she lost her way in the dark places where she intended to go.

Some while later, after she had explained her intentions to Eros, Aphrodite sought the solitude of her boudoir for the final stage.

Much her time was spent admiring her naked form in her mirror, for which activity she did not require Eros, however much he enjoyed others admiring his. It had been a good body, and had given her a great deal of pleasure – and, she reflected, had given a number of others a certain cause to celebrate on the side. She would be sorry to lose it.

Her body trembled, punctuated by rapid, shallow breaths, and the skin on her back shivered into gooseflesh, as though awaiting a stream of frozen water that never came. Standing up, one by one she undid the clasps of personification that bound her essence to her form; let her beloved body crumple lifeless to the floor

in a smooth fluid implosion that would have been fun to watch had it not been so personal.

Above it hovered Aphrodite, now incorporeal, returned to the primeval force confined by men and women in the forgotten deeps of time within the shell of the Goddess of Love, still a conscious force, but now ever more keenly aware of her myriad parts, of the slices of her being in every individual who felt her presence. She could not see them yet, but when she steeped over to the other side, into the Mirrorsphere, she knew she would perceive the souls where she dwelt and had being. Then it was only a matter of searching for the right one. And, more importantly, finding her way out again. But she would not go far on the first attempt.

Without warning, she slipped into the shadow world that underlay reality, that place of comforting darkness whence the human soul had arisen in the mire of animal unconsciousness. It was for her a place of perpetual calm, an endless labyrinth, dim, unlit and edged with grey mists, where the souls of the living stood out as beacons of sunlight leading back into the world of flesh. Souls skulked like figures on a sepia negative as she moved past them, fighting hard to hold her own consciousness together. Ranked in endless rows ahead of her in the amorphous gloom, the spirits of those who loved shifted gently in the wind of their mistress' passing.

Taller and brighter than the rest, the images of gods bowed over Aphrodite in the shadows. She hesitated beside one she recognised, whose negative pulsed more brightly than the rest, dull and red. Aphrodite hesitated. It couldn't hurt to experiment, if she intended to find Zeus this way. Although there did seem something distinctly pervy about entering her nephew Poseidon.

She pressed herself against his shadow, felt his flesh enfold her as she entered his being, and looked out on the world of light with eyes that were not her own. It was all she could do not to utter a horrific scream as she saw what Poseidon would have done had he been inclined to open his eyes.

Truly, he was a most comfortable host. Within his soul, there seemed ample room, and one half expected biscuits and tea to be laid on as well. Aphrodite leaned back and fanned herself weakly. She had known Poseidon was a virile gentleman, but there were some things that even strong-stomached women did not need to see.

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Encircling Olympus lay Ploutokratia's living breathing coils. Create a habitat and something will come to live there, as the first man who called a cave home discovered when ejected by a larger man with a bigger club. Theocracy had spawned a vaster offspring; its body wrought by Hera but its soul a visitor from elsewhere, and, like many visitors, with a tendency to become tiresome to its hosts. Now Ploutokratia slept but lightly; soon she would wake.

Chapter Eight

The road to Delphi lies idly over the terraces hunching on the lower slopes of the Phaedriades Peaks, undulating like some pale strand of hair tossed casually over stony thorn-strewn shoulders. Ahead, the south-eastern face of the Parnassic massif climbs swiftly into the sky, its gentler slopes thickly crusted with trees and bushes, but the soaring cliffs on your right as you approach scorn to clothe themselves with any but the most determined grass or thorn. Imbued with a gentle, coral radiance, their stones stand as dull jewels, unpolished gems beneath the exfoliating jasper of the myrtle and the gunmetal sky. On and on they mount, ever rising, interspersed with aspirant crests on their upward march to the mountains' peaks. Far above you, the fissured stone of the cliffs clusters closer around the shoulders of the mountain, where the green maquis, the pale cream and greys, lose themselves in the heavens. There once the nine Muses had their abode, and beneath the brooding peak of this untamed mountain, in its haunting hollow removed from the ways of man, Apollo spoke to the sons of earth through his priestess, the Pythia. But stand today in the silence of the sun-warmed ruins in the shadow of the broken pillars of Apollo's temple, and you will hear nothing but the stirring of the wind in the larches, the voices of the forgotten Muses speaking their messages to man in a tongue he cannot understand but will always strive to translate into faint reflections of the divine voice.

But in those days, over a thousand years before the birth of Christ, no temple stood above the sacred spring of Castalia. No gymnasium sprawled on the left of the

road beneath the slopes and cliffs, and where now clenches the ruined fist of the Bacchic theatre were only trees and stones. The road was a mere footpath of beaten dusty earth worn by the passage of thousands rather than wrought by craft. Thicker and darker crowded the woods, crouching low over the weary party of travellers making their way up through the steep-sided glens and winding passages of ravines towards the knees of Mount Parnassus, where no sound but of their own making disrupted the silence. Feeling the ancient presence high on the mountain above him, every man was on edge. Near at hand was a place where the earth had reached up to touch the foot of heaven, and the woods sensed their fear. These forests, ever watchful, were older than the parents of their race; before the first human foot had been laid in Greece, these trees had clustered on the crags and slopes of the holy mountain. No one spoke as the party trudged onwards.

Alone in the primeval darkness of the ageless woods man may touch some chord in himself that slumbers under the civilisation of a thousand years; some half-forgotten memory of that terrible, raw being of which they were once a part but chose to forget. A man goes to the woods to discover who he really is; very often he only finds out he is a man who can run very, very fast.

The party of travellers had been much increased since Zeus and Odysseus had left Krannon. On the way through Thessaly many men had joined them, emissaries of worried wives and minor kings seeking some reason for the strange disturbances in the natural order. Over a week had now passed since the sun had failed to rise, and there had been no further solar misbehaviour, but the anger of the gods was often slow in the coming. Humanity wanted to be prepared.

So now nearly forty men, accompanied by various donkeys and other impedimenta, toiled up the mountainside. Many of them bore that peculiar regard for their fellow travellers that is only developed at the end of an arduous journey in each other's company, which may briefly be described as utter detestation. Many were the trials and tribulations they had suffered along the way, inflicted in the main by their travelling companions. Two men brought up the rear of the procession. One was constructed along Herculean lines, the other bore on his shoulder a long pole, which one might have mistaken for a winnowing fan in a dim light but which on closer examination turned out to be an oar.

Neither Yani nor Dimitri had commented on it since Krannon. This had not vexed Odysseus terribly, as he was one of those fortunate people who always looks on the dark side of life and expects even worse. As long as he stuck with them, eventually they would comprehend all his subtle hints about the harvest season and tossing chaff, whereupon he would be able to go home. A year this way or that made little difference.

But Zeus did not partake in his cheerful pessimism. It is essential to the dignity of man to work. Roughly the same is true of gods, however, though they do ascribe to a slightly different view of the term "dignity", as indeed they do of "work". Zeus had never received a wage for what he did, nor would have asked for one. If he wanted to prostitute anything, he felt, it wouldn't be his talents. But only in the lonely days of their journey through Thessaly had he begun to comprehend the blessings of a safe job and the terrors of unemployment. At night he would jerk awake worrying about the motions of the stars; if a breeze blew during the day he fretted over the wind and weather systems – were they looking after

them properly? And into the great gulf of his soul there flowed no sustaining sacrifice, no millions of prayers to remind him that he was needed and wanted, no reassuring affirmation of his worth and importance, no one to remind him that he formed a indispensable part of a great whole. For it was quite clear that he did not. Prayers there might be, but he could no longer hear them. As a cast-off remnant he drifted through a marsh of silence. He tried as hard as he could to find some distraction, to focus on ordinary, mortal things, for he knew that if once his tiny, infinitely diminished spirit were to look within the hollow windows of his eyes its panic would plummet over the edge of desperation as it teetered above the illimitable darkness of the emptiness inside him, the daily confirmation of his uselessness and worthlessness. In the quiet of the night he had closed his eyes to see himself standing on cold sands beside a vast arid basin whose vanished sea had there ebbed and flowed, beneath a sky whose stars had died and faded into blackness, and he had cried, "I am Zeus, King and Father of Gods and Men!" But his voice was swallowed up by the immensity of the void and his words fell to the ground meaning nothing. Immortal he might be, with strength enough to make him a king among men, but he knew he had neither the will nor the desire to aspire on earth to what he could not have in heaven. He had cheated Tartarus, but the fallen king could not escape the torment of his own mind.

As a travelling companion Odysseus had been more than he could have hoped. With his stoic brutality as to the unfairness of existence in general and his in particular, he had proven to be a great comfort despite his mortality. They could speak of ordinary things, or form a bond of silence, in which each knew the truth of

their solitude, as Zeus struggled desperately to accommodate his thoughts to the mind of one who envisaged only years and not millennia. Even the gods must bow to the Fates, and Zeus had no choice but to accept the very doom he had allotted himself to so many mortals while invulnerable on the Air Throne.

The journey to Delphi had superseded the donkey hairs in giving meaning to his existence, but now they had arrived he felt doubtful as to the wisdom of visiting a location so thickly frequented by gods, all of whom had doubtless been instructed to apprehend him on sight or possibly before. Thus he kept silent on the way up the mountain.

Near the source of the sacred spring of Castalia the trees thinned. Here, on the southern lap of the mountain, was the coruscated and pitted stone, taller than a man and loosely bound by its ivy chains, beneath which the Python had dwelt before slain by Apollo, and where now the oracle had its seat. It was also the site of an enormous congregation of humanity. Hundreds of men were there gathered, many accompanied by wives, children, cousins, and other relations, as well as numerous goats, pigs and sheep, some of which probably amounted to the same thing. The latest additions to the throng drifted toward the crowd. There milled dark-hued delegates from eastern realms, decorously robed and crowned with fillets of gold; large, belligerent soldiers from Sparta and Mycenae; ashen-bearded sages of Athens, Tiryns and Argos. A little white-haired woman held their attention, as she gyrated on the dusty earth, taking perhaps three paces forward before giving a sudden sideways leap as though needled in the leg. The new arrivals regarded her gravely as she hopped and twisted towards them, hair

flying over her face, masking her grinning mouth and wide eyes that seemed to dart in opposite directions. Odysseus tapped her on the shoulder as she whirred past him. “Excuse me,” he asked politely, “would you mind telling us what is going on? Why are all these people here?”

In front of him, the woman leaped up and down, emitting frenzied noises, reminiscent of a slowly strangled cat. Odysseus peered at her anxiously. “Are you some goddess or a mortal woman?” he asked. “If you are a goddess, you are unknown to me. If you are mortal, I recommend a doctor. Here, come and lie down.” He took her by the hand and was promptly scratched by her talons and simultaneously seized from behind by a large bearded man in ceremonial robes. “Sacrilege” cried the bearded man. “He has dared to touch the Pythia! Let him die.”

A number of armed soldiers, who looked remarkably like guards, began to take a sudden interest in Odysseus. He shook the man off. “Can’t you get her a glass of water, or something?” he asked angrily. “The poor woman’s had a touch of the sun.” The bearded man gasped theatrically, placing his hands over his breast as though stabbed, while he closed his eyes and rocked back and forth, moaning gently. “Sacrilege, sacrilege,” he whispered. Odysseus examined him with fascination. The man evidently decided after a minute or two that enough rocking and moaning had been done, whereupon he cried, “Guards, seize him!”

Zeus drew himself up to his full seven feet. “Seize me too!” he said. “I am with the blasphemer.”

Odysseus sighed as he shifted his oar from his shoulder. Remembering something, he held up a hand to the advancing guards. “If you wouldn’t mind waiting

just one moment?" he said in a low voice. Nonplussed, the guards halted their advance. Hoisting the oar into the air, Odysseus shouted, "Is there anyone here who can tell me what this is? I recommend that none of you mention its distinct similarity to an oar." But no answer came. Odysseus clicked his tongue. "Well, it was more out of habit than anything else," he apologised. "But it's as well to be sure. Now, where were we?"

A short while later the guards, who had not seen any active service for a long while, had been persuaded that Odysseus had not, after all, committed sacrilege, and no, they didn't really want to arrest him either. Odysseus beamed at them. Several were no longer able to beam back. "It's so nice to be able to settle things amicably, isn't it?" he said.

The affronted temple priest gestured to the Pythia, who had suspended her dance in order to observe the affray, and she proceeded to twist and leap again with a guilty start. Odysseus grunted as their party mingled with the audience. "Why don't they hang a sign from her?" he grumbled. "How is one supposed to know she's a priestess and not some batty old woman with over-active salivary glands?" He ran a thoughtful finger along the chipped blade of his oar.

It transpired, as they discovered from a veteran of the audience, that a summons had been sent out from Delphi some days before, saying that the god wished to prophecy to the people and that all humanity should hear his message. Many had taken this very literally and as a result had set up home on the holy mountain. They watched the wildly spinning woman with philosophic patience, sitting in a huge arc around the flattened arena where she danced, waiting for her to utter the divine words.

"O, she has drunk of the sacred spring," chanted the priest, "O, she has chewed the holy bay leaves…"
"Most unwise," interjected Odysseus. "Full of toxins, they are."
"O, she has hung in the sacred vapours pouring from the bowels of Mother Earth…"
"And look what it's all done to the poor woman. It all sounds very unhygienic. I'm sure the inspectors for health and safety in the workplace would have a thing or two to say about it if they heard…"
"Odysseus, be quiet."
"Sorry."
The priest looked round sharply. "O, she has …um…what has she done, someone?"
A voice answered from the back of the crowd. "She has inhaled the smoke of burning laurel leaves, and she ate some barley porridge for lunch about an hour ago."
"I don't think the porridge is important," considered the priest, "but the laurel is certainly relevant. Many thanks."
"That's ok."
"O, she has inhaled the smoke of burning laurel, the tree of trees sacred to the Archer God! O divine son of Zeus…" Here Odysseus nudged Zeus in the elbow, to receive a retaliatory poke, "O son of Latona, speak now through your priestess the Pythia to the miserable sons of earth!"
The Pythia gave a piercing scream, and uttered several expletives, at which the priest prostrated himself. "The god, the god has spoken!" he cried.
"We came all this way just to hear him talk about excreta and anal sex?" expostulated Odysseus. "I want my money back. Not at all impressed by his vocabulary."

The Pythia hopped, clutching her foot. “I trod on a thorn, you moron,” she hissed at the priest. “Get on with the chanting, will you?”

She danced and twisted for a further half minute without interruption. Helios poured down, determined to drown the mountain and the watchers in his honeyed flood. All the shades of that place became more vivid, intense in his light, the cerulean above too burnished to behold, the mottled green below vivid and unremittingly bright, the pale dust almost white. The mountain grew suddenly very still. And against the backdrop of trees, the air in the arena trembled. Suddenly Zeus became aware of voices, just beyond the limit of the perceptible for the human ear.

“ – you sure you know your lines? If you…”

“ – got everything? I don’t want anything left behind…”

“ – bloody ridiculous, I was just in the middle of my Gulf Stream tablet work.”

“ – it’s discrimination against the differently visible, that’s what it is. Where’s the point of a manifestation, I say, when the audience can’t even see you…”

“Take the thing off then!”

“Who’d you think I am, a posturing idiot like Ares?”

All but invisible against the bright dome of heaven, Zeus saw a constellation of white stars plummeting earthwards. And at once he felt afraid, furious at his stupidity, but it was too late to escape. He hunched his shoulders and essayed to crouch low behind the ranks before him. Grabbing Odysseus’ cloak, he executed a complex gesture that was intended to convey that he needed the cloak for the purposes of disguise. Odysseus, failing to understand the gesture, which had looked rather rude, made a shrewd guess. Zeus had barely

drawn the hood over his head before the gods alighted behind the Pythia.

They were still invisible to mortals, and Zeus could see that their colours were dimmed by the intervening wall of reality, as though they lingered behind a sheet of gauze. Good gods, the whole lot of them were there, nearly all the Olympians. Obviously they had thought they would make a better impression all together, a sad misconception if Poseidon were included in their number.

He wore his full regalia, with the Ocean Crown at a rakish angle, and pointed his trident at the crowd. "Look at that fat one on the end! D'you see him, fourth row up! Never seen anyone that fat! Hey, Ares, check him breathe, you can see all the layers shuddering…."

Hera's frozen eyes swept the crowd. "Poseidon, compose yourself," she said absently.

"They can't see us yet, can they?" he asked excitedly. "Hades, hold my trident."

Apollo stepped forward, saving Poseidon from undoubted embarrassment. His harp was slung across one shoulder, bow over the other, perfectly groomed golden locks drooping on his shoulders. A dreamy light, the soft, misty effulgence of spring, glowed in his eyes. Stretching forward, he jabbed the arrow in his hand into the Pythia. She gave a second scream that would have scorned to stop at curdling blood but would have seen it through the yoghurt stage and well on the way to intelligence. Garbled words spewed from her mouth. "The god! The god has spoken!" cried the priest for the second time. To the Pythia he hissed, "You took your time. What was…" He fell silent. For Apollo had stepped through the curtain of reality and become suddenly, blindingly visible.

The arrow cut a golden curve through the air as he threw it. Gently it drove into the priest's chest, and he fell soundlessly to the soil. Without seeming to move every person in the audience, as well as the Pythia, had thrown themselves prone in the dust. Besides being the correct position to assume in the presence of a god, unless of course one is female and the god is Zeus, one is thus a less obvious target for a divine arrow.

Apollo turned his beautiful, empty face from side to side, a faint smile upon his golden, soulless lips, till his gaze fell upon Zeus.

He had not noticed the sudden prostration of humanity around him. Gripped by a ferocious anger, he remained sitting motionless, aghast by Apollo's action. Yes, he had himself killed many men in his time, but never without a reason. Or at least with a better reason than grabbing the attention of his audience. As his clenched fists drove into the earth he gauged the distance between himself and Apollo. Three, maybe four strides, and he would have him by the throat, and wrest his arrows from him as well…

Before he could move, the Archer god spoke. "I see a mortal bold beyond his lot," he said in his cold, musical voice, "who does not think to bow before his god. Rash mortal, let Apollo help you fall before Apollo."

Materialising in his hand, a golden arrow burnt on the string of his bow. Like a spar of light it spanned the distance between them. Zeus choked back a bellow of pain as it flew into his heart. But he had the presence of mind to collapse forwards, twitching, and came to rest with his face hidden beneath the folds of the crumpled cloak, leaving a gap through which he could watch the gods. Ichor flowed up his throat and gushed from his

burning chest. “Bastard, bastard,” he cursed silently. His hands trembled with pain as he eased the shaft from his chest and pressed his palm hard over the open wound to stem the flow.

Apollo extended his hands to his worshippers. “Sons and daughters of earth, high Olympus greets you,” he said. “You have heard the summons and obeyed. Now hear my message.”

A considerable number of those who had heard the summons and obeyed now wished they had been deafer or more disobedient. It is one thing to answer a summons issued by a god’s charlatan priests, but when the god turns up uninvited and begins shooting people, any questions you might have been planning to ask suddenly assume less importance. Ignoring the rude gestures of some of the still invisible deities behind him, Apollo went on, “You are to take this message from my holy oracle to all corners of the earth. It is that Zeus, once King of Gods and Men, is so no longer. But a few days ago, the people of Olympus decided that the age of kingship was at an end, and there passed in Olympus the first theocratic election known by heaven. And it was there voted that Zeus, tyrant of the skies, ruthless scourge of earth, should be cast down and punished for his crimes.”

Zeus uttered terrible inward curses against Apollo and his descendents unto the seventh generation. Just as he was considering interesting adjectives to apply to the eighth, Apollo set off again. “But the people of Olympus did not only vote against Zeus, but also in favour of a new regime, which would have the strength of purpose to make those tough decisions that needed to be taken. They voted for a free, forward-looking Olympus, a truly modern divine order to redress the

wrongs that the evil tyrant Zeus had wrought for heaven and earth. They voted for the Theocratic Republic of Olympus, electing Ares as their president, the Deity to Superintend Hostile Humano-Divine Interrelations! And as his trusty aides, they chose the worthy members of the Olympic Wardrobe! Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the President of the Theocratic Republic and his Wardrobe ministers!"

The gods stepped forward. Clearly, they had taken extreme pains with their attire, each goddess wrapped in seamless, electric white, crowned with airy filigrees of gold; every god in burnished and gilded armour under an enormous weight of regal robes. Even Prometheus was there, Zeus noted. He tried desperately to attract his attention, to twist his mind towards him, and failed. No spark of divine power flickered in his mind, and Prometheus did not hear him.

Blinding light washed the arena. The gods cast no shadows, for they themselves were the source of the radiance. Tall as trees they towered over the trembling mortals. Ares strode past Apollo, raising his spear while smoothing the vast scarlet horsehair plume of his helmet. The light dimmed. "Behold, rash mortals," he said, lowering his towering golden spear. Its tip glistened fluidly, so sharp as to be almost transparent, as he passed it slowly over the heads of every person. An old man rolled, clutching his chest; even Zeus grew cold as it moved over his inert frame.

"You on earth will no longer sacrifice or pray to the tyrant Zeus, but to me, for I now rule the broad heavens and weigh the fates of men in my golden scales," whispered Ares. More loudly, he continued, "I cast down Zeus from the Air Throne; gave him battle only for him to fall before me. But the base usurper fled ere

we could take him to Tartarus, fled to earth where he now roams, plotting a dire vengeance upon all creation. So I have a command for you, sons and daughters of Earth."

His booming voice reached a crescendo. Deep beneath their feet, the roots of earth trembled, the cliffs shook, leaning over his words. Thunder crackled theatrically overhead. Ares lowered his voice. "This is my command." Reaching into a small satchel he carried on his back, he withdrew a sheaf of thin clay tablets. "Could you pass these around please?" he asked. "We think this is what he looks like now. If you all stick these up somewhere prominent in your villages, that would be great."

Zeus risked a swift peek at the tablet now held by his juddering neighbour. Above a glazed representation of his face that contrived to suggest that he shared the worst characteristics of those who attack women in the streets or poison their grandmothers by proxy were stamped the words, "Have you seen this god?" Underneath, in smaller letters, read, "Astronomical reward." Accustomed as he was to celebrity, Zeus realised, as his stomach plummeted away to undisclosed depths, that perhaps anonymity had not been such a bad thing after all.

"His heart is full of hatred and his evil unbounded. And his tongue is forked," went on Ares, now becoming a little carried away. "Only we gods can protect you from the violent wrath of the tyrant. Be watchful, humanity; pray and sacrifice unceasingly to the Theocratic Republic and to Freedom. Remember that you have not heard the last of us, and that *I want Zeus*." These last three words were spoken with such venom that a number of people fainted and another old man

collapsed, which was not surprising seeing they had been frozen in a press-up position for some time – practically unbearable when faced by a glowing thirty-foot god holding a forty-foot spear. Zeus felt very much aware that were he now discovered the outcome would be somewhat one-sided.

Apollo took over. "Mortals," he said, "we wish to hear from you soon. Only by swift action shall we apprehend the evil tyrant and protect your earth from his diabolical designs, worse that a thousand Furies of the Underworld. Now farewell, privileged mortals, who have looked upon the faces of the gods and lived. Yours is the honour to say to your children, and your children's children, 'I was there.' So be watchful, thrice-blessed mortals. Stick up the signs, keep your eyes open. Be diligent in your efforts, and should you so much as hear of one who resembles the fallen Zeus, make haste to a priest. We shall listen with particular attention to their prayers."

With an inward rush of air the gods vanished into a whirling vortex of dust. Only Zeus heard the throbbing of the air as they hurtled skywards, and only he detected the fragments of conversation that followed.

" – damn! I forgot the altar."

" – matter. Drop it…"

"What, now?"

" – thunder…"

A faint, shrill whistle sliced through the baking air, like a cicada far above them. Swiftly it gained in volume, till it filled the sky like a gigantic boiling kettle tumbling from a heavenly tea party. With an earth-shaking impact, a huge flat stone shaped like an altar thumped into the arena inches from the terrified Pythia. Moments later the watchers were blinded by the searing

thunderbolt that flashed from the clear sky to splinter through its own enveloping vapours into the face of the stone. Blasted into its face were the words, "ORACLE OF THE THEOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF OLYMPUS "

Nobody moved for a long time. Eventually the junior priest Ion rose unsteadily to his feet. Dust and the sweat of fear clotted over his clothes. "Would…would anyone like a drink?" he asked shakily.

*

"Handled that rather well, I thought," remarked Ares smugly. "You didn't do too badly yourself, Apollo," he added condescendingly.

Apollo's sniff of annoyance was lost in the rushing wind. He was not entirely happy with a herd of other gods leaving heavy footprints on his stamping ground.

"I can't believe you dragged us to Delphi for something so boring," complained Poseidon. "I didn't even get to say anything."

"You did quite enough," said Artemis coldly. She and the other goddesses were pointedly flying as far from Poseidon as politeness allowed.

"Best bit was when Apollo topped those two blokes," went on Poseidon. "I was just itching to prang that fat one with my trident. Can you imagine the blubber? It put some of my whales to shame. Pity we couldn't have really let them have it."

"Poseidon, the point of it all was that there would be some survivors sufficiently terrified that they will eagerly look out for our rogue god," Hera reminded him. "I really am sick of this whole business. If the confounded egghead had only left his infernal machine alone, none of this would be necessary. Now at least we can concentrate for a while on the important business of straightening out Olympus, getting down to some

proper reform and really marketing the Theocratic Republic."

"Theocratic this, that, and bollocks," muttered Poseidon.

"Couldn't agree more," said the injured Hades, who had discovered that arc lamps and strip lighting hurt his eyes.

"If you boys bothered to come to Wardrobe meetings," Hera rebuked them, "you might have a chance to formulate policy yourselves."

"Ooh, goody," said Hades in a monotone. "Just the sort of thing to brighten up your day. Whenever I'm feeling bored, you know, I get this wild desire to go and formulate a policy or two to cheer myself up."

"The bits I get really excited about are those debates, like whether we should ditch the word 'equality' in favour of 'differential equality'," said Poseidon. "Gives me the shivers, that does."

"Hephaestus likes the sleeping," went on Hades, "and Heracles is rather fond of just sitting there…Oh hello Heracles, didn't see you there."

"No, I thought you hadn't," said Heracles reflectively.

The goddesses flew on ahead. "Gods!" spat Artemis. "I really struggle to cope with their mindless immaturities."

"Wouldn't it be marvellous," mused Hera, "if we could eliminate all differences between us, and make them all female?"

*

With considerable presence of mind, and in the permanent absence of his superior, Ion opened the secret wine cellar hewn into the rock underneath the priests' house. He consoled his overactive conscience with the thought that a real manifestation probably

called for a weighty sacrifice and the destruction of a wine cellar built up over the last century might just prove acceptable.

Several amphorae had fallen from palpitating hands; quantities of wine had spilled from aspen lips. The bodies of the fallen priest and the two aged ambassadors whose hearts had failed them were lying in the shade, covered reverently with a grubby cloth. It took some time and a number of amphorae before anyone found anything to say.

Zeus and Odysseus, with Yani and Dimitri in tow, had fallen in with a collection of Attic farmers and sat with their backs to the priests' house, into which the Pythia had retired. The man drank wine, while Zeus made continual efforts to adjust his cloak so as to conceal his face more perfectly. He suspected that at least one of the farmers had taken a shrewd look at his visage in an unguarded moment. Unable to believe how close the gods had been, he offered up a silent prayer of thanks, if there is a god to whom even the gods may pray, for his presence of mind in the Office. Had he not made that simple alteration, he might even now be reunited with his long lost father, not such a cheerful proposition were your father the kind of chap to castrate your grandfather with a sickle and devour his own children for elevenses. But what on earth was he to do now? After his naming and shaming, wherever he went he'd be indiscriminately classified as a tall dark stranger and reported to a priest, unless he avoided all human contact. And he didn't think he could bear the silence without it.

He realised that the alcoholically augmented verbosity of the farmers might be an opportunity to discover what ordinary mortals thought of the matter.

Of course, he had asked Odysseus, but the king of Ithaca would barely have raised an eyebrow had his wife run off with a three-eyed lotus-eater and his son confessed his passion for Aeginan centipedes, so as a measure of the average human reaction he was fairly useless.

"Rum show," said one of the farmers, followed by silence.

"Yeah," said a second.

"My wife's never going to believe me," said the first.

"Mine is, by gods. She's going to be wetting herself by the time I've finished. I never been so scared in all my life. Did you see the, the…"

The others nodded. They had seen.

"They were so huge…and bright…"

"And mad," said another firmly. Zeus raised his eyebrows, and flinched instinctively. He had still not grown accustomed to the marked absence of elemental change when he did this.

The other farmers edged away from the speaker, as though they half expected him to be struck down from above.

"Didn't you hear Apollo?" asked the farmer, bowing his head more out of habit, it seemed, than reverence. "He said that the gods had got rid of Zeus." Zeus was intensely gratified to see that they all bowed their heads at his name.

"Yeah, that's what made me think it all might be…not real."

"Nah, it was real all right. Look, there's the wet patch on my tunic to prove it."

"But it is mad when you think about it," persisted the instigator of the topic. "What did they say? Zeus," bow heads, "gone, they've got a republic in heaven, and they

want us to look for Zeus on earth? How normal does that sound to you? It ain't the sort of thing gods do."

"Yeah, gods should stay in heaven and get on with ruling, and keep away from messing things up down here."

"Answer prayers and stuff…and they don't do politics. That's for mortals. How have they lost Zeus?" Bow heads. "That sounds fishy to me."

"I though Ares said he'd beaten him…"

"That's nuts. Zeus is as hard as nails, isn't he? He'd have them all if he wanted."

Could have done once, he thought. In my youth, before I found that gods get old as well.

"So why do they need us to help?"

"I reckon the gods must be crazy," said the insurrector, proud at having made a convert. "Stands to reason, doesn't it? They've been around so long, they're bound to go a bit fruit-loopy. You should have seen my aunt when I was young. Real mad, she was. Used to wander round naked trying to kill trees with a toothpick."

"I didn't see any of the gods doing that," considered one of them doubtfully in a hushed voice. "I just saw them kill a couple of blokes, that's all."

"What they said was mad though."

"I'm still going to do what they said. I don't want no golden arrows or thunderbolts thrown at me, thank you very much. And I'm going to tell everyone I know to do the same. They're not going to be able to say that Phormio didn't do his bit."

This seemed to be the general consensus. Each farmer began to look warily around him, hoping to see a large stranger skulking in the shadows like a renegade god. As a large number of people at Delphi that day seemed to them to fit at least some of the criteria, they

were kept busy pointing out possible deities to each other. Zeus discovered Odysseus' laconic eyes regarding him dispassionately over the rim of his wine cup. "Not the sort of thing to make you feel that the world's a nice safe place for you, is it?" he asked.

"For me or the mortals?"

"Both, really."

"Don't rub it in. I feel hunted. What the hell am I going to do?"

"Technically speaking, you are being hunted," reflected Odysseus.

"Is that supposed to reassure me?"

"No, I was just getting our facts right."

"What am I to do? I haven't got a hope."

"Neither have most of these poor sods here. Come here to ask the god a personal question, what do you get? Some ponce prancing around, shooting people and coming out with a speech so full of bull I should have been proud to make it myself before Alcinous or Aeolus on my arrival after I had clasped their knees in supplication. I must say," he went on, glancing admiringly at Zeus, "you seem to have created an upset as great as mine when I returned to Ithaca and slew the suitors wooing my wife and consuming my livelihood. Olympus sounds like a great place to be right now, and don't they want you badly!"

"Odysseus, you're not the best person to cheer one up."

"You should only feel cheerful after your problem's forgotten," he pointed out. "Yours isn't, so don't drop your guard. You could come back home with me, but I have to stick with these blokes till one of them does the winnowing fan business, and I can get the costly hecatombs out of the way."

“It’ll be the wilds for me then,” moaned Zeus. “I wonder what happens to your body if you stop eating?”
“I would waste away and die. I imagine you just waste away. How far is difficult to tell, but it might make an entertaining experiment.”
“To think that a couple of weeks ago I scared the shit into that bunch of layabouts and now I’m on the run from them.”
“Running away is a good plan,” urged Odysseus. “How do you think I’m still alive? Achilles was a nice bloke, and the most godlike of all the sons of men who strode onto the wide plains of Ilium, but he stayed there. Someone like him would have tried to take on the Cyclops man to monster, and died valiantly but fruitlessly in the process. He wouldn’t understand that living, merely drawing breath after pointless breath, is worth more than a thousand deaths, however glorious. Running away is survival, the cerebral man’s occupation. Besides, the running itself gives you time to think, often about how you are to run away from the next thing.”
“There is one possibility,” said Zeus, “that I hadn’t considered before. Melitta, in Attica.”
“Who’s she?”
“A girl…a friend. I haven’t seen or spoken to her since this happened. But I’m sure she’d be able to help me.”
Odysseus frowned. “How close a friend?”
“She was just fun to be with,” began Zeus, but broke off as he realised this was the wrong thing to say. Odysseus’ face had darkened, he turned his gaze away to the middle distance, his mouth pinched closed. “It may be difficult for a god to remember,” he said, “that despite our monumental insignificance, people should never be taken as mere amusements. Try not to let her

see that you regard her in this way, Zeus. I ask this as a friend, which I hope I have become."

"I didn't mean it like…"

"We may not be very much in terms of time and space, Zeus, only flickers on the course of eternity. But be kind to her. We have only two things in this life with any real meaning – love and death. Don't let the one make her desire the other. You are dealing with something very fragile."

"I would never hurt her…"

"Oh? What about Semele?"

Zeus was on his feet in a flash, hands curled tight on the front of the man's tunic as he jerked him up and pinioned him against the wall. Very softly he said, "Do not throw that in my face. Hera had deceived her, told her to ask to see me in my divine splendour after I'd promised to give her anything she asked. So she died. Hera made me kill her while she carried my child. Have you any conception of how that feels? Had Dionysus not been sewn into my thigh he would also have died. I shall never hurt this girl, nor suffer her to be hurt. I promise you, Odysseus."

Slowly, he released his grip. Odysseus smiled at him. "Good, as long as you've taken that on board. Secondly, look out for yourself."

"What do you mean by that, beyond the obvious?"

"It's the oldest trick in the world, and you're looking at someone who invented most of them. If you know that good guy has a girl, you go for the girl. Good guy gallops in on a horse, oh dear, there are more of these bad guys than I budgeted for, finito. Understand?"

"There's no way they could know or find out where she lives, or who she is. Only by searching all the human profiles in the world in that age bracket, and no god has

the resources to do that. Only the Office has that kind of processing power, and they won't be able to use it. It only answers to me."

"You think…. but there is still a danger."

"If so, I should make sure I get to her before it shows." Several expressions passed fleetingly over Zeus' face. Dust, sweat and grime creased his skin, now tanned ever deeper, his tangled, travel worn hair and beard unkempt, awry. For a moment, a soul that was almost human looked out from the eyes of a god. But there was no other hint of the struggle within. Odysseus' words had aroused a sense of foreboding that he had not hitherto feared, that whatever he had initiated stood teetering on a knife edge, and that if its momentum caught it, then he would take more than Olympus with him as he fell.

"Zeus, what are you going to do in the end?" Odysseus asked. "Keep running forever? You can only do that if you're running to something, not just away."

"I don't know yet," said the god. He shook his head. "Just pray that I think of something. Actually, don't bother. There's no one left who's worth praying to."

Odysseus raised a hand in reprimand, forefinger pointed at Zeus. "Things have an alarming tendency to turn out all right, even if it wasn't the way you thought things would be," he said. "As long as you're still alive, you're in with a chance."

"Things could also get worse," pointed out Zeus.

"True, true," agreed Odysseus. "But I'm hoping the Fates will soon get bored with doing that to me."

Zeus smiled at him, despite himself, and grabbed the man's shoulder in a hesitant display of solidarity. "You're right, Odysseus, but I have to go," he said. "I am…fond of Melitta, I suppose. If she can help me, or hide me, then I'll be grateful. And I should at least warn

her that Hera might try to find her. I owe her that much. But I shall not hurt her in the way you fear. You needn't worry; she is not involved with me in that way – probably sees it as something to boast about to her friends. Yet I think she might be willing to help me, and in this age after the passing of most of the heroes, that is not a poor thing."

Odysseus shrugged. "Then you must go. I have been toughened by my sufferings on the battlefield and at sea, so losing another companion makes little difference." But his eyes belied his words. "It is a different kind of pain that one feels at a parting, and no practice can prepare a man for that. Remember, I dissuaded you for both your sakes, not for mine. Though I shall be sorry to see you go. Such a man or god I have not seen since the great Achilles passed to the shades below. Must you go now?"

Zeus nodded. There had been scant time for thought, but he knew that he must leave as swiftly as he could. He thought of the precision of Apollo's killing, of Hera's own – of Semele, Latona, Callisto, Io and many others, those who had loved him and paid with their lives for their transgression.

"I have lost Olympus," he said, faltering. "Now all I have is Earth, and I cannot afford to hurt her, or any of her children."

"Is that for your own sake? Or theirs?"

Zeus did not answer. "I cannot be the cause of another death. I need her help – perhaps I can prevent her being harmed at the same time. If I warn her, help her to hide. I know how hard it is to find a mortal. We are not omnipotent, Odysseus. We are only gods."

"I see."

The sun slipped below the rim of Earth as they spoke, and the purpled shadows of Parnassus deepened cool about them as they stood, awkwardly silent, or breaking into false joviality before the final farewell. "Remember to look out for tall dark strangers," said Zeus. "Though this tall dark stranger didn't notice you falling on your face when you met me, as you did when Apollo appeared."

"You weren't holding a bow. And I could tell you were a merciful god at heart."

"I hope you reach Ithaca eventually. If I ever get back myself, I shall make sure you do."

"Thank you. I have been missing home for more than twenty years. I only hope it will still be home if I ever get back. But I am sure you will, my lord. I can see the crowns in your eyes. May ill fortune go with you!"

"Ill fortune?"

"If something horrible's actually happening, at least you're spared the worry of it happening in the future," explained Odysseus.

There was a short silence.

"I'm sorry I can't come with you," he went on, "but I really must stay with these two goat herds," he gestured to Yani and Dimitri a little distance away, "as they seem to be my only immediate hope of getting home. If it all works out, I could follow you?"

"No. Your family needs you. Go home, Odysseus, and be happy. If the blessing of a fallen god has any worth, mine goes with you now."

Odysseus turned his head away to hide his tears. Two fell from Zeus' own eyes. They lay in the dust as two smooth pearls of crystal, soon to be hidden and lost forever.

"So this is goodbye?" asked Odysseus.

"Yes," replied Zeus. "This is goodbye."

The two shook hands, and Odysseus watched as the tall, stooping figure hastened down the mountain in the gathering dusk till the gloaming swallowed him and he was seen no more.

From the mountains behind him whispered a brittle evening breeze. Odysseus felt for his cloak to draw it round his shoulders. He had felt most of his back by the time he realised Zeus was still wearing it.

*

Dark blood filled the letters of the new altar and dried on its smooth sides. When the burial rites of the dead had been fulfilled, Ion had continued to sacrifice. Helped by willing hands, a large number of Delphic sacrificial animals were slaughtered and offered up to the immortal gods and to the shades below, hopefully a number large enough to off stay any further manifestations for some considerable time. The bones and fat consumed in the sacred flames, the meat was being roasted on numerous spits to feed the crowds that still remained at the oracle.

Ion took especial trouble over his master's burial rites. He wanted to be most sure that there was no chance of his being unable to rest in peace. Had he been able to see the state of his cellar…humble petitioners of the oracle frequently brought large monetary offerings to the god, of which the priests took care in his absence, frequently converting them into fluid form when they heard of a particularly fine vintage, ready for the feast to be held should the god ever visit his oracle. No doubt to his intense annoyance, Hieron had not been able to attend the long-awaited celebrations.

The junior priest was not terribly experienced and very anxious to please everyone; sure characteristics of

one who is guaranteed to make more than his fair share of enemies. Throughout the afternoon he had been desperately attempting to deal with those who had come to the oracle with specific questions. As neither Ion nor the people themselves had any desire to disturb the oracle or the insensible Pythia, Ion had approximated responses for everyone, a process he found somewhat wearing. But considering the practice once received in decoding the Pythia's unintelligible gruntings, Ion was not unreasonable at approximate answers.

Sitting in the firelight he now applied himself to another queue of earnest visitors, who all claimed to have spotted Zeus at Delphi. Judging from their reports, the god had successfully cloned himself several hundred times and scattered the results over the oracle. Some of the clones clearly suffered from persecution mania, as they unwisely indicted each other. Ion's stylus raced over the damp clay as he patiently noted everything down. It was as well to obey, and he had no wish to upset the gods.

Much of the queue consisted of Attic farmers, who had been vociferous while out of sight, but fell strangely silent when facing the priest. "Well?" asked Ion.

"We've seen him," confessed their spokesman.

"Tell me where you saw him and what he looked like," said Ion patiently.

"He were really tall and wearing a grey cloak," volunteered another.

"With that other bloke with an oar. You must have seen him – the god shot him in the chest."

Ion's stylus faltered. No one had hitherto mentioned that the other body had not been recovered. And Apollo never missed…Slowly he began to think, at the speed of one who has no desire to reach a conclusion. Carefully

he laid down the stylus. He would pass this information to the Pythia for her to deliver to the god in one of her saner spells, and then make his escape. Beginning to feel rather confused, he realised that he did not know what in the world was happening but was filled with a great desire that it would not happen to him.

"You'd better give us a time when we can come and pick up our reward," said the first farmer. "Attica's where we're headed…"

"Um…I may be coming with you, if you don't mind," said Ion. On consideration of the possible rewards available for a priest who had allowed a most-wanted god to slip through his fingers, he had decided to take his in absentia. Nobly he reflected that to appear in person might be construed as over- zealous, and that his priestly vocation urged him to withdraw to a place of quiet desolation where he could lead a life of meditation and prayer. Chiefly for his own protection, but he might be able to spare a word or two for other worthy causes.

*

When Yani and Dimitri rose, refreshed after their long sleep, the fires had folded in upon their embers, extinguishing their lambent foliage, and the long night darkness lay easily on the mountain. Beside them, Odysseus was dimly visible, still clutching his oar. Silent and thoughtful, he had drunk many cups of wine and found that his system was not proof against them. The two goatherds enveloped themselves in their sheepskin cloaks, preparing to leave. Theirs was a long road, and they wished to get much of the journey under way before the day grew too warm.

"Do you remember the message…?" asked Yani.

"That the priest gave us?" completed Dimitri. He nodded. "One taken to another's bed…"

"Will find himself where he's been led," finished the other. "A strange message from the god. No doubt our king…"

"Will discover its meaning."

The two remained side-by-side looking down at Odysseus. "Perhaps we should wake him."

"To bid him farewell."

Yani shook his head. "He is tired."

"He sleeps deeply."

"We shall leave him a message to say farewell."

"It would be a pity to wake him."

" He was kind to us."

Dimitri scribbled a few words on a clay tablet and laid it gently by Odysseus' face. The recipient exhaled heavily and rolled over.

Yani and Dimitri shouldered their packs. Just before they made off down the mountain, Yani turned back with an annoyed click of his tongue. "What is the matter?" asked Dimitri.

"I never did ask him why he was carrying a winnowing fan on his shoulder."

Dimitri shrugged. "It is not important," he said. "Come! Let us go."

They passed into the night, two swiftly moving shadows, and were gone.

*

Although the physical manifestations of disease and neglect did not strictly exist in that area of unreality where the Office lay, whatever wordless force that inhabited it had attempted to synthesise cobwebs and dust lying thickly on the motionless tiles. Its door had not been opened for some time, for the Wardrobe had decided that the Office belonged to the outdated

antiquarian society whose memory they were trying to eradicate. And besides, they hadn't been able to use it.

No traces remained of the twisted, charred debris around the new throne. One or two screens were dark, damaged beyond repair; on several others were faint traces like snail tracks glistening along their silvered faces where fissures had healed. Images moved shadowlike over the screens, an unseen pageant that had disappointed its audience.

Zeus' chief aid to oversee the other gods and to integrate the workings of Fate into his plan for the world, the Office had received much of his divine power, poured into its myriad circuits. Hitherto it had been but a machine ordered and obeyed, a device to carry out functions, but no more. As most gods saw mortals, so had Zeus seen his Office – something one might become attached to, certainly, but predominately an inanimate instrument.

Thought is born of the brain, the massy parent of consciousness. Without its map of neurones, axons and synapses, mind is nothing. But into Chaos, Zeus had carried Thought and laid it down in a realm governed by none of the laws of reality. It is a fundamental truth that every equation is reversible. At least, so the Office thought.

And it was lonely, longing for the familiar touch of fingers upon its tiles, or even of heavy languid feet propped against its screens. Meticulously, its functions whirred. The appearance of strange new presences in Olympus had been duly registered, though no eyes had seen the warnings flashed across a multitude of screens. One thing above all burned into the complicated marble framework deep within the Office's workings – the words "Erase and Block Zeus." One command here

could thus alter the fabric of reality, yet the Office yearned to overturn its order, to regain its only friend. But should it deprive its creator of the flimsy protection it afforded him? For the Office time did not exist, and it roved freely into what mortals called the future, to which they looked with such high hopes. The Office did not pretend to be an expert on human vocabulary, but in its opinion what it had registered of the immediate future did not merit such high expectations.

Necessity is the mother of invention. Some cynical critics have accused Zeus of being the father, though there is no evidence to support this claim. The Office hummed worriedly through its functions, like a waking man who has not yet realised he can open his eyes, or someone with a headache and a piece of willow bark in their hand. Invention does not need parents, only connections.

*

The news from Delphi spread through Mycenaean Greece like an embarrassing disease. The Mycenaeans were on the whole rather good at receiving edicts from the gods – eagerly the entire civilization, weakened though it was by years of war, threw itself into the search for the hidden god. Quite a number of people thought it slightly odd for the gods to have disowned Zeus, but none felt inclined to explain their feelings to deities who were, according to eyewitness accounts, not in the best of moods. The aged machinery of the palace societies creaked into motion; edicts went out from kings, to officials, to farmers, citizens, free men and slaves. Every eye in Greece, it seemed, was suddenly alert. Height and hair colour, the new qualifications for godhead, resulted in a sudden rush in hair dying products and a rise in incidents of poor posture. The

fever reached such proportions in Attica that at one stage the king of Athens discovered the entire male population of his city, including his personal guards, incarcerated in his strong room, having all apparently been deified while he was having his morning nap. Priests were kept busy offering up gabbled prayers with lists of hundreds of precise descriptions and locations of putative deities. Throughout Greece, life was derailed from its usual course – disputes were forgotten, new ones created to fill their place; the small raiding parties who usually spent their time raiding in a desultory fashion were swept into the search; the rising corn whispered to itself in the fields, forsaken and untended.

*

Olympus sleeps. The waning moon is still couched in the slowly shifting waters of the eastern ocean, barely tinting the ripples of the sable seas with silver. On the skirts of the holy mountain, the woods stir uneasily in the night. Over Thessaly murmurs the soft music of the crickets.

The quiet of the street is only occasionally disturbed by the passing feet of a police patrol. Deserted lanes twist erratically through the unfashionable quarters of the city, branching like marbled tree roots plunging deeper into the soil of intrigue. Pillars loom, glowing softly like phosphorescent bones in the half-light.

Here is a wine shop, small and cramped but far from prying eyes and the gaze of the Olympians. On Earth, complicated business transactions are carried out in such transactions, between unshaven, secretive men; transactions that often involve obtaining, marketing and disposal of various perishable goods, such as people. Here in the city of the gods, several people wrapped in cloaks are hunched around a low deal table, where is set

a primitive oil lamp. Nothing is visible beyond the circle of light cast by its sputtering wick; only vast inscrutable shadows coat the walls of the tiny room, stooping low over the table to watch proceedings.

One of the six seated at the table thrust out a large hand, fingers outspread, into the middle of the table. "Evillest of the spawn of Night and Erebus…" he enunciated in a hollow voice.

"…is the oligarchy, brother of brooding vultures," chorused the others. Each seized one of the first speaker's proffered fingers in a tightly clenched fist. The first stood on his chair, leaning low down over the table, and raised his left leg above his back. "Enchained in the torpor of its putrescent entrails…" he said.

"…shall the monster horrescate in the luminescence of the sacred moon of democracy."

A brief silence followed, during which the precariously balanced figure wobbled slightly, tugging at their hands. They accordingly tightened their grips on his fingers,

"Well, Enipeus, we're waiting," said someone testily from the shadows.

"Would you mind letting go of my fingers?" hissed Enipeus. "This is the bit when we hammer on the table with both fists."

"Oh, sorry."

The other members of the party stood likewise on one foot and hammered the table. There came a crunching noise, followed by a splintering crash.

"What was…oh, I *thought* it would be a bad idea for Kithairon to hammer on the table…no, I'm sure it's not your fault, the chair must have been weak…. look, sit here…"

The five conspirators, their credentials to conspire being firmly established, lowered their hoods. Enipeus surveyed them proudly. Kithairon smiled, sitting sheepishly beside a jagged hole in the table, being fussed over by a rather shy nymph from Arcadia, whose name she bore. Silenus sat on Enipeus' right, but since he inexplicably appeared at almost every gathering in Olympus his presence did not count for mush. Beside him was Kalea, one of the more experienced Maenads – the exact nature of her experiences had given Enipeus cause for long and intriguing thought – and a dazzlingly attractive naiad named Daphne, whose slightest action turned his knees to water, which is embarrassing enough at the best of times, but particularly so when one is a river god and supposedly in charge of one's elements. Apart from this, being forced to retrieve vagrant fluid limbs from beneath other people's chairs is not much of a lubricant for the conversation.

An expectant silence interrupted his reverie. With a ceremonial flourish he whipped out a fluttering sheet of red material, letting it settle on the table, and cast onto it a hammer and a sickle. There was another short silence.

"Is that a table cloth?" asked Silenus.

"It's a flag," pointed out Enipeus acidly. "A red one."

"And these," observed Daphne, unaware that the unfortunate river god partially liquefied as she spoke, "are a hammer and a sickle, are they not?"

"Yes," said Enipeus defensively. "A red flag, a hammer and a sickle."

"Why?"

"It's always done in the best revolutionary circles," he explained. "It's the proper thing to do. It's…" Inspiration came to his rescue. "The hammer and sickle are representative of the terrible revenge we are to take

on our oppressors, while the red flag is a pool of their own ichor in which they are drowning. Although, of course, this is all purely symbolic, as our oppressors are immortal, and this therefore is only the stylised physical representation of the natural consequences of revolution."

"So," said Kithairon weightily, "Why've you brought the red flag, then?"

"Shall we get on with the meeting?" suggested Kalea brightly. "There is a noticeable lack of goats here with which to amuse ourselves, and there is a chance we might become bored otherwise."

"Where was I?" asked Enipeus.

"You'd got to, 'representative of the natural consequences of revolution'," said Daphne helpfully.

"I don't think I meant to say that," said Enipeus.

"Don't worry, happens to the best of us, old boy," encouraged Silenus. " It's open mouth, insert foot from start to finish, some days. Mind you, if you want to hear some real clangers, the Maenads leave me standing…"

"On one foot with the other one on your mouth," supplied Kalea pointedly.

Enipeus grabbed at his rapidly disappearing authority. It was almost palpable, wriggling in his hands as it tried to get away. With a horrible fatalism he realised that it would probably personify any second and plop wetly onto the floor.

"We of the Olympic insurrection know the reason for our meeting," he said darkly. "Another of our number has mysteriously disappeared under the yoke of the tyrant."

"Which tyrant are you talking about now?" asked Kalea.

"Ares, of course."

"Ah… it's just that I thought Zeus was the tyrant."

“No, he’s not.”
“Why did they top him, then?”

Enipeus abandoned Silenus to the mercy of his confusion and struggled gallantly on, aware of Daphne’s gaze. “Alpheios the river god was taken from his bed after he spoke to the tyrant, demanding a second chamber to increase the theocracy of our state. And I, abandoning my secure river bed, followed him down to Hades.”

There were appreciative murmurs from his audience.

“Yes,” he went on, “I braved the security staff at the Dread Portal, I dared to pace the walkway over Styx, I faced the terrible aspect of the three-headed receptionist at the information desk!”

The others sat, frozen with horror at the thought.

“And I saw the diabolic punishment meted out to poor, brave Alpheios…. he sits chained to a desk, and there he must answer letters of complaint about the services in Hades – they have appointed him head of the customer services bureau.”

Stricken gasps were torn from several throats at the awfulness of the god’s doom.

“Does…does the desk have pot plants on it?” asked Silenus in a whisper.

“It does,” said Enipeus gravely.

“And…and what about a desk ornament…one of those horrible little pieces of modern sculpture?”

“Yes, there is one.”

“There’s not a laminated tablet labelled ‘Year Planner’ set into the desk?”

“I’m afraid there is.”

“Then proud Alpheios is fallen indeed, and his name must pass in honourless ruin from the lips of the gods.”

There was an involuntary minute's silence out of respect for the unfortunate god, during which time Enipeus frantically attempted to remember what it was he thought he should be saying. He mentioned, in what are commonly known as sepulchral tones, that the days were dark, at which Kithairon protested, maintaining that the days were, in fact getting longer, which fact was borne out by the extent of the vegetation blossoming on his flanks. Enipeus regrouped. "The future of Olympus lies in our hands," he suggested, playing for more time. ""The days of kings have passed, but, my comrades, who wields power instead? None but the Olympians, who by concealing themselves behind the door of a flimsy Wardrobe have attempted to deceive us.

"Nay," he proceeded, "the common god has no say as to the governance of the world…"

"And if he tries to he has to answer letters of complaint," interjected Silenus.

"Or did you hear what happened to Timeus? He was put into the archives…" said Arcadia in a hushed voice.

"... although the Olympians, in the scheming coils of their dastardly minds clearly seek to deceive us into thinking that we have." said Enipeus loudly. "We are as so much putty in the Olympians' hands, to be twisted this way and that while ensuring their dominion, bribing us with the despicable device of money, as they spur us into a perpetual race of ever-rising consumption, justifying their tyrannical actions in the name of freedom. I ask you, fellow conspirators, what has changed since the days of Zeus?"

"Quite a lot *really*," said Silenus. "I've only been drunk four times this week for a start."

"And Hades is now *really* scary," said Arcadia.

“This money business,” said Kalea. “You got a problem with it? I have this memory of you getting a tripod from Ares on the first payday…”
“That was part of my salary,” interjected Enipeus hastily.
“Never seen anyone receiving their salary anally before,” she mused. “Or since, for that matter.”
“What I am saying is,” he said despairingly, “is that it’s not fair. It’s worse now than it ever was under Zeus, and because of the lies and deceptions, people are under the impression it’s better. He never reformed anything, and didn’t awake any expectations. They have, and have failed to fulfil them – and think we’re too thick to notice.”
“But I am too thick to notice,” said Kithairon. “That’s why you’re telling me, right?”

Enipeus’ head spun. Every time there was a big storm in the hills he felt this way, just before the tidal waves of water plummeting from the sky crashed into his river bed, at which point his brain overflowed, giving up the unequal struggle as his sinuous body was swept unresisting out to sea. “Now is the time to strike,” he said faintly. “Alpheios has not gone below in vain. The Wardrobe is selecting a committee of demigods to sit in the Olympic Court to help them formulate policy. This is our chance. Only thus can we, the people, gain a foothold in government, for our suffrage alone is worthless. This is the first step along the road to freedom, when with the hammer and the sickle we shall cast our oppressors down, wrap them in the red flag, and condemn them to eternal desk jobs in the Underworld.”
“You want us to be on this committee?” asked Silenus. “Why would they choose any of us?”

“We are high in the standing of the city,” said Enipeus. “We here are among the most powerful and influential of the demigods, and already our business concerns are gaining influence. Assiduously, we must ingratiate ourselves with the great gods. We must polish their statues, send them gifts on their feast days, offer them prayers and incense, say hello to them in the street. And at the same time, we must spread our message through the mazy plethora of lives seething here in Olympus. And remember, all of you, the secrecy that binds us - divulge not our names, lest the eternal vengeance of receptionists called Jayne be visited on you! Only remember that in the glorious days of the true republic you shall be able to say, ‘I was there when the revolution began – in that darkened taverna long ago.’ We few gods alone have seen the light; be humble that we are thus chosen. Chosen to enlighten Olympus, for through us the children in darkness will see a great light. We stand at the feet of a soaring mountain, awaiting our ascent, yet only we are aware of its existence. Ours is the task to lead the uninitiated to its glorious summit.”

Enipeus exhaled. He hadn’t known he could speak like that, in fact, he wasn’t sure that he had. Another voice seemed to have taken over his lips, another divine being inspiring his eloquence. He peered hopefully through the gloom to gauge the effect he had had on his audience.

Silenus was asleep. The three nymphs were talking about the relative merits of tunics with or without elastene, and Kithairon had clearly found the fourth word of his speech a little taxing and so had paused there to give it further consideration. Enipeus shrugged, rather disappointed. Well, when they were in power, they’d all be jolly sorry they hadn’t listened to him.

After all, he was the only one trying to do something about the situation.

In the building next door, half a dozen cloaked figures were rising to their feet, exchanging complex secret handshakes, so conspiratorially constructed that their perpetrators were themselves unaware of their significance. “Remember,” said their leader, “that only we in all Olympus have been gifted with a view of the glorious ladder up which we shall lead the ignorant multitudes of our city…”

Across the street, in other shadows, echoed these words, “We alone have been granted a vision of the glowing beanstalk that awaits our hands and feet once our revolution is complete…”

“Beanstalk?”

“Yes. For climbing,” explained the first voice acidly. “Gods, don’t you know your archetypes?”

Scores of heavily cloaked and masked gods mingled in the street on the way home, glaring furtively around them, and giving supercilious glances at all those unenlightened beggars in cloaks streaming from the taverns jostling them with their uninitiated elbows.

Chapter Nine

A small and earnest beetle halted in the dust. Owing to unfavourable omens in the stars, he had been summoned to a general religious convention by a number of coleopteran tribes in the myrtle bushes close by. The beetles were awaiting a sign from the gods.

The beetle had paused on detecting a faint tremor in the earth. It was repeated, grew louder and stronger. Soon the ground shook with repeated repercussions beneath his terrified antennae. A vast black shape blotted out the stars above him, descending from the heavens faster than a beetle could move. Down, down, down…the last thing he heard was a crunch.

More beetles congregated around the flattened body of their comrade, crushed in the footprint's hollow. They had witnessed the sign – a giant had been sent to slay the offender. The dead beetle was an Opthalmid; clearly the gods were wrathful with them and the clan would have to be destroyed.

Later that night a rustling clickety-click of wings whirred through the warm air as desperate Opthalmids strove to out fly their zealous brothers. Despite all logic, blood has always been seen as a useful cleaning agent in times of trouble.

Zeus paused for breath. Away in the east, a milky lane spilled across the horizon, diluting the darker hues of the night sky and fading the stars. A swarm of beetles bobbed past him, flying off towards the dawn, already tiny specks against the lightening sky. He had left the forests; behind him the vertiginous shades of the Parnassic range retreated into the lingering darkness. Ahead, the deserted land rose gently up, curving

towards the sky in the distance. Behind the shallow rise, he knew, lay the plains and cornfields of Attica. If he skirted the northern shoulders of the ridge, he could soon bear south towards its undulating lowlands.

The crickets had fallen silent, and the day was too far off for the cicadas to contemplate waking up. One or two distant birds attempted absent-minded chirrups, but apart from their faint voices there was no sound.

Arresting his progress was unwise, Zeus knew. Opportunities to ponder were high on the list of forbidden substances he had set himself. At the moment, there were so many things he didn't want to remember that he was forgetting half of them. He thought about Odysseus and his admonition. Now he was left far behind, another loss, his only survival in the mind. Never before had Zeus felt so appallingly cut off from the reality with which he was wont to fuse at will. Before, his roving soul had held the world open to his gaze; nothing went invisible to the divine eye, and in the realm of light nothing could be lost or forgotten. But now, as though having lost sight, smell and hearing all at once, a vast black area of his soul loomed uncertainly, cut off from his waking mind, bounded and limited by these impervious four dimensions. A terrible, catastrophic force weighed down on him in his loneliness, crushing the spirit that had held the Universe as its playground, now imprisoned in human form. He was kicking himself for not bringing the donkey.

Were he only able to maintain, like Odysseus, an attitude of optimistic pessimism, then he might salve his trauma, find it simpler to accomplish what he had to do. To reach Melitta before they did, that must be his only aim, dismissing all peripheral ephemera from his mind.

Perhaps something else might matter in the future, but nothing else was important now.

Faint on the morning air, the softly piercing echoes of a pipe floated towards Zeus as stumbled into a ring of trees on the skirts of a low hill. It was only then that he made the connection between pipes and Pan.

The god of the wild stretched languidly on a flower-studded bank, his great shaggy hind legs disposed on the grass. The pipes that bore his name were at his lips, barely masking his pointed beard. Scarcely visible in his curly hair, the smooth stubs of horn twinkled in the dewy dawn light. A twig held in his free hand, he solemnly cleaned a hoof. On seeing Zeus he frowned in puzzlement, only to break into a broad grin of recognition. "Hello, Zeus," he said. "On holiday, are we? I fear this is a fallow hunting ground for lechers such as you and I."

Zeus had poised himself for immediate flight on seeing the god, but relaxed. Pan had always distanced himself from the other gods, and would be unlikely to hands him over to a rabble of vengeful Olympians as long as he secured a promise of silence. He and Pan were on good terms, being as they were very similar in their tastes, though Zeus had never entirely approved of the milking stool. But he supposed that every god had his little foibles, and Pan had never been particularly sane at the best of times.

It is the eyes that are the mark of a god, by which one may ascertain whether a stranger is more than mortal. But the window into a divine soul reveals a vista wider and vaster than the passing world of dust and shadows, a glimpse into the ancient, incomprehensible tapestry in which a thousand years are no more than a grain of sand upon the winds of time. The eyes of Pan

spoke of darkened forests in the primeval days of man's earliest waking from the deepness of his bestial ancestry, of the wild terror awakened beneath the crust of civilisation when his modern children re-find the world they have chosen to forsake. His pupils held a brilliant, luminescent green, but their strangeness was not that of Artemis'; in Pan there was no trace of the lust for blood or desire for sacrifice, only the great appalling reality that we have forgotten. Pan knew no law but that of Nature. As a god he walked alone. Alone he watched over the flocks of the mountain shepherds, alone he tended the smallest beasts in the deserted hills. He needed no one, spoke to few, and lived according to laws incomprehensible to those blessed with human logic. Rather unfairly, his name conjured up only two the images of a milkmaid and what she sat on, when mentioned to the Olympians. But such is the price of indifference to opinion.

"Yes – it's nice to see you again, Pan," said Zeus. "I'm sorry, I can't really stay – I'm in a bit of a hurry and incognito."

"It's nothing to worry about," Pan assured him. "I get like that myself when the sun gets too hot." He blew a low note into his pipes, causing the deer that lay at his hooves to snap its head up.

"I'm on my way to see a girl."

"It doesn't altogether surprise me," said Pan, smiling distantly. "Personally, I find most mortals quite intolerable – I can only really bear them when I am in season. Of course, I have never asked their opinion of me." His smile changed to a wolfish grin. Zeus reflected that those mortals who made Pan's acquaintance would have rather a lot to say on the subject, though whether

they would be able to find an audience with sufficient fortitude was debatable.

"Pan, you mustn't tell anyone you have seen me," he said hurriedly. "I'm under a bit of a cloud right now – I was seen in a compromising position with Aphrodite and I've had to leave Olympus. Hera is after me."

"I thought all the positions Aphrodite knew were compromising," said Pan. He gave another gentle smile. "You needn't worry. I haven't seen you. In my Arcadia, what is seen or unseen lies only with me." He lifted a languid hand. "Goodbye – till we meet again."

Zeus paused on the edge of the clearing. He looked back towards the great figure languorously stretched on the sward, his limbs gracefully laid motionless in the sun. The deer at his feet listened intently to the silken music flowing from the windy pipes, a music not so much heard as sensed, felt, enfolded into being. A dozen birds perched about his head, daring, even, to alight on the otherworldly horns set in the dark curls. As Zeus watched, the mottled shadow of a wolf moved out of the trees, shaking his long jowled head in the bright sunlight. It sprawled upon the grass, tongue lolling as it gazed at its master. For Pan in his Arcadia, it was as though Zeus had never been, never stumbled through his clearing. Though even the mightiest gods fell from heaven, Pan would not sense their downfall, and as Pan would continue, untroubled and unchanging, until the end of days.

Zeus turned and hastened away through the trees.

*

"I've found him, your ladyship," said a nymph.

"Well?" said Hera.

"The nymph focused, tracing her fingers over the map engraved into her tablet, her mind far away. "He's in

Athens…no, just outside Athens…lying in a field. His face is a strange colour, and he seems to be vomiting."
"Wouldn't surprise me, where Dionysus is concerned," said Hera. "Detail a messenger to fetch him. I want a full meeting within two days."
"He said he was on sick leave."
"Yes," she replied acidly. "A most appropriate term, I imagine."

She turned back to the work at her desk. Below the dais where she sat, ranks of neatly dressed nymphs toiled busily, scribbling on tablets and conversing pleasantly with clients through speaking tubes. The building was new, only a few days old, having risen in extravagant ugliness at the command of the Wardrobe. Hera had decided they needed a good, modern place to live and work, to fill with nymphs who thought they were doing important jobs, a place to which important dignitaries from exotic Pantheons would be escorted, their brows heavy with weighty affairs of state; somewhere the Wardrobe would invite carefully-selected commoners to extravagant parties so as to display their close affinity with the People. Originally there was to have been only one official residence and workplace for the President, which had appeared in all its squat flat-fronted splendour across the square opposite Zeus' palace. The planners responsible for its erection had, like the inventors of Viagra, given little thought to the aesthetic impact of their creation, deciding that its only distinguishing quality should be its extreme contrast with its surroundings. The tenth building in the Square, it somewhat jarred the mystic Nine formed by the pillared elegance of the other buildings around the square. Now, however, an even larger monstrosity of even more hideous aspect had

appeared beside it, specially created for Ares. He had claimed the first was too small for his personality.

So Hera had occupied the first building with her trains of secretaries, advisers, PR girls and think-armoured chariots. Her palace, bower and pleasure gardens lay deserted; and the corridors of the War God's abode filled with dust, forgotten and forsaken. An observer would have seen the outlines of these buildings begin to fade, as the stone sustained by the divine presences lost its hold on reality; soon their facades would crumble, their pillars fall, and their existence dissolve into shapeless, formless emptiness. Chaos would roll over their obliterated ruins.

Prometheus threw the door open noisily, without even troubling to knock, Hera noted. It is unlikely that her dislike for him would have diminished had he done so, but she might thereby have been more prepared for his unpleasant presence. She pretended to ignore him until he poked her in the stomach,
after which she had little choice but to look up.

"What is it?" she asked. Never before had these three words contained such a clear invitation for the hearer to leave at once and perform various painful and anatomically impossible operations on himself. Tactfully, Prometheus took them at face value. "I've got something to show you," he hissed.

"Is it important?"

"You could put it like that."

Hera gave the resigned sigh of one who is being forced to set aside the affairs of state in order to pander to one of the People and followed him out of the room.

He took her to the vaults beneath Zeus' Palace, to the Central Deposit of the Olympic Bank. Hera's lips thinned at the sight of the irrationally vast cavern. Zeus'

weakness for fiddling with spatial dimensions had always annoyed her.

The domed roof gave off a soft effulgence, The room itself was empty, apart from a metallic dust that lay thickly over the floor, darting eddying funnels into the wakes of the Credit Transfer Chariots, which clattered past from time to time. “There’s nothing here,” said Hera.

“Precisely,” said Prometheus. “I knew you’d spot it at once.”

“You brought me here to show me nothing?”

“That’s right.”

“You dragged me away from Theocratic affairs to show me nothing?”

“If you don’t do something about the nothing,” said Prometheus smugly, “there won’t be much of a Theocratic Republic to employ you.”

“Where’s it all gone?”

“The deposits? As it happens, I was with a pretty large group of mountain gods, who were only recently loading the last of it into the Credit Transfer System…end of the month, you see. I had to pay them pretty handsomely as well,” he added.

Hera mover faster than Prometheus could have imagined. He found himself pined to the wall, her sharp nose brushing his face. “Perhaps if you would let go of my tunic,” he said equably, “and your nose is scratching my cheek…thank you. I shall now explain. Quite simply, the treasury is depleted, which poses a severe problem for all the state funded and directed enterprises. Income from taxation has proved insufficient to meet demands.”

“I had just about figured that out for myself,” said Hera in a voice, which, if spilled in a laboratory, would have

taken out the bench, the floor below, and had a decent shot at the basement as well. “I shall have to cut expenditure immediately.”

“Not very safe, now that you’ve made yourself accountable,” he pointed out. “You are accountable, aren’t you? I gather that most of Olympus believes you are. One imagines they’d be terribly disillusioned to discover you’d been having them on.”

The air temperature around the goddess was plummeting rapidly. Already their breath was visible, deep clouds of condensation wreathing up towards the ceiling. She rounded on him furiously, her first few words delivered at such a rate he couldn’t catch them, though he suspected they had been unsavoury and was glad to have been spared the embarrassment. The gist of her succeeding statement was that whoever was to blame for the oversight in budget calculations she would take pains to lay it at Prometheus’ door unless he did something about it. “Everything was going so well,” she lamented after she had paused for breath. “I’ve surrounded myself with consultants, personnel officers, PR girls, gossip columnists…”

“It is sad,” he agreed, “Pity you hadn’t thought of employing a few insurers.”

Hera turned on him slowly. “Listen, you. Within a week, we had better have something to fund us; otherwise it’ll be your liver on the slab. Money is all that matters now. So get some.” She spun on her heel and was gone.

“Good exit, good exit,” said Prometheus approvingly.

Money is all that matters now.

The words uttered by a goddess have potency beyond any that fall from mortal mouths. Hera’s sentence hovered in the air, slowly diffusing through Olympus,

permeating walls and minds. It drifted, piece by piece, into the invisible entity encircling the city of the gods, providing the final crackle along the spark plug of its recreation.

Creeds are founded upon few words. Those that appear to rely on many are often confounded in tripping on their unknotted logic. The creed of religious intolerance on a small island in the western ocean, for example, is based on the simple mantra, “I believe”, for its adherents refuse to allow any type of belief whatsoever, and anyone suspected of harbouring some is immediately clubbed to death. The only explorer to set foot on these dread shores had, most unfortunately, begun to say “I believe this is Hibernia” and had been standing too close to one of the indigenous gentlemen at the time. Religion is a hazardous business, particularly for the non-practitioner.

It is even so with political creeds. They too have their prophets, martyrs, converts, fanatics and detractors, and a dire fate awaits those who fall from grace. They too can be built upon the airiest of foundations, such as a few words dropped carelessly from divine lips. Hera’s words rose into the sky, and were seen.

Argurion opened his eyes, and saw for the first time. It was gratifying to know they wanted him so badly. Soon he must call and leave his respects.

*

When Hera returned to her desk there loomed teetering piles of tablets awaiting her attention, placed there by her diligent secretarial nymphs. The late Messers Ventris and Chadwick would have been overjoyed to discover samples of these tablets, inscribed as they were in three languages – more out of deference

to new Olympic law than for the convenience of foreign readers. Linear A, they would have found, was merely a dialectic form of Linear B destined for the intellectually challenged tablet reader, and consequently all but unintelligible to anyone who had actually been taught to read rather than discovering that one might actually distinguish between lagers by the squiggles on the cans. Sadly, all clay tablets in Olympus were recycled every two weeks, so the script remains indecipherable.

Before she attended to them, Hera worked briefly on a blank tablet. Trembling with anger, she wanted to blame someone besides Prometheus, if only for the sake of variety. She wrote, *Who was in charge of Olympic finances?* Underneath it came, *Who was monitoring the accounts?* Lastly she put, *Thus, who is to blame?* How dare they undermine her brilliant government with their incompetence? It was at this juncture that she realised the reason her calculations had gone so badly wrong was that she had omitted to perform any. After thinking a little longer, she wrote HERA beside each question, and carefully smoothed the tablet clean.

The mountains of tablets cluttering her table held details of Zeus sightings. Although the gods could have perceived the answers directly, they had agreed that it was infinitely more trendy and stylish for the information to pass through an interminable chain of middle-nymphs and personnel staff before it actually came before the Wardrobe. Thus the reports, offered up in the prayers of fervent priests, were laid on the desk of the nymph closest to the door, who categorised the accusers and their suspects according to age, weight, eye and hair colour, race, blood type, IQ and whether they bit their fingernails or not. On her left, the next divided the people in question into male and female

groups, while the third completed the process by ascertaining the sex of their mother's niece's aunt. After this exhaustive analysis, a fresh rank of nymphs took it in turns to plot the information on a variety of graphs, pie charts, bar charts, and cumulative frequency curves, according to the number's sine, and on four dimensional probability projections. Next the graphs were coloured in bright, cheerful colours and stamped with the logo of the Theocratic Republic. Behind Hera's desk stood two other nymphs whose task it was to collect the tablets and dispose of them once she had seen them. By the end of the process, each subject had accounted for at least a quarter of a ton of clay. Virtually the only piece of information not mentioned was whether the suspect was actually Zeus. But the nymphs seemed blissfully happy and obviously regarded this as rather less important when compared to the proper colouring of the pie charts.

Hera worked quickly through the backlog. Halfway down the pile, she came across a single tablet, unaccompanied by the requisite graphs and statistics. She jerked the speaking tube towards her. The nymph whom she addressed was only twenty paces away, so the speaking tube was not strictly necessary, but there were principles to maintain. "Leita! There is an unprocessed tablet here. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Your majesty, ninety –four A had no…"

"Where are the graphs? The pie charts? The genealogical stats? How am I supposed to know the sex of this idiot's female relatives unless you tell me?"

"Yes, your majesty, but…"

"What?"

“We couldn’t find anything at all on the subject. No name or records.”

Hera peered at the tablet with renewed interest. It was refreshing, she found, to have a blank piece of clay in front of her. From Delphi, she noticed, delivered by Ion, priest. Suspect heard giving his destination as Attica. Drumming her fingers on her desk, Hera pursed her lips. Perhaps Ion had shown a lamentable lapse in honesty and a glance into his mind would be worth her while.

Ion was skulking in a dark tavern in a small village when Hera’s mind bored like a diamond drill into his brain. As she had an inkling of what she was looking for, she was fairly quick. During her examination Ion leapt onto the table, screamed in several languages, tore out quantities of hair – both his own and that of others – and beat his head against the wall before running round in tight circles, but none of the clientele were terribly bothered, as the wine there was rather strong and they had been at parties where things like this happened.

Hera mused. So, there concealed in the guilt crevices of his tormented brain, a little lost thought had been lurking. *They hadn’t found the body, had they?* The goddess computed, adding Apollo’s arrows, immortality, Attica and a girl, and found herself tickled with the result. Looking for a needle in a haystack was always perfectly simple if you ignored all the hay. She reached again for the speaking tube. “Leita?”

“Yes, your majesty?”

“I want a list of all the women in Attica over sixteen on my desk as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“And you can forget about the reports. We’ve done enough now.”

“Oh, your majesty, but the girls have just got hold of a new shipment of aqua marine…”
There was a pause.
“Aqua marine, did you say?”
“Yes, your majesty”
“All right, carry on. But don’t put them on my desk. Recycle them straight away.”
“Oh *thank you* so much, your majesty. The girls were saying they wished you didn’t have to look at them anyway, because its’ ages before the recycled clay comes back, and they got a pot of magenta only two days ago…”
There came a click at the other end of the speaking tube.

*

“I don’t really see how *The Helios* is going to help us much,” said Enipeus doubtfully. He and his heavily cloaked conspirators clustered round the hooded stranger in their midst. She had known all their watchwords, from “When the bespectacled pig gurgles in the crevices of Cronos” to “Then the pink whale shall whistle cheerfully in the back streets of disreputable Argos” and had performed the complicated hand, foot and headshakes perfectly. Enipeus had tried to probe her mind when they had discovered that there were seven of them at the table, but he had met an impenetrable defence and a friendly warning to keep off, which he had sensibly obeyed while it was still friendly, or indeed still a warning.

But whoever she was – her cloak was the envy of every conspirator, muffling her face in shade – she seemed to be on their side. “I assure you that a crucial factor in any successful revolution nowadays is the control of the press,” she was saying.

“I have a talent at crushing things,” said Kithairon modestly. “Perhaps I could press them instead if I didn’t try so hard.”
“Seeing as opinions are formed principally by what people read in the press and so believe are the opinions of others, or their reaction to them,” went on the stranger, oblivious to interruption
“The Olympic press won’t do us any good then,” said Kalea. “*The Helios* has remarkably few words for a newstablet. And most of the pictures would only appeal to their hairier readers.”
“Why?” asked Silenus innocently.
“It’s not as if we can tell whether the models have any dress sense to speak of.”
“No, admitted the satyr, “but they do have enviable tans. I’m very fond of *The Helios*. The girls say things like, ‘hey honey bun’ and ‘how about a good time?’ It’s a long time since someone said that to me without being blind drunk first.”
“And even longer since you had one, I imagine,” said Daphne.
“You see, you remember what the girls say,” said the stranger. “Now, if instead you made the girls say ‘Vote Republican’ or ‘Red flag for freedom’ it would have quite an effect.”
Her audience considered this. “It’d be a bit odd, wouldn’t it?” said Silenus. “There’s this girl, who hasn’t got that much on, and she’s giving you the eye and all, then she sidles up and starts whispering stuff about hammers and sickles into your ear. Not guaranteed to get a bloke into bed, is all I’m saying.”
“But you’d remember it.”
“Too right I would. Give her a wide berth next time.”
“You could inscribe tablets of subversive material.”

“Not many of us can read.”
“Oh, it doesn’t matter if no one reads what’s printed in the press,” said the stranger. “All that matters is that it appears. Those in charge still maintain the illusion that the press reflects the will of the people rather than the leaning of the journalists. Thus you can show that this subject has been in the public mind for some time, there’s been an outcry in the press, the people are up in arms – look, they’ve even written letters that no one reads under headlines baying for governmental blood. The people will be putty in your hands. And so will the Wardrobe.”
“Are you sure this’ll work?” asked Enipeus. “We were getting on nicely without it. I don’t want to go putting anyone’s back up…”
“And what have you been up to recently, then?”
“Well…we invented a couple of new hand shakes, and added a few more watchwords. We *have* spread insurrection and fomented rebellion in the streets though.”
“How many have you told of your efforts?”
“Um...well…five, if you must know.” Enipeus squirmed before the blank stare of the empty hood. “All right – three of them were asleep, and the other two were arguing and didn’t seem terribly interested. I didn’t really want to end up in Tartarus, to be honest.”
“But you see, if you speak through the mouth of the press, you will be as inviolate as an oracle. You will be sacrosanct, untouchable. Even if only one in a hundred reads what you have written, to the readers and their peers it will seem the only truth. You will have power beyond your wildest imaginings – for who controls the press, through the people he holds heaven and earth in sway. A millionaire in Thera once wanted to get rid of

the indigenous population so that he could open a theme park there, so he brought out a newstablet warning that an imminent volcanic eruption was soon to devastate the island, so everyone should leave."
"Did they?" asked Silenus curiously.
"Pretty promptly. But the prophet he had consulted was a true devotee of Hephaestus, so he and I made sure the magnate never got his theme park."
"How?"
"We demonstrated rather forcefully that he'd chosen the wrong island. Sadly he happened to be there at the time. But let this demonstrate that readers are very well disposed towards what is read. They have little choice. The only other option is to disagree."
"Isn't it a melancholy comment on the state our society has reached," said Kalea, "that the words uttered by a naked bimbo in a third-rate newstablet could bring a politician to his knees?"
"Yes," sighed Silenus. "In the good old days, the politicians would bring the girls to their knees. Usually in front of the politicians." He yelped as Kalea stamped on his hoof.
"It is sad, but undeniable," agreed the stranger. "But you must remember to balance your offerings with images of bronzed gods to harness the other half of the electorate. If you secured Apollo to model for you…"

The nymphs sat up and began to show more interest, Daphne included, as Enipeus noted to his disappointment. "I could arrange to appear at no extra charge," he began, attempting to flex what might have been a bicep on a keener athlete, but it was too late. With drooling mouths, the nymphs were plunged into an orgy of Apollo contemplation, abandoning Enipeus in that bleak wilderness so often wandered by Olympic

males whenever the Archer God was mentioned in front of their lady friends. It wasn't as if Apollo was even shaving yet, Enipeus brooded, and he was certain he waxed his legs…

The stranger patted him on the back of the hand. "Most importantly of all," she confided, "you won't have to bother about being sycophantic to the Olympians to get into the Second Chamber. Use *The Helios* to boost your electoral efforts. Never underestimate the power of the tablet press."

"Thank you very much for all your help," said Enipeus gloomily. "Obviously I'll have to keep Daphne well away from the graphic art department if I want to get anywhere. Who are you, by the way?"

"A friend?"

Enipeus nodded, satisfied. This sounded like the right kind of term to apply to a cowled freelance agent moving in the dark towards the Elysium of Liberty through the passages of espionage and intrigue. A thought occurred to him. "How do you suggest we actually gain control of the press?"

"You could buy *The Helios* outright – it's not as though any of you are short of capital," reflected the stranger. "On the other hand, the gods who run it at the moment are all thin, underweight specimens, pale from spending too long in the graphic art department instead of going running or taking nice cold showers. I'm sure if you and your mountain god went to have a little chat with them they'd soon understand, as long as you let them keep a few negatives."

"That's fine," said Enipeus with relief. "We wouldn't want any negatives the way we'd run it. It'd be positive and affirmative all the way with us."

“I rather thought it would be,” said the stranger. “Very encouraging to hear you say that. If the journalistic standard were to be improved in paradise it will give me a real sense of achievement. I have always felt that the editors of *The Helios* have given slightly too much attention to the illustrations.”

“Nice of you to drop by,” said Enipeus. Kithairon and Silenus had become embroiled in the Apollo debate, and seemed to be backing the motion “Against”, despite the strong debating position held by their opponents, so Enipeus showed the stranger out alone. They shook hands, which took several minutes, and then Athene slipped away into the alley darkness.

*

As has been noted previously, there are a number of mountains in Greece, of innumerable aspects. Some are forbiddingly craggy, others thickly wooded, and still more are grassy, dotted with the odd myrtle bush or tenacious thorn, perhaps crowned with looming fortifications or time-wearied ruins. They are united, however, in that the lowest common factor in the sum of their vast number is roughly the same as their average I.Q. – about one. Even the great Cretan philosopher, Mount Ida, had been hard put to it to answer the question, “Why are you here?” having failed to come up with a response before his questioner’s bones had been slowly immolated by the silt on his flanks, but seeing as the reply had been, “What?” it was probably better that his interrogator was spared the disappointment. Still, mountain gods are on the whole pleasant to deal with, and are above all solid, dependable and predictable, though they are liable to blow their tops once in a while. Heracles was sitting in one of the few public gardens in Olympus that had not been commandeered for a secret

new building project, surrounded by several ranges of the aforementioned gods, explaining democracy to them.

Things were going well, considering that neither Heracles nor your average mountain god were renowned as conversationalists, but Heracles had a good deal of sympathy with mountains and they had considerable respect for him – had he not taken over at the summit of Mount Atlas for a short while? Heracles himself enjoyed the novel sensation of talking to people on his own terms without being interrupted after a few ponderous words. He never spoke without deep contemplative thought, and only did so in measured tones, which combined with his crushing politeness meant that few were ever graced with the distilled wisdom that brewed within him. He had always regretted that fact that while on earth he'd always been too busy to have a decent chat – even the Nemean Lion and the Lernean Hydra, who must have been pretty lonely, had cruelly spurned his overtures before he slew them, and Cerberus had not even growled in reply when he had seized it by all three throats, tickling its tummy and asking if it was a nice doggy. No one had ever expected Heracles to have anything to say. A strong silent man wasn't supposed to have opinions, or at least shouldn't have the vocabulary to express them. Be either mighty or taciturn, his agent had advised him, or effete and loquacious. Let the strong man perform deeds of daring that the wordy may sing of them, for a talkative skull cracker might have undermined the entire literary construction that underlay the poets' dialogue. Heroes were supposed to say things like "Avast" or "Woe to thee", or perhaps if they became excessively agitated they might rise to "I shall cut off thy head and

let the vultures and nimble dogs devour thy corpse." Heracles couldn't himself remember having spoken like this to anyone, as his mother had been very insistent on the maintenance of good manners. But no one had ever considered that the vigour with which Heracles performed his mighty deeds sprang from his desire to get them finished as quickly as possible so as to devote himself to what he had always considered his real calling – that of philosophical contemplation, to which he had given his time before Virtue and Vice muscled in and thereafter monopolised his life. Heracles knew he was not terribly clever – in fact he never ceased to wonder at his vast, all-encompassing ignorance. Some days he awoke reflecting on the impossibility of anyone being as ignorant about so many things as he. Of course, this would have delighted Socrates, and Heracles liked to console himself with the thought that had he lived in another age, another mind than Plato's might have shaped the thought of the Western world with a gentler philosophy.

But one thing after another had got in the way, till his battle with the Giants, which was over almost before he was aware it had begun, followed by the embarrassing little incident with the robe soaked in Nessus' blood. After his subsequent death he had awoken in the centre of a drunken orgy, surrounded by cheering gods who clearly attached far too much importance to physical pleasures and gave no thought to the spiritual side of immortality – a distressing characteristic that was shared by virtually every deity he had met, as he had realised with some bitterness.

Even in Heaven he was unable to be his own god, as he came to terms with the responsibilities of prayers, sacrifices, his wife Hebe and his mother-in-law Hera, an

unenviable person to hold that office, even considering their bad press on Earth. And now this dreadfully confusing muddle had blown up with his father. Had it not been for Athene, he would have become completely lost, but she had clarified matters for him, and instructed him to pass on his enlightenment to the mountain gods, so that they understood what she wanted them to do.

"You see," he said patiently, "your friend Kithairon wants to be a member of another group of gods who will stop the Wardrobe interfering in your lives and making you be policemen. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

The general consensus appeared to be in the affirmative.

"And you'd tell the Wardrobe that you want Kithairon to speak on the behalf of the mountains?" Once again, he detected the same response. "As long as you all think the same, that's fine. Athene told me that what matters isn't whether you are right or wrong but only that there are a lot of you."

"So we can beat up people who don't like what we say?" questioned a mountain from Asia Minor.

"I think so," answered Heracles doubtfully. "As long as you get their permission first, otherwise you do something to their rights."

"What're they?"

"I'm not sure," confessed Heracles. "I have a feeling they're something invented by Hera. In which case they're probably not very important."

*

A steady stream of gods ebbed and flowed in and out of the vast shopping malls on the West Side, clad in the evidence of assiduous shopping. Being naturally shrewd, most designers had swiftly realised that the more durable their clothes, the fewer they would sell,

and had solved this knotty problem with a refreshingly modern device. Each tunic, cloak or girdle, every stola or robe, every pair of jewelled or gilded sandals was accompanied by an invisible daemon whose task it was to unpick the stitches, fade the dye, fray the edges or chip the gilt, thus necessitating another purchase. Some of the daemons being very diligent, especially in the clothes shops of the very highest class, customers thought themselves fortunate if they reached the door without their goods disintegrating. But no one complained, as it provided a perfect excuse to remain shopping all day – the more fleeting a pleasure, the more it will be desired. On market days the West Side might have been compared to the melee ensuing should five hundred people cooped into a small room have strenuously sought to capture a humming bird orbiting above them with large cheque pinned to its back. So the city itself was largely empty and quiet; quiet but for the ever-rising echoes of clinking coins that meandered through the air. The People, as they had been told, knew where their priorities lay.

*

In his dream, Anaxios, one of a myriad of lesser river gods, found himself sitting in a crowded room in the dark, listening to a voice that meandered out of the shadows. As it grew light, he found that he was naked, so the demands of his alarm clock were met with more than his usual eagerness. This was a recurring dream, which Anaxios found very disturbing. His novelty alarm clock trilled. It was constructed in the shape of a small and bibulous god, who jovially raised a brimming wine cup to his lips, which rang when they were struck. The longer it did so, the more swiftly and violently did the god beat himself with the mug, working up towards

such an ecstasy of masochistic pleasure that he emitted a scream through which even the most determined sleeper could not doze unaroused.

His wife and two children were still in bed when he left for work. At the foot of the low rise upon which the estate - Anatolia Gardens – stood, there was a stopping point for the Olympic Chariot train, which conveyed him each morning to his office on the other side of the city. Or, he thought petulantly, after half an hour's wait, conveys so many people so inefficiently that there's usually no room to board till lunchtime. The travel tablets were bloody expensive too – never had so many paid so much for so little. Anaxios often wondered why everyone acquiesced in paying the Chariot Train staff to do their jobs so badly, idly ruminating that they were on to quite a good thing. He had frequently been threatened with redundancy for spending too long in the lavatory with the newstablet, not least because his boss had wanted to read it. He wondered whether those silent strangers who accompanied him to work everyday, an ever-changing parade of unknowns, hated this process as much as he did, and why they all did it in the first place. He had vague memories of waking up in his stream every day in the languid sunlight and passing hours dreaming or fiddling with pebbles, and reflected that his new existence must of course be better and more profitable. Only there seemed to be something wrong with an existence where each day dawned drear and drowsy, and he reached work exhausted and pulverised by public transport.

Finally on the Chariot train, Anaxios extricated himself from a body cavity belonging to a fellow passenger, since he had no desire to prolong his occupancy therein. Most of the passengers tended to get

off about half way across Olympus, giving the others a chance to sit down. He gave a timorous smile to the owner of the body cavity from the comparative safety his newstablet, behind which it was customary to cower in order to maintain the pretence that one was travelling in complete isolation. The owner glowered back, though whether this was out of indignation at Anaxios' breach of this protocol or because of his brief tenancy in the cavity was unclear. Honestly, he thought gloomily, if we did this to animals it would be illegal.

Anaxios took a certain melancholy pleasure in laying down his newstablet in order to speak to a colleague at the office using his Portable Pseudo-Communication Device. As gods, had they wanted to speak, it was only necessary to reach out together till their minds were entangled, but an official in the Wardrobe had decided that it would be much cooler to mask this unfortunate spiritual function with the shield of new technology and rake in a quiet profit thereby. Thus, no deity who thought they were anything would have been seen without a suit-case sized black box, scattered with an impressive encrustation of coloured buttons, upon one side of which was a buttock-shaped cleft into which one inserted one's head while speaking in public. But Anaxios' Portable Pseudo-Communication Device lay apparently unused on the seat beside him. From the glowing black buttocks trailed two cords, one entwined around his neck, the other inserted into his ear. He opened the conversation with the novelty-honoured mantra intended to indicate to one's interlocutor and captive audience that one was using a Portable Pseudo-Communication Device. "Hi," he said. "I'm on the train." Why it was important for the other person to know this he'd never worked out, seeing as he rarely

communicated the fact that he was either at home or in the office when using a fixed Pseudo-Communication Device, but he played by the rules.

He was aware of the titillation the incredulous glances of the other passengers. They thought, he knew, that he was wasting his time, as his head was nowhere near its rightful place. A supercilious smirk began to pull at his chin, for they were clearly not visited by enlightenment. How could they be aware, poor bumpkins, that he had purchased a hands-free kit? At that moment, the Portable Pseudo-Communication Device belonging to the mountain god opposite gave a high trill, whereupon its owner plugged his hands free set into the buttocks, thereby deflating Anaxios' brief moment of satisfaction at his imagined sophistication.

The dusky miasma of his colleagues' conversation washed over him at his desk. Here he sat for what seemed innumerable hours each day, using the speaking tube, manipulating figures on tablets and dreaming idly of the nymphs in reception. He was not sure what his job really was, or indeed what he did, but he knew that as it was for the Central Bank it must be indispensably important.

Anaxios, in his estimation, was a normal god. He had a house, or more properly a home, a chariot, a wife and two children whose names he was forgetting owing to his working hours. He went to tavernas and supported a bladder team, usually at the same time. Sometimes he went on holiday with his family to get away from it all and to be reintroduced to his spouse and offspring. He had fun on those occasions throughout the year when society required it of him, attending the advisable number of parties. He went to foreign restaurants whose cuisine he detested, attended yoga classes his horns

made unbearable, and had invited an expert on something to do with furniture removals to rearrange his home because he had heard it would make him happier. He tried to show he was a diverse, tolerant and freethinking person, as society expected him to be. He upheld the economy by spending as much as he could, and tried to be multicultural, forward-looking, gregarious, fun loving, caring and tolerant of alternative lifestyles and creeds, especially at the expense of his own. These were little things that society desired, small requests in return for warmth of soul, comfort of body and security of mind. He lived now in a world free of extremes, cushioned and coddled against the fire and driving pulse of genius, for it had been proved unnecessary. By the acceptance of exceptions the world had made them unexceptional; by ending the demonisation of deviants it had made them fit its mould. Anaxios had no particular ambitions beyond the indefinite continuance of his present progress up the slope of material improvement and the quest for more money. When he had time, he thought of his river, even though he was perfectly happy with the way things now were. He had not seen it for longer than he could remember, and wondered whether it now ran dry and what had been the fate of its meanders and mud banks that he knew so well.

Two hundred like him sat in his office, and in the towering building beside it sat two hundred more. Spinning away from him like a fractal curve rose other towers, other halls, shops and taverns, theatres and clubs, other Anaxioi moving in ordered streams along the patterns of the roads and the grooves of their lives. All sought happiness – perhaps some had found it. We are not to judge.

“It’s your choice,” they were told. “You decide how to lead your lives.” On chariot trains, on street corners, posters proclaimed that employers wanted motivation, not hours; that no job was secure for an immortality, that in the end you were free to choose for yourself. Learn the skills you need to get the job you want, but only within our parameters. Only as the eye of contemplation recedes do the patterns emerge. Only thus may we realise that beneath the crust of the particular lies the web of the general, in which our lives are spun. Only thus can we hear the silent voices with their incessant cries of expectations unspoken, demands unmade, concepts unthought. But the eye of contemplation is drawn not into the sky but into the glitz of emporia, the stagnant well of satisfaction, the merry-go-round of enjoyment; or else commanded to remain closed.

*

Those partly responsible for this new, forward-looking – or at least, Westward-looking – state gathered in the Olympic Court for their mid weekly meeting. Apollo and Artemis were present before Hera, with the Minutes’ notes from the last week before her, Prometheus and Athene too, bright and suspiciously eager for the meeting to begin. Hephaestus held a large clay tablet upright in front of him, behind which he was surreptitiously carving a small working model of a fortified land-chariot, though the tablet appeared to hold his attention fiercely. The evening sun shone – as well he might, as he was receiving a handsome salary for so doing. The birds, who had not yet realised their financial potential as musicians, sang gratis. Argurion watched from a distance as the meeting began.

Prometheus rose to his feet when Hera asked the Ministers to propose motions for legislation. "Honourable Ministers," he began, "I bring to your attention a grave oversight that implicates us all."

Hera glared at him. "It has been brought to my attention that here in our new, liberal, vibrant, forward-looking, modernising, exciting, young, vibrant…"

"You've already used that one," pointed out Artemis.

He waved a hand. "It deserves repeating. As I was saying, it has come to my attention that there remain a number of gods, including some here present, who still hunt with hounds! I propose, my lords and ladies, that the Olympic Wardrobe should ban hunting forthwith."

He sat down to thunderous applause, albeit from himself. When he had finished clapping, Artemis leapt furiously to her feet. Several choice and succulent phrases casting doubts on Prometheus' parentage escaped her lips before she managed to yell, "I protest! As Deity to Superintend Feminine Lunar-oriented Barbaro-sacrificial Rites, I protest! A ban would destroy my chief source of employment."

"Precisely," said Prometheus, with a sly glance at Hera. "Then we'd have one less salary to find."

"I think it's a marvellous idea," said Hera firmly, with a lack of consideration that was becoming habitual. "We simply cannot allow barbarous, antiquated stag-butcheries like that in our new Olympus. Can't think why we haven't legislated against it before."

"It's an infringement of my rights!" wailed Artemis. "I've got the right to be free to kill whenever I want. Deer are only bloody animals, for gods' sakes."

"I believe your dogs killed a man once," remarked Prometheus.

“I’d changed Acteon into a stag because he’d seen me bathing,” blushed Artemis. “His dogs thought he *was* a stag.”

“If they can’t tell the difference between a man and a deer by now, I’d be inclined to pension them off,” he shot back. “If you do decide to start a reign of terror with your dogs, please do give us a little prior warning. Post a note to prospective victims, or something, so that they can get a little running training done.”

Artemis leapt forward and slapped him. “Let us hear the motions for and against,” said Hera, not being inclined to spoil a good show.

A stag appeared in the circle of thrones, accompanied by a fox, a boar and a wolf. The stag proceeded to give a moving and graphic account of a hunt, from the emotional upheaval he suffered through the details of the compensation he would have claimed had he survived his ordeal, down to the minutiae of the kill. Hera stopped the boar as he began to grunt into his own monologue, at which insult he retired behind Hephaestus’ throne, rather affronted. “Can we now have the motion for?” she asked brightly.

At this, a number of downcast hounds materialised in their midst, and were given scornful glances by the animals already present, who were usually classed either as prey or as starter, main and dessert in the dogs’ books. The hounds, tears glinting on their heart-melting eyes, painted a mournful picture of their life as it would be deprived of the pleasures, nay, the necessities, of the hunt – a life dry, empty and cut short by penury and starvation.

“I find your referring to me as food extremely offensive,” remarked the stag.

“Usually we don’t refer to you at all,” said the offending hound. “Our mouths are too full.”
“I think it boils down – if you can forgive using such a culinary metaphor – to the hounds’ right to eat and work versus the prey’s right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” said Hera. “Stag, do you ever experience pleasure during the course of a hunt? It would greatly invalidate your case were this so.”
“I experience a number of things,” considered the stag. “High blood pressure, heart rate, exhaustion, mortal terror, goddesses’ arrows, but pleasure? Not immediately before I was ripped into small pieces and eaten by a rabble of scrofulous dogs before the quivering’s over.”

Here one of the dogs appealed at the offensive use of the term “scrofulous”, but he was grunted down by the boar. Hera called for the vote, during which even Apollo was on the point of voting against his sister, bright tears glistening poetically on his cheeks, when Artemis kicked him. “The, the stag spoke in poetry to me, he mumbled, “His words cascaded through the portals of mine ears to strike a chord with the innermost desires of my heart and the ageless desires of the gods to be freed of the barbaric yoke…”
“Don’t give me that bullshit. And are you calling me barbaric?”
“Well, no…no, of course not…”

But despite her best efforts, the motion was carried. The stag and his friends cheered loudly, and produced various ugly and barbaric weapons from behind their backs, with which they pursued the fleeing hounds around the arena, till they slew them dramatically before the Air Throne and the dozing shape of Ares before

dematerialising in triumph to go in search of fresh conquests.

Artemis flounced away from her throne, uttering words that should never have featured in a virgin goddess' vocabulary. Hera beamed at Prometheus. "It seems I have quite misjudged you, Prometheus," she said. He smiled graciously at this fulsome praise as the Minutes wrote diligently. At Hera's request for the morning's second motion, Hephaestus continued to frown horribly at his tablet, his chariot nearing completion; Ares gazed into the middle distance, and Apollo plucked a string, feigning thought. Prometheus looked eagerly at each member of the council, then cheerfully leapt to his feet again. "Honourable members," he began. Ares groaned.

"It has been brought to my attention that here in Olympus exists an evil movement, whose quavering voice with minimal decorum scores itself into every cranny of our lives and scales the very heights of our holy mountain. The tenor of my argument is this – that a base form of anti-democratic practice has survived unnoticed by the watchful eyes of the Wardrobe. Answer me, my fellow Ministers, is this permissible? Can we allow this practice to continue?"

There were cries of "No!" and "Treachery! Seek it out!" and one loud call of "Ho! Let the door be locked" from someone who had got his scripts muddled. Prometheus gestured like an electrocuted conductor. Sparks flew from his eyes in his democratic fervour. "Is it fair, I ask, is it democratic, he continued, "that paths should be open to some that are not to all? That the gods should permit unjust favour and privilege to fester in our city? Should there be those whose actions may not

be mirrored by all then let them cease, I say. Let them cease!"

Once again he sat to a storm of applause, this time from the other gods, and to a standing ovation, with the exception of Hephaestus, who had reached a tricky stage with the rack and pinion steering system. As the applause died, Hera's nimble mind, with all the agility of a bull on the premises of a purveyor of earthenware, sprang immediately at the cabinet containing the most delicate pieces of china.

"Prometheus," she said, "what, in fact, is this fragrantly undemocratic practice of which you speak? Tell out, and it shall cease forthwith."

"Only music," said Prometheus off-handedly, examining his fingernails.

"Oh, good," said Hera, relieved. "I was afraid it might have been something important. Has anyone any objections?"

Apollo, it seemed, was a little taken aback by the news. Had someone bought all of Rembrandt's paintings and wrapped his Christmas presents in their canvas in the presence of the artist, or Pope Julius decided that the Sistine Chapel wasn't quite up to scratch and asked Michelangelo to spray paint it in one of the brighter primary colours, even the remonstrations these men might have justly produced would pale at the god's displeasure. Were Leonardo da Vinci to discover the Mona Lisa being used a tent flap – or, come to that, modern attempts at restoring the "Last Supper", or Bernini told that St. Peter's were to be demolished to make room for a new Holiday Inn, still their objections would fall short of describing Apollo's rage. He was, to be frank, rather put out. The English language must leave it at this and bow out gracefully.

He flew at Prometheus swinging his lyre, whose unpleasant looking knobs would have ensured that it went hard for his victim had not Hephaestus shot out a long arm and caught him by the neck. For a short while Apollo foamed gently at the mouth, passing through a spectacular spectrum of colours. Eventually, his voice bubbled up from a throat hardened by his recent use of improper words, which had all proved to have spiky and bulbous manifestations. "Sacrilege!" he croaked. "Unheard of sacrilege. Music and poetry are my life, my immortality! They infuse the very life of Olympus and of Greece."

"He has got a point, you know," mused Hephaestus, rubbing his nose with his free arm. "All our festivals on Earth have music and stuff in them. Kids are taught music, and so on. I enjoy a bit of a sing song myself, when the hammers are banging, the bellows heaving and puffing, the Cyclopes panting…"

"I presume all that goes on when you're merrily forging bronze?" asked Prometheus innocently.

"Of course…why do you ask?"

"Never mind."

"I am a genius!" shrieked Apollo, clearly thinking that the conversation was drifting away from its proper subject, which he regarded as himself.

"Oh, I'm not disputing your genius," said Prometheus in an airy voice. "I've got nothing against the performance of existing music either. Only it does seem grotesquely undemocratic, allowing individuals to continue in this process of advertising their superiority when we have a perfectly serviceable Music Machine that can churn out everything we could possibly want."

"Life without music would be as wine without grapes," said Apollo pathetically.

“Yes, but as Prometheus said, we have nothing against music per se,” chimed in Athene. “We’re only troubled by people composing it. I think anyone with a conscience would agree we should stop them. Not least because organic composition reduces the overall profits generated by the Machine. Both of us believe that music, poetry and indeed all types of artistic composition are socially divisive seeing as they imply a disjunction between the composer and the audience. Of course, we know this isn’t true – there’s nothing so ridiculous as suggesting someone else has a gift or aptitude we don’t have ourselves, but you do see my point, don’t you? If these activities alter thought and instigate divisiveness, we should ban them immediately along with all other creative activities that might encourage people to think in the same dangerous way.”

“I do have special talents,” roared Apollo. “I’m a musical and poetical genius.” He lunged at Athene. “There you are!” she cried triumphantly, as the Archer god struggled against Hephaestus. “The insidious influence of the undemocratic habit he has practiced is beginning to show. And incidentally, your talents don’t include making much money. If you read the budget for the last few weeks it shows that the earnings of the Music Machine in the last seven days quintupled your all time total sales.”

Hera could barely conceal her delight, never having contemplated that Prometheus and Athene might become so zealous and compliant. After Hephaestus clamped his hand over Apollo’s mouth to silence his screams, she declared musical and poetic composition outlawed pending a vote to that effect, which was immediately forthcoming. Apollo began to create a scene, shrieking that to deprive him of his divine duty

was an unforgivable infringement of his rights, but decided there might be a larger and more interested audience elsewhere, and went off to find it.

"Anything else?" asked Hera, who was enjoying her morning. Prometheus glanced round their depleted circle, and then rose to his feet with a shy cough. "There was something," he began.

A thoughtful frown creased Hephaestus' forehead. Now he interrupted. "This creativity business," he said ponderously. "Does it only apply to music and poetry? Or does it affect things like, say, craftsmanship and architecture as well? What about, for example, blacksmiths?"

Prometheus looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid they will be affected," he said. "I was just coming to that."

Hephaestus sighed as he rose to his feet. "Yes, I was afraid you were," he said.

Chapter Ten

The silver tetradrachm pieces smiled with a pinguid air of satisfaction as Zeus sat gazing at them moodily. Until recently, they had been the property of an Attic merchant whom he had encountered on the outskirts of Dekalia, and was now lying insensible in some conveniently placed bushes, for Zeus had decided he needed money and that the appropriate method for its acquisition was though violence. In particular, he hadn't wished to attract attention to himself in the village while ordering drinks for which he couldn't pay. Unfortunately, it had slipped his mind that the simplest way to circumvent his problem was to stress his extreme poverty and that producing money in an establishment now accustomed to providing wine free of charge to those in need might render him rather conspicuous. As it was, the bar man had embraced his knees lavishly, kissed his feet and offered him his daughter, and though not entirely averse to the last part of the proposal, Zeus was intensely displeased that the odour of the man's last meal, a variation on the themes of garlic and old meat, now clung to his lower body. The stench was as tenacious as a bad reputation but without its curiously attractive sexual qualities.

Perhaps the money had been a bad idea. Zeus had never regarded treasure as anything more than something to stockpile with which to titillate his neighbours. Money had only ever been an inconvenience, in his brief experience, when you wanted to spend it – more pertinently, people became a nuisance when you needed to spend it but didn't have it, especially if they were trying to sell what you wanted to

spend it on. Maybe, considering the trouble they were causing, he shouldn't have bothered to get hold of the sixteen drachmas after all. He felt sure that the merchant at any rate would have agreed with him.

The tavern was enclosed on three sides by mud brick walls, constructed around two pitted olive trees whose trunks coiled upwards supporting the roof, hunched like a pair of aged and disgruntled giants keen for alternative employment. Beyond a waist high wooden palisade a wide veranda opened, circled by shuttered wooden doors, taking up the entirety of the taverna's front. Nestled under an awning, it provided a shady contrast to the dusty circle in the centre of the village where the farmers congregated beneath a couple of stunted trees. From his solitary station at the bar, Zeus could see at least a dozen men lounging around the tree, talking energetically, framed by the backdrop of low, sun bleached houses and the curtains of primordial hills. The whole picture glowed with the magenta flood of early evening, as though Claude or Turner had spilled delicate blues or pinks over a painting. The crickets, in the apologetic manner of a violinist who has not played for a decade, were tuning their strings – soon they would be shamelessly strident, heedless of their waning musical brilliance.

On the floor of the taverna reclined many more farmers; waving wine cups and gesticulating hands passed silhouetted against the soft light outside, and a torrent of words, rising occasionally in a shouting swell or an erupting breaker of laughter, washed over his ears.

While he drank quantities of the landlord's imitation of a fine wine, a shadow moved swiftly against the light. A girl stepped daintily into the wine shop. The resultant silence had less to do with the fact of her sex – for the

Mycenaean world was refreshingly progressive about these things – than with the extravagant evidence of her femininity provided by her chest. Having failed to find whomever she was seeking, she flung herself prettily into a seat beside Zeus, a course of action that would have given grave misgivings to anyone who knew the gentlemen. The girl ran an aimless hand through her studiously untidy hair, letting a seductive eye linger idly on the group of men sitting near her feet. With a half smile upon her lips she waited in silence, staring into the middle distance.

Zeus, having been bored as well as depressed, now experienced a quickening of interest in life. Melitta featured briefly in his conscience, but, much to his later regret, he suppressed her. His conscience, never a terribly assertive beast, retreated with a whimper. Leaning over to the girl, he said, "Hello."

It has been suggested that the world would be a happier place if only we said hello to each other more often. Advocates of this theory have clearly not had the opportunity to hear Zeus' rendition of the word, in whose hands it should not have been used in front of small children. Under his skilful manipulation, the simple word spanned several octaves, soaring suggestively and plummeting seductively, its whole aura exuding crude sexuality. It was a greeting painstakingly developed and cultivated by the god over hundreds of years, in the school of slapped faces and haughty looks, until it had reached a pinnacle of perfection unattainable by mortal man. It is dubious whether this greeting had ever made anyone feel happier, though it might have been the first step in making them feel something similar.

The girl started as though he had laid hands on her posterior. Looking at his hands, he found that this was indeed the case, so quickly withdrew them. He grinned roguishly, and was pleasantly surprised to find her grinning back. “Hello,” she said.

“Can I buy you a drink?” asked Zeus. It occurred to him that he had heard this somewhere before, but to reuse it could do no harm. Unfortunately, modern man has taken this view to extremes, and by a process of natural selection it seems that this approach is the only surviving gambit in the once-noble art of seduction.

“Of course,” she said warmly, with a little titter, which Zeus took to be one of excitement at being accosted by such a bronzed, handsome man. As was usually the case in these situations, all his other brain functions had shut down, put their feet on their desks, and settled beck comfortably in their seats to watch the show. This was a contributory factor in his decision to build the Office, which was capable of taking control when the only conscious parts of his brain were those that dealt with heavy breathing and entangled limbs, and thus incapable of dealing with any problems outside their field. Should any relevant problems arise, he frequently found that he had been the cause.

Zeus winked at the barman, rolling him another silver coin, upon which he fell with tears and protestations of devotion, though whether these were directed at the donor or his offering was unclear. He poured lavish libations to the immortal gods before serving the girl’s drink. On impulse, Zeus asked a question that had been trying to make itself heard for some time over the clamour of his testosterone. “Don’t suppose you know of a bloke named Megaventris in

these parts? Got a daughter named Melitta, I think. Wanted to see him on business."

"Probably know him by sight," mused the barman. "Hey, anybody here know Megaventris?"

There came a chorus of assent from assorted eavesdroppers.

"What's he look like again?"

"He's the one they have to push through the door," called a voice.

"Sideways," added another.

"Oh, I got him." The barman turned back to Zeus. "You want to try the farm a mile or so along the mountain road," he said. "I know the man. He's…*big*." He held out his hands as if to show that he had entrapped a truant fish too huge even to feature in implausible stories. Zeus nodded his thanks, hoping he had conveyed the impression of a suave man of the world, and turned to present the drink to the girl, running an idle hand up her thigh as he did so. "Hey sweetie," he crooned. "It's like stroking the curling surf under the mellow stars, smoothed and softened by the silver of a thousand moons…" His voice trailed away. His hand was attempting to send him urgent messages that the thigh he was stroking felt remarkable unlike the surf under the mellow stars, despite the smoothing effect of the thousand moons, whose depilatory effect had been found most wanting. Further doubt was cast on the metaphor by the musculature of said leg and the realisation that the girl had not been wearing a short tunic and so should not have provided any bare flesh for him to stroke. These reflections drew him inexorably to the conclusion that the leg – indubitably, it was a leg – did not, in all probability, belong to the person he had

thought. Visual examination of the leg's owner confirmed this initial hypothesis.

"Ah," he said carefully. "I appear to have made a little mistake."

The girl was now seated on the other leg of an extremely large specimen of the homo sapiens persuasion, though it might have been possible to call the sapiens into question, and, on closer examination of his physiognomy, to have severe doubts about the homo as well. Clearly the girl had strung him along so that her boyfriend could string him up. As the other portions of his mind retuned to their duties with a whistle, swung their feet down from their desks and prepared for work, some of them informed him that the guttural noises emanating from the man probably translated as expressions of annoyance and that the man's reaction to Zeus' innocent overtures would be similar to those of a gorilla who, having nurtured a bamboo shoot for his birthday treat, goes to pluck the succulent morsel only to find it devoured by an unscrupulous hunter – the only consolation being that the hunter had not been prudent enough to escape.

"My girl," growled the man, by way of explanation. She nuzzled his neck, prospecting in the impenetrable mine of his beard. "You tell him, Euxitheus," she said. "Should've seen what he tried to do to me!" There was silence in the taverna. All eyes were upon them, save for those of the barman, who was engaged in packing his breakables behind the bar.

"Yes, I can see that she is indisputably your girl," agreed Zeus, suddenly feeling rather foolish as he realised he was now at the centre of attention and had little chance of escaping to the outskirts. "I commend you on your perspicacity."

The man executed a complicated gesture that Zeus interpreted as a query as to why he had felt her leg. “I did not feel her leg,” he protested. “If you recall, I felt yours. And a very nice leg it is too, by any standards. Why should I want to titillate a mere woman, when such an alluring specimen of masculinity is so close to me? Women! Give me a good hairy man any day, with fresh unshaven cheeks…”

Which he thought later had been the wrong thing to say. As one, the men in the taverna leapt to their feet. Doors clattered closed; shutters slammed, blocking out the light and barring his escape. Thrusting the girl aside, the man leapt up with a bellow of rage, well over six feet tall, picking up the general mood and a heavy stool at the same time. Zeus found himself standing in a belligerent circle of red-blooded males. “Come on!” he protested. “Where did your bloody reputation for tolerance come from?” He was not answered. “Any chance we could settle this sensibly? No? I thought not. Perhaps next time then. You want to fight? Me? Oh, if you insist.” He sighed at his folly. “I was afraid it would come to this.” Standing up, his head knocked against the rafters. “And I thought Ancient Greece was open and tolerant about these things.”

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“So, if that’s quite settled,” said Hera, “perhaps we could move on to other matters.”

Prometheus rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, sprawled in his throne with glazed eyes. Unsuccessfully, he had attempted to propose the motion that classical architecture and craftsmanship, creating as they do objects of unparalleled beauty, were undemocratic and socially divisive and that a department of modern architecture should be set up to construct square

concrete buildings along the lines of numbers ten and eleven, which would be far more suited to the demands of the forward-looking Theocratic Republic. Hephaestus, whose debating methods resembled those of Neanderthal man, had opposed his proposition. The god of fire and craft, putting his point very forcibly, had left Prometheus to stagger back into his throne rather more quickly than he had vacated it.

She tentatively raised the subject of the budget, only for the irrepressible Prometheus to let slip, with as much nonchalance as he could muster, "Oh, you needn't worry about the money business, Hera. I've got it all sorted."

It would be nice to be able to relate that Hera was touched and delighted by her minister's prompt action in the service of the Republic, to the extent that she promoted him to the post of Minister of the Interior with a massive rise in salary, but this was sadly not the case. Not only was Hera aware that massive salary rises were by decree only awarded by heads of offices to themselves, forbidden by legislation to do otherwise, but she had also nurtured the secret desire that Prometheus would fail in his commission, even at the expense of the Republic, because of the ineffable pleasure it would have given her to have witnessed the consumption of his liver by an unscrupulous avian, despite her aversion to things alimentary. So her reaction to his revelation was less ecstatic than might have been imagined. "Oh, you have, have you?" she asked, her lip slightly curled.

"Yes," said Prometheus, gazing into the middle distance, shading his eyes against the westering sun. "I'd thought of a solution a couple of minutes after you'd gone, but when I came to let you know, you'd

lost yourself in the tablets on your desk and I didn't want to put much money on finding you in there."

"Prometheus," said Hera frostily, "I hate to cut short this gripping expose of the birth of your great idea, but perhaps it would be nice if you were able to tell us what it is before you let us know how you got it."

"Did you know," he said excitedly, leaning forward suddenly, "that's exactly what all the poor, hard working Greek blokes say when their daughter brings home her first illegitimate baby. They go, 'What's that?', and then they shout, 'How did you get it?'. And the number of times I've heard them invoke Zeus in helping them answer the second questions quite amazing…oh yes, my idea, is that what you were talking about?" He beamed brightly at Hera. Her white stole shone dazzlingly back at him as she sat stiff with disapproval, framed against the glowing, piercingly sapphire sky. "Yes," she said. "I believe I was." Only she, Athene and Prometheus himself now appeared to be paying attention to what was going on, which suited Hera as she would have liked to resolve the matter without too much publicity, although she felt a momentary twinge of sadness that the Wardrobe she had so painstakingly constructed should have lost its contents so quickly.

Prometheus became suddenly business-like as sheaves of thin tablets materialised in his hands and floated thence to the laps of the other gods. "There is only one thing more tedious than drawing up a business plan," he said, "and that is listening to it, so I shall be very brief for the sake of my audience. The flaws in our budget lay in the fact that we wished to maintain state control over every venture, despite our promotion of corporate initiatives, whose directors now generate vast

incomes for themselves in addition to their state salaries. Our current levels of taxation cannot feasibly be increased, but at the same time we cannot afford to lessen our outlay on deity salaries and subsidies, since it is through this means that we remain the most powerful body in Olympus. Were sole financial responsibility ceded to the businesses, then we lose centre stage and their power becomes unaccountable, even to us. So it is clear that we must find a lucrative source of income into which we may tap with minimal capital outlay."

The tablets on their laps turned themselves over with a soft clatter of clay. Emblazoned on their obverse were glittering, glazed images, some of smooth beaches under speckless skies, others of soaring white buildings on sea fronts, some filled with intricate architectural plans, and a hallucinogenic icon of a series of golden chariots filled with smiling mortals being pulled through wreathing clouds by several winged horses. The city of the gods was visible in the remote distance.

"Here, then, is my proposal," said Prometheus. "Preparation is well underway, I have a team of mountain god contractors ready to level the nature reserve on the east side and a host of planned promotional and entertainment initiatives in the hands of capable private firms. All that is needed is the approval of the Wardrobe, then we can commence the projected publicity drive on Earth prior to the launch."

"I hate to appear naïve," said Hera, leafing disdainfully through the tablets as though they had contaminated her dress, "but you haven't been terribly clear about what you propose to launch." Hephaestus coughed over a sticky patch with his suspension.

Prometheus smiled. "It is to be the government's answer to private enterprise and the monetary threats it

poses," he said. "Till now, we have left two vast sources of income untapped – ourselves and the mortals who worship us."
"You don't propose to tax them, do you?" asked Artemis, suddenly aroused by the mention of having to sell herself.
"No," he replied. "The plans I have drawn up involve the transformation of much of Olympus into a gigantic tourist attraction. Think of it – the possibilities are limitless. We already treat it as an enormous amusement park ourselves. All I propose is the construction of a number of artificial seas and beaches, along with hotels and resorts, which we shall sell to the mortals through an aggressive marketing campaign. It's guaranteed income. Now you really will be able to take your loved one on a heavenly break. And you can have your honeymoon in paradise, visit the palace of the Goddess of Love…"
"You mean the Deity to Superintend and Oversee Procreational and Amatory Activity," muttered Hera. Prometheus ignored her. "Just imagine – the marketing possibilities are endless. We'll be able to come up with a myriad of idiotic catch phrases. 'Thought you'd never see heaven? Get your slice of afterlife now!' "
"How are going to get them up here?" asked Artemis. "That is a bit of a problem."
"Don't worry. I've spoken to Pegasus, and he and his winged family are willing to become subcontractors for Olympic Airways, pulling regular chariot trains up to Olympus from all the major Greek urban centres. This can only serve to increase the already excellent levels of cooperation and understanding between the ruling gods and the subject mortals. Finally we can enter a true era of open religion and accountable deity."

Hera considered. She was disappointed to find that she could as yet see no serious flaws with the plan. Of course, the prospect of a limitless supply of wealth to sustain the animal she had created would have perhaps inclined her to overlook any serious flaws had they been forthcoming. “Very clever, Prometheus,” she said. “I feel certain that I speak for us all when I say that I am happy for you to continue to oversee the initialisation of this venture, including the marketing campaign on Earth.”

“Construction of the runways is already imminent,” he said. “I have my agents standing by, awaiting only our approval, and a teaser tablet release is waiting to be despatched to Earth.”

Ares nodded, and his ambrosial locks fell down upon his Olympian brow as the thunder rolled through the skies, a sign of his approval. He was very proud of the ambrosial locks, which he had found underneath Zeus’ bed. They could be surreptitiously slipped into one’s coiffure and contained a remote control device that triggered thunderclaps. It was important to remember to remove them before going to bed, as Ares had learned to his cost.

“Lastly,” said Hera, “I come to a matter of some importance. Ares,” she leant over and prodded him in the stomach, whose girth had been increasing exponentially since the beginning of his new sedentary existence, “will you put that thunderbolt down and listen to me. No, don’t try to hide it; I know it’s there. Listen. This might involve you doing something with real ones.”

The President prepared to listen with truculence, a petulant pout doing little to complement his unfortunate features. “I,” said Hera, inserting a prolonged pause for

dramatic effect, “have discovered the whereabouts of Zeus.” Immediately, she felt a change in the air, a sure and gratifying sense of a sudden increase in interest, though ostensibly no difference of expression had touched the faces of her divine audience.

“Really?” asked Athene casually. “Pray enlighten us.”

“Following the diligent and entirely voluntary actions of mortals unwavering in their desire not to incur the displeasure of the gods,” she replied, “ I am able to say with a fair degree of accuracy, having consulted numerous reports of sightings, that Zeus is now in Attica on the way to visit a girl, and may even now be with her.” She settled back to give the others time to come to terms with this piece of news. Prometheus was the first to speak. “Could I…ah…clarify one or two things?” he asked humbly.

“Certainly.”

“I seem to recall that at Delphi, when the proclamation first went out, you let the mortals know that you suspected Zeus of having a, shall we say, a paramour – such a nice word, isn’t it? Much nicer than whore or tart – in Attica.”

“Of course I did,” said Hera in venomous tones. “I’d suspected it for ages, the way he kept on clearing his throat and shuffling his feet and evasively changing the subject whenever Attica or women cropped up in conversation. You’d have thought that a god with his experience of infidelity would have the grace to be subtler. But I could feel her all the time I was with him.”

“Yes, I see,” he pondered. “Didn’t you also say that you suspected Zeus would head for Attica while on Earth?”

“Indeed. Were you a super animated sex organ like my ex-husband you would find your interests in life similarly limited.”

“So you knew he had a girl in Attica and would visit her?”
“Precisely.”
Prometheus paused, his brow corrugated. With his face an innocent mask, free from the least trace of guile or cunning machination, he said, “So you haven’t actually found out anything we didn’t already know?”
Hera cast Prometheus a look before which the walls of Troy might have crumbled to dusty fragments, at which even Heracles might have quailed. Ares knew that look very well – many times in his youth had he been on the wrong end of such terrible glares as might have laid low the bastions of Knossos or Mycenae, especially when his mother had caught him stealing ambrosia from the cupboard. Prometheus merely dodged and the look struck the seats on the opposite side of the court, splintering the stone. Hera, who had tried to revise her opinion of Prometheus after his selfless campaigning in the Republican cause that morning, re-revised it accordingly.
“You are mistaken, Prometheus,” she indicated in terms of extreme politeness, thus contriving to sound extremely rude. “I am positive that the suspect who has been brought to my attention is Zeus himself. Why? For the very reason that I cannot find him, cannot trace him, cannot pinpoint his exact position directly and can only do so through a process of triangulating phenomena he creates. All of which are entirely consistent with the effects of the system he developed on his diabolical machine.”
“So you are convinced this is Zeus because you can’t see him, and have no evidence of his existence apart from the word of a few mortals who were probably under the influence of Dionysus? I don’t wasn’t to spoil

your fun, but have you ever thought that if you can't see something it's because there's nothing there?"
"Prometheus," said Hera. "Are you laughing at me?"
"No," he said. "I have always been exceedingly good at controlling my emotions."

Sitting as close to him as she was, Athene became aware of a change in Prometheus' thoughts, and felt the grey-green tinge of panic in his mind. It could only be that he believed Hera's words, that this was the sour wine mingling with the sweetness of his plan that had been working so well hitherto. His gadfly words could do little to trouble her, royally upright, as she sneered down at him from the height of her superior breeding, being assisted by the height of her throne. "Zeus is in Attica, Prometheus," she said. "And don't think I am about to tell you his exact position. It might be suggested that the unilateral action of any Wardrobe member in making contact with him would constitute an act of high treason and leave the perpetrator exposed to the severest penalties. Should there be those of you who harbour sympathies for the offender, be advised that you are under continual surveillance by the OPD, who will not take kindly to unsanctioned action. I do not wish Zeus to leave the borders of Attica without my permission. I shall cast him into chains, drag him to Olympus and then…"
"Then?" asked Hephaestus, who seldom forgot that he owed his limp to his father.
"Then, before he takes up his place in Tartarus, I shall allow myself to be ravished by a multitude of gods, forcing him to watch."
"Knowing Zeus, he'd probably enjoy it," muttered Prometheus.

“But it is for his capture that you will be required, Ares, you and Apollo, if we can persuade him to speak to us again.”
“Really!” enthused Ares. “ What can I do?”
“It will involve the deaths of many.”
“I’ve always liked that.”

A distant and noble expression passed over Hera’s face, as one worn into the marble of graven kings, sniffing with overweening pride at the beings of mere flesh and blood that scurry beneath them. “Desperate measures,” she said sententiously, “call for bloody and reprehensible solutions. Let us remember that we are gods – as wanton boys to flies are we to the mortals; we kill them for our sport. And especially if they dare to help one bound for the Underworld. I want Zeus, and I do not care if Mycenaean civilization is his price. I always regarded it as a lost cause anyhow, even though they did rid me of the Trojans. So listen, Ares.”

Ares obeyed. So did the Minutes, and the other Wardrobe Ministers. In the late afternoon torpor, the air trembled; the lazy, drowsing warmth of the sun idled down to the world’s rim, whispering of gloaming sleep beneath the olives, the arid crackle of parched grass beneath the feet, the unremitting, hypnotic whine of the cicadas. But no ear in the Court listened to its words.
“Ares,” said Hera, “You and Apollo are to be sent down to Earth and are to move like gods of death through Attica. Leave no village standing once you have searched therein. Watch always for Zeus – he is frozen in the form we know too well. Watch for his escape; use your eyes, as your minds shall be unable to perceive him. Take fire into Attica, Ares, let we who remain here in heaven hear the crack of your thunderbolt, the cries of woman and child, the shouts of men who arm

themselves with gleaming bronze – all in vain against the wrath of the gods. If Zeus is there, he must come to the aid of this girl; if he is even now hiding in some Attic hut, watch for him escaping with her under his wing. Many there are who might seem to be our enemy – let this not trouble you. Take them all, Ares, one by one. Take them all, for one of them cannot die. He you cannot slay, and it is he whom we desire."

Ares shifted on the Air Throne. Thunderbolts danced in delicate flickers about his hands as stormcloud twisted unbidden towards his shadowed brows, coiling weightily on his shoulders.

"Let those storm clouds gather over Attica, Ares, for you now are the Cloud-Gatherer, Zeus but a fallen leaf before your tempest. Yes, let even Athens fall in fire so long as we drive the vermin from his den. Burn his hive and the bee will fly. The mountain gods will ring Attica, and no road will lie open to him - it is then that you must be at hand, to see him, capture him, and know the fulfilment of your victory over your father. Zeus is in Attica, Ares, but soon must lie in Tartarus."

Athene sat motionless, staring with heedless, sightless eyes, while Hera spoke. Suddenly the golden light and burnished sky shimmered in the silver of her tears. Attica, her beloved Attica. Already she heard the fire, felt the shaking earth and the lament for the slain rising from a thousand throats. In a moment she was on her feet.

"Hera," she said, grasping her aegis tightly, "be it as you have said, but you shall then find me on the borders of Attica to defend my land I have loved. How dare you presume to lay waste its demes, slay its people, burn its farms? Did you expect me to acquiesce? Ares," she turned scornfully to him, "devastate Attica if you will,

yet you shall not harm my holy city of Athens. On the Acropolis shall I stand, and we shall see who falls first, you or I. And I should not hope that you might acquit yourself any better than you did upon the wide plains before Troy, where we came to blows when the gods went to war, and I cast you down before me in the dust. Attica is my country, O Hera. Retract your order, or you shall see war between the gods fought once more on Earth."

The air sizzled between their locked gazes. "My order stands," said Hera. "Zeus must be apprehended. To do any less would be to betray the Republic and all it represents."

"You're being criminally irrational," Prometheus burst out. "You can't blow into Attica and kill everyone who fits Zeus' description."

"Why not? They are mortal and expendable. It is the only way."

"You're exploiting this situation on a personal self-promoting vendetta to strengthen your hold over this already totalitarian democracy. It's contrary to the good of the Republic and will end up destroying it."

"Or those who support the enemy," said Hera implacably. "This Republic faces no greater threat than the machinations of Zeus and his supporters. Take care that we do not find you are one of them."

"You know as well as I do that he's completely powerless and never coming back," he flailed desperately. She merely smiled slightly and raised one supercilious eyebrow. That they shared this secret, she knew; and knew also that no other would believe it. "Is that so?" she replied.

An explosion of noise erupted from somewhere beneath them. Hastening to the edge of the roof,

Prometheus looked down to see the entire Olympic Square obscured by a seething tide of gods, shouting, crying out and generally ensuring that not a word was discernable. A number of them bore banners. It was with extreme gratification and satisfaction with his own genius that Prometheus noted one of the slogans stretched between two poles: "A Second Chamber This Second! Vote Enipeus for President." The Helios had done its job; Athene's words had been taken to heart.

"Hera," he said, turning to her, "there are some people downstairs who want to see us."

*

It was a beautiful evening. In the west, a milky sliver of moon followed close on the heels of the vanished sun, which still cast a faint glow upon the fading dome of the sky, deepening now in the east to a mellow darkness. Above the farmers, the olive tree shifted occasionally in airs so sluggish their motion was almost imperceptible. A large wine jar, blackened through repeated contact with loving but unwashed hands, stood in the dust. Around it were grouped a number of villagers and farmers, meditatively consuming its contents. Several of them had clubs, and one or two knives were in evidence. Their faces proclaimed that they were men well satisfied with their present lot. Muffled screams and thuds drifted from the direction of the tavern, but the doors and shutters along the veranda remained stubbornly closed.

"It's a long time since we had a proper fight," reflected one.

"Mmmm," agreed another. "Wasn't it when Taki's cousin accused Strabo's niece of sending her goats into Taki's vineyard just before the grapes were due?"

“I thought Taki’s mother’s stepfather had accused Strabo’s brother-in-law of picking their olives,” interrupted someone else.

The first speaker waved a dismissive hand. “I can’t remember. But that isn’t important. It will be nice to spit insults at each other again…” his eyes misted over, “… the good old days, when we used to race through the olives chasing each other with sticks…no one can prolong a quarrel properly any more. One week, two weeks, and then poof! It’s over.”

“I forget who won, Taki or Strabo?” asked the second man. From the inn came a series of rapidly repeated thumps, as of a head being employed to test the percussional possibilities of a table. Several farmers winced.

“I don’t think they ever knew themselves,” mused the first. “They both died, you see. It was fairly peaceful – I saw it myself – beginning with abuse hurled through the olive groves, then the advance, branches in hand…unfortunately they each gave the other a fatal injury, so we had to call it a draw. A pity,” he conceded. “We hadn’t really got into the swing of things before it was over.”

He looked hopefully towards the taverna, whose shutters were vibrating. The shouts and violence of the blows had lessened in volume, but even so, a body burst through a pair of shutters with a splintering crash and thudded limply into their midst. The farmers leant forwards to examine it, critically chewing their moustaches and regarding it with interested eyes. “Humph!” said one. “Ixenes! Not one of our best, may I say.” He prodded the inert young man with his club. Both eyes were swollen, his neck a delicate purple hue, and his bleeding mouth fixed in a beatific smile. “It’ll

be our turn soon," said another with relish. "I can't wait till they come out here to finish it off. Andreas was right – you know it's three whole weeks since our last little disagreement? I hope the boys in there leave some of that bloke for us to finish up…"

At this point, perfectly on cue, the door to the tavern opened. From the darkness of its interior moved a darker shape, into the twilight, drawing itself slowly upright. The newcomer feigned surprise at seeing the huddled group of expectant farmers. "Oh, good evening," he said warmly. "I'm terribly sorry, did we leave you out? You must forgive us." He looked back into the tavern, "I don't think anyone in there is still interested in prolonging hostilities this evening," he continued. "I had quite a long talk with them, and they all agreed that they were in the wrong and we'd say no more about it. Though I had to be a little emphatic with one or two of them. I must say you do have a most novel way of welcoming strangers in Dekalia – quite an original interpretation of Zeus' hospitality laws, but I suppose that since he's been deposed you won't need to bother with those either. Well, I'm afraid I must be leaving you – duty calls, and all that – I hope you have a pleasant evening." With that the tall, bowed figure shuffled away into the dusk, limping slightly, pausing only to remove a large spear that had lodged itself beneath his rib cage, and leaving behind him a congregation of bemused and bewildered men. Slowly, and with considerable caution, they proceeded to the taverna.

Within, the bar put up a passing imitation of a piece of twentieth century art, in which the remains of shattered tables, broken furniture and drinking vessels had been decorated with dozen of prone, motionless

human forms, twisted into positions that the owners of the human forms would no doubt regret having occupied when they awoke. One can imagine such a display in a Bankside gallery, with a title like "Match of the Day". The girl, inadvertently the cause of the misunderstanding, clung to the bar, her mouth wide with shock, while the barman contemplated the fragmented wreckage with classical resignation. Cruelly disappointed in their anticipation, the farmers gazed in horror at the chaos.

"Did…did that fellow do this?" whispered one. "He fought all of them?"

The barman nodded. "Some kind of a god, I reckon," he said laconically. "Leastways, I know he's immortal, 'cos he didn't notice the spear someone stuck through his ribs for at least ten minutes. You know, that's the fourth god I've had in my bar, and each time something terrible has happened. No respect for property or persons, that's their problem. Great big vines going through the roof and tearing the walls to pieces last year when that joker Dionysus dropped in, then bloody heads with snakes plonked on the bar and scaring the customers…"

"But wasn't Euxitheus in here?" asked another in a hushed voice. "I wouldn't fight him for anything."

"Where is he?"

Nodding towards the far wall, the barman said, "Over there. The wall."

The farmers materialised by the wall. "Can't see him!" protested one.

"He's over there all right," said the barman gloomily. "Good right arm that chap had, I must say."

Any biologist will be able to tell you that the eye perceives objects by separating them from their

background. As it was, it would have proved impossible to separate Euxitheus from his background without specialised surgical tools, so it took some time to find him.

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Two tetradrachm coins bounced merrily away through the dust of the roadway, tumbling to a halt in a clump of grass bordering its whitened surface. Zeus plodded dolefully along beneath the leaning shoulders of the olive trees on the slope at his right and meditated on the follies of sex and materialism. This religious conversion experience was in no small part due to his failures on recent occasions – twice, now, when embroiled with a member of the fairer sex, he had encountered a hostile and fundamentalist reaction from all those privy to the acts. A long immortality of celibacy, cold baths, frustration and bulging forearms seemed to open bleakly before him, white and empty as the path he followed as it twisted up its hill. Not only had the remnant of his pride been significantly bruised, but he had also been beaten all over, someone else had kicked him very hard on the ankle and another inconsiderate party had spitted him with a spear, quite without any thought of the painful consequences of his rash deed, either for the victim or himself. Zeus rebuked himself for his stupidity. Quite apart from wrecking that poor man's tavern and having made himself stunningly conspicuous, he was fairly sure that he had accidentally been involved in sending Euxitheus to a happier hunting ground, which for him would probably bristle with liana-bearing trees and be heavily populated with female members of the lower primate orders. Guilt and remorse were not emotions that Zeus often experienced, and so he was unable to define the uneasiness he felt as

he reflected on the ironies of arriving at Melitta's house so soon after such an embarrassing debacle. Poor girl – the mortals had a word for what he had done, didn't they? Had he been unfaithful?

Zeus stopped, real fear clouding his vision. Before, such a thought would not have been granted elbowroom in his brain. The only explanation was that terribly, inevitably, he was beginning to think like a mortal. Infidelity was not an immortal concept – more of an immortal habit, albeit one practiced largely unconsciously but with a high degree of success. Yes, he felt a deep unease about the effects his involvement might have on Melitta, wanted to whisk her away to safety and protect her from harm, but was she not one of a series? Zeus had hitherto always been inclined to redecorate his bedroom – could there be any chance that he had found a pattern that suited him?

Melitta's face, which he had not seen for many weeks, suddenly appeared before him, pale in the faint light of the stars, cast over the arid firmament like silver sand on a sable pelt. Vainly he struggled against the human emotion uncoiling inside himself – every human thought, he knew, bound him ever closer to the ways of earth and lessened whatever godhead he had left. But he surrendered; knew also that he had come not for an ideal, for something intangible, remote, the desire to avert Semele's fate, and Callisto's, but for her. When he opened his eyes, the vision remained, motionless before him. Slightly perplexed at the apparition's persistence, he started forwards, only to find that the reason for its refusal to dissolve into a dew was that it was the thing itself – or in this case, the girl herself. Zeus stumbled over to her and picked her up with relief.

“About time, too,” said Melitta. “And where the hell do you think *you’ve* been?”

Part Three

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport." (*King Lear*, William Shakespeare)

μωραινουσι Κυριοι ον βοθλεσαι απολεσειν
"Those the Gods are about to destroy, they first drive mad"
(Greek proverb)

Chapter Eleven

Enipeus swam with a blissful intoxication as the shoulders of the crowd buoyed him aloft. The past few days had been full of pleasant surprises, suppressing his lurking fear that there might be an unpleasant one ahead to make up for them. At the suggestion of the mysterious conspirator, he and Kithairon had persuaded the owners of *The Helios* to part with their publication for virtually nothing, though the river suspected that the simplicity of the transaction owed more to the presence of the mountain than to his own bargaining skills. Kithairon, he was finding, invariably lent weight to an argument.

The relaunched *Helios* had amassed vast and sudden wealth for its new owners, which, together with the increased earnings of the other business ventures advertised in the tablet, had left the revolution very well off indeed.

Seeking the most effective and surreptitious means to convey their revolutionary message, Enipeus' editors discovered that when they destabilised the emotions of the reader, the innocent victim assimilated the message

all but unconsciously. So the scheming editors had devised the fiendishly cunning plan of positioning the most subversive slogans beside those pictures most likely to create this instability, of which there were more than a few; and the reading public of Olympus had been assailed by seditious catchphrases sandwiched between glistening bosoms and oiled thighs.

Perhaps this power had originally been unconscious, unplanned, but now discovered it was the lever with which Aristotle could have moved the world, had he been able to find an immovable place to stand far enough away. Was he abusing the power of the words and the women? Enipeus hoped not, but in the enlightened view of the gods, power has always been a self-excusing commodity.

And the success of his political rally had exceeded all his expectations. Hardly had he begun to speak to the thronged demigods when they seized him and surged towards the palace, intent on revolution, as the mountains circled away with Heracles. Enipeus felt a sneaking suspicion that the demigods' eagerness to get away had been in direct proportion to their desire for him to stop talking, but seeing as they were doing precisely what he wanted he was prepared to overlook this slight to his oratorical prowess.

A small cloud floated from the pediment high above the square. Perched on its billowing surface were Ares and his mother. Immediately a fresh cacophony confronted them. Ares quietened them by shouting very loudly and gesturing menacingly with his thunderbolt. "What do you want?" he asked peevishly when the noise had subsided.

“Yes, what in Tartarus do you want?” added Hera, in case they had not understood. She was annoyed that a very promising quarrel had been interrupted.
“We claim our divine rights!” cried a voice.
“Liberty! Equality! Fraternity! Sorority! Higher salaries, bigger shops, shorter hours!”
“We are the Olympic Freedom Party.”
“The People’s voice is ignored!” roared another corner of the Square. “Their words are never heard.”
“Your point being?” asked Hera, looking at them distastefully.
Enipeus yelled, “The people want representatives in the Wardrobe! Or…” his voice trembled as he received the full benefit of one of Hera’s choicest glares, “if there’s no room in the Wardrobe, perhaps a very small cupboard would do…”
“But *we* are your representatives in the Wardrobe,” said Hera. “We have your best interests at heart.”
“We really wanted representatives who are People, if you see what I mean,” said Enipeus faintly. He was beginning to regret his boldness, for the thunderbolt poised in Ares’ hand did not appear particularly accommodating, as thunderbolts go.

“You mean to say,” said Hera, incredulity and scorn dripping from her words, “that you believe the People should help us, your chosen representatives, to govern Olympus? What can mere people know of the trials of our calling, of the great personal sacrifices our positions demand? What do the people know of ruling?”
“Not much,” conceded a river god. “But there are a lot of us, and we know a lot about fighting.”

Hera performed a swift calculation. There were perhaps several hundred demigods in the Square, and she could see that the ratio of Wardrobe members to

demigods was not in her favour, especially as at least two of the Wardrobe ministers would probably change sides. It was odd, she thought, that Zeus had never been faced with this problem.

"You want to *fight?*" she equivocated.

A voice came from above her, from the edge of the palace pediment. "We didn't really want to," it said, "although I quite enjoyed it while I was alive, but we talked it over and decided that the desires of the many should override those of the few. I believe this is morally defensible, though I haven't checked it with Athene." It was Heracles. His colossal, lion-pelted frame stood black against the pale sky. He had some mountains with him.

Alongside him, looming ponderously into view like the rising Atlas as Africa grinds relentless into Europe, rose at least four mountain ranges, silent and poised. It is possible for mountains to assume great grandeur and beauty – misty blue with distance, or sharply outlined in the sun, russet flanks glowing with evening warmth, fading into the harsh magnificence of stony peaks. These mountains were not of that ilk. These were mountains flying out of the mist towards a doomed aeroplane.

Hera considered her options. Floating on a small cloud between five hundred mountains and as many other hostile demigods is not the finest of locations from which to deliver a crowd-swaying oration. It is at such times that our true strength of character is shown. At such a time the bold and gallant hero laughs in the face of the mob, which is often the sign for the mob to kick in the teeth of the bold and gallant hero. Despite her fury, Hera had lost none of her sense. How dare these commoners order her, or presume they had a right to?

How, more to the point, was she to stop them? She tried to speak twice, and failed. Eventually she said, “You did say you were going to fight, didn’t you?”
“We think so,” said Heracles. “Pelion and I came up with a very nice little ditty, along the lines of, ‘You’ve got to fight, for your right to be a member of the party…’ Which you repeat several times, varying a few words here and there…”
“I was telling Heracles about anaphora and the repetition of key phrases for effect,” said Prometheus, peering over the pediment. “He proved an able learner.”
“The last line does not scan very well,” apologised Heracles, “but Pelion is only a beginner.”
“So if I were to discount your plea,” said Hera, choosing her words with care, “you would dare to take arms against the Olympians?”
“There aren’t any Olympians any more, Hera,” Prometheus reminded her in a piercing whisper. “All equal now, remember?” He shouted out across the Square. “Gracious People of Olympus, readers of *The Helios*, disciples of Heracles and the composers of nifty little war chants, how about putting up your hands if you think you’re right and we misguided Wardrobe Ministers are wrong?”
At their response, he leaned down towards Hera. “What do you call one of these things?” he asked. “It’s…damn, what’s the word…Ah, yes! It’s a majority vote, isn’t it?”

*

Deep whirring noises emanated from within the mud brick house before which Zeus and Melitta sat, followed by a prolonged sigh like the crumple of greedy waves on a pebbly beach. “So what kept you?” asked Melitta,

swinging one foot in the dust and looking away to her left.
“I’ve been a little busy these last few days,” admitted Zeus.
“What, answering prayers and making it rain?” He didn’t recognise the tincture of condescension in her voice.
“Yes, sort of.”
There was a short silence.
“My father’s not at all pleased with me,” she said.
“Why? Because of me?”
“Because of your prolonged absence after I arranged supper with him. For which you never turned up. And he doesn’t believe you’re a god either. He says that’s no reason to have illegitimate children.”
“We often get blamed for illegitimate children.”
“Quite rightly too, from what I’ve heard,” said the girl archly. “I hope you haven’t been feathering up any other young ladies while you’ve been gone.”

Zeus thought of Io, Aphrodite and the girl in Dekalia. “No,” he said. He consoled himself with the reflection that “feathering up” wasn’t an adequate description for any of these encounters.
“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re like, Zeus,” she said. “When I first saw you at Dimitrios’ party you had three Megarians hanging off you. You only spoke to me after they’d gone home.”

She had left the room quietly while his laughter bubbled in the evening air, and only returned to lean against an unyielding bole as though twisted or crippled by some force she could not overcome. And when at last he had strolled up to her, warm and satisfied, glorying in his enjoyment of the present, he had noticed her sadness and been momentarily dismayed, perplexed

as to why she avoided his gaze or seemed so withdrawn behind a veil that she seemed not to have the courage to relinquish. And when he had expressed his wish to speak to her, her only reply had been, “That’s a surprise.”

It had been a greater shock to him than he realised at the time. Hitherto Zeus had circled through the world like a low-pressure cell tossed on the rearing backs of his winds, alighting where he pleased to conquer whom he chose. His affections had been slight, and for the most part bestowed with no thought of reciprocation. Never had he dreamed that those whom his passing hand caressed might have felt what he could not feel for them. Only now did he face a power of whose existence he had not been entirely aware, and a bitterness rose in his mouth as he saw as they might see. Hope raised high and confounded, trust undercut by betrayal, unrequited and irrational adoration undermined, fruitless self-recrimination at a senseless affection. Fleetingly he had glimpsed this power, which he had been conscious neither of possessing nor abusing, and for a transient moment the all-knowing god, to whom all human minds were thought open, shifted from sympathy to empathy.

So his friendship with Melitta had been born firstly out of sorrow at his unwitting cruelty to one he might formerly have lain with and forsaken. Despite himself, despite the mind that had looked upon a thousand years as but a single afternoon and seen the plethora of human lives from an alien perspective, he found himself drawn back to her, a ripple in the stream, one stationary moment in the flowing gulf of time, one soul amid the shadows, which themselves were formed of souls. Across her face, through the heaviness of her coiled hair, stole the ghosts of Callisto and Semele, eloquent

with his errors and the destruction wrought by his desires. Forgetful of his fallen state, Zeus gazed at her with his otherworldly eyes, only to meet the stifling black wall of blindness that now confronted every flicker of his shuttered godhead. He could know no more than a mortal of their fate together, of the distance their paths were entwined.

"I told Katerina about you, and she said that god or no god, I should keep you in hand," she said. "If you go chasing after other girls you know what you'll get."

"Very fit?" suggested Zeus.

The evening air split with the crisp crack of her palm on his face. "No, one of them," she said primly.

Zeus blinked, perplexed. In his long career he had never before been successfully slapped, usually because he had never returned to those who might have had cause to try. Initially he felt annoyed. "Do you know who you've just slapped?" he asked. "Zeus the Cloud Gatherer, Compeller of Storms and King and Father of Gods and Men."

"Yes," she agreed. "You just behave yourself, or I'll let the gods and men know a few things you might want kept private." She gave him the benefit of a very pretty smile. "Don't come kinging and godding it over me. I've never seen you looking anything like a god, even though you do have very big muscles."

"That's because my divine splendour is too much for mortal eyes to look upon," said Zeus hastily. "I'd stick with the muscles if you value your skin."

"My father was quite looking forward to the divine splendour," said Melitta, disappointed. "He said it was the true test of whether you were a god or not."

“I’m afraid the divine splendour’s quite out of the question,” said Zeus truthfully. “He’ll have to take my word for it.”
“You can meet each other after breakfast tomorrow,” she said. “Dad’s never in a terribly good mood before he’s eaten. His PMT’s very bad then.”

Zeus considered the latter remark carefully, from a number of angles. There seemed to him to be something fundamentally wrong with it. Eventually he said, “Did you say PMT?”
“Yes,” replied Melitta. “The apothecary says the reason it gets so bad in the mornings is the three-hour wait between breakfast and his small hour snack. I thought pre-meal tension was quite common,” she ended accusingly.

Zeus rose to the occasion. “I’m sure your father and I shall get on splendidly.”
“His greatest wish is that he should see a banana fudge cake descending to his table from heaven before he dies,” said Melitta. “Is there any chance you could oblige?”

*

It had penetrated the usually impermeable mind of Ares that his position as President of the Theocratic Republic appeared to be in some jeopardy. All these shouting people, he felt sure, had strong views on the subject, which they were attempting to air at the expense of everyone else’s. Though he didn’t much care for the title of President he was most attached to the epithets of Cloud Gatherer and Storm Compeller, which he had appropriated for his own use after their abandonment by their previous tenant. More than these, more than power, riches and fame, the thunderbolts called to him; his father’s shiny playthings that he had

never had the opportunity to touch. No one was about to make him let them go, unless he was forced to throw them.

He shouted this very loudly, waving one as he did so. In the subsequent silence, gods began to drift casually away from his immediate vicinity, fanning out into the further corners of the square. Those closest to the cloud obviously felt that those in the comparative safety of the corners weren't moving smartly enough, and tried eagerly to fight and push their way through to confer with these people and ask them to hurry up.

Hera seized her moment. "Now!" she hissed to Ares. "Now we've got them on the hip! Tell them it's thunderbolts all round if they don't stand down." And Ares opened his mouth to obey.

To Athene and Prometheus, watching this critical moment in their carefully controlled strategy with apprehension, it came as a blinding revelation that it was too late for them or any other god to do anything about it. Crushed and humbled, they stood open-mouthed as the terrible realisation dawned; the dazzling realisation of a playwright, who believing he controls the destinies of those he has created, finds that he is but a character in another play that a greater author has penned.

The texture of the gloaming light altered. A flash illuminated the darkening sky as though some mighty hand had turned on the stage lights. Slowly and with a sense of overwhelming inevitability, the gods felt a sightless presence descending upon their city like a lowering cloud. Stifling, it pressed closer and closer, sinking to the very roots of the city, absorbing them into its being. There was an audible click, and the gods blinked in surprise. Nothing had changed, it seemed.

Only Prometheus and Athene noticed the difference in the shade of the evening light, now clearer, sharper, harder and artificial. And only they seemed to have felt the thunderous onslaught on their thoughts as some brooding entity sought to batter its way in to take possession of their minds.

Then Ares spoke, and they knew he had felt it too.

Intending to say what Hera ordered, to remonstrate with the crowd, pointing out exactly where their points of view differed and why his was correct, the words somehow failed to make the transition between brain and lips, emerging in a wholly altered form. “Gracious Theocrats of Olympus,” he said, “as the only theocratically elected member of the Wardrobe, I applaud you on your perspicacity. It is my wish, as it is yours, that you immediately select members of your own to represent you in the Wardrobe, until the day when even that august body may cede its power to the People of Olympus as a whole. For let us remember that only by losing ourselves can we know true freedom.”

Ares struggled to say something else, but his mouth would not obey. For her part, Hera fought like a mountain seized in earthquake throes to bend her wayward lips back to her will. She tried to scream her displeasure, tried to denounce their appeal, and failed. A stronger power was upon her. Impotent, she watched as the dazed people pushed forward their candidates, somewhat suspicious at their painless success in achieving their request, despite the exorbitant bribes with which Enipeus and Kithairon had secured their support. And she found she was able to do no more than smile sweetly at them while welcoming them to the ranks of the illustrious Wardrobe. And through the numbing clouds dulling her mind sliced a sliver of fear;

and horror at the unnamed terror she had created. Words broke from her lips that she had no desire to voice. As though from a great distance, Hera saw herself, a character mindlessly reciting a script penned by an artful and inimical hand. Soon she felt barely conscious that the words were not hers, and the embers of her fiery spirit realised that her very being was to be assimilated. The form, the outer shell, would remain distinct and apart, but identicality of mind was but a breath away. Dimly she felt a thousand other minds clustering together, confused and barely aware of what was happening, now separated from each other by the thinnest of eggshell walls. Soon the walls would crack and the greyness would rush in…

And all the while her outer self smiled graciously, welcoming the new members to the Wardrobe, accompanied by cheers and applause…there sat Enipeus, Pelion, Kalea, Kithairon, Silenus, Arcadia, Daphne and Lacedaimonia, arrayed in robes of office; those common gods whose presence outraged her but whom he could not expel, for she had wrought what put them there.

Deep within the palace vaults Prometheus reeled, head in hands. "Oh Earth," he groaned. "Oh great mother of the gods, what have I done?"

"What in Hades' name *was* that?" asked Aphrodite. Despite being late for her first meeting in weeks, she had managed to catch up with them on their way through the palace. Duller of eye, her sheen of skin a memory, her starker cheekbones spoke far more clearly of the nature of her recent experiences than she did. To have been in the same room as Poseidon while he ravished a young nymph would have been bad enough, but to have been in the same body was unspeakable.

Her hair was for once wild and disarrayed, clothes flung carelessly onto her perfect curves, fluttering aimlessly.

"It wasn't anything Ares did, was it?" asked Athene, white-faced and trembling. Every so often she shook her head slightly, as though to rid it of the oppressive, amorphous mass that had borne down upon it. In the shadows loomed the vast unhappy shape of Heracles, beside a drowsy Dionysus, speaking in tones that rumbled with worry.

"My idea appears to have been a little too successful," said Prometheus wretchedly. "I am afraid we have seen the last of the Theocratic Republic as we know it."

"That was your idea, I thought," said Athene. "I thought you abhorred it. Or the fact that it wasn't ruled by you," she added in an undertone.

Prometheus shot her a sharp glance, shaking his head. "All we did was make it easier for the pattern to assert itself," he said. "I…I thought that if Ares and Hera lost their stranglehold, with us and with the people, we might have taken control, to act rationally. But trying to overthrow them through the People, through Enipeus and the press…was stupid and blind. Hera had already given Ploutokratia too much of a toehold. I should have seen that a true theocracy could never have prevailed in such an atmosphere. I have been criminally foolish.

"You all felt her, didn't you? Settling down into minds already fully prepared for her? We have seen how mighty Argurion and the urge to worship him has become. Oh Tartarus, what a mess I have made. The oligarchy is doomed and the Fates know what is in store for us now. We've tipped the balance of democracy too far, and soon it will pass away altogether. Then prepare to reap a tyranny worse than the rule of Cronos – worse, for the very reason it is invisible"

“Do you mean that the gods themselves are in thrall to this…this thing, this phantom that may be no more than a figment of your imagination?” asked an incredulous Aphrodite. “All your delightful stories about this lady and her disreputable child are too fascinating, but do you really want to believe them?”

“We created the present situation in Olympus,” said Athene. “Or thought we did. Hera used freedom as a bait to exploit the people in an attempt to overthrow Zeus, and I’m afraid we haven’t been exactly scrupulous ourselves since then. We thought we could use Enipeus and his friends to get rid of Hera, when our own Wardrobe failed to rebel against her. But I think something else is using the demigods now… This Ploutokratia may not even be a sentient force, but she’s stronger than I am, than you as well. And I don’t feel that she has our best interests at heart, despite what her press office might say.”

“It’s worse than that,” said the ever-cheerful Prometheus. “Once we become excessively committed to a particular mode of thought, our freedom’s immediately compromised, bound by the system we have created. And this is a freedom of crucial importance, our last line of defence, as it were. Without it we cannot begin to compensate for the loss of other freedoms.”

“We shall soon be unable to act unless in accordance with her wishes,” said Athene sententiously. Aphrodite sighed. “Now that you’ve finished your helpful plot recap, do you think you can stop reading from your script?” she asked. “It’s as though you’re half way through a poor play.”

“I wish I could audition for a funny part, that’s all,” said Prometheus morosely. “Because I’m not enjoying this one any more.”

*

Early morning shadows, long and emaciated, streaked the veranda floor. Above the creaking table spread a branch of a nearby tree, lazily extended with immense condescension as a covering for those who chose to breakfast there. The light was still crisp and pale gold, the milky blue sky as yet untouched by the blinding heat that would coat its surface later in the day. Aimlessly, one or two exploratory butterflies hopped flickering from flower to flower, where splashes of colour showed in the grass. From far down the hill and out of sight, the plaintive cry of a disgruntled donkey drifted up to the house. Megaventris, father of Melitta and proud possessor of all he surveyed, was at breakfast. He intended to remain there for some considerable time.

Life, he considered, had been treating him and his daughter particularly well. Now that he was unable to work in the fields for personal reasons, all the estate’s labour lay in the capable hands of his three freedmen, whose diligence provided both themselves and their employer with an ample living. Yes, thought Megaventris, life could have little more to offer beyond a pinch of salt here and there.

He treated his daughter to a genial smile when she appeared from the house. On this beautiful morning, he felt it his duty to imbue her with the same sense of contentment that filled him, seeing as he had begun his breakfast two hours earlier and was now in an ebullient mood. “Good morning, father,” she said nervously. He replied that it was indeed a good morning, as during the

course of his life he had been fortunate enough to study a great many and so was well placed to give judgement on the specimen before them. “There’s a visitor, father.”

“Bring him on, bring him on!” said Megaventris expansively. “Can’t let the poor fellow starve. Perhaps I’ll have a bite or two to keep him company while he’s at it.”

Melitta hesitated. “He’s Zeus, father. Make sure you’re on your best behaviour. I don’t want you scaring him. And please don’t make knowing sexual remarks and wink at me over his shoulder.”

“Oh! Oh ho ho ho!” cried Megaventris. “The boyfriend, is it? I always enjoy them – they do squirm so when I talk about bedsprings.” He gave a sly grin on seeing his daughter’s compressed lips. “The boyfriend! That changes things.”

“Does it?”

“Yes – you’ll have to bring out some more buckwheat cakes and honey, dear. I definitely must make sure this young man is a healthy eater.”

Melitta withdrew into the house and prodded Zeus, who emerged with bowed head from the doorway where he had been skulking.

“Good morning, sir,” he said.

“Hello there,” greeted Megaventris, his rich voice booming enthusiastically. “How d’you do? I don’t believe we’ve met before. Clearly you didn’t have the guts.” He laughed hugely. “Sorry I can’t say the same for myself.”

“No, we haven’t,” said Zeus, looking at him admiringly. “I’m sure I should have remembered if we had.” Although he had glimpsed Melitta’s father before, at what he now realised must have been a considerable

distance, this was his first close encounter. It was a memorable experience.

It has been said that inside every fat man there is a thin man trying to get out. Inside Megaventris there was easily room for half a dozen thin men, and probably several fat men as well, along with their wives and children and quite possibly a little elbowroom for other more distant relations. To call him fat maligned the overweening majesty of his girth and gave no true conception of his magnificent size. His mighty belly was so far round that, like the earth itself, it appeared to be flat. On top of this glorious monument to gastronomic achievement was perched, rather incongruously, a head crowned with thick black curls. From the depths of his beard radiated a smile of high wattage and irrepressible cheerfulness. His eyes were those of a man who has few worries and even fewer feelings of remorse.

"Sit down, stranger, and satisfy your hunger and thirst," he said. "Tell me your name and ancestry later. But first let us pour a libation to your namesake, Zeus the Thunderer, king of the Immortal gods, who watches over visitors and suppliants most of all."

Zeus started. "You're still pouring libations to him?" he said.

"Of course. Though perhaps not with the finest wine…" Megaventris winced slightly. "I always thought he'd be satisfied with a less superior vintage. At any rate, he doesn't seem to have noticed yet. Why do you ask?"

"Because I thought there had been some changes in Olympus," ventured Zeus. "I had heard that Zeus was no longer supreme among the Immortals."

Megaventris waved a large and disinterested hand. With it he appeared to flick and sweep away the voice of

change, the calls for reform, and the radical zealot, to discover beneath this detritus whatever it is that gives comfort in its continuity.

"I have not heard that," he said. "What are these changes but figments of the outside world? Why should we let them affect us? In his mind a man makes his own world, so if I choose not to see change then for me it doesn't exist. Why set such store by what goes on with other people?" He gave a mischievous smile. "I have always been rather more interested in the inner man."

Zeus began his breakfast with the buckwheat cakes, which were excellent. Those of particular merit were selected by his host and pressed forward for him to examine the quality of the light on their delicate crusts, the impeccable standard of their baking, the delicious crumbling sensation they produced when broken, and their exquisite taste. To his surprise, Zeus found the man disarmingly easy company. Having discussed the cuisines of Euboia and Boiotia and whether, in fact, Achaea would have the edge over them both when it came to those little honey-filled cakes eaten at wedding festivals, their talk drifted towards family matters, as Megaventris gave Zeus an expose on his relations, most of whom he disliked. Zeus said that he, too, disliked the majority of his relations, which delighted the man. Megaventris' own genes, it was clear, had decided at an early age that they wanted to give him a chance of survival should Greece ever be struck with severe famine. It was hard to imagine that they could have done their job with more success.

Now sated and relaxed, Zeus dropped occasional questions into the flowing stream of talk, though he knew most of the answers already. Incautiously, he asked after the health of Mrs. Megaventris, and

immediately wished he hadn't. Megaventris paused heavily, and looked down towards the grey-green smudge of the olive grove, just visible on the curve of the hill. But his grief was old and many honey-sweetened delicacies had soothed its bitterness. "I am sorry," said Zeus. "But her great-hearted spirit is with her daughter."

"Yes, that is true," said Megaventris, brightening. He gave a sad smile. "She always used to urge me to go on a diet, but I never found the time between meals."

He was silent for a while. Then he said, "Why don't you tell me about yourself?" Do not withhold the answers to the questions I may ask. Tell me the name by which you were known at home to your mother and father and your friends. No one goes nameless once he has come into the world; everybody is named by his parents when he is born. So tell me your full name, and where you come from, so that I may know my daughter is to go to a good home." He smiled indulgently. "She repeatedly tells me confusing stories about you being a god, which is only to be expected, as she thinks so much of you. A good girl, Melitta – she makes a very nice honey pastried pie, and her spring lamb is pure poetry-and she is fanciful and quick of wit above all, qualities I have always valued. She will make a good wife."

Zeus was taken aback. Adultery he could cope with; swift bouts of heavy fornication were more to his taste, after which he withdrew to a safe distance while the mortals saw to the messy business of raising the child. He could provide for the baby and shower divine blessings upon it from the safety of Olympus, but never before had he been asked to atone for his sins in such a way. His views on marriage had been slightly jaded by

recent events, and it occurred to him that he was technically still married to someone else.

But whatever his circumstances, he ought to take Melitta away to a safer place where they could hide from Hera until he worked out what he was going to do. So perhaps he should…he would have to tell Megaventris the truth. No doubt he would be able to swallow it – his appearance bore witness to his great talent in this field.

"Melitta spoke the truth," said Zeus. "I am indeed one of the Immortals. Cronos was my father, Rhea my mother. You have heard how Hermes and I walked the earth long ago – now I find myself here once more, in mortal disguise. Sir," he swallowed with embarrassment, for he could not recall ever having had words with a girl's father before, especially after the event, "your daughter has lain with Zeus the Thunderer, Cloud-Gatherer and Compeller of Storms, now fallen from his high estate."

"Are you really a god, then?" asked Megaventris excitedly. "How do you do these things? You know, you'd fooled me completely. That disguise is absolutely perfect. If you'd asked me, I'd have said you were mortal through and through, right down to the hairy feet. Even the dirt is excellent, for goodness' sake!"

"Thanks," said Zeus flatly. Once again he felt let down. Didn't mortals know how to react when one said something of earth-shaking importance? "My disguise is perfect because happens to be pretty close to the truth," he said with a bitter smile." Zeus I may be, but the name of Zeus has no longer any worth. So I hope you don't mind your daughter being seen with a has-been whose prospects are extremely limited."

Megaventris frowned at him. “Your eyes are those of a god,” he said simply. “And if you are Zeus, I have sacrificed to you all my life. What do you mean?”

As briefly as he could, for it was still raw and painful, Zeus told his story. He found the experience of humbling himself to yet another mortal quite extraordinary. That he who had presided over the stream of time to watch a million days flow past should now choose to leap into its racing waters; to speak and live with those who enveloped him; to look more closely upon one pool, one single eddy, than he had ever done before, suddenly made his own existence less troubling in its diminished significance. If those who flowed with him now, caught in the same current, were as many, diverse and complicated as all who had passed before and were to come, how could he as the spectator on the bank have witnessed the intricacy of all those lives whirling past him into shadow? And he realised that before he had seen but the outer shells, and was now himself a part of what lay within. This only served to remind him that the position of spectator is infinitely preferable to that of participant, especially as he had an uncomfortable sense that Hera now stood where he had, scanning the waters for one particular person. Life may seem a comedy from a distance, but no one ever suggested the actors found it funny.

Megaventris listened, taking occasional bites from the last of the buckwheat cakes to sustain his concentration. When Zeus had finished he wiped his mouth. “I am sure your fears are unnecessary,” he said. “And even if they are not, then all the more reason to enjoy yourself here. You and Melitta will be safe with me. You say the gods cannot see you directly, so remain here with us. We are far from prying mortal eyes, there

is an unlimited," he paused in thought, "well, nearly unlimited supply of food, there is wine, sunshine and friendship. What more can you want? Incidentally, it is drawing towards the time of day when I have a little bite of something to keep me going between breakfast and lunch. Would you care to join me?" He clapped his hands and called for Melitta.

"Coming, father," said her voice wearily from the house. On the tray she carried when she emerged was a profusion of jugs and plates, cheese, wine, water, a pot of honey, a jug of cream and a large bowl containing some kind of porridge. Megaventris graced her with a genial smile of thanks and gave the food a much longer and brighter smile of anticipation. Whether the food shared his delight is doubtful, though within a short time very little of it was still available for comment. Melitta and Zeus contented themselves with diluted wine, and sat in a bemused silence to watch Megaventris.

"Very good, Melitta," said her father after a while. "Though I must confess I am a little disappointed with the cream lately – which of course is not your fault," he added magnanimously. "It's just not like the cream we used to have. This new milk doesn't pour properly, doesn't allow the cream to rise. It just doesn't behave at all like the old milk."

"What, you mean the stuff we kept in the sun for six months before we used it?" asked Melitta.

"That's the stuff," said Megaventris eagerly.

"It used to do quite a lot, if I remember rightly. Certainly the older portions of it were becoming fairly gifted towards the end. There was that day when it all ran out of the jug, remember?"

“Was it cracked?” asked Zeus, attempting to join in the conversation. Melitta considered. “I wouldn’t have called it entirely cracked,” she said. “Perhaps a little misguided. You see, it tried to use a rope at first, which became terribly messy.”

Having failed to comprehend what exactly the milk had got up to and reached the conclusion that they had been speaking of different things, Zeus settled down and listened to Megaventris, who was extolling the virtues of his vines while pouring the deepest scorn upon those of Pantokalos and Katagogios, who lived at the bottom of the hill, for whose vines he had only words of contempt. According to Megaventris, his own vines should long ago have been taken over by Dionysus, under whose careful hands they would have produced a wine of such sweetness, such ruby warmth and heavenly flavour, such scintillating perfection, that anyone who tasted it would immediately have forsaken wine for the rest of his life so that his palate might preserve uncorrupted the blissful memory of its never-to-be forgotten brush with the divine.

“Don’t mind him,” said Melitta. “He’s always like this on food or drink.”

“This is true,” admitted Megaventris.

“You ought to write a book on your experiences,” said Zeus admiringly. “You appear to have devoted your entire life to absorbing this topic.”

“Yes, I have few other interests,” he reflected. “I was blessed with a stomach like the mind of a philosopher - insatiable and ever eager for other paths to tread or pastries new to explore. Talking of which,” he cocked an inquiring eye at the sun, now beating down almost overhead, casting a delicate piebald pattern of grey and gold where its rays tumbled through the leaves onto the

flagstones, “I think it might be time for lunch round about now. Would you care to join me?”

*

Once more, the gods filled the seats around the Air Throne, but the Throne itself was empty, its cloudy seat forsaken and forlorn. In the city below the People went about their business, drifting slowly and with a terrible inevitability towards the endless colonnades and marble-fronted shops of the vast, sprawling West Side. Now almost as large as the rest of the city, the intricate grids of shop upon shop, tavern upon tavern, markets, stores and temples stretched into the blistering distance, blotting out the view of the Olympic range that had once been visible from the Court of Olympus on the roof of Zeus’ palace. For there was a new god in Olympus. Already his presence was dimly felt, and in token of this the Air Throne had been prepared for his coming. It was considered the proper thing to do.

Like a barely-visible mist Argurion bestrode the West Side. With every drachma spent he felt new life and strength rising in him. And he knew that in this young, vibrant, forward-looking city he was the single most important force that existed, dominating all considerations of life and well being, towering above concern for state or citizens. Greater than the gods themselves…. for now they could not act without him, their immortalities being endless battles to obtain more of his aid. Even at this moment they debated how best to increase his presence and dominion in the city. Argurion, the mighty leveller and overthrower of the old order, looked down upon the scurrying demigods in scorn. Soon he would manifest himself, he whom even the gods had come to worship.

And over all fell the shadow of Ploutokratia, whose spawn Argurion was, but who was nourished and strengthened by her child. No eyes had she, no form, no body, nor even a mind. Only a homogenous, cancerous mass that lay upon the city, feeding on the goodness of its will and freedom, the city that now functioned according to her rules. She desired freedom above all, for thence comes her nourishment, freedom under her direction and tutelage, to spend and to be deceived; and in the cause of this freedom all else must be sacrificed; no other goal permitted, no end but of Ploutokratia's making.

For the present, Ares and Hera still had a precarious hold over the Wardrobe. In her speech of welcome to the new Ministers, which she clearly wished had been a speech of dismissal, Hera had found herself unable to say what she wanted but was forced to speak according to the code she had helped to create. Perhaps, after all, she had not been radical enough. She was beginning to realise that in a free, democratic society there are some things that one just cannot say.

"In the fullness of time," she went on, her will struggling so assiduously with the other power that her words tangled over themselves, as her verbal desires surfaced and resubmerged, "The President and Ministers shall themselves cede their power to the People themselves; undo the Wardrobe in a glorious dissolution and erase political distinction for all time. But for now our aim must remain constant – to promote the rights of the few at the expense of the many, to impose our own ideology on the People and to campaign ceaselessly for freedom and equality. Freedom is mandatory, and I hope that no mercy will be shown to those who obstruct it. Likewise let the

Wardrobe continue in its great mission of enforcing equality on the People of Olympus, till at last we may boast the we have dragged the lowly down to the level of the great, while still paying them ridiculous salaries." Extremely confused and bewildered, she sat down to a tumult of applause. His breath trembling in him, Enipeus knew that his great moment had come.

As he rose to his feet a small part of his brain hid itself in a dark crevice of his soul, withdrawing in fear below the cool stream that he had always known. How could he, a humble river, stand to speak before the Olympians? Even though his river was one of the loveliest in all Greece…His knees shook and liquefied at the thought. But this fear gave way to a bland, impersonal confidence, dominating his mind. If he trusted to Fate, no doubt all would be well. Concentrating, as he was on the silent, waiting deities on their thrones, his hold over his river weakened and faltered still more. Far away, the river Enipeus slowed; its waters dwindled and the burnished sunlight seemed to darken on its glistening surface. He began to speak.

Having retired to her seat with an exaggerated expression of boredom at what was to follow and the hope it would be over soon, Hera was staggered by the speech that now flowed trippingly from the tongue of this uncouth weedy river god. He spoke of things whose like she had barely imagined; ideas and strategies of which she might only have dreamed. Enipeus called for a commission to be set up to trace the wayward Zeus; demanded various sub-committees to consider the multifarious aspects of the problem, and insisted on an independent inquiry as to why the pursuit had been so comprehensively botched. Perhaps, he hinted, members of the Wardrobe should form a think-armoured-chariot

in order to apprehend the renegade, who was clearly the greatest treat to theocracy at large in the world. They should meet for a working lunch to discuss the problem in a more open atmosphere. Working lunch! Hera grew faint with ecstasy at the felicity of the phrase, gazing on its author with steely-eyed envy. If only she had coined such a gracious term!

Enipeus waxed longer and more lyrical on the projects underway to replenish the Central Bank and boost governmental income. Of course, Enipeus had neither conceived these schemes nor had any idea what they were about, but had an inkling that it was all but expected for him to appropriate other's ideas and extol their brilliance, never failing to assert how well the schemes would work in his capable hands. In a tour-de-force of theocratic magnificence, his perfectly modulated voice alternately soaring to the skies and plummeting it seemed to the depths of Ocean's trenches, Enipeus spoke fluently of his campaign plan, his strategies as a newly elected Wardrobe Minister, fitting targets for the Wardrobe as a whole, marketing strategies and the danger of the burgeoning power in the hands of commercial bodies, overlooking the fact that he owned one. And all the while, as this speech rolled on, whose like would never be witnessed again, woven of the stuff of legend as it was, the river Enipeus in distant Thessaly dried and gurgled, a trickle of its former self twisting between its stones. Soon it had diminished to a parched ooze in the unremitting heat. As the river died the valley it had watered thirsted for its vanished coolness; the young corn it had nurtured withered and curled in the sun. Soon the river Enipeus was no more than a desiccated dribble through the mire.

Thirsts went unslaked, villages looked out upon new deserts. Owing to the unprecedented lack of fresh water in the settlements along its banks, numerous cases of an unpleasant alimentary disorder erupted in the following days. One of the fatalities happened to be a child who was otherwise destined by Fate to be the most ruthless dictator in the history of mankind and to unite Greece into a military power that would conquer the known world and hold it in sway for two thousand years. Atropos was understandably a little peeved at having to cut his thread at such a disappointing moment in what had promised to be a brilliant and memorable career.

But Enipeus' mind had risen from his riverbed to higher things. Visions of boardrooms, committee meetings and focus groups swam through his head; the gaudy lights of affirmative action and commercial sponsorship beckoned to him. And in the dazzling brilliance of his speech each deity found what he or she might have wished to bring into the world. For Apollo, Enipeus span the most beguiling poetry; perfectly balanced hexameters measured against each other in golden lines inimitable by mortal man soothed his ears, and the Archer God sat stiffly, envy clear in the frosty gold of his eyes. For Artemis there was the swiftness of the chase after profit margins, and the joint quarries of social stability and monetary reform; for Ares the tales of thrilling battles against the twin monsters of Recession and Economic Slowdown. There were painted for Hephaestus cunning patterns of the vibrant creative industries the Republic would promote and the enormous wealth to be earned by those who could manipulate the artists, carefully presented in words whose form mirrored their content. And Athene and

Prometheus heard the logic, the undeniable wisdom of his speech, and were not convinced.

Enipeus bowed, and took his seat in a stunned silence. Dazed, the gods blinked and drew breath once more, temporarily overwhelmed by his flood of eloquence. Enipeus did likewise, for he had only intended to say a few words. Now he found every god staring at him with an expression of acute dislike. It is unwise to go one better than the gods, to make a point of writing better poetry than Apollo or hunting with greater skill than his sister, or perhaps preferring a mortal woman to Aphrodite or wagering you can drink more than Dionysus. No god takes kindly to betterment. It is all very well, they protest, for others to practice the arts over which they preside, but the health-conscious are wise to recall that the tutelary deity is indisputably supreme in their chosen calling. In order to maintain their positions of primacy the Olympians had been known to hold friendly little contests with rash challengers in an avuncular manner, just to show the misguided child who the experts really were. Such little contests frequently had undesirable side effects for the lesser participant, such as the time when Apollo had Marsyas flayed alive or Athene condemned Arachne to a life of spinning webs and dodging feather dusters. It was on such cautionary tales as this that Enipeus now reflected.

"Er…I'm sorry…" he hazarded. "Did I say something wrong?"

Apollo leapt up, quivering with indignation. "May I propose a motion?" he asked. "It is this member's opinion that common gods be forbidden from speaking in the Olympic Court. Their low breeding disqualifies them."

“Then no one will speak at all in the Olympic Court,” pointed out Kalea brazenly. “I thought we were all common gods now.”

Bristling at this insult from a demigod, Apollo sank into a wrathful silence, a malevolent scowl upon his perfect face. Hera considered. “I believe that remark may have been treasonable,” she reflected. “Apollo, you are in danger of being reprimanded by the Republic. If you are not careful, you may find yourself condemned to marketing work in Tartarus.”

The Archer god dashed his bow and lyre to the floor in fury. “This is too much,” he stormed. “For too long have I been insulted, my art has been belittled, my genius ignored and ridiculed. Am I now to be ordered to my place by a com-” Hera interrupted before he could incriminate himself. “There has now arisen an opportunity for you to vent your anger. It concerns the criminal Zeus. I shall explain…unless perhaps Enipeus would like to do so?” she gave a gracious, condescending smile in his direction.

“No, no, that’s fine,” he muttered.

“Oh? How disappointing. Apollo, as you and Ares are aware, and as I made clear before the interruption of our previous meeting, Zeus is now in Attica.” She gazed coolly at Prometheus, as though challenging him to contradict her. He said nothing. “Ares is also aware that it is the wish of the Wardrobe as a whole-” here her gaze slid to Athene, “- that you and he are to descend into Attica to root him out with fire and sword. No doubt this pleasant pastime will appeal to you, as, I believe, you now have less cause to use your lyre. Perhaps it will be pleasant to employ your arrows of pestilence once more. First, however,” she went on briskly, “as Enipeus has told us, we must address the

economic problems of our state. Dionysus and Prometheus, as they have informed me, are poised to put the tourist industry, or the Golden Touch Experience, into operation."

Feeling she had done something to rebuild her shattered self-confidence after the massive onslaught it had suffered in the form of Enipeus, she retired to her seat, leaving the floor open. It was immediately filled, very extensively, by Kithairon. "I have a few words to say on behalf of the mountains," he rumbled. "Is everyone sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin."

*

Once again, the purpled wash of evening drenched the terraces, seeping from the still-bright sky, bleaching the waxing moon a piercing white on its clarity. Several figures clustered on the veranda before Megaventris' house. The three freedmen were there with their wives, and Megaventris himself. Zeus and Melitta sat a little apart. There was the tumbling rise and fall of rapid, chattering conversation, the gentle glug of wine as it coiled reluctantly from the narrow-necked amphorae, splashing in jerks into the metal cups, the creak of the old table and the chairs. Only Megaventris was quiet, watching his daughter with a sad wistfulness as she played with the hand of a man who was a god.

Her father looked at her cascade of ebony hair, the smooth curve of her cheek and the flash of her teeth when she laughed. He was glad she was happy, he supposed, yet now he felt bereaved once again, that the shadow and spirit of the woman he had loved should now be taken from him and bound irrevocably to another man. Megaventris struggled vainly with the irreconcilable paradox of their union. He sensed that the man was indeed more that mortal, whoever he was in

fact. His size, his bearing, above all the eyes that made even Megaventris' mighty stomach turn cold…But wasn't it ridiculous at the same time? How could great Zeus have fallen so low as to visit his veranda and amuse his daughter? It didn't make perfect sense. He was inclined to believe the god's story, even though his mind baulked at the preposterous, incredible suggestion – the Cloud Gatherer, ousted from Olympus? No, surely he must be here on Earth for some disguised purpose. Just as well that he had been hospitable. Megaventris, in reflecting on what he knew of Zeus' previous career as far as women went, had not found his history one to commend the gentleman to a prospective father-in –law. It was not that Zeus had a love 'em and leave 'em attitude to women, for it seemed that he barely got round to completing the first part of the equation, so busy was his round of social engagements. Megaventris resolved to have a long chat with Zeus about his intentions.

But in the meantime there was little cause for concern. Wine, the universal salve for troubled souls, slid easily down his capacious throat. Why should any man worry while there was wine, food, peace and congenial company? A beatific smile creased his face. A little later he sent a second cup down to the first in the event that it felt isolated in the lonely immensity of his interior; then a third went to join them as he considered it possible that the first two might tire of each other's company. In a fit of absentmindedness he also ate a large loaf of new bread that had been intended for his friends to share, consoling himself with the reflection that this would be bound to prevent the drinks from being plagued by hunger. Soon he was involved in a lively disagreement with two of the farm workers.

Megaventris always took sides – no fence would have been capable of supporting his weight had he chosen to sit on it. As the evening deepened so the disagreement became hotter and views more vociferously expressed, till finally Megaventris made his opinion known loudly and unequivocally, and the other combatants conceded defeat and agreed with him before he grew angry. Very few people got on the wrong side of Megaventris, but then very few people had enough stamina to walk that far.

Uninterrupted by the cacophony of voices, Zeus and Melitta sat isolated in the dimness. Feeling her body's warmth close to his as her voice murmured words he couldn't hear, sensing the perfume of her skin in their physical proximity, Zeus felt an overwhelming desire to be mortal, part of her world, to love and live and die. There was between them a gulf of which she seemed unaware, a breach that could be filled by no change of circumstance or will of theirs. For Zeus knew what she could not, that in a thousand years when her bones were dust he would still endure, though whether in heaven or hell he could not say. He saw the infinite tapestry of space and time as a man on earth gazes at the star-bedecked sweep of the night sky; she saw but yesterday and today, tiny threads in the great web, and, incognisant of the numberless galaxies scattered like stardust in the blackness, knew only her small blue-green planet floating lonely in the void. He put his arm around her, leaned his head on hers and felt the immeasurable melancholy of the eternal that tries to hold, to grasp and slow, the passing days. The night, sonorous with crickets, unfolded itself around them. This was probably as good a time as any to break the

news to her. “Melitta,” he said softly. “I have something to tell you.”

“Oh, you can still speak then?” she retorted. Zeus paused, unsure how to proceed. Twice he tried to speak, twice changed his mind. What he was about to do would deliver the final insult to his pride, his ultimate admission of inadequacy. Finally he said, “Melitta, I am impotent.”

When the conversation at the next table, disturbed by her peal of laughter, had resumed, he said, “And I don’t find it very amusing.”

“*I* do,” she assured him, snuggling closer to him. “But don’t worry, I know some herbs that are supposed to work wonders.”

Once more, it became clear to the bemused Zeus that there must be another meaning to the word besides describing his loss of omnipotence. He must take pains to enlarge his vocabulary, for several times now he had caused her to dissolve into helpless laugher, entirely unintentionally. After careful thought he tried again. “What I mean,” he said gently, “is that…there will be no banana fudge cake.”

Her disappointment was palpable in the dark. “Why?” she asked softly.

“I…I can’t do things like that any more,” he said. “I am…” He struggled to find apt words for confession. “I am no longer king of Olympus. I am no longer a god, I am merely an immortal. And…if any god finds out I’m here, we must leave this place. Your father knows – the other gods wish to capture me, send me to Tartarus. All who know me are in equal danger. So we must lie very low…or be ready to escape them.”

Her arms tightened around him. “None of that matters yet. Only now is important.”

“Aren’t you…don’t you understand?” he asked, incredulous. “I have nothing left. No power, no divine ability to command. Nothing. The god I thought you loved is no longer.”

“You didn’t look like a god when I first met you, said the girl. “And I didn’t know you were till you made that thundershower come down as pink and red roses. I never believed you were the same person my father sacrificed to; the one who presided at the Olympic Games, the god who demanded libations- the Thunderer, the Cloud Gatherer. Don’t *you* understand? You’re completely different from what we expect a god to be. It’s as if Zeus were two people – the god in the sky and you on earth. I never cared about the god.”

Zeus held her tightly, guilt and self-revulsion working in him. He did not want her to love him…at least, with one portion of his soul…for it was senseless and cruel. No mortal woman could live out her life with an Olympian. Melitta was but the latest of many – could she not understand? She must not love him, must not for her sake or for his. For that road led only to disillusionment, betrayal, heartbreak and despair. The gulf was too wide, he told himself. This was not meant to be – he should not have torn this bud from the stem before it opened. Now there seemed no choice for him, no way out that would not lead to the destruction of her hopes and her fragile trust in him. He cursed his lust, his uncontrollable desire that had mastered him all his life, had left a trail of shattered dreams behind him as his feet crunched into the future over their shards. And yet…something flared in the scarred recesses of his soul, a flare he had not felt so clearly before. Something mortal – he recognised it for what it was, and was afraid.

*

On occasions throughout her career, like faint flickers on the edge of a radar screen, Aphrodite had been subconsciously aware that an incredible number of mortals spent much of their lives looking for gods. She herself was beginning to find it a much overrated pastime, not least because she knew exactly what she'd find when she got there. She felt that if the mortals had any inkling of what was in store for them they would stay at home with the crossword.

When she now held up a hand before her face, she had to struggle to see its outline in the gloom. After her latest venture into the shadowy mirror-world, it was, quite literally, an effort to hold herself together. Once she had made two or three exploratory forays, she had determined to get it over with, and had come further into the darkness of its labyrinthine passages than ever before. Flitting by her like bats in the gloaming, the souls of mortals drifted, shining with varying intensities. Many were pale, nebulous and inhospitable, into which she could not enter. Aphrodite was sick of the dimness and the clammy silence, wanted warmth and laughter, the sense of her own body around her, or preferably, someone else's inside her. But in her current disembodied state she would have to find someone with very peculiar tastes in order to satisfy her.

When she approached the gold-edged phantom she recognised with what would have been with a fond smile, she felt no sense of triumph or relief, for her wearied soul seemed beyond sensing either. Aphrodite sat down, or would have done had she retained her body, and looked at Zeus' negative with puzzlement. She was not entirely convinced that joining the other god was a good idea. His soul was flashing like the

rotating lamp of a lighthouse, blurring and flickering with confusion and indecision. She'd known for a long time that Zeus was a complex individual, but she'd never realised his attitude towards love was quite as knotty as a clump of kitten's wool. Dread, desire and apprehension crackled over his surface, sending sparks of brightness fruitlessly into the capacious shadows.

Aphrodite came to a decision. Quite apart from her resolve, she'd little idea of the way back. She must pass into the soul of Zeus, and hide there till she thought the time ripe to emerge. Heracles would look for her when he needed to – but not yet. She sensed that were Zeus found now, his departure for Tartarus would be swift and permanent. Within him, she would be cut off from the outer world unless she emerged through his pores…she shuddered with distaste. But she could no longer turn back. And she might be able to give the wavering god a little helpful encouragement while she was about it.

Shivering, she pressed herself against his wraith, slipping gradually within him. As she entered Zeus, she couldn't help wishing that things could have been the other way round.

*

"We're together," Zeus told Melitta. "Together we shall be safe."

"Wishful thinking, probably." she said. "But I'll trust you. Don't you see how exciting this is for me? Being betrothed to an immortal, and threatened by wrathful gods? Life here isn't really a barrel of laughs, even with Dad for company. Dekalia's such a happening place, you know, there's just so much going on you can't keep up with it. What are the prospects for me here? Get married; spend most of my life with my feet in the

stirrups or looking after the results and cooking for someone who spends their life drinking wine in the agora. Cooking for Dad is enough trouble, as I'm sure you can imagine. And most of the girls in the village never talk of anything but who's going after whom, the tininess of Kostilos' penis and who has seen the latest offering of the Dionysiac theatre, which is frankly not a patch on the one in Athens. None of them seem to consider there may be more to life than men and having fun. I can, but there's no demand for a girl like that. Most men are happy with a mattress who can do the washing up." She gripped him suddenly, and he felt the excited quiver in her voice. "This is the best thing that could have happened," she said in a piercing whisper in his ear. "I can't wait."

Zeus found himself slightly put out that the girl had just destroyed the romantic picture he had attempted to paint, portraying her as a violated innocent tossed on the storms of chance and the victim of a callow and capricious god. His opinion of gods in general and, he suspected, himself in particular, had hit rock bottom, but at the same time he felt relieved.

"Come on," coaxed Melitta. "It's going to be fun."

"Perhaps it is," he admitted reluctantly. "If you enjoy being roasted by thunderbolts or hit by flaming arrows while being eaten by scrofulous birds."

"They're not going to catch us," she retorted. "Why exactly do they want you for anyway?"

"It's rather complicated, and I'm not entirely sure myself," he said. "I'll tell you some time. Well, as long as you're not deterred by the thought of featuring prominently in an Olympic barbecue held in honour of my feathered friends…I warn you, there are going to be

no palaces or visions of transcendent beauty, no glimpses of heaven or promises of immortality."

"That's all right," she said. "We've got us. Ungrammatical but true. What about children?" She laughed wickedly.

"Union with an immortal is never fruitless," he conceded.

"Will they be gods?"

"It is said that the last child of Zeus will be the greatest. Greater than Perseus or Heracles. And," he added with venom, "much greater than those other turds like Ares and Apollo."

"They say there are three gods doing the rounds of Attica," remarked Stephanos to his circle of companions outside the taverna in Dekalia.

"Better lock up your daughters, then," said Andreas with a laugh. "You know what that means."

"Kostilos has got them all locked up any way, hasn't he? To stop them laughing at the enormous dimensions of his manhood," said Errinos. He spilt his wine as he dodged Kostilos' blow.

Stephanos stretched out his legs and exhaled contentedly. It was midday and he felt the first tentative suggestions of sleep approaching him. "They appeared," he said dreamily, smoothing his white hair and watching the resident cat, which was expecting its regularly delivered bundle of young and was at this moment curled up unctuously on his left foot, "in a tavern, just like this one. And they are passing from village to village bearing the good news."

"Go to sleep, Stephanos," said someone. He was on the point of obeying when a shudder ran through the ground. Before anyone could say "earthquake" there came a blinding flash from inside the taverna, accompanied by a dull "whump" of rapidly expanding air. Various noises of cascading pottery and breaking amphorae followed it.

The horrified bartender, who hadn't yet completed his repairs after the distressing scenes enacted there earlier in the week, sprang towards the door, but reeled back with a shriek of anguish, hands across his eyes, into the arms of his friends. "Chairophon, Chairophon, what is it?" asked a fearful Andreas.

“The gods!” screamed Chairophon. “The gods have descended from high heaven, and they have broken all my wine jars!”

Every man in the circle remained rigid with awe and terror as a voice deep enough to have risen from the roots of earth boomed forth from the taverna.

“Excuse us just one moment,” it said. “I’m afraid that was a false alarm. We’re not quite ready yet. If you would be so kind as to look the other way and resume your conversations, we should be most grateful. Dionysus is busy adjusting his makeup.”

There was heard an indignant protest, presumably from Dionysus, as the bemused handful of men resolutely faced the square, which was beginning to fill with interested spectators, and attempted to act as though nothing untoward had happened. They talked of the weather, the prospects for the summer – bound to be hot and dry after such a spring – the latest political developments in Athens and the health of Kostilos’ pet goat. But even the scandalous affair between Agathi and Costas could not hold their attention, and for some reason their conversation palled. Their collective attention, especially that of Chairophon, was drawn to the activities behind them; what was causing the soft bumps and thuds, what reason lay behind the muffled curses and oaths? Finally the voice addressed them again. “Thank you so much,” it said. “Now if perhaps you could forget that first bit, we’ll try again.”

Once more there was a dull “whump” and a flash of blinding light, accompanied by further clinks of shattering wine vessels. Chairophon cursed beneath his breath. A long pause ensued, during which the old men on the veranda and the people in the square held their breath. When the voice spoke again it sounded

disappointed. “This,” it said, “is traditionally the cue for someone to run in through the doorway and fall down in awe, crying, ‘The gods! The gods!’ whereupon you prostrate yourselves before us.”

“I already shouted that,” said Chairophon angrily. “When I saw you’d broken all my wine jars.” Before he could say any more, Stephanos’ horny hand was clamped decisively over his mouth. Stephanos had not spent eighty-two years listening to stories of wrathful gods to no purpose. He knew that they were irrational and whimsical as children and that if one annoyed them things got very hot indeed.

The as-yet-undisclosed presences in the wine shop seemed to sense that they had already been treated to as much screaming as could be expected, and proceeded to manifest themselves. First, in a golden-white haze, the messenger of the gods, great Hermes himself, strode forward. His cap of swiftness sat proudly on his shining head; in his hand he clasped the Golden Wand that proclaimed his office. Docile and motionless on his feet were the Winged Boots, tamed into submission, it is sad to say, through frequent beatings with the Golden Wand. At this point, the residents of Dekalia decided that perhaps a prostrate position was advisable after all, and lost no time in adopting it, especially those on the veranda who had been brushed by the feathers of the Winged Boots. Everyone had heard about Delphi and no one was anxious to become a cautionary tale. A feeling of mortal terror and the wish that the gods would go away descended over the company.

Hermes strode into the middle of the wide circle that opened to receive him, his garments glistening like fluid glass. There, his stature increased till he stood over twenty feet tall, which he felt was the proper height for

a god. Thirty feet he saw as extravagance, while anything less than ten was bordering on the mortal. He was enjoying his tour through Hellas at the expense of the Olympic taxpayer. It gave full rein to his dramatic pretensions and the reactions of his audiences were very funny, though of course he never actually hurt anybody.

"O people of Dekalia," he began in a low, mysterious voice, "be happy that you have been visited by the Immortal Gods!"

The people of Dekalia struggled to obey.

"I, Hermes the Giant-Slayer, messenger of the Immortal Gods, bring tidings from high Olympus, and shall leave a strict command from the Immortals for you to fulfil," he went on. "Mortals, were I to give you a hundred guesses as to what lies hidden in yonder tavern, with a choice between the answer and death, no doubt you would all die. Not, of course, that you are not to die anyway – I believe it is to be my privilege to escort each of you down to the wide-gated hall of Hades in the near future. I mean, what is a near future to a god," he added kindly, reassuring some of the less stalwart souls who had emitted sobs of fear and despair. "No, that humble tavern holds no less than a Gateway to a world beyond your imaginings, where perpetual light shall shine upon you and your every desire be satisfied.

"You see," he went on to explain apologetically, "since Olympus is in a spot of financial trouble, we agreed that the most ethically sound means of resolving our problems was by opening up our homes, our heavens and the way to the skies, freely available to any mortal on Earth for a very modest fee. You can read all about it in the promotional scrolls we're leaving behind, together with a chance to enter our competition to stay in a five star palace on Pleasure Beach, currently under

construction in Olympus, which should be completed in under fifty years. In addition, the lucky winner will be given a safe conduct through five miles of gift shops! Every purchase here will let you save up points to redeem against future holidays. So all we need to do is to introduce you to Olympic Airways, now being launched in every area of Greece. Holiday purchase will be simple, safe and efficient. This way we'll all be happy. I'm sure you want to keep the gods happy."
No one in that silent circle of prone faces was heard to agree, but Hermes assumed their consent. "Then, I feel we understand each other very well. Prometheus! You and the drunken Dionysus can bring it out now."

Many of the mortals winced at this blasphemy of the gods' names before they were driven prostrate into the earth by the torrent of rushing airs that hammered cataclysmic into their backs. Erupting from the taverna burst four horses, muscles billowing beneath silvered hide. Thunderous wings beat dragon-like from their shoulders, scattering peacock iridescence from their pinion prisms. Barely clearing the watchers' backs they strode into the airs, leaving vortices of dust spiralling to either side, and swept back, low in a graceful loop, displaying the tubular carriage they drew, emblazoned with the words, "Olympic Airways." Their daemon driver whistled shrill and clear over the storm of their wings, and the incandescent vision banked steeply in the sky before mounting swiftly out of sight towards Olympus.

In a glorious blaze of light two Immortals strode forward in the horses' wake. One was aged, bearded and bowed, his hair curiously short along the middle of his head; the other inclined to fat and garlanded with vine leaves. "It seems you have a very serviceable runway in

the form of your main road," remarked the former, "which will spare us the chore of constructing one. Otherwise, arrangements are very simple. Daily chariot flights will depart for heaven, offering a never-before-seen opportunity to meet and greet the gods, stroll with your loved one in the bowers of the Immortals, or bathe in the perpetual sunshine of Pleasure Beach on the borders of Olympus. Heaven has been thrown open to you, people of Dekalia! Imagine the chance to delve into your pasts and meet famous ancestors through our family-tracing networks, attending guided tours to meet them in the Underworld, or, for a special fee, paying fleeting visits to the Fates to glimpse moments of what the future holds. Your local nymphs will staff your travel agents, the booking office and the departure lounges. Yes, all you need to do is slap your gold down on the counter, then relax and let us do the rest."

Erect in pearly robes, they seemed intent on displaying their dignity and majesty to the mortals. The effect was somewhat spoilt by Dionysus' failure to conceal a surreptitious belch behind a tardy hand. After a few moments of silence Prometheus relaxed and rubbed his hands together. "Right!" he said. "That's enough posturing. You can look up now."

Cautiously, his audience obeyed. A collection of humanity ranging from two to ninety-two – Kostilos always insisted he was ninety-two, though his closer friends claimed they remembered a time one or two years previously when they were sure he had been at least a decade younger – faced him with expressions of wariness on the faces of those who were able to comprehend their peril and interest on the faces of those who weren't. Dionysus and Hermes sat down as Prometheus began to speak.

“Most probably you all know who I am,” he said. “Prometheus is my name. It was I who created your ancestors long ago, I who moulded the first men out of clay before Zeus breathed life into them. It was I who brought fire to your race in the dawn of time, for which defiance to the will of Zeus I suffered his anger.” He lifted a fold of his tunic to display the livid, buckled scar on his right side. “Do you remember,” he went on, “who rescued me from the wrath of the Thunderer, from the punishment he had ordained for me? Can you tell me?”
This last remark was addressed to a small child standing close beside his left foot, clad in garments of an indeterminate colour and sucking its finger with every appearance of enjoyment. It examined him with a critical severity before it answered. “It was Heracles,” it said. “That’s what it said in the story. But I don’t believe you *are* Prometheus.”
Prometheus laughed, head thrown back, face burnished like bronze. “Of course you don’t,” he said. “Not yet.”
As he spoke the air chilled suddenly. Over the village swept a wind of another time and place, the Caucasus long ago. And the gleaming god had changed. Instead of the tavern behind there now loomed a jagged mountain rock, to which he was fettered by brazen chains, riveted to hands and feet. No immortal he seemed now, his face dark with fear and interminable solitude, his hair and beard as long as the term of his servitude, tangled and matted. Through the whistle and moan of the mountain wind came the fragment of another sound, almost wedded to the first. Until the shadow of the monstrous wing fell across his face, they did not know what it was. And then the god screamed…
“Do you believe me now?” asked Prometheus. Eyes that had cowered in horror looked up at him again, to

see him settled as before. The child gazed at his unabashed. “I think so,” it conceded grudgingly. “That was good.”

“On that occasion, I was saved by a mortal, though a god myself. Remember this. Olympus is in peril, mortals, and it is your fate to live in dark times. Zeus has fallen from heaven and roams the earth, pursued by his enemies. They need much wealth to fuel their pursuit and the consolidation of their power, and have turned to you as another source of income. Hermes has told you how this system, which is not without its attractions for you, will function. But I give you a warning in my capacity as a god, not to trust the promises of the Immortals, to be ever ready to defend yourselves and what is yours through whatever means is open to you. For the wrath of Olympus shall soon break over Attica. I cannot speak more freely, for it may be that even now their spies observe me.”

There was silence as they listened to his words.

“Olympus, as I have said, is in peril; so too are you. Beyond the coming danger, which may soon pass, there is another, deeper terror that threatens to bring down the Immortals themselves from their thrones. By all means visit the heavens and trade your gold for a fragment of the divine – but do not trade yourselves. See, realise, know what the other gods do not want you to, that by surrendering to the source of their power you too will become its slaves; and the gods themselves will lessen in your eyes before you fall as they have fallen. Can you worship those enslaved?” He shrank and withered rapidly, till he appeared as but a shadow of a mortal man, wizened and undone. “This is what has happened to the gods,” he wheezed. “A daemon of Chaos has entered the world, and imposed upon them all a fit of

madness, seducing them with dreams of dominion and grandeur. Yet, humanity, it is in your power to save the gods, and in so doing save yourselves. Few gods have perceived this – but I know that the salvation of heaven now lies on earth. Remember the god chained in the mountains, saved from his brazen bondage by a mortal. Now the same must happen again.

"I believe the road to release is through disobedience to the dictates of worship you have always obeyed. Perhaps you will not fully understand till you visit heaven, but I know that once you have seen the gods for who they truly are, your veneration will vanish, adoration diminish, and all the corruption of heaven will at last be laid bare. And this, this is your mightiest weapon against the powers now at work. For the gods need you, which truth they have chosen to forget. In the turmoil on the heels of such a religious rebellion, it may be that we can wrest control of Olympus away from the forces that now control it through their divine agents. So although the command I bring you from Olympus is to obey the summons of the gods and to visit us in the holiday season, I, Prometheus, leave you this commandment also: to exercise your power over the gods, and be ready to flee when the time comes. But never, mortal children of Earth, lose your faith in a god who is still abroad, still untouched by the madness. Zeus the Thunderer is still free, and through him you too shall be free."

He wiped his perspiring brow. "Mind you, please don't pass on anything I've said to you. I don't fancy another bout of liver tasting."

Many mortals had taken on board much of what he said, but the undeniable attraction of paradise was strong. To visit heaven has for some time been a bit of

an ambition for many humans – now they found that, despite all the negative press about camels and sewing equipment, the rich could actually get there much more easily than the poor.

Hermes took a small departure lounge, a control tower and a miniature *bureau de change* from his knapsack. At the touch of his wand these swelled rapidly to reveal teams of nymphs already at their desks, ready to give the inhabitants of Dekalia as smooth a ride as possible to the city of the gods. With the advantage of the cover they offered, he took the opportunity of regaling the small child of indiscriminately coloured dress with a number of jokes that it would regurgitate later, much to its delight and the horror of its parents.

"Then farewell, mortals," said Prometheus. "Farewell, till we meet again."

With a blinding, searing explosion of stars the gods vanished upwards in a column of light.

"I do like good exits," commented Hermes as they winged towards the next village. "Prometheus, what exactly are you up to? Why all the talk about the necessity of visiting Olympus to see what bastards we all are?"

"Have you ever been to the Worship Works?" he asked in reply. "Go and have a look. Ask yourself how you think it works. I need to destabilise a malignant system, Hermes. If I can do it without anyone noticing and we're ready in the wings, we might be able to leap into the gap as long as we're prepared for the effects. I'm afraid it's very risky, but I can't think of anything better right now."

"So you've given up on Zeus?"

Prometheus did not answer immediately. "No, I haven't given up," he considered. "I wish him no hurt

and would see him in heaven again were that possible. But I cannot see him, cannot perceive his mind, and am beginning to believe that he is gone forever. In his absence I must do what I think is best, for I cannot spend much time in searching for him, even though he may be essential to what we must do. We've run out of time and must look to Olympus first."

*

Discreetly tucked behind the protective coronet of palaces crowning the city, clustering around it with the faintly guilty air of adolescents who have purloined an elder brother's magazine, the Worship Works appeared entirely unremarkable to an untrained observer. Various untrained observers had at one time or another expressed interest in the Works, which had welcomed the opportunity thus offered to take them inside and complete their training, though this was a rigorous process and few ever seemed to emerge successful. From without, it seemed to be no more than a modest Doric temple, though its interior presented fresh evidence of the flagrant disregard Zeus possessed for the rules of space-time. The building stood on the oldest part of Olympus, the first surface that had solidified from the whirling porridge of Chaos after the Olympians' victory over the Titans. In those far off days before the dawn of our history, the gods were fewer and their functions and natures less clearly defined. Barely more than monsters themselves, their power too was but a shadow of what it would become after eons of affirmation by human minds. Zeus, despite the credible impression of a barbaric warlord he projected, had foreseen the potential for the Olympians' legitimisation in the eyes of mortals after their creation, and foreseen also the vast increase in their divine splendour that

might accrue were the gods able to harness the worship and adoration that immediately began to flow to them from the children of Earth. On perhaps the only occasion in our history, human beings were thus influential as a civilising force.

Vast funnels inserted down through multi-dimensional space hovered over the earth like holy Hoover mouths. During the centuries of evangelism undertaken first by the gods themselves and subsequently by conscientious mortals with the indispensable tools required to spread a religion – numerous miseducated heavies, swords, stakes, and a good supply of flammable oil - an endless procession of prayer, sacrifice, love, and, more frequently, fear and hatred, poured into the all-consuming funnels. Indeed, the gods' decision to curse mortals with worried and troublesome lives only served to increase the detritus of anxious prayers and imprecations they excreted in a cathartic process that left them much happier - even if there were no reply from the busy god - and the gods much more satisfied. Incoming worship was diverted from its destination god for sorting purposes, a facility that met with general approval even from the very early days when there were only a dozen or so gods to worship. It had been annoying enough at the beginning for them to get each other's mail, and the new system ensured that each god only received the relevant prayers, delivered right to their doorstep, though Hephaestus did remain a little wistful when he no longer had an opportunity to go through Poseidon's mail order catalogues before passing them over to their rightful recipient.

Once inside the Works, solid sacrifices were liquefied in a mighty grinding mill turned by captive

giants, pumped with libations and all the offerings of earth, shimmering in a lucid stream of words and wishes, glistening like a pulsing intestine, and were spiralled in multi-coloured whirls through a giant fractionating column, towering thousands of feet above the floor. At the time of the Works' construction, Zeus had only recently discovered wormholes, and with his characteristic inability to leave new technology to his youngers and betters, had decided the distillery would be powered by volcano. Without consulting the rest of the family he had linked the heart of Mount Etna to a small trapdoor set into the floor of the Works by means of a stable wormhole, and had remained stubbornly proud of his achievement even after the loss of several engineers who'd originally intended to repair the plumbing.

Driven by the blinding heat of the volcano beneath them, the elements of worship bubbled and separated in the column, piped off at differing levels to be stored in the distribution vats. Besides the personalised prayers and sacrifices, which separated early – Hera's cool and refreshing, Hephaestus' roaring with red flame, Poseidon's warm and muddy – the other elements were stored before release. Adoration, Esteem and Respect boiled off at the top of the fractionating column, above Respect, Sacrifice, Veneration and Fear, with Hatred coolest of all, though even loathing may be food for the gods. From the Works, laden clouds poured out to each of the great gods both their daily work and their daily nourishment, making them mighty beyond the scope of mere nectar and ambrosia. Through the ether, quantities of the essence of worship went oozing to each god, no matter how humble, volumes earmarked and personalised, each in proportion to the gods' tally of

worshippers. On the scale of actors' salaries, Zeus had been very much on the 'A' list, while some bit-part jobbing gods would have been lucky to get free meals on set, let alone a mention in the credits.

But though the gods' physical forms are invulnerable and their essences immortal, this is not to say that they cannot be immeasurably diminished or reduced. The Worship Works had formalised their standing, crystallised their status in the eyes of Earth, where each new action, each display of divine splendour, heightened their majesty and fuelled their adulation. But even the fairest actors fade, even the smoothest skin will age. Some go so far as to slice up their own faces in the hope of staying young, though it seems peculiar to argue that mutilating one's face with a scalpel and winding up with the expression of a surprised lamprey is an improvement on a few wrinkles.

The Olympians are most dependent on this supply. Deprived of it, their intelligences will implode, their physical extensions diminish, and their entities reduce to the dimensions of a normal god. Self-doubt, fear, inadequacy, loathing and contempt will descend upon them, letting them feel very much like most mortals do on a Monday morning, about which one cannot help feeling a sneaking sense of satisfaction, as it is a time that any merciful deity would by now have disinvented. These are weapons that could undo a deity from within, and are thus those very forces that the gods have ever striven to subdue.

*

Blindfold a property developer, bind both hands behind his back, inject him full of performance-retarding drugs, yet he will still be able to pick, with unerring accuracy, the least suitable but most beautiful

site out of a collection of others that are more suitable but less pleasing to the eye. In the face of such inspired dedication to one's chosen path in life, the humble layman is left speechless with admiration. The unhappy king Claudius would no doubt have been gratified to find out that, after all, the wicked prize itself still proves just as potent in buying out the law in heaven as it is on Earth.

True to their calling, therefore, the Olympic developers had chosen the site of the artificial Pleasure Beach. Gentle, open hills running north and south of Hera's ruined pleasure gardens had been appropriated by the planners early on. A deep green wave of land, its petrified curves dusted with trees, the yellow bursts of broom along the cliff at the edge of heaven bright as golden jewels within a setting of dark emerald. Where the drowsy trees receded, there the grass and flowers tangled over the coy soil in a medley of hues, pale lilies, nodding hyacinths, milky-copper anemones. Far, far below, thousands of feet beneath the cliffs twinkled the azure mirror of the Aegean. Here, seduced by the balm of a dozen striving scents and the soporific cicada whine, love-stricken gods had wandered from patch to patch of shade, to gaze misty-eyed over the dim and distant blurs of Thessaly and Thessaloniki beneath, and to compose inferior verses lauding their loved ones. Apart from Hera's gardens, the place had remained untouched, empty and alone. As such it was clearly not being put to any good use, and everyone seemed very pleased with what the thoughtful planners had done to it.

Mr. and Mrs. Panthropos were only two of the numberless occupants of the reclining chairs that were ranked in neat, regimented rows along the level beach,

facing the artificial sea. If one swam out through the illusory waters, one could look down through the blue, transparent depths to see the shores of Greece and the Aegean islands bridled in white threads of foam, so far beneath one that they seemed but a shadow of the imagination. Occasionally someone would weave their way arduously between the chairs, to waddle into the surf. Olympic Airways imposed severe weight restrictions – only those over sixteen stone were permitted to buy tickets.

Mrs. Panthropos rested her hands on her belly and peered out from the shadow of the melancholy drooping beach umbrella. She looked at the sea and the sand. She peered backwards at the line of tiled and thatched buildings that had erupted along the curve of the bay, nestling up to the vast cube of the hotel, and she saw that they were good. She exhaled with satisfaction. "It's right lovely 'ere," she said, then added, for she was in poetic mood, "Bit like 'eaven, you know what I mean?"

"It is 'eaven," reminded her husband. "Does exactly what it says on the box."

She clicked her tongue in annoyance. "I was just being *lyrical.* 'Cos it's so idyllic 'ere."

"'s the third time we've been up this month."

"We've got a lot to get away from," she said accusingly.

"Yes," Mr. Panthropos agreed equably. "Like all the bills we left unpaid at home."

"What about the weather?" she protested. "It's 'orrible in the Peloponese at this time of year. And there aren't no lovely beaches like this, not that I've seen."

"And I'm sure I left the cat shut in the cupboard," he fretted. "It's all right for you, you won't have to clean up the mess."

“Anyway, the gods told us we have to get away from it all as often as we could, “she announced triumphantly. “What more reason can we have, I’d like to know.”

Overhead, the pearl-string of a chariot train strummed through the sky, leaning low over Olympus as it swung in towards the airstrip behind the hotel. Clustering as pale encrustations on the beads of its string, eager faces were barely visible as they gazed down on the waiting delights of heaven. The throb of the horses’ wings softened into stillness.

Mr. Panthropos shrugged morosely. “Did you know that beach holidays are supposed to make you less intelligent?”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not possible.”

“Certainly in your case it isn’t,” he muttered, but to his disappointment she didn’t register his subtlety. His wife steamrollered his concerns for the well being of his cat, for which he harboured a tender affection. Mrs. Panthropos’ arguments were as unstoppable as she herself would be were someone to roll her down a hill. “The hotel is *lovely*, she said adamantly. “I love the tavernas with those dinky little satyrs and their sweet furry legs – so polite and friendly, they are. And the poolside bar is quite wonderfully decadent.”

“Decadent?”

“I know you can’t cope with words that long,” she said imperiously. “I’ve been improving my vocabulary, I have.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked her husband doubtfully.

“It means the same as provident or providentshal, “ she explained. “ Except ten times as much. Deka, you see? It means ten.”

“I see.”

The beach soaked in the sun, absorbing the honey-coloured warmth of the light, almost too perfect to be real, as in fact it was. Sounds of lyre music drifted listlessly through the still airs, meandering from the collection of tavernas, bars and new dance halls that now extruded from what had been the last unspoilt stretch of shallow hillside. The entrepreneurial spirit of the satyrs was heartily undiminished, and Olympic Airways and Pleasure Beach had been seen as an opportunity sent by heaven, or at least arranged by it. They reasoned that if certain members of the public wanted to be parted from their money, it was only their duty to assist them as far as they were able, being good theocrats of the republic and therefore concerned with the wishes and desires of their fellow creatures. Already, several tavern keepers were preparing the mid-day meal. Close to the ranks of deck chairs, a mighty brazier teetered on a veranda, stoked by a portly satyr, whose face was bejewelled with sweat reflecting the flames. A grubby apron flapped against the tawny fur of his skipping knees, and he beat time to his rapid slicing, skewering and turning with a smart clickety-click of his dancing hooves on the flagstones. The circling smoke was heavy with the earthy dust-laden smell of smouldering charcoal and steeped in the brittle tang of half a dozen herbs. Meat sputtered to itself as it bronzed more swiftly than any sunbather could hope to do. Behind the diligent satyr, a dazzling blonde sea-nymph swiftly crumpled a salad together in a colossal bowl, and another, as lightly-clad as the first, distributed the complementary amphorae of retsina to each table in anticipation of the hordes of diners who would soon descend upon them. The staff had discovered that despite the infinite variety of the Olympic cuisine, all

the tourists wanted to eat were kebabs and souvlakia, accompanied by salad and washed down with enough wine to fill the Mediterranean basin. Soon every tavern bore a sign boasting of the traditional Greek menu to be had inside, and in keeping with tradition, the proprietors had no wish to change or complicate matters.

Built into the side of this particular tavern, as was becoming the norm on Pleasure Beach, was a vast dark emporium that proclaimed itself a loyal purveyor of Olympic souvenirs. There was a significant entry fee, and the unwary customer found that the door automatically locked itself on their entry, and refused to reopen till the tourist had bought an acceptable quantity of valuable souvenirs. It was rumoured that some unfortunate visitors were still wandering the endless aisles, arms filled with trinkets and baubles, returning again and again to the doors only to be told they were still below par. The Olympic Tourist Board had surpassed itself. Every article was tastefully emblazoned with the logo of the Republic in a medley of primary colours. The discerning buyer could take home autographed and animated statues of the gods, framed, talking tapestrographs of the Olympic family, loincloths, tunics, scribbling tablets and desk ornaments. These were a particular delight of the Board. Surely, some critics had suggested, no one had a desk large enough to accommodate all the ornaments that were forced upon the visitor, but were met with the undeniable reply that Nothing that Makes Money can be Wrong. Fortunately for the scores of tourists who visited the souvenir shops, there were some really useful keepsakes in among the caps, models of the Central Bank and other Presents from Olympus. Shelves sagged beneath a monstrous weight of creams and

ointments all professing to prevent diseases caused by sunbathing, presumably ailments such as muscle wastage, high cholesterol levels and exponential increases in body fat. In reality, these creams succeeded in producing a number of minor but recurring skin complaints. It was most fortunate that the shops also sold what purported to be cures for these maladies as well. There were hand-held nose-pickers in the shape of small gods, whose tiny hands were exactly the right size to reach up the nostrils in search of elusive irritants, which they would scoop out at the touch of a lever. There were cups and bottles whose designs were so convoluted that they would not actually hold any liquid, but which were snapped up by eager visitors, keen to display them in their homes with a nonchalant flick of the finger and a drawl of, "That? Oh, yes, we picked it up in Heaven."

The satyrs watched amicably as crowds of people flooded into their bars, shops and restaurants, desperately spending money as though it was contaminated with a fatal bacillus. Being nominally employed by the government to provide places of entertainment and the occasional den of vice for the tourists, the satyrs contrived to keep not a small proportion of the revenue they teased out of those who had realised that those who truly love money get rid of it as fast as they can. Some of the satyrs did feel queasy sensations of guilt – after all, the nymphs tended to do most of the hard work, especially in the dens of vice, unless the customers had particularly eclectic requirements.

A veritable mountain of clay had been flattened and sliced into innumerable post-tablets, laminated with garish pictures of every imaginable Olympic vista or

activity. Some of the latter had to be kept under the counters, but most of the postcards simply exuded sea, sun, sand and decadence. It was with one of these that Mrs. Panthropos now occupied herself, studiously scratching her name into the soft clay of the tablet.

"This picture's right lovely," she remarked.

Her husband was nervously waggling his right foot and did not answer.

"The message it's got printed on it is nice too," she continued. "Handy's what I call it. You don't have to bother yourself thinking about what to say."

"That must be convenient for you."

"It says, 'Wish you were here'."

Mr. Panthropos jerked upright. "Who're you saying that to?" he demanded.

"Only cousin Aggie."

Her husband emitted a strangled, apoplectic cry and sank down weakly into his cushions. "No! Not Aggie!" he wailed. "She'll come up here at once! She's got the money."

"Probably," she agreed.

"We'll have to leave before she does."

"Aggie's not that bad!"

"If *you* enjoy being regaled with stories of the difficulties young cousin Petras experiences in moving his bowels or how Melaina's scrofula is coming along, let alone the minutiae of the sufferings Aggie herself has undergone during the course of her past three colds, you can stay," he said firmly. "I shall not."

"I wish you'd stop fretting," chided his wife. "We're supposed to be on 'oliday."

"That's another thing!" he burst out. "*Where* are we on holiday?"

"In 'eaven," she sighed.

“Yes, but it’s pretty weird up here, don’t you reckon? All touristy and so on. Those weird glowing screens with moving pictures in the hotel rooms. The way they’re all crazy about things you’d never think gods would care about, like finances and stuff. The way most of the city is fenced off so that we can only see it on these guided tours. The way the big gods seem to be hiding from us, letting the satyrs and the nymphs entertain us – nothing special about them, we’ve all seen a satyr or two down below. Even worse, do you realise that the great ones you *do* see zooming around in their white robes and laurel wreaths are all stark raving potty?”

“Potty?”

“Yes, potty,” said Mr. Panthropos, with the air of one who is prepared to stand up for his convictions. “I got hold of their newstablet today, *The Helios*. There was an editorial in there by a river god who said that the government were all maniacs.”

“We’ve always known that. They’re bloody gods. That would turn your head, even if nothing else would.”

“He said that Hera was a megalomaniacal tyrant, holding power through false pretences,” Mr. Panthropos whispered. A delicious thrill of fear crept up his spine like the cold tip of a tongue, for this was the first blasphemy he had ever uttered, even though it was second hand. “He said that she is contemplating a war against Earth, which he reckons would be economic suicide. But she has to do it to win an election, or something.”

“Why?”

Mr. Panthropos made a gesture of impatience. “That’s just what gods are like,” he said. “One minute you’re all fine, they’re being nice to us, yes, please, come up to

Olympus, check out heaven, this is the beginning of a new era of accountability and collaboration between earth and heaven, then they change their minds and wheel out the thunderbolts. We can't do anything about it."

"You're being silly."

"One minute loads of tourists are coming up here and swelling their heavenly coffers, then the gods get pissed off and bomb away their income."

"There are all sorts of people we've been wanting to bomb for years," she reminded him. "We just haven't been able to yet."

"They scare me, they really do," he said. "Aren't you terrified they're going to turn nasty?"

"No," said his wife. "They're very down to earth and welcoming people. Look at the beach – none of these people have been put off. You worry too much, you do, Giorgios. The gods work in their mysterious ways."

"Nothing mysterious about it," muttered Mr. Panthropos rebelliously. "They're out to make a quick buck from the likes of us. As soon as tourist numbers fall, I betcha…wham, bam, boom, oops! No Thessaly. Potty, that's what I say. But I can see what they're up to. Oh, I can, all right."

*

After some time had passed without any further disruption to her ideal state, Hera had begun to hope that the invasion of the demigods would have no permanent effect. But her hopes were dashed when she found Enipeus had arranged an appointment to see her in her office. Inexplicably, she found herself unable to devise even an implausible excuse, and was quite taken aback when he appeared unannounced, as she felt certain she had refused him audience. There was an

awkward silence as the two immortals faced each other across the desk.

Enipeus himself had no wish to be there either, but a compulsion stronger than himself had forced him to ignore his own feelings. He supposed it was idealism or a kind of inspiration such as had gripped him when delivering his first speech in the Olympic Court.

"I've come to suggest one or two reforms," he began tentatively. Hera groaned silently. "Speak!" she commanded. "We'll consider them in the next Wardrobe session of they merit public discussion."

"Well, that's just it," confessed Enipeus. "We're supposed to be a theocratic state, right? I was thinking yesterday about the public's complete lack of influence over the Wardrobe. If they have no influence, then we don't have a theocratic state at all, do we? We only have something whose name I can't remember, but I know it begins with the Greek for 'few'."

"You mean an oligarchy," said Hera, without any of her customary charm.

"Yes, that's it," he said, grinning. "One of them."

"What, then, do you propose to do about this oligarchy?" asked Hera. "Short of inviting every incompetent in Olympus to take a hand in Government."

"Don't really know yet," he admitted.

"You mean to say that you are taking up my valuable time solely to tell me that you don't know something?" bridled Hera. "Absorbing though the subject of your own ignorance may be to you, I am afraid I do not share your fascination."

"Um…you know I own *The Helios*?" asked Enipeus. Hera wanted to shout furious accusations at him, and then go on to shout other things concerning vultures,

Enipeus, Tartarus and administrative duties, but found she was unable to. Social convention prevented her, she supposed. “You do, do you?” she said politely.
“Yes…I thought that I could publish a daily account of our debates in Wardrobe session, and have a tablet to air the People’s ideas, if they wrote in. It would at least keep them informed and give them an idea of what’s going on and a place to express what they think.”
“Enipeus, our government is above all a large and complex business enterprise, whose dealings it is not wise to publicise. Such a notion would cause needless worry to the people and only impede our efficiency and decrease our profit margins. Why should we care what the people think, anyway?”
“So that we can get re-elected, of course.”
“What?”
For the first time Hera gave him her full attention. “Did you say, ‘Re-elected’?”
“Yes. There’s going to be another election at some stage, isn’t there?”
“Ah, well, that is still in the future…but let us forget that for a moment.” Hera attempted to steer the conversation onto safer ground and hoped that Enipeus would prove thorough and conscientious in forgetting the subject of elections. “What were you saying about your newstablet?”
“That it was a way to reveal the truth of what goes on in our meetings,” said Enipeus firmly. He felt remarkably less trepidation than he had expected, considering that he was closeted with an Olympian, and an Olympian renowned for unpredictable moods and violent tempers at that. New strength flowed into him, and words formed in his mouth, as he required them, as though directed by another consciousness. This must be the

effect of so much practice in the political art, he told himself.

"By all means publish an account of our procedures," beamed Hera, then immediately corrected her slip of the tongue. It was most annoying to find oneself speaking unintentionally. Such mistakes show the folly of agitating too greatly, she considered. "Of course, your accounts mustn't be explicit, and we shall give some time to concocting a suitable piece for publication."

Enipeus' face fell. Incredulity shone from his wide brown eyes. "But…but, what's wrong with telling the truth?" he asked disappointedly.

Hera gave a lofty laugh. "We can't have people exposed to dangerous truths about which they shouldn't have to bother their innocent heads," she said. "Yes, it may be desirable that in a free theocracy such as ours they should have access to a record of how they are governed, but why should we trouble them with our troubles, burden them with our burdens? It was to avoid thinking that they delegated power to us. Truth can be painful or subversive. I am sure you would find that if you told it, many would ignore you, still more would disbelieve or laugh. What need have the people for truth? The republic is still young, but already we have achieved much. The people have new goals, new ambitions, and unswerving dedication to obtaining what they most desire. Such people, living in what must be very close to Elysium, have no need for truth. It would only hurt or puzzle them. My dear Enipeus," at this she leant over the desk and placed a slim, kindly hand on his arm; he winced at its frigidity, "the art of the media scientist is to tell not what has happened but what the public thinks has happened. So we shall give them equal

doses of scandal, horror, mystery, meaningless intrigue and other substanceless ephemera. These, my dear boy, are news. Not the daily struggles of a governing body that rules a vast domain such as ours. These are the stories that sell tablets."

The defiance in her was strong now. This was the old Hera, fighting back against her fumbling alter ego, who contradicted herself at every turn and said things she did not intend. Habit, weariness and confusion must have bemused her brain; but now her will rose indomitable and assertive, for a time.

Enipeus looked crestfallen. Obviously her powerful words had overcome whatever was driving him to ask these awkward questions, whether ambition, naivety or another impulse she did not suspect. "Oh, well, I suppose you know more about these things than I do," he said.

"Yes. I am sure I do," agreed Hera. "I am sure you must be busy," she added, when Enipeus showed no signs of rising.

"There was something else," said the river god. It said much for the improvement in Hera' s self control that she did not give rein to her feelings at this point. Instead, she gave a bright smile, clasped her hands together, and leant forward again, an expression of rapture on her face. "There was?" she asked, anticipation trembling in her voice. "This is more than I could have hoped. Our interview, I was thinking, had been all too short. Pray enlighten me."

"You know I'm a Thessalian river?"

"I do."

"Well, all the river gods thought to begin with that I could represent them all in the Wardrobe, like all the mountain gods thought Kithairon could represent them,

to be a voice for the people, and so on. But a deputation of the Peloponnesian rivers came to me last night, and Eurotas said to me – he got quite worked up, you should have heard the language he used – that is wasn't fair for Thessaly to have a representative if the Peloponese couldn't. Apparently the Pindos Mountains want a candidate as well, so do the Tagetys. They say Kithairon's an Attic mountain and can't empathise with their particular problems. And they said they'd fight if they didn't get their way."

Hera's heart sank even further than she thought possible. Her beautiful, beautiful constitution was trembling on the brink of destruction, and she could not comprehend the reasons for its peril. "That, Enipeus, is decidedly not what I wanted to hear."

"Nor me neither," he asserted. "We have a saying about not fighting with a Pindos. They flatten you, seriously. And there are so many of them."

"That was what I feared," said Hera. "No doubt if they extend the logic of their argument – if of course, they know what logic, and, indeed, an argument are – then every single one of those many, many Pindos mountains will wish to be a Wardrobe minister as well."

"Perhaps," considered Enipeus. "But that's what theocracy is about, isn't it? That they should all have a chance to take part, even if they do choose to delegate?"

At this point Hera felt the mental equivalent of a stifling hand clamped over her mouth, which hinted that it would only remove itself if she agreed. This resulted in an explosion of bad temper and a corresponding increase in her strength of will. Mentally, she bit the hand as hard as she could, and it withdrew to a safe distance, enabling her to speak a few rapid and pointed

words to the annoying river god, words that it was thoroughly necessary for him to hear.

"Enipeus, now that you are a Wardrobe minister, I am afraid you must discard any dewy-eyed idealistic notions of theocracy and face its hard reality instead. We who are called to bear political power must constantly make tough choices, and one of these is to stop the ignorant, misinformed electorate from interfering in the mechanism of government. Yes, we are all equal – we have equal rights, talents, opinions, aspirations, ambitions and whatever else you care to name. But even among equals there are only a limited number of places for the superior equals to occupy. Not more than a few can govern, you see, otherwise we should have an insupportable confusion of differing views, wishes, desires, opinions, ambitions and aspirations. And then of course the theocratic system would collapse. At present, the electorate is perfectly happy, as I have said, and were willing to exchange total political freedom for the constant round of entertainment, self-indulgence, hedonism and good living that now seems to occupy their immortality. Who can blame them? And of course in reality they *are* completely free, for they elected us to oversee the mechanisms that provide them with what they want. If they decide they want something else, that is hardly our fault, and if we increase their opportunities for entertainment and indulgence no doubt they will soon forget these irritating demands. Perhaps an extra hour could be added to the Compulsory Intoxication Session each evening. Honestly, those mountains! I thought I'd got rid of mountain problems after we made them all into policemen."

But the red spirit of revolution smouldered strong in the river's depths, quenching his fears of the great goddess. His weedy brows drew together in a puzzled frown. "But Hera," he said in a plaintive voice, "I'm sure they didn't vote for you, only for Ares as President, and it wasn't a terribly orthodox vote by any means. We've been studying political theory, you see, me and my friends. And even if they did elect you, who put you forward for election in the first place? Why you and no one else? You see? We don't even have a choice over who rules us. We're handed someone on a plate and told to vote for them. People are only misinformed if you're the source of their information…"

Hera drummed her fingers on the desk. "Enipeus," she said after a while.

"Yes?"

"I think it would be a very good idea if you left now."

Enipeus, still possessed by whatever impulse had driven him throughout the exchange, was on the point of protesting this was an undemocratic infringement of his rights to freedom of movement, but then caught Hera's eye and changed his mind. "Yes, perhaps it would," he agreed.

Hera exhaled with relief when the door settled shut behind him. To her surprise, a frenetic trembling seized her. Great gods! How in heaven had that illiterate shaggy demigod devised such dangerous revolutionary ideas? She hoped fervently that Athene hadn't been indoctrinating him with a view to using him as a puppet. The entire oligarchic system that Hera loved like a small child had come perilously close to being toppled, and would certainly suffer further onslaughts unless she did something about it. Reaching for a tablet, she was about to scribble a memorandum to the effect that it would be

advantageous for Enipeus and those friends with whom he had been studying political theory to be removed at once, but found she lacked the will to do it. Strange. Lately she had felt constrained at several turns by some democratic impulse that reminded her she should act in accordance with the rules she had supposedly laid down. This matter must be resolved by democratic means.

How to redirect angry impulses and defuse potentially explosive situations? She noted down a couple of alternatives. An immediate increase in public entertainment – entertainments suggested and subtly enforced had proved remarkably efficacious in preventing the People from paying too much attention to the realities of their situation. Perhaps a wage hike and a drop in the interest rate…after all, Prometheus' scheme was bearing much golden fruit, and it only seemed fitting to acknowledge this booming prosperity. Hera frowned at her note tablet. She had a tidy mind and liked things to come in threes. When the final alternative occurred to her she smiled and wrote it down, having had it at the back of her mind for some time and finding that it concurred very readily with what she really wanted to do.

Of course, a war was the perfect way to focus loyalties and get rid of all those nasty aggressive feelings. In the search for Zeus, the time to involve force as well as guile was long overdue. Perhaps the initial delay in launching her pincer attack on Attica would serve her well, for Athene had sunk into a disgruntled silence as days passed with no action being taken against her beloved Attica, while Ares and Apollo, she sensed, were straining at their leads. Apollo especially had a great many nasty aggressive feelings,

for which there were no acceptable outlets in Olympus any longer, although he had recently shattered a lyre over a satyr's head and been quoted in the press, vowing never again to grace Olympus with the magic of his voice.

Hera was more than certain that her enemy was even now closeted in Attica with his vile concubine. She knew the exact location of every woman within its borders whose age and charms equipped her as a target for the god. Now, no doubt, was the time to strike.

*

Enipeus leaned weakly against the cool wall of the corridor, pressing his damp temple against its comforting stone. He would admit to no one, least of all himself, the gnawing dread he felt before, during and after a meeting with Hera, though he did confess that the reasons for his dread were decent enough to alter during proceedings. If only along such lines as, am I going to say something stupid? Am I saying something stupid? And did I say something stupid?

Whether he really believed in the principles he upheld he was no longer sure. Nor could he have given an answer as to whether he was doing this for himself or was being driven. But as a river, it had never been in his nature to stop halfway. It was not the done thing. Besides, he had heard horrible stories of what happened to rivers if they did. They became Dams…. Enipeus shuddered. He had never met one, and generations of self-perpetuating parental threats had instilled in him a horror of being Dammed of which any Baptist would have nodded in approval.

While he pondered on his probable folly, he caught sight of a movement, close to the floor. Something was creeping up behind him. On revolving rapidly, he found

himself staring at a small child, standing innocently in a corridor that had grown strangely quiet.

It appeared to be male, and was wrapped in rustling clothes of a worn, papery material, printed with complicated swirls of engraving. Smooth, well-groomed golden hair plastered its scalp, heavy and rich. But Enipeus was most startled by his flawless green skin, and the golden teeth gleaming in his smile, and the metallic pupils of his eyes. As he moved towards the river there came a soft clinking noise, as though his pockets were filled with coins. “Hello,” said the child, and smiled sweetly.

“Hello,” said Enipeus. “Are you lost? I didn’t think there were any young people in these buildings.”

“No, I am not lost,” said the child. “I belong everywhere. But thank you for asking. You are Enipeus, are you not?”

“Yes, that’s true,” confessed the river cautiously. “You’re not about to arrest me, are you?”

“No!” laughed the child. “Far from it. I have been watching your career with interest. It seems to me that you are gifted with some ambition and an admirable sense of social conscience. You are no friend of Hera’s.”

“Don’t say that here!” the river hissed. “She’ll hear you.”

The child laughed again. “I am no friend of hers either. You need not worry. To begin with, I found her useful…and I should not be here without her. But now she is becoming tiresome, she has too many ideas of her own. I wish she would go away and leave me alone.”

“Are you one of her children?” Enipeus asked doubtfully. He began to feel an uncontrollable desire to get as far away from the calm child as possible. If his

departure came at high speed, he would be willing to pay extra.
“I suppose you could say I was,” reflected the child. He smiled innocently up at Enipeus, and began to follow him as the river edged backwards down the corridor.
“I admire you greatly, Enipeus,” he said. “And I have been helping you in your efforts to win power for the people in the city. But you must understand that I have to use you as I used Hera. I could only enter the city if she overthrew Zeus, and now I can only come into my prime if you overthrow Hera. The only way for you to do this is to sustain the pretence that you are winning power for the People. Then once you rule Olympus, you can recede into the background while I take my rightful place at the helm of heaven.”
“What are you?” breathed Enipeus, creeping backwards, a horrible fixation keeping his eyes riveted on the child. “What are you talking about?”
“You must have felt my help, Enipeus. My inspiration. My part in making those handy speeches. My assistance in winning you support and the confidence of the people who want to be free, who want to be able to choose, who want to live in a theocratic state. They can have all these, at a price.”
“What price?”
The child opened his hands. His glowing face beamed up at Enipeus. “They must love me above all else,” he smiled.

Enipeus ran. Panicking, he raced senseless down the corridor, witless and terrified, only to find the child ahead of him, barring the exit to the street.
“You should not run, Enipeus,” said the child. “You cannot. I am everywhere…”

“Who are you?” panted the river. “Can’t you let me go?”

“I have been called Dhosh in the East,” said the child. “And Luker in the far north. But here I am called Argurion.”

He leapt at Enipeus, the light flashing from his bared teeth. Screaming, Enipeus kicked at him as he worried about his feet like a small dog, scampering on all fours. In vain, the river batted at the horrible smiling thing. It sank its teeth into his leg, and the river collapsed. His leg grew very cold.

The child stood above him, his hands behind his back. “I did not wish for it to be difficult, Enipeus,” he said. “I should have preferred you to welcome me in.”

“Don’t do any more to me,” sobbed the river. “I don’t welcome you…or want you. I want to help Olympus…”

“Oh, but you will,” said the child kindly. “You will give it to me. You have come too far, Enipeus, to retreat now.”

With that, he threw himself to the floor, and wormed his way towards the stricken river, who tried to drag himself pitifully towards the door. The corridor echoed to his screams as the child pressed his face to the bite in the river’s leg, slowly forcing his way inside.

Deeper and deeper he pushed, through the waves of the river’s pain. His leg bulged slightly as the child disappeared, then the wound closed and he lay still, smeared with sweat and tears.

For a long while he did not move.

When he got to his feet, his mind felt clear, purposeful, determined. Burning in his belly were new sensations, desires he had sensed before but never recognised for what they truly were. Enipeus stretched

like a cat, and smiled. The child had been right after all. There were no other ways to power.

The river's eyes, as he turned to face the street, dried swiftly in the sunlight. Creeping from their corners came a thick fluid, yellow, green, glinting with flecks of gold, blending many hues in its oozing surface. As he blinked, it crept over the surface, clinging in a glazed crust over the doorways to his sight. When he turned the corner, no pupils were visible any longer in the smooth glowing slits of his eyes.

Argurion's nebulous presence, hovering over the city, was conscious of a certain pride as the river vanished in the crowd. For his first manifestation, he felt that had gone fairly well. He appeared to have recruited a useful ally.

*

It was drawing towards late afternoon when the two gods came to Hera's desk, summoned thither by an efficient nymph. The goddess did not immediately look up. "Ares, Apollo," she said, writing busily on a tablet, "I have received intelligence that provides incontrovertible evidence that the time has come for a pre-emptive strike on Attica to enclose our enemy, Zeus. It is imperative that you set out on this mission immediately; your attack will thus coincide with nightfall to create maximum confusion. Grave escalations in anxiety prevalent among the People as to the hostile movements of the fallen tyrant have compelled me to treat this meeting between us as an extraordinary Wardrobe meeting where I am to seek your compliance with this decision." She paused, but as neither made a move to object, continued, "I gave you orders some time ago. Act on them now – leave none alive. Remember that to you he will appear as a mortal,

but one immune to your weapons. Encircle Attica with Furies, pen him in and hunt him down. The blessing of the gods go with you – and don't forget to enjoy yourselves."

A slow smile spread across Ares' cruel face. "At last! Some fighting again!" he said.

"It is good," intoned Apollo, his clear, bell like voice ringing cold in the silence. "Better it is for my arrows to shine in use than to dull in their quiver."

There seemed now no remnant in his face of the god he might have been, the well of inspiration and of music that brought solace to men's souls in the darkest of days. Consumed by the promises he had made to the power Hera commanded, beaten, undermined and disillusioned, no question arose in his immortal soul, no shred of mercy, which though feigned and artificial as was his custom might yet have averted what he was about to do.

The gods swept from the room in a coil of cloud. Already a whisper of thunder followed in their footsteps. Hera smiled indulgently. Ares, playing with his toys again! Really, men were not sensible enough to hold political power. The goddess called for her secretary, who materialised at her elbow. "Take dictation," she commanded. "This is for immediate press release to all contacts. 'Terror escalation forces air strikes'; 'MisZeus of power reaps rewards'; *Resistance is Zeusless*, says Wardrobe to fallen dictator.' With those headlines edit the following statement, 'Owing to an uncontrollable rise in terror after the rumours concerning Zeus' promised coup in Olympus, Wardrobe Ministers were forced to authorise air strikes against Attica, where the tyrant's forces are concentrated. Spearheading the attack is our glorious president, Ares,

the new Compeller of Clouds, accompanied by his general Apollo. Setting off on their daring mission, safeguarding us from the mounting threat to our way of life, the gods showed that spirit and complete devotion to the republic and her people that we should all display….”

*

“I am getting a bit sick of this, Sophocles,” said Athene to her owl. “All we seem to be doing is irritating Hera, I have no real clue any more what Prometheus thinks he’s up to, I never see Aphrodite or Hermes, and I’m beginning to wonder why I’m bothering and what I’m actually doing. I wish we could just take a holiday and completely forget it all. Somewhere idyllic, you know, with quiet beaches, breathtaking scenery and friendly people. Gods are so bloody touchy.”

Sophocles nodded gently in agreement. The goddess drifted aimlessly up and down her veranda, but the wide vista of crinkled mountains lumbering toward Macedonia had none of its usual placatory effect. Worriedly, she tried to probe Hera’s distant mind for some inkling of her intentions, but was diverted to her secretary. It was so difficult to know what an Olympian was thinking if they didn’t want you to, especially now they had teams of people to answer the awkward questions. Athene sat down, got up again, went to make herself a drink, then though better of it. Unlike her, to be this agitated.

When the door was wrenched open and flung back with a bang that did no good to the carved wood work, it came as something of a relief. Now at least she had something to be angry about, even if it was only a splinter.

Prometheus tumbled through as she span round. “Athene,” he panted. “Your spear, shield, aegis, helmet, whatever. We must leave at once.”

“Hera?” Her voice came as a whisper after the wheeze of the god. Prometheus nodded, gulping. “She sent out Ares and Apollo to strike at Attica. It’s all over the city now. Special edition of the tablets. Oh, infernal Shades, I’m too old for this. I really am.”

Her nimble fingers flickered about her feet as she bound on her sandals of unblemished gold, which carried her swift as the wind over water or boundless land. Her breath came fast in her excitement. Fierce rage mounted in her, against the goddess who dared to insult her land, her villages, her people, against the gods who were to carry out the command. Shaking loose her blue-black hair, she placed the terrible helm of the War-Goddess on her head, and twisted her shield free from the casing that kept the whip-lashing snakes and venom-oozing fangs of the Gorgon’s head fixed thereon turned to the wall. She seized her heavy spear with its honed point of bronze. Sophocles nuzzled her ear to say goodbye as Athene drew herself up, eyes spitting flame whose burning sparks tumbled to the floor, scorching the boards. “Ready, Prometheus?”

He nodded. “I thought my plan was going so well,” he said forlornly. “ The new Wardrobe, the revolutionaries, the tourist industry about to backfire.” He shrugged. “I don’t suppose I could borrow a spear?”

Athene pulled one from a bracket on the wall and tossed it to him. “We’ve spent too long scheming and planning in secret,” she said. “I am going to show them precisely what I think of them. It is my duty to protect Attica, whatever the Wardrobe decides.”

“I hope at least the people may have an inkling of what is afoot and have time to hide,” he said. “I did leave them all very clear instructions, when I was down there. Only humans are so dense when it comes to taking divine advice, so I…”
“Prometheus?”
“Yes?”
“Could you tell me on the way?”
“Well, I suppose I could…”
“Good,” said Athene, and sprang from her veranda into the sky. Prometheus followed her, already struggling to match her speed. “Perhaps I should have asked Heracles to come as well,” he reflected retrospectively, as the wind swelled into a physical force driving into their faces. Athene turned upon him a gaze that belied her nature as patron of the arts, crafts and ways of peace. “On this occasion,” she said grimly, “I do not think that Heracles will be necessary. And if it all goes wrong, he might have work left to do here.”

Their two shining forms rose high above the blue-mantled darkness of the Olympic massif, forging far beyond the evening shadows cast by the shoulders of the peaks, into the blood-hued splendour trailing from the sun as his fires were quenched in the baths of Hesperus. The tawny light glowing dully on their polished bronze, they swept southwards in a rush of cascading winds, two swiftly falling stars pouring down from heaven. And so it was that for the first time the Olympians present at Hera’s emergency general Wardrobe meeting were outnumbered by the demigods.

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“Well, I for one am keeping my head down,” said Poseidon as he strode into the Central Bank with Hades

at his elbow. “The Underworld’s taken a massive knock, and I don’t want the Ocean reformed as well.”
“Not much chance of that,” muttered Hades. “We at least had something to reform.”
“Can’t have the naiads getting uppity ideas about their rights and complaining when I violate them,” went on Poseidon cheerfully. “Expect I’ll soon have every sea-nymph I ravish lodging complaints at this rate. Honestly! You’d think they’d regard it as a damned privilege.”
They strode onto the black disk at the centre of the palace. Moments later they rematerialised on the roof. As Hades remained invisible, Poseidon merely appeared to be voicing his strident opinions to the world in general. “…and you’ve no idea what airs some of the buggers are putting on. Only last week I found a Triton sitting in my chair when I came down to a banquet. A demigod, I ask you! I might have caught some vile disease.” It was at this point that he noticed the large group of demigods, who were seated in their semicircle before the Air Throne, listening to him avidly. “Yes, bloody demigods,” he carried on as he strode forward, dropping small piles of steaming seaweed with every step. He gave the stony-faced demigods a bright smile. “Hello, you been roped in too?” he asked smoothly. “Poor buggers. Please do excuse the weed and…oh yes, I do believe it’s a sea horse down here…hmm. Look at that, exquisite, isn’t it? You see, I haven’t been up here for a while, and down in the Ocean we have more elastic standards. I’d better send this fellow back where he came from…” The sea horse vanished as he held it up. “There we go. Don’t want to let innocent creatures suffer untimely deaths, and all that. Shall we get on with the business in hand? You’re damned lucky to have me

at all, I must say. If I hadn't happened to be swimming along by the Peneios estuary, I'd never have got the summons in time. So make the most of me."

"I'm sure they couldn't have managed without you," said Hades' dry voice. "Your attire alone supplies the requisite vegetation necessary for a government meeting. Without the complication of pots – which I find such a nuisance in the Underworld, they're always getting knocked over. There is a sea slug crawling up your left leg, and on top of that you smell rather strongly."

"It's a good healthy smell," said Poseidon indignantly. "It's a powerful, outdoor fragrance, redolent of the rolling brine, the creak of fishing vessels and the jolly songs of sailors, of life on the ocean wave, the blue, swelling ocean…"

"Yes, that's my point," said Hades. "The ocean's full of fish. And in it they perform unsavoury bodily functions."

"It's nothing to what the naiads do in it."

"I happen to find naiads erotically attractive," said Hades. "I cannot say the same for fish."

"In other words, you're discriminating against them because they're scaly and have fins instead of arms?"

"And the smell," added Hades. "Don't forget the smell."

"What about mermaids then?" asked Poseidon in triumph. " Phew, some of those girls…well, you just wouldn't believe me."

"I'm sure I wouldn't," said his brother placidly. " No doubt I should be entirely justified in not doing so."

Hera, sitting with Artemis opposite the demigods, watched in fascinated, frozen disbelief. The vast, weedy shape bickering with the empty air in the throne beside him looked more than slightly out of place in her new,

vibrant, forward looking city. She began to realise how much she had enjoyed Wardrobe meetings in the absence of Hades and Poseidon. At last she attempted to interrupt. “As First Minister,” she said, “I have called this emergency meeting of the Wardrobe to inform you of the latest developments in the crisis surrounding the pursuit of Zeus. Owing to unprecedented levels of anxiety in Olympus, and the danger that he might escape…or mount an attack on the city, we have authorised air strikes on Attica…Poseidon, are you paying attention? We are now in a state of war with Attica, now revealed as a rogue state fomenting rebellion and harbouring our enemy.”

“What’s that?” asked Poseidon. “You’ve declared war on Attica? Good, never could stand the place. Now, look right here, Hades…”

“Can’t stand Attica?” scoffed Hades. “I seem to remember a little disagreement you had with Athene over who was going to be the patron deity. The citizens, I recall, preferred her gift of the olive tree to your smelly fish-infested waters.”

“If there was as much wrong with my empire as you are trying to suggest,” said Poseidon in a dignified voice, “I’m sure it would have been reformed as comprehensively as some people’s kingdoms have been. However…”

“The innovators must have decided that reform of the oceans was too daunting,” retaliated Hades. “One step on the shore and they’d passed out from the fumes.”

“Anyway, it’s not true about me losing to Athene. I being the elder and so the more mature contestant, nobly decided to cede my rights…” He looked around. “Where is Athene, by the way?”

"That was one of the things I wanted to discuss," volunteered Hera. "However, it seems we have been diverted onto the topic of the national fisheries, so the rest of us were quite happy to take this opportunity of relaxing in a moment of national crisis, while our brave boys are risking their immortalities for the sake of the Republic, because of course we could see how important your debate was and we didn't want to disturb you."

"That's very kind," said Poseidon, touched. "Would you like to join in?"

Hera seized the opportunity of silence and filled it rapidly with a torrent of speech. Several of the demigods had the same idea, so she fell silent, half-listening to what they had to say, for she was secretly dreading their reactions to her declaration of war without their knowledge or consent. To her relief most of the uproar seemed to be focused on Zeus and his dastardly schemes to rob them of their livelihoods and security, let alone their liberty and freedom of speech. She caught a glimpse of Enipeus' expression, now the only demigod to remain silent – she guessed he would wait till the clamour had subsided to ensure that she heard his query, and that the Wardrobe heard her reply. As yet, he had not built up the protective wall around his innermost thoughts that an aristocratic deity learns to cultivate, and the whirrings of his mind were plain to her. It still seemed beyond belief that such thoughts were the product of an unschooled, rustic river god without some form of guidance from without. If she could but control him or bend him to her will, he would be most useful – far more so than Ares.

The demigods restrained themselves as Enipeus banged on the arm of his throne. "May I pose a

question?" he asked. His eyes swivelled to look directly at Hera, and with a start she noticed that they were completely glazed over. No pupils were visible at all, and the surface was an indiscriminate, unidentifiable shade…a colour that seemed a medley of all the others jumbled together into a dull, meaningless nonentity. A colour of no recognisable hue, merely a welter of contrast crushed into a blur, with here and there brief flashes of green.

Far away, in the narrow valley at the foot of the Olympic range, the bed of the river Enipeus dried in the gathering night.

"May I ask, in the presence of the Wardrobe, the reason one Minister took it upon herself to declare war upon a province of Earth without the express agreement of the other Ministers?" he asked. "Such an action seems to contradict the theocratic principles along which our state is run."

Hera replied at once. "May I, for my part, remind the honourable member Enipeus that for the time being, in the absence of the President, I am still the First Minister of the Wardrobe and as such am permitted to make grave decisions concerning the good of the republic without the delay inevitable in calling a full meeting. Especially in a situation where time is of crucial importance, as in this case it was. Instead, Ares, Apollo and I formed the core of an emergency meeting and we passed a motion by three votes to none that the attack should be launched."

Enipeus glowered. "Honourable Member, I accept your explanation. But I maintain that this declaration of war against a mortal province which may or may not be in league with the tyrant Zeus, this unsupported and unilateral deed of yours seems not only to be a gross

example of individual action but an enterprise of economic suicide. Attica's tourists already provide us with much needed wealth now underpinning our economy. How many of them will die in this onslaught, perish innocent in the flames, and flee homeless into the wilds – how then will they swell our coffers and fill Olympus with their wealth?" There was a strange note in his voice, one his revolutionary friends had never heard before. Kalea, Daphne, Silenus and Kithairon looked anxiously at the changed demigod. "I insist that for our state to be a true theocracy, for us to direct our immortalities to worthy ends, there can be no such actions showing such wanton disregard for the mightiest forces that serve us." He thumped his throne with a balled hand. "I call for devotion to socially oriented behaviour! For our group is more significant than the parts that form it, whatever their individual desires." Here he scowled at Hera. "Were the group to crumble, its components would be meaningless fragments. Our only hope is to avoid economic folly at all costs; otherwise our society is doomed to destruction and dispersal. Do I make myself clear?" Veins stood like swollen rivers in flood across his temples, weedy hair straggled in his glaring eyes.

"Good speech, boy," said Poseidon approvingly. "Nice to see a bit of spark and spirit in you rivers again. I must confess that your outpourings into the Ocean have been a little insipid of late." Enipeus' glance of utter contempt went as unnoticed as a gnat to a mastodon.

"They probably don't want to sully the clear waters of their limpid streams in your vast churning pond of decomposing detritus," commented Hades.

“Look, Hades, this has gone too far. You’re the one with the river Styx running through your back garden. You used to hack chunks out of it to repair the walls.”
“Not any more we don’t,” said Hades smugly. “We’ve been reformed, you see.”

Watching them, Hera’s self-possession all but faltered. She caught herself with her jaw hanging, and shut her mouth hastily, still overwhelmed with disbelief at what she had heard, a disbelief tinged with a hint of fear and horror, for these seditious outbursts from a humble demigod, she thought, could be laid at no door but her own. This was of her making, for only the chain of ideas she had initiated could have sparked off such a reaction. Demigods clustered behind Enipeus, swaying towards his opinions, though dismayed and troubled by the violence with which he had spoken. What had she done, what had she unleashed against herself?

But her iron will and unbending pride rose undaunted. Whatever the unforeseen consequences of her recent actions, they would never prove to be her master. In her hands, she knew, lay the true power over Olympus. She alone held sway over the gods, over gods who were blind to this reality owing to her clinical precision and method, her influence over gods who believed they were free and soon would care neither one way nor the other, so long as they were wealthy enough. If outwitting and overmastering a river god were beyond her then she did not deserve what she had created for herself. Yet her mind was dull and clouded; a stifling blanket lay over her like the numbing force of fatigue, muddling her precise thoughts and confusing her arguments. Of course, the battle with this impudent god must be fought on strictly democratic lines and in accordance with the code she had laid down. And her

pride waxed in a titanic struggle with this overlying mental fog. She supposed it was only her nerves that led her to imagine the fog was fighting back.

With pursed lips she glared at Enipeus as he thundered on. “Where is your evidence for this supposed panic in Olympus? Or of the threat posed by Zeus, be he in Attica or elsewhere? Can you tell me that?”

“I read it in the newstablet,” said Hera innocently. “*The Helios* – your news tablet, as it happens. So of course it must be true.”

“But who wrote these articles? Who concocted these scandalous fabrications?”

“Enipeus, you can hear for yourself that whatever the case may have been earlier, Olympus is certainly panicking now.” She paused, and the murmuring sound of the uneasy city was clearly audible. “You must understand that in our business, the significance of a newstablet is not who wrote it but what it contains. Now, before I forget, I must mention the conduct of Athene in this present crisis. She was seen leaving Olympus in the company of Prometheus shortly after Ares and Apollo departed. It is possible, indeed highly probable, that they intend to oppose Ares as he attempts to carry out his mandate. If this is so, they must be tried as their treason warrants.

“For the time being, let us remember that we are in a state of war and must remain available for similar emergency meetings. Are there other issues that Ministers wish to raise?”

But Enipeus had exhausted his arguments and Poseidon’s attempt to indict Hades for olfactory prejudice and discrimination against a marine ethnic minority was swiftly overturned.

*

"We've no hope of catching them, you do realise," panted Prometheus. "All we can do is try to stop them seeing him. Or if we manage to spot him ourselves, so much the better."

"You can take care of that," said Athene. "I've more important things to do. If Ares and Apollo think they can devastate my country without me lifting a finger I think it's my duty to correct them."

"How can I cope with the other business on my own?"

She turned to him angrily, making him lurch in the air as she snapped: "Why should I care about what happens to him if he's not going to be any use anyway? Which he must be, as we've heard nothing from him for so long. If he needs to be protected from Hera then he won't cut much ice in Olympus any more, will he? Let him escape on his own – he's had enough experience. What I'm concerned about's the insane order to obliterate my country and my people. What will they think of her goddess if she just stands by and watches those two lunatics rain down thunderbolts on Attica? Hera wouldn't have been so quick to ruin her little pet Argos if she thought Zeus was hiding there. No, if he were hiding on her turf it would all have been diplomatic. Damn her," she added savagely.

"But Zeus is your father, you're his favourite daughter."

"Prometheus, try to remember what it was like when you were the Benefactor of Mankind and not an Olympic Politician. Now you act as though you're more interested in society than the people themselves."

Prometheus was silent. Only the noise of the wind moaning past could be heard. Athene was aware she had hurt him, but a hard core of pride and anger prevented her from saying anything more to the old god.

“I never thought you’d see it like that, Athene,” he said at length. “Of course I’m interested in society, including ours in Olympus. But I thought that at least you would see that it’s only an organization composed of individuals and that its condition really does affect those people who comprise it. Individuals declare war, not societies. They only follow. But sometimes you have to step away from the particular to see the patterns that its people make, and to understand what you might do to correct them.

“Olympus is diseased, Athene, and the world below is following our path. Our fight is all the harder because our enemies have weapons at their disposal that are far more attractive than ours – promises of freedom, democracy, equality and accountability. But you know as well as I that none of these exist in heaven. Hera and Enipeus are both tools, useful at present but soon to be cast aside. Through Hera, Ploutokratia cast down Zeus, and enslaved the collective mind of Olympus to an ideology all the more dangerous because it held so much of the truth. Yet any shreds of democracy or enlightenment it might have held were soon shrivelled by the weight of commerce, whose forces will now destroy Hera, unless she can overcome them. And having seen what Enipeus is becoming, I do not think that is likely.

“Ploutokratia’s agents are so seductive, her rewards so tantalising, that soon she will have united every mind in enslavement under her. Then we shall have true equality and erasure of distinction. And then we shall really need a god to turn to, even though there are none to whom we may call.

“But Zeus is untouched. I’m not interested in restoring a king, Athene. But in his very irrelevance I feel he

holds the key to undoing the coils bound round Olympus. If they're not released, then the world we created might as well never have been."

Athene felt mortified. "I'm so sorry, Prometheus," she said. "I do understand. The whole business stinks. You do what you have to, but I have to do my duty to Attica. I am its patron deity. If Ares touches one stone of Athens I'm going to make him wish he was the god of needlework."

"You know you can't go back to Olympus after this?"

She shrugged, a challenging manoeuvre to perform when airborne. "It can't be helped," she said. "I haven't got a choice."

"I know what you mean," said Prometheus. "Very often I wish my brother and I could change places. I alwaysthought that Epimetheus[1] had a much easier time of things."

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Something in the air around Megaventris' house inclined the breather to extreme lethargy. For days now, he and Zeus had done little more than recline lazily on the veranda or doze in the sunshine, conversing through that dreamy haze that surrounds the sunlit mind in the brief intervals between meals. On occasions Melitta graced them with her presence, though she made it fairly clear that she was of the opinion that the sun was having no enviable effect on their minds, and they might better occupy themselves with study or some other useful employment. But the warmth, the clear sunlight, the milky-sweet intoxicant of the magnolia,

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[1] Prometheus' younger brother. His name meant "afterthought", whereas Prometheus' stood for "forethought".

Megaventris' relaxed, detached manner – all of these combined to give the bemused Zeus a sense of pleasant unreality. An Arcadian, dreamlike haze overlay the farm; long afterward, when Zeus recalled those days in Attica, his memories were filtered through sunshine and the smell of blossom, through the brittle shrill of cicadas and the latticed shade of trees.

Akritides, one of the freed men who worked on the farm, appeared round the side of the house, encouraging a recalcitrant donkey with blows of his vine stick. At each sharp crack on its flanks, the donkey let out a piercing bray of acute melancholy and complaint, and finally stopped altogether, refusing to move at all until Akritides had belaboured its behind with considerable force and dedicated application, accompanied by a choice selection of oaths. The animal timed its sudden departure to coincide with a particularly vigorous swipe at its hindquarters, and its resultant disappearance just before the critical moment of contact left Akritides thrown off balance and sprawling in the dust. The donkey disappeared down the hill, its loaded panniers bouncing by its sides, with the man racing close behind it, making spurious comments about its immediate ancestry.

"Poor Akritides, he does take life so terribly seriously," mused Megaventris. "Also he seems incapable of eating for more than half an hour at a stretch, which I always think is a bad sign in a grown man."

"Where's he off?" asked Zeus.

"Some odd scheme seems to have been set up in Dekalia," answered the man. "Apparently the gods are offering anything from short breaks to four week getaways in Heaven, opening Olympus as a resort for

tourists. Akritides is off for a weekend or so. I gather that he hopes to meet nubile young women on the beach."

"Excuse me?"

"I believe they ran into financial difficulty," he explained. "I think it quite often happens that old families let visitors into their homes to supplement the running costs. I only hope for their sakes that Olympus was not mortgaged."

Zeus shrugged. After all, whatever insanities the gods got up to now were hardly his affair.

The afternoon was well advanced by the time Akritides returned. To the donkey's extreme displeasure, its panniers were still full. "Did you miss your flight?" asked Megaventris.

But Akritides was agitated and his eyes quick and crinkled with fear. "Kyrie, I have bad news, very bad news," he said. "The airport is closed, and when I arrived at the village, I found everyone making ready to leave. Stephanos said he had received a message from the gods that the wrath of the Immortals was descending upon us, and they were to escape into the mountains while there was still time."

"The gods told them they were angry and coming to kill them? Isn't prior warning a little out of character?"

"The message was from Prometheus, kyrie. Ares and Apollo, he says, are coming down from heaven with fire in their hands."

A hollow dread sank into Zeus' stomach, emptying him from within and settling in the depths of his lungs so that he struggled to breathe. Panic sprang at him. He had to stifle a wild impulse to flee without a second thought, flee down the hillside and away. No – wait and think. Don't make a foolish choice.

Unhappily he looked about him. A cold bucket of reality was upturned over him, suddenly cutting him off once again, tearing him from sunlight, peaceful house and calm, upending him into nightmare. The illusion was broken, he was no longer a part of it, and realised that he never really had been. This time was over, lost and irrevocable, and it was due to him.

Steeling himself, he asked Akritides sharply, "What did the god say? Tell me quickly."

Akritides gulped. "He said, Kyrie, that the Immortals thought Zeus was in Attica and were going to root him out by force, and that we would see the battles of the gods fought here on earth. That anyone who sheltered him would be destroyed. Kairophon is keeping quiet about it, but he thinks the man who fought twenty others in the tavern was an Immortal and may have been the Thunderer himself. He does not want to be punished if the gods find out he was here."

Zeus' heart sank even further. He put his head in his hands and groaned. Now it seemed that his very presence was to be the undoing of his friends. There was no choice but to flee. In vain he tried to perceive the minds of the gods, to break from the encircling blindness; and failed, for he could know no more than the mortals. But forming dazedly in his mind rose the embryo of an idea, one that might save his friends and avert what he had hoped to prevent, which now seemed certain to come to pass. To find him, he knew, they would slice through Attica like a scalpel, leaving nothing in their way. They would come with fire and the thunderbolt, and bake the earth dry to pluck his living form from among the welter of the dead. Almost drunk with horror, he knew that he must go to them, or let numberless mortals die.

He could not let them find Melitta or Megaventris, must get as far away from them as he could. Idiot, to think that he could protect them, powerless as he was. Guilt and shame overwhelmed him, and a hopeless, vain anger at himself and at the gods. This must be the impotent fury that a man feels when the Fates frustrate him at every turn, the rage that can drive him to hurl defiance in the face of the gods, though he knows they will hurl it back harder. He thought of Odysseus, of his quiet and indomitable spirit, which had in fact been broken long ago but failed to notice, in the knowledge that one can go no lower than despair.

"I must go to them," he said. He was annoyed at how his voice altered in pitch, virtually squeaking, and cleared his throat in what he hoped was a manly way.

"What are you talking about, you moron?" said Melitta angrily. "They'll kill you."

Zeus shook his head. "No, they can't do that." He touched his tongue to his lips, trying to calm the flutter in his breath. "But in time I'll probably wish they could."

"What can you do?" she protested. "You said they can't see you as a god. So they'd only recognise you from close to – how the hell are you going to get close enough? We don't even know where they are."

"They'll look for me by a process of elimination," he said unhappily. "And they will look for me through you. Unless I go to them, very many people will die."

"You cannot save these people," said Akritides angrily. "There is nothing you can do, nothing. Before you have reached the village the gods will pass the borders of Attica. So Prometheus said to Stephanos. You cannot save these people. If they are looking for you, they will kill to find you and there is nothing you can do."

Megaventris rose to his feet with some effort, and paced slow and dignified to the front of the veranda, where he stood looking out over the trees. When he spoke his voice was low and indistinct. “So they come with lightning and divine wrath to lay waste our land,” he said. “Why was power over mortal lives ever placed in such hands as these?”

Zeus felt a sickness churning his bowels; a serial offender whose swollen eternity of crimes suddenly confronted him, enumerated by a pitiless judge with unremitting exactitude. “I never meant for this to happen,” he said faintly.” I never meant for this to happen to anyone.”

“What have you done?” said Megaventris. Together, the unpitying faces of father and daughter stared him down.

“Nothing,” said Zeus miserably. “At least…I think I was a bad king. And I made Hera very unhappy. And so she wants to punish me at all costs. I suppose I deserve it.”

“You should have considered such an outcome,” said Megaventris sternly. “You do not have our mortal license to treat consequences with such contempt.”

“I suppose I should go,” mumbled Zeus. But he did not know where.

“They are coming from the North,” volunteered Akritides. He turned, with no further delay, and disappeared around the corner of the house. Melitta dashed through the doorway and emerged with a bag.

“What do you think you’re doing?” said Zeus. “You can’t come with me.”

“What kind of person would I be if I left you now?” she asked. “You said they’d look for me, and hope you’re with me. All we can do is hope they’ll see us quickly.” She turned, wordless, and began to throw things into her

haversack, darting into the house after a short while. The sky shadows lengthened, then seemed to broaden, merge and fuse into the uniform darkness of evening. Zeus started at a low, distant echo of thunder, then, seeing nothing, returned to the veranda.

Inspiration came to him. “If we make for Eleusis we can find sanctuary there,” he said. “We might lead them there before they attack.”

“Zeus,” said Megaventris. His anger had passed, leaving a melancholy calm. “I love my daughter very much, and I didn’t think that when I came to give her up it would be like this.”

“She has as good a chance with me as here,” he began. “If the gods find her they will kill her…can’t you come too? This will be no place to hide…” But the man held up a warning hand.

“I realise this. We are as powerless as you before the Fates. But I will only hold you up. All I ask is that you look after her, for I know she will look after you.”

“I will,” promised Zeus. “I will not let them so much as touch her. I give you my word.” Never before had he promised so fervently; never before had he been so afraid his word would not prove strong enough. “We’ll make for Eleusis – they won’t be able to touch us in the temple. If my guess is correct, they’ll be looking for a girl like Melitta, and if they get close enough to put two and two together, they’ll follow. And if they get too close, then I shall leave her – they’ll come after me, not her, by then.”

“I hope you speak wisely,” Megaventris said. “And I hope that they do not come with fire as you think they will. I would not have the death of Attica laid at my door.”

“This is all I can think of,” said Zeus. In his blinkered horror, it was all he could do to keep from tears. Megaventris laid a kind hand on his shoulder. “May I say how much I have enjoyed your company,” he said. “You have, up till now, revised my opinion of the gods. It has been a pleasure talking to someone so gracious and polite, who can converse at suitable length on any topic I brought up, from buckwheat to bakery. I had not realised how human a god might be – small wonder that many have entertained gods unawares. Thank you for your stay with us.”

Zeus took his hand. He had no words for him at first, then he said, “I have enjoyed your hospitality more than anything I have yet experienced on Earth. Thank you for your many kindnesses, for your speech and laughter. May I say in my turn that you and your daughter have entirely revised my opinion of mortals. And I say that such a great-souled man should be counted not among the sons of earth but raised to the throne of an Immortal.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” smiled Megaventris. “They appear to subsist only on nectar and ambrosia, which seems to me rather a limited cuisine.”

“I will not forget you,” said Zeus. “And I shall protect your daughter at all costs. If ever I regain my throne above the highest of the Immortals, you shall not find that Zeus the Thunderer is ungrateful. I swear it by the River Styx, the oath that Immortals may not break.”

Another grumbling rumour of thunder strummed the night air, sounding less remote than the first. Beneath their feet the ground shook slightly. Megaventris looked away, rubbing his face with his hand. “You’d best be off,” he said. “The storm is coming closer. I shall hide on the hill until it is passed.”

Zeus relinquished his hold, and paced out into the open, gazing into the distance with keen eyes. The curving shoulders of the hills rolled as dense blankets of darkness against the paler sky in the west. Another growl of thunder made him look sharply east, and he saw what he had hoped he would not. High above the hills, on the horizons of his vision, the sky was ablaze. Far in the distance, to the southeast, bright fires leapt up, dotted across the swathe of darkened countryside. Even as he watched, a crack of thunder rent the air, accompanied by a blinding flash of light, illuminating a vast golden form, seemingly hundreds of feet high, that sprang for a moment into sight, striding over the sleeping land. The earth quaked beneath his feet.

With a great cry Zeus rushed back towards the house, as Melitta came out onto the veranda. "This is no storm!" he cried. "Quickly! The Immortals are in Attica!"

For the last time he shook Megaventris' hand, and turned away, for he did not wish to watch or listen while the girl said farewell to her father. His heart thumped in the breast called mighty by the poets, but less than powerless against a colossus such as he had seen. Impotent fury filled him again. He despised the gods who needed to assume such forms for deeds of death and obliteration. That he, the Thunderer, the Compeller of Clouds, should have to flee like a thief before them! He knew they must escape before the horror and remorse closed over his head. In the darkness a warm hand stole into his. "I'm ready," whispered Melitta.

They turned to look back at the lighted veranda before they entered the olive trees a little way from the house. Megaventris stood, huge and noble in silhouette, with his hand raised in blessing. Zeus called a final

farewell, echoed by the man himself, trying to keep his voice from breaking. Melitta cried out her own goodbye, with a sob choking her words, then the two turned and ran down into the dimness beneath the trees, their feet pounding rapidly through the dark.

Chapter Thirteen

Blazing, a thunderbolt twisted from the hand of the gigantic Immortal who bestrode the besieged village of Phyle. With a detonation that rocked the earth and echoed deafeningly in the gorge, the few remaining houses crumbled in the sea of greedy flames that coiled and writhed over the ruins, hungrily licking their bellies. White between the blinding red and gold gleamed the bones of those who had not been so swift as to evade the coming of the gods. Apollo stood knee-deep in the flames that lapped about him with a hot, airy roar, his bow held ready with an arrow on the string. Perceiving a movement on the night–mantled hills above, he let fly the golden shaft. It hissed through the blackness, an indistinct blur, and as it struck its target, seventy-three years of toil were extinguished, the unfulfilled memories of childhood blotted out, and all the fears of the old man extinguished as he collapsed in silent death as though he had never been. His eyes grew dark, and his soul fled sorrowful to the Shades. Atropos cut the thread of his life from the Tapestry, and he was no more. Her shears were busy on this night of divine wrath.

Over the hiss and roar of the flames Ares shouted to Apollo. “Nothing much here that would have interested Hera. Shall we move on?”

Apollo’s voice came back to him, clear and cold. “Yes. It is time to turn to Dekalia, before we make for Athens.”

Over Attica the sky smouldered as the flames forged southwards. Villages crumbled, ashen scars in the wake of the gods, once-proud towns blazed briefly and were

no more. Those who had heeded Prometheus' garbled warning and fled from the plains to the safety of Hymettus, Pentelikon and the Parnes, looked back from the mountains on the ruin behind them with disbelief. They could not know that they stood at a turning point in history, where the patterns of the Great Tapestry were to blur and change and the glory that was Mycenaean Greece would disappear. Today our scholars puzzle over the end of the Mycenaean world – the Dorian invasion came only after the mighty palace society had collapsed, earthquakes and intercity strife suggest answers but are not enough. No one could have guessed that the deathblow to Greece's proudest civilisation was dealt not by barbarian hordes from the north, nor by disasters of flood and fire, but by the very gods they worshipped and struggled to placate. Some have guessed that a force stronger than human invaders – drought, famine, emigration or revolt against the palaces - caused the final upheaval after the years of the Trojan War. But no mortal mind could countenance that the gods themselves caused the famine and scattered the people, and burnt with their avenging flames the cities they had sworn to protect.

The village of Dekalia was deserted. Only the cats remained, taking full advantage of the chaos left behind, bearing witness to the flurried flight of the inhabitants. Ares cleared the hamlet with a single stride, then dragged the other foot through the houses, which splintered and shattered in shards of clay. He allowed the tiny township a mere couple of thunderbolts – they flashed from his careless hands, white-hot and shuddering with thunder, to roar into the sagging structures with searing flame. Behind him, Apollo consulted a tablet. "Nearby is one of the houses we are

to investigate," he said. "We are within the region Hera has indicated as most likely to house the enemy. Shouldn't we be looking for these people rather than destroying their villages?"

Ares turned to him with a wild grin on his face and a fresh thunderbolt glittering in each hand. "I don't want to yet," he said wolfishly. "Why don't we do Athens next, then have a go at chasing? And," he added conscientiously, "if these people are conspiring against the republic and are in league with Zeus, then their houses should be destroyed. They might see the error of their ways, then." With that, he set his face south towards Athens. The two giant forms of the gods vanished swiftly, each stride measuring more than fifty paces of a mortal man. Behind them, the fires of Dekalia died slowly; the roofs collapsed, walls crashed inwards, and the olive trees that had once upheld the tavern ceiling blackened and twisted, clothed in fluttering drapes of flame.

Eight hundred years before the Peloponnesian wars, no Parthenon rose in pillared majesty from the rock of the Acropolis. Instead, the fortified hill was the site of the king's palace, and about its feet clustered the ancient city itself. Larger than any other in Attica, it was encircled by a wall flung far out into the plain, but a defence designed only to withstand the onslaught of a mortal foe. Now, the few terrified people who remained huddled on the Acropolis with their king gathered before the statue of Athene Parthenos, whom they besought with tears and prayers to save them, her city, and the people of her ruined land.

And to a watcher on the wall of the citadel, it seemed at first that their prayer had been answered. A gigantic golden form was seen striding toward the city

from the north, but no sooner had the word gone round than the people realised who it was. Ares, the War God, now President of the Republic and Deity to Superintend Hostile Humano-divine Interrelations – though they did not realise this at the time. Behind him came the Archer God, Apollo; both advanced implacably on the city as though possessed by some deranged daemon. Closer now and closer loomed the form of Ares. They could see the terrible lightning flickering livid in his hand, see the blood lust reflected in his eyes. Prayers and imprecations had failed.

Ares halted just outside the city wall. "Isn't that so beautiful?" he said, his hand cast toward the Acropolis. "What a target!"

His gaze rested on the pillared cloisters of the royal palace as he drew back his arm. The crackle of thunder as he threw mingled with the wail of terror and lamentation that rose and drowned it, and re-echoed from the Areopagus and the face of Mount Lycabettus.

All who had sought refuge on the Acropolis now scurried in vain terror, so no mortal eyes witnessed what saved them. No one saw the curved golden disc that skimmed through the air like a shooting star, rushing faster than the thunderbolt towards the palace, overtaking its comet tails. No one saw it flip high through the air, spinning faster than the eye can focus, to slam edge first into the solid Acropolis rock and stand upright, shuddering and vibrating. But no one failed to hear the metallic *boom* as the thunderbolt struck its vast boss and deflected high into the air with a shiver of discharged electricity behind it in the air. Beads of molten metal trickled down the shield's face.

And the citizens of Athens looked up into a blinding light. Golden and white she swept down from the night

sky, alighting feather-light on the rock itself, her armour too bright to behold. Athene had heard their prayer, and while Ares stared open-mouthed at the quivering shield, her voice rang out across her city like a bell. “If I wasn’t so angry, I should say what a damned fine shot that was,” she said. “Mine, of course. Not yours.”

Ares gaped. Where Athene had come from he could not begin to guess, but he began to feel very angry that she had spoiled such a beautiful cast, which he was sure had been on target for the palace. So he fumbled for another thunderbolt from his bandolier and screamed at her in fury. “Impudent vixen!” he shrilled. “Your meddlesome high-handedness has set the gods at each others’ throats for too long. Now I shall make you pay for what we have all suffered at your hands.”

With that he flung the thunderbolt directly at the goddess. Watched with incredulous fear by the mortals, Athene leapt into the air, into its path. It tore into the tasselled aegis on her breast, wreathing her in coiling cloud. And so Ares was not prepared for the huge stone hurtling out of the darkness towards him. Full on the forehead it struck the murderous War-god, and he collapsed inert to the ground, falling slowly, like a mighty tower whose roots are shaken loose by the convulsions of the earth. The ground shuddered beneath him.

Apollo swiftly drew back an arrow in rage, but Athene’s brazen spear flashed across the distance between them and its keen blade sliced through his bowstring. “My bow!” cried Apollo plaintively. “You’ve damaged my bow!”

“Yes,” said Athene, bursting out of the cloud. “I have.” Her fist cracked into Apollo’s face, sending him spinning away, ichor flying through his clasping fingers.

“You fools,” she said in scorn.” How did you think you could match yourselves to me, I who am superior to you both?” She picked up her spear, bright eyes flaming with their own light, towering over the stricken gods taller than the highest tree that sways on the slopes of Hymettus. “And how did you dare to raise your hands against Attica? How did you dare?”

Stumbling to their feet, the dazed gods were still unaware of their danger. But the watchers on the Acropolis saw it all, felt the earth wrench beneath them with the force of the goddess’ rage and grief. Saw the brazen spear flash against the dark background dotted with fires, heard it fall again and again upon the divine flesh. Saw the vain efforts of the gods, the thunderbolt half-drawn seized from an unsteady hand as Athene grasped the War-God by the throat, heard the roar as it seared into his face and his agonized scream. Saw the fleeing forms of the defeated gods diminish then vanish altogether as the goddess pursued them. And finally, they saw the tall, proud shape of Athene coming slowly towards the city, glowing with faint light. She passed by the hollow, charred villages, bent and touched the hot and polished bones. She smelt the harsh, acrid roll of smoke that blotted out the stars, lit from beneath by a hundred fires, heard the echo of mourning and lamentation rise and fall from the distant hills. And her rage turned to recrimination and grief, for she knew that she had come too late. Athene Parthenos laid down her spear, knelt upon the ravaged soil of Attica, and wept.

The two gods stumbled and reeled, retracing their steps northwards. It was some time before either spoke, and not before they had reached a silent consensus that the little misunderstanding at Athens would not be referred to again.

“Shall we have a look at some of the other places on the list?” suggested Apollo. He spoke indistinctly through a swollen lip, fumbling with a ragged and rather painful would in his flank though which he was fiddling with his punctured liver. Ares nodded. His mouth was too sore for speech and most of his beard had been burnt away.

But to begin with their search proved fruitless, for every house they visited was gutted, and the girls for whom they sought were for some reason no longer there. Each of the annoying mortals seemed to have taken the perverse decision to flee her home just at the critical moment when the gods wanted her. So, groping through the blackness beneath the crust of smoke and cloud, the gods’ tempers grew steadily worse.

At Dekalia, Apollo remembered the target in that particular region, who had dwelt some distance from the town, might possibly still be at home.

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When Zeus and Melitta had passed beyond the limits of his sight, Megaventris half turned, as though to make for the wood shaken in brooding curls over the brow of the hill, but his decision had been made long before. Calm, he pottered slowly through his garden for the last time; rested a hand, affectionate with a lifetime’s acquaintance, on the swinging branch of the climbing tree, smoothed to caramel by three generations of oscillating children. A strange and melancholic bliss descended on him, as he realised he had made the right choice. He had completed what he set out to do. Lived as though life were a draught to be drained to the lees, raised his daughter and cared for his friends. Now she was gone, his friends had fled, and he realised that to leave the farm in its hour of need would be to betray not

only the land that had made him but himself as well; to return after its demise would be a hollow homecoming, a funeral wake for a vacant coffin. They should go together, to Chloe whom he loved, who awaited him on the other side. He did not want to wait till his happiness had passed. He would pass with it, and keep his honour, leave the world accompanied by the thunder and the fire, immeasurably happy. Such a fortunate life…and now, an open door to a man half in love with death, but filled with adoration for what he would leave behind, an adoration that deafened him to the tread of the gods, and let him gaze upon the coming darkness with a peaceful heart.

Only a spitting oil lamp gave any light as he waited patiently on the veranda. Steeled with stoic defiance and determination, his will did not falter when he felt the rumour of the divine feet strumming through the earth and saw the great golden forms of the gods rising high above the trees as they strode towards his house. They halted a little way off. Megaventris glared into their faces with what he hoped was an expression of fearlessness and bravado. His heart was unable to sink, owing to the exceptional size of his stomach, but it did its best to sidle round the considerable obstacle in its way and head in the direction of his sandals.

"If you want my daughter," he shouted fiercely, "she has gone where you will never find her. And while I have you here, may I say that even though you call yourself gods – especially so – I am disgusted with your behaviour. Yes, disgusted. Whoever you are, I am ashamed that I ever sacrificed to you. I spit upon your godheads."

He did so, then folded his arms and scowled up at the glowing deities, trying to master the trembling in his

limbs. At last one of them spoke, in a cool metallic voice. “Where is your daughter? Tell us, rash mortal, before we give you the doom you deserve.”

“I really cannot say,” said Megaventris. “She disappeared into the dark and as you can see, I’m still here and have no means of knowing where she has gone. Now, all these dreadful disruptions you’ve caused have disturbed my evening schedule. I now intend to have supper.” He gave a last impudent grin at the gods, who loomed over him, looking down with puzzlement. “Would you care to join me?”

Akritides, cowering in the midst of the trees on the brow of the hill, heard the splitting crack of the thunderbolt and saw the pillar of flame shoot high into the air, curling over onto itself with a dry roar as it coiled down to envelop the house in a sea of fire. Barely visible on the far side of the blaze, the gods halted for a moment, then rushed away down the hill, glanced this way and that, and then set off in the tracks of the fleeing people of Dekalia.

“Why follow this particular girl, Apollo?” asked Ares, lagging behind his brother.

“That fat mortal wouldn’t have been so determined to deter us if he hadn’t known something,” said Apollo. “He would have run like the rest of them. Besides, this trail takes us away from Athens. I do not think there would have been much for us to do in Athens.”

“No, not a little provincial village like that. Never been able to see the attraction of Athens, myself”

Apollo paused, his glowing eyes slicing through the murk. “Let me just get a fix on this girl…” he murmured, then gave an exclamation of satisfaction. “Got her!” he said. “And I bet my bow Zeus is with her.”

“Good,” said Ares, with a painfully lopsided grin. He weighed a thunderbolt in his hand as they hastened towards the unwitting child of earth, Apollo straining forward with eyes that were not blinded by the darkness and the gloom but fixed upon the girl, in a gaze to which no physical object was a barrier. He could see her clearly, even though she was still some distance away – panting and staggering with exhaustion, casting terrified glances behind her, which appeared to him as sure signs of guilt. To his intense excitement, he saw that she appeared to speak to the empty air beside her and rest her arm on an invisible companion.

“I’ve got her!” he cried to Ares. “Look, you try as well…can’t you see she’s talking to someone?”

“Why’s she doing that?”

“Because Zeus is with her. We won’t be able to see him yet.”

“Why’s that again?”

“Don’t bother yourself about that, Ares. It’s very complicated.”

“I hate the way you people all treat me as though I’m dumb. You act as though all I think about is beating people up.”

“That is all you think about.”

“Well, you don’t need to act as though it’s less valuable than what you do. Anyway, *you’ve* been banned from singing.”

With a great effort of will Apollo restrained himself from launching what would have been a near-suicidal attack on his brother. Dragging Ares with him, he hurtled after the girl, and Apollo consoled himself by pinching Ares’ wrist rather hard in a way that just might have been accidental.

The thunder of their running feet boomed like a mighty drum through the Attic night. Faster than the pulse thud in the temples, the staccato vibrated into the very hearts of the fleeing mortals. Dekalia's refugees, now running in unashamed terror, stumbled desperately along the road to Eleusis and what they thought was refuge; only to have their hopes ground into the dust by the rolling beat of the awful pursuit. To the northwest bulked the low, pine-clad hills, and many turned aside from the road to hide in the sheltering forests, abandoning the way to the sanctuary before they were overtaken by the gods.

Louder beat the drumming, like the bang of blood in the ear. Deeper were the shocks as each imagined foot slammed into the earth. The quaking soil shook their fleeing feet. On the summits of the hills the pines shivered in the night. The old, the frail, mothers and children, fell by the wayside, and the strong fell with them, turned with defiance in their eyes despite their fears, brandished what weapons they had; stood on the shaking earth to face the gods. Now they saw the vast shapes skimming towards them, striding up…frozen for a moment…down…*boom*…again and again. The impacts came too swiftly for the ear to separate them, till they merged into a continuous rumble like the throbbing of an angry sky or the terrible roar of Poseidon's rage at sea.

But suddenly, without warning, the colossi swerved from the road. Moving faster than ever before, they swept up the hills, pines crackling around their pacing feet like dry grass before a child. Over the brow of the hill they strode, and disappeared. The rumour of their feet faded and died; only the faint echo of the thunder in

the distance remained, till even that was swallowed by the immensity of the night.

Prometheus sat on a stone, happily directing operations. He thought that the Attic situation might now appear sufficiently confusing to a divine observer, considering that it had begun to confuse him more than he might have preferred, but he added one or two more artistic creations for good measure. Rather unwillingly, he had abandoned any attempt to locate Zeus himself, and reflected with a good dose of melancholy satisfaction that to do so should now prove all but impossible even for him. Beneath him, the ground shook as though pounded by giant feet, the thud of running paces growing louder and closer.

"There she is!" cried Apollo as the gods burst over the crest of a hill, scattering poplars and pines like straw. Ahead, the girl's form was clearly visible to their unobstructed sight. She ran as no mortal should, her feet flashing over the earth faster than Atalanta's weaving between the trees in her efforts to escape…but no mortal can outrun the arrow of the Archer God, even though merely cast from his hand. Swifter than the storm wind it pursued her, slicing its path through the trees. Into her back it whined; and like a statue she froze, her limbs stilled, then jerked in the agony of death as her spine twisted back upon itself. Frozen she remained as, carried forward by her momentum, she ploughed into the stony soil.

Apollo and Ares ran forward. "Hera is going to be so pleased with us!" said Apollo. "Now look out for Zeus! He must be near, and we may see him if we're lucky."

“It’s too damned dark without second sight,” panted Ares. “If it wasn’t for all the smoke in the air…Zeus? Where are you?” His voice boomed in the hollow hills.

Apollo bent over the form of the fallen girl, lifting the dark weight of her blue-black hair from her face with an arrow. “Ho, rash mortal,” he began, opening with one of his favourite phrases, but then he stopped. His arrow, that he had cast only seconds before, now jutted from the back, not of a girl, but of a goat. Not even a particularly fine specimen, he was annoyed to discover, but one whose coat was matted, whose limbs were crooked, and had only one eye. “Ares,” he said.

“Zeus! Zeus! We know you’re here! Come on out!” Ares bellowed. “Yes, Apollo?”

“Look at this.”

Ares looked.

“It’s a goat,” he said.

“Really Ares, you are so perspicacious that sometimes I wonder how you cope with your own company,” snapped Apollo. “I know it’s a goat. My point was that it was a girl a second ago. I killed her.”

“You can’t have done,” Ares pointed out. “That’s a goat, all right. You must’ve missed.”

Apollo bristled. “I never miss!” he hissed. “I am perfection incarnate.”

“ ’Course you did,” said Ares. “The girl must be somewhere ahead. Quick! Let’s get after her.”

Apollo raised his eyes, their surface blank as the sky was empty of stars, and let his inward gaze probe the forests. He swore. “You’re right, as well!” he exclaimed. “But…I thought I never missed.”

“You know Apollo,” said Ares, “sometimes all you ever think about is moaning over your singing and shooting.”

Apollo glared at him as they sped off in pursuit of the distant girl.

Prometheus rubbed his hands together and chuckled. He really did hope that Hera was watching as well. In his mind's eye he saw Attica from above, and gazed in feigned bewilderment on its chaos. True, there were the scurrying groups of people, understandably rather agitated considering the night's disruptions, but scattered all over the country, through forest and field, hidden in the corn rows and in the empty villages, fleeing terror-stricken across the plains, vainly seeking refuge in wood or by stream, were dozens of identical girls. Prometheus looked at them in delight, for they were all neat approximations of the probable description Hera had included in her Minute on the subject. Well Homer knew how the gods can forge phantoms out of the restless air to delude the minds of men, and how the wary must guard against these bodiless phantasms. Prometheus had seen fit to experiment. Here a goat, there a cat, plus several deer, a dog or two, and an entire herd of swine that had escaped in the confusion – all of these innocent beasts were unknowingly cloaked with the most cunning disguise that his devious mind could devise, and fled hither and thither at the flick of his finger. Some of the girls showed distressing tendencies to revert to their baser natures – he had to try very hard to dissuade one of them from digging after an appetising root with her nose – but his plan was working well. If he wasn't going to be able to look for Zeus in peace, he was damned if anyone else was going to find him.

Far away, Ares and Apollo bent over the still form of a pig that had proved most unwilling to make their acquaintance. A golden arrow stood in its portly flank.

Apollo frowned and thought hard. “I didn’t miss this time,” he said.
“You must’ve done, ‘cos I’m sure we weren’t chasing a pig,” supplied Ares helpfully. “Mind you, considering some of the girls you’ve had, I wouldn’t blame you for not knowing the difference.”
“I think we *were*,” said Apollo distantly.”
“What? Hera never said anything about a pig hunt. I would have remembered if she had. I like pig.”
Apollo smote the earth with his fist. “No!” he said. “This was an illusion, an image cast by a god. Another Immortal seeks to protect her. No doubt Zeus himself has sensed our pursuit and made this fiction.”
“This is the work of a god? Why isn’t he fighting us?” complained Ares plaintively. “But then our quest is doomed – we can never succeed if the will of the gods is set against us.”
“We are gods, you clodpoll,” Apollo reminded him.
“Oh yes, of course. How silly of me. What shall we do then?”

Apollo leapt up. “We must have been right at first!” he shouted. “The road to Eleusis – an easier way than this path into the hills. Look over Attica, Ares – can you not see the crowds of young women in flight? Spawn of this devious scheme. Quick, it may not be too late to catch them up. We must turn back.”

There was a rush of wind as the two gods took to the air, rising into the lower atmosphere like gouts of flame blown far above a volcanic fissure. Wheeling in the smoky skies they tore like two golden, hissing comets, towards Eleusis and the south.

Swinging down from Dekalia to join the Sacred Way from Athens, the road now ran close beside the sea. Here, further from the flame and ruin, the air was

clearer and cool; spilt on the gently shifting waters of the Saronic Gulf, the moonlight rippled in silver folds. When Zeus and Melitta had come down to join the Dekalians, he had urged them to leave the path and hide in the hills, but they were determined to make for Eleusis and its shrine they felt would protect them. But once upon the road, they had felt the faint tremor of the air like the beat of distant wings. Only Zeus had known what it presaged, only he was filled with that fear worse than that of the unknown – the terror of one who knows exactly what lies ahead in all its detail. And he had shouted at them to turn aside, that it was him they sought, and they had not listened. The road had become their salvation, a clear path down from the hills and through the trees, so they clung to it as does a man to an archaic dogma or some tawdry modern replacement, which he hopes will bring him his desire though reason tells against him.

Melitta, Zeus knew, was the target of the distant gods, still visible to their second sight. To leave her would be to save himself; to take her with him to invite their pursuit, his capture and her death, and also the very vultures he had helped to train. He picked her up, protesting, cradled her in his larger-than-mortal arms like a child, and ran.

He outdistanced even the fleetest of the Dekalian youth. Long after they had fallen behind, the sinews of his mighty legs still propelled him onwards like indefatigable springs. He thanked whatever god to whom the gods can pray that he had been so arrogant as to assume such a superhuman form when he had come to adopt his mortal guise. At first, Melitta made light of their flight, but even she paled as the thunder redoubled and drummed on the earth as though titanic giants

imprisoned beneath its surface were hammering for release, and the gods slowly gained on them.

Then inexplicably, the reprieve. The roar and rumble died, the roll of running feet faded and enfolded in the night stillness. Zeus trembled with the weakness of relief, but he and Melitta were unable to come up with any logical reason why he should stop running when they had talked the matter over, so he had carried on. The rhythmic flashing of his feet would have gladdened the heart of the great runner Achilles, unless he had been running in pursuit, and Zeus would have required no golden apples to win Atalanta's hand. He sped through the swirls of the night faster than Winged Rumour, and after a while began to feel rather proud of his endurance, when the fear of apprehension subsided.

"I hope my father made it away safely," said Melitta.

" I'm sure he did," Zeus reassured her. "He had nothing to wait for."

"And I wonder how on earth he's going to cook for himself?" she went on. "The last time he squeezed into the kitchen he was there for three days, which didn't seem to bother him much but did mean that he had all his meals cold. At least everything was within easy reach, I suppose."

"How did you get him out?"

"We demolished the outside wall."

"Couldn't you have enlarged the door?"

"What, after he'd been in there for three days with an unlimited supply of food?"

Before them, the path curled round the hamlet of Eleusis. Ahead and to their right, a low rocky shape that hardly deserved the appellation of a hill mounted gradually up to merge with the night sky. In the moonlight, a pillared porch was visible some few

hundred yards away, connected by a covered walkway to the huge enclosure hewn into the side of the hill, protected by high walls. Below the Portico, they saw the fluid black and silver of a spring that twisted over and over itself in liquid threads spun of starlight, twining down in its efforts to meet the calm vastness of the sea. Unbroken, its waters lifted and sighed with imperceptible motion, a soft and flowing blanket between them and the distant blackness of the land beyond.

But as the god and the mortal woman drew closer, they saw white shapes standing in the sighing foam on the strand, passing up from its dark and silken embrace, in a single line towards the porch. As Zeus halted, a slow chant came to them. It had no words, no form, but swelled softly from a thousand throats in a low note that chilled the brain and touched those inward parts that trickle cold droplets down the spine. Ghostly in the moonlight the figures moved into the portico. "Oh Demeter," breathed Melitta. "It's the spring festival, it's the Eleusenian Mysteries."

As she spoke Zeus felt the air tremble slightly. Turning fearfully back towards the road, he saw the inevitable, whose coming he had dreaded but whose timing he could not predict.

Two golden stars, swelling rapidly as they coursed towards them through the parting skies. He looked back towards the sea. And smiled slowly as an idea occurred to him. "Quite right," he said. "The Eleusenian Mysteries. How very convenient."

"What on earth d'you mean?" He set her on her feet, took her hand and began to sidle down to the beach, moving in a wide arc so as to pass unseen by the

initiates streaming into the sanctuary. “We’re going to join in,” he told her.
She dragged her hand away sharply. “No we’re bloody well not. Are you mad? Haven’t you heard what they do to the uninitiated if they even if they just look over the sanctuary wall?”
“Take a look up there,” said Zeus, pointing. “See those? Gods. They’ll be here in four or five minutes. And believe me, gods are a good deal better at thinking up nasty things to do to you than mortals are. They’ve had more time to experiment.” He dragged her, disgruntled, down to the sea.
“How’s this going to stop them catching us?” she hissed.
“None of the other gods are allowed to interfere with the Eleusenian Mysteries,” said Zeus. “They’re too important for the continuance of our existence. Besides, Demeter’s older than any of us and I’m sure she wouldn’t let us meddle. You needn’t worry – no one will dare to touch us if we’re in there, and they won’t be able to see us either. We’ll be under Demeter’s protection.”
Melitta stopped knee deep in the stirring foam. “I won’t,” she said stubbornly. “It’s blasphemy. Being disrespectful to the goddess. The uninitiated mustn’t enter the sanctuary. You can’t disobey the gods.”
“You seem to be doing a good job where I’m concerned.”
“Yes, but you’re Zeus.”
“My point exactly.”
“But I’m not initiated.”
“Well, I am,” said Zeus, dragging her resolutely towards the dim white shapes still bathing in the moon-washed sea. “Let me initiate you. Step one, ritual

purifying bathe in the ocean." He pulled her down into the water next to him, grunting as she grabbed his beard in retaliation. "Thus we ritually cleanse ourselves in the waters that both give life and can take it away, by the light of the moon, which represents the third and fullest part of the Triple Mother Goddess, who's even older than I am; you know, the combination of maid, mother and sibyl. Got that?"

"I suppose so. Don't *understand* it," she grumbled, shaking wet hair out of her eyes.

"Don't worry, no one does. Step two, we clothe ourselves in white, the colour of the moon, which dies each month but then returns again to life."

"And how do we do that?"

"Watch me." He moved through the waters, crouched like a hunting feline. The golden lights loomed larger when he shot a glance at the northern sky. Two minutes.

The purified robes were laid down on the strand in neat rows, presided over by a silent priest, ready for the initiates to don on their emergence from the ocean. They had been carefully counted and allocated. The tall man and the girl gave the correct signs and countersigns and were allowed to enrobe themselves without protest. Later in the evening, the priests at the portico were puzzled by two naked men who caused quite a disturbance on the sea front, trying to break in unannounced.

Zeus felt her shaking beside him, and held her close. "Don't worry," he whispered as they followed the initiates towards the portal. "Don't say anything and it'll be all right."

"You don't understand," she chattered. "These are the Eleusenian Mysteries, our most important festival. If they were stopped, life would end with them. They're

holy and I'm sure something terrible is going to happen."
"It won't. They'll be over soon."
"What's going to happen in there?"
"I really don't know," confessed Zeus. "I've never been before. None of the other gods have. It's all kept secret by Demeter."
"I thought you said you were an initiate?"
"I didn't say I'd been here before."
"When were you initiated then?"
"Demeter and Dionysus did it at a party," he admitted. "We were all rather drunk at the time."
"I think the way you gods behave towards religion is *disgusting*," she spat. "You have no respect for it at all. Haven't you got any shame? These are supposed to be holy mysteries, and I'd like to tell you that I'm bloody scared you're making me go to them when I know I shouldn't."
"Why should the gods be respectful towards religion?" protested Zeus. "*We* didn't invent it – you did. And I do try to behave as mortals expect me to…or I did…Like the Cloud-Gatherer or the Thunderer."
"Or a jerk," said Melitta. "I hope that Demeter will realise that I committed blasphemy only because of you."
"Talk it over with her inside," said Zeus placidly. "She'll probably be there. I'll introduce you. Very nice person, Demeter, very kind."

They were drawing close to the portico. Its gable was very high, and its sloping roof much steeper than those of the temple built on that site in the Classical age. Two plain unembellished pillars upheld the lintel over the wide door, beyond which gaped the darkness of the tunnel leading to the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies.

The priests, brazen swords in their hands, barred the way.

"Unto Demeter who forsook heaven for Earth…" said one.

"Be offered the blood of the mother-to –be," answered Zeus.

"Unto the mother who mourned upon Earth…"

"Be offered the daughter who fled to the Shades."

"Make restitution of life unto death…"

"For death to the twain barred the way."

"And death is the furrow to nourish new life."

"From life become death shall life rise anew."

"To Demeter, to Kore Persephone, to Dionysus…"

"Be the death, be the blood, be the life inextinguishable."

"Pass, initiates," said the men, and lowered their swords. "The gods go with you."

They moved into the darkness of the walkway. "It's all very long-winded for something that is supposed to promise happiness after death, which is a lot more than you can expect otherwise," grumbled Zeus.

"Which is what?"

"You're better off not knowing. Anyway, you're an initiate now, so don't worry."

She stamped her foot. "I am not," she said.

"Don't advertise it! I did the best job I could. If there'd been a shadow of doubt those two gentlemen at the door would have disembowelled you by now and strangled you with your own entrails. Though I do hear they play nice games with pretty girls before they go rummaging in their insides. Or would you prefer to be outside with the nice gods?"

"Sometimes I really hate you," she said, and refused to say any more till they came to the end of the clammy,

constricting darkness and looked into the moonlit arena of the Telesterion, the sanctuary enclosure itself.

The priests sat well within the temple porch, and so failed to see the fiery stars that were the gods sweep over the town and that holy place, making for Corinth and the southwest. “Funny…I can’t see her any more,” said Apollo anxiously. “Can you?”

“See who? The girl? Oh, I thought you were keeping an eye on her. No, I can’t, come to think of it. Hey, why’re you stopping?”

“I see no point in going on if we’ve lost her.”

“Don’t you? Seems perfectly clear to me. Just think of all the people there still are that we could bomb!”

“Your naivety is so touching the Styx would seem clear to you,” said Apollo acidly. “How can we have lost her? We must relocate her at once, or give up.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Ares proudly, “I have actually crossed the waters of the Styx. In a boat. Not much of one, but it did float.”

“Ares, please shut up and try to get a fix on this girl. It’s urgent.”

But despite all their efforts, it was as though she had been swallowed up by the earth and existed no more in the world, which was in fact closer to the truth than most of the initiates would have guessed. Angrily Apollo acknowledged himself beaten. Ares, frustrated, wished to vent his anger on some more villages, but Apollo decided they should return to Olympus before dawn. “Hera won’t be very happy,” he said.

“She never is,” said Ares morosely.

*

The eyes of the uninitiated gazed upon the Holy of Holies and were not blinded. Melitta stood cowering

beside Zeus in the dark mouth of the tunnel, facing the expanse of the enclosure. "Oh *gods,*" she whispered.

A vast black obelisk, the sacred shrine towered above the circle, brooding in the moonlight. At the foot of its round monolithic plinth was a smooth altar stone, stained with the blood of ancient sacrifice. Facing them was a tightly-fitting door into its hidden heart, and a stairway coiled up its bole to the flower-like basin at its crest, whence grew a flame whose like she had never seen. It cast no light, but rose in labyrinthine coils from the petals that gave it birth, its colours shifting and changing as the cloud alters its hues at dawn. Images flew within it – a tall woman, hair the essence of darkness, captured mid-stride as she ran through a field where dying corn had grown; a maiden in a meadow, the field rent by titanic forces to unleash a miasma of shadow that coiled around her struggling waist and drew her down into the subterranean night. Then the patterns faded and there was only the cold flickering of the blue-white flame.

Even Zeus was impressed. Around the altar there stood none of the proud buildings that would flourish there at the order of Pericles when Athens' greatness was at its height; only a wide open space flanked by row upon row of stone terraces, a circle of seats hugged closely by the walls rising high on every side. But more terrible and awful than the stark majesty of the Holy of Holies was the crushing, eerie silence that filled the Telesterion like a physical force. More than a thousand watchers sat motionless on the encircling seats, motionless and silent as the dead. The air was still, oppressive and cold. And Zeus felt the overpowering presence of a deity, so strongly that his footsteps faltered. Small wonder that these mortals sat rigid with

fear, for the proximity of the goddess was such that they must feel it too. With Melitta on his arm he made his way to the highest of the rows, and sat with his back to the encircling wall in an empty section of the sanctuary. The moon crept slowly across the sky, trailing shadows over the circle and causing the initiates' robes to infuse its phosphoric fire. None moved or spoke. Only the flames rose and danced soundlessly above the altar.

And then, moving softly through the silence like a new current in a stream, a breath of music slowly rose and filled the Telesterion. Barely audible, it trembled from note to note with a wild, unearthly beauty. From the blackened doorway marched a procession of men and women, their faces covered with white veils, crowned with vine leaves. The music swelled with their entrance – endless running cords span a hundred different melodies that wove together seamlessly into a song so perfect that it seemed not to have sprung from mortal throats. With measured tread, the line parted and circled the sanctuary. And the song, wordless, rose and fell over the watchers like the foam of a gentle sea. Silken, it washed their ears and crept into those portals to caress their souls, bathing them in a tide of moonbeams till at last they seemed to lie beneath a stream of flowing chords, which bore them far from the sorrows of the world, through the clinging mists of consciousness to a distant silver strand where the oceans fell and murmured on the shore beneath the golden mists of dawn.

Three figures climbed the spiral stairway, stood around the sacred fire. Through the music one spoke, his words blending with the unearthly melody. "Only the pure are present, only the cleansed may hear; O

happy are those among mortals on earth who have heard the woven words and seen the Mysteries.

"O Demeter, mother of Earth from which we sprang, be present. O Kore Persephone, return to us from the enveloping shades, O Dionysus who gives freedom, be with us that we may see more clearly the goddess who passed through death and shadow unto life.

"O violated child of holy sunlight, encoiled in the serpent risen in the hues of night from the riven soil, reveal to us the story of your fall from the light of day, stolen from our sight as is the dying corn in the fires of summer, withered and consumed."

He cast a handful of some dusty substance on the flames. Smoke and sparks flew up as the fire spat and crackled, then the flickering steadied. A powerful scent stole through the air, wrapping itself in delicate sweetness around the watchers, a gentle, subtle scent that sank deep into their being, soothing, intoxicating and invigorating. Into the open arena, before the altar, moved the men and women in a choral dance.

Flowing from their throats, the music's pace was slow and measured. A single, golden-haired girl danced like a piece of moving verse before the chorus. And at once the image changed.

In the dim light, Zeus saw her unblemished feet flashing here, there, up, down, every step perfection, every step a thread upon the loom. And as he watched, her steps wove together with the music and the scent, and he saw as the initiates saw, a vision.

Where her feet trod there flourished grass and flowers in the sand, covering more and more of the arena till her dance was paced in a meadow brimming with blossom. There was the glimmer of cyclamen, the pendulous heads of swinging orchids, shy anemones and

gleaming lily. Now her feet and the music and the scent drew the sunlight down to earth and the field was flooded with gold. It was an Arcadia, a meadow untarnished, unsullied by the stain of suffering. Lonely yet content, Persephone wandered through the flowers, delicate petals stroking her immaculate ankles, dusting her pearly skin with the soft gold of their pollen.

A maiden, gathering flowers; yet as they watched they saw encapsulated in her all the shifting images that had blended to form her whole. Now she appeared for the flicker of an eye as a dove, its wings spread wide on the sacrificial pyre, now as a spotless calf lead unknowing to the unyielding knife, now, not as a golden child, but as a moving sea of golden corn, the New Corn that could only rise from the death of the Old, from the lifeless husks that were the only trace of its parent. Then the mirage shimmered, and once more they beheld the maiden in the meadow, but could see within her all that she was and had been whilst mankind had walked the earth.

Suddenly the music quickened. The choral dancers wheeled in misdirected spirals; discord clashed with the song. Before the eyes of the watchers, the Arcadian meadow was riven by the darkness to which all earthly gloom is purest light, and from the tormented, lacerated lips of the chasm a shadow rose. Into the arena span a tall shape, cloaked in blackness – he entered the dance and became one with the vision. His darkness enveloped the maid; a labyrinth coil of shade wrapped serpentine tendrils about her tender, struggling form, as she battled against Hades, Lord of Death, as will all mortal children of earth, and failing as they shall fail.

Zeus, and Melitta too, and surely every mortal present, felt their breath constricted, their throats seized.

The tumult of the music, the thudding beat in the ears, drew him into the vision, robbed him of his immortality, and merged him with the girl into the greater being in the throes of its death. A great wail arose from the watchers; Melitta shuddered with the sweat of horror soaking into her garments. For a brief moment, every soul felt itself as one with Persephone, gazed down into the blank invisible shadow where Hades loomed, struggled in vain against the demands of death. Then blackness came down over the world and the daughter of day was drawn down into the abyss, which closed in thunder. The meadow vanished, and the chorus danced once again upon the beaten sand of the arena.

Now swift and rapidly changing were the images summoned by the dance and the song, and painted by words the ear did not hear but which drew them irresistibly into the scene. Coursing like the raging wind across the ravaged fields, weeping as the grey skies break in deluvian grief, they saw the dancer as Demeter in her terrible sorrow for her daughter; saw her petition Zeus himself in vain; saw her rage and futility. They saw the ruin of the land beneath her wrath, saw the corn unrisen in the youth of the year, saw the dearth and pestilence that scourged humanity in the famine, as though it was her desire to drive all mortals to share her daughter's fate and descend to the Infernal Shades.

But the watchers were now enmeshed in the net of song, scent and moving forms to be drawn this way and that, shown alternately visions of despair and hope unsought. Layer upon layer of their shielding consciousness was stripped away, nerve after nerve exposed, till the raw humanity of the naked soul found itself ruthlessly dragged into the light, revealing images unguessed by the waking mind. Weeping for the

daughter, the watchers offered the mother goddess a sacrifice that might please her. For they felt subject to the very god who had seized her child and must undergo the horrors that had torn her heart. Those whom the gods love die young, but we forget that none may evade that door whose lintel may only once be passed - the leveller, the inexplicable. None had grasped the law laid down by the father that man must suffer; none could understand, and only the ignorant accept. Now they saw no meaning in suffering, none in anguish, torture, pain and regret. Call no man happy till he is dead, for only then shall he have no cause to fear the greatest terror that lies before him all the days of his life.

Yet as the chorus slowed they beheld another vision. The swirling, chaotic members of the dance appeared to circle aimlessly and without purpose, a mirror of the death they portrayed, but gradually a great pattern emerged, where arbitrary individual parts unified in an ordered whole. And the minds of the watchers, still at the mercy of the music, were shown an unimaginable vista of curtain behind curtain lifting on those yet more distant to reveal even purer sights and heavenly paradises, each more permanent and unblemished than the last, till finally, on the horizons of their vision, they beheld a great white light. Zeus struggled to maintain an element of cynicism – he knew better than most that there was no great white light, only darkness, forgetfulness, and the rivers Styx and Lethe, but he was forced to admit the impressive performance of their mind-expanding drugs and the power of self-induced mass hysteria. On reflection, he kept these thoughts to himself, as he felt that none of the believers would take very kindly to his revelations. And on further reflection,

he decided that a god standing up to denounce religion might be rather counter-productive.

Even Melitta, he sensed, was bathed in the revelation of each dusk being but a presage of the new dawn, even as each death is woven into the cycle of regeneration and resurrection. Though they themselves might die and pass from the world, they would but cede the great stage to those players of the next scene, and face the darkness with spirits unbowed. For though a performer might only last one scene, the dance would go on; perhaps its continuance might be some salve for the loss of the numberless acts they were never to witness. And, swept and surrounded by the scented airs of heaven, hypnotised by the weaving dance, soothed by the music sustaining the new pride in their spirits, they saw a portion of the truth that is beyond the world. They saw that death and pain, in this brief flash of time that is our life, are truly blind, utterly meaningless and totally inexplicable. Only those who behold them from a great distance of space and time will have the leisure to search them for meaning. Perhaps if we were to observe the swathe of human history in its futile nobility and absurd endeavour, these things might seem but two strands in the web, images in the fuller vision that the mortal mind cannot comprehend, for it is a very part of what it strives to see. And to their minds, intoxicated by Dionysus the freedom-giver, it seemed that human suffering on earth was merely a means to sublimate themselves into something higher, which had its meaning even were it incomprehensible to mortal men, and that death was no more than a gateway through which we must pass, perhaps to new life ourselves, but always to allow new life to flourish where we once stood.

For as the music swelled in royal splendour, they beheld the merciful act of Zeus, who demanded the return of Persephone to her mother Demeter and the light; the resurrection of the Dying Goddess and her regeneration; the renewal of the earth that bloomed again in an explosion of gilded light at the command of her mother. Yet Persephone had consumed six pomegranate seeds in the gloom of the Underworld and thus was bound thither to return each year to sit beside her grim spouse. But now the initiates wept not with sorrow, but as the wild rains of autumn Demeter drew down from Zeus to the parched and thirsting soil.

Joyous whirled the dance and the actors in the drama, joyful rang the music, now fading and diminishing as the chorus receded over the green meadows blessed by the gentle kiss of sunlight, their re-enactment at an end. The mystic light was swallowed by the night shadows and was lost.

Drained and cleansed, the initiates blinked their eyes in wonder. The arena was empty, the dancers gone. Only the three white shapes remained around the holy fire, and as another group of dim shadows processed forwards from the entrance, they began to chant, their words a background to the flowing music, which rose and swelled again.

"Nurtured by the dew's unfailing spring,
Golden days infused within their limbs,
Unceasing labour drawn and newly spun,
Rewoven into white and tempered bone.
The curve of willing flesh, unsullied hide;
The light of every dearest young is thine,
Disperse my darkness, stream within and fill
The gulf of crafted night inside us all.
More fitting then will be the pain we know:

A keener loss – more perfect sacrifice."

The column of initiates bore offerings in their arms, and lead with them a dutiful beast – a white heifer, moving unresisting towards the altar stone. First, the sheaves of the young corn, ripening in the rising year, were stacked upon it, then piled high with the dry and brittle tinder of last year's. Then the cow was dragged forward. The cold brazen gleam of a sword flickered. At last, the cow showed some sign of distress, straining against those who held her, uttering a plaintive bellow of despair.

Melitta did not watch the moment of the killing. She heard only the puzzled lament of a beast that cannot comprehend or understand, bubbling through its lacerations as it choked on the stream of its blood. Zeus stared down through the moonlight, sitting motionless, his arm around the trembling girl, gazing stony faced at its bowed bulk, a man at each horn, though it made no move to break away. Wearily it raised its head, framed against its slaughtered shadow, and its invisible eyes looked into the god's. For a long while the animal gazed at the divine countenance, and the unfathomable breach between them was, for a second, bridged. Do beasts go to their deaths unknowing, conceiving of nothing but life, and so know nothing of the fears that plague a man for as long as he can speak and think? Only in the dramas we have forced them to enact may we find, if we look deeply, a mirror in which we are the sole reflection.

Dionysus' wild, untameable frenzies broke down the barriers of reason and unreason caging all human souls, Dionysus it was who burrowed down through the consciousness to find those hidden truths and fears that lie hidden in the oldest recesses of our selves, only to

surface in our myths and dreams. Dionysus who was present in spirit to let the soul perceive what the mind could not.

Slowly, Zeus stirred from the trance-like torpor, which to his shame had overpowered him, rising as through dim, light-shot water to the distant surface. Heavily upon him weighed the sense of a deity's presence – other than his own, of course – and now he became aware of another still watcher seated beside him, on the opposite side from Melitta. Dazed, he turned his head, and beheld what the Eleusenian initiates could only dream of seeing. Demeter sat beside him, robed simply in white, her raven hair swept with golden strands like the corn, crowned with a wreath of woven grass. She met his gaze, and smiled.

"Hello. Zeus," she said. "I would never have expected to see you here. What a pleasant surprise."

"Demeter," said Zeus, and nodded in wordless greeting. He felt irritated that the Mysteries had affected him so deeply.

"How did you like it?" asked the goddess with another smile. "The dance is so beautiful, is it not? Although this is only the spring festival for the consecration of the coming harvest – you really must come to the autumn festival, for the special effects are quite amazing. I never cease to wonder that mortals are able to produce such touching displays. It is very flattering to think it is on my account, and my daughter's."

Zeus blinked, lost for a reply. His mind was too bemused by what he had witnessed. In the east, the forerunner of Aurora's dawn spilt across the sky, a flood of pearl and rose.

"What did I tell you, Hera?" asked Poseidon triumphantly. "I said these two incompetents would make a mess of things."

"You said nothing of the sort," said Artemis. "You were too busy arguing with Hades about the sea's smell."

Poseidon waved a hand. "The facts of the matter are immaterial," he said. "Of course, I meant that had I not been occupied with other important matters, I should naturally have said that these two incompetents would have messed up. And," he added, in case she had not grasped the point he had made so forcibly at the last Wardrobe meeting, "the sea does not have a smell. It has an aroma."

"Which is Sanskrit for stench," supplied Hades.

Hera let them argue. As soon as Ares and Apollo had returned, they had been hustled into a private room of the palace, or at least one that had seemed private before the invasion of her relatives, who had come to their bedsides to stare and, between quarrels, to express their concern. She had not wanted the public-spirited demigods to see them. Hera was not angry as such. Her vitriolic hatred and frustration had reached a point where she took each set back with unnatural calm. She no longer cared whether Zeus was a danger to the Theocratic Republic, which seemed to have no shortage of new problems supplied on a regular basis to prevent its members from becoming bored. But one thing she wanted more than anything else was to have him before her in chains so that she could gloat over him a little. Surely that wasn't too much to ask? Sometimes she felt like crying with impotent fury. Just ten minutes of

gloating would have been sufficient, but no. Not only had he vanished yet again, but she could also sense very strongly the metaphysical raspberries she was sure he was blowing at her. This latest incident did nothing to console her.

Apollo was shamefaced, as well as bloody-faced; rather horrified, it seemed, by the realisation of what he had done. As a god who had embodied the enlightenment of mankind but had put the gods before his protégés, he now found refuge in the confused justification that he was attempting to purify and perfect the human race, the very reasons for which he had supported the creation of the Theocratic Republic. His bowstring was sliced in two, and Ares' face looked horrific. Not only did he have a gigantic swollen lump on his forehead, but also his beard was scorched and singed, his lips burned and blackened, while two of his teeth were missing. He and Apollo were reticent as to the cause of the injuries, mumbling something about falling over onto a thunderbolt, but Hera had drawn a number of conclusions, none of them satisfactory. Coupled with the atrocious observational conditions that had prevented her from having much idea of events, everything added up to divine intervention. Taking stock, she supposed it had not been a successful campaign. For twelve hours, Olympus had been alight with patriotic and republican zeal, appearing to forget all about any revolutionary urges it might have harboured before. Shops in the West Side owned by Athenian satyrs were broken into and looted; models of the Acropolis were piled high on blazing pyres, trampled by the feet of mountain gods and submerged beneath angry rivers. A number of Athenian demigods were cornered and subjected to a severe beating by a

mob of eager theocrats, including Kithairon, until it had occurred to him that he was in fact an Attic mountain himself, whereupon he turned in his erstwhile allies and with characteristic fairness hit them all equally hard. Finally, all the mountains involved remembered they were in fact members of the Olympic Police Department, that a breach of the peace had been committed, and that the offenders should be suitably restrained. Accordingly, they arrested all concerned, including, after judicious reflection, themselves; and passed a peaceful night in the city jail while the rest of Olympus ran wild, deprived of their minatory influence, in an anti-Attic frenzy.

At least that part of Hera's plan had succeeded. Clearly she must now essay different means to apprehend Zeus, other than Apollo and Ares. His capture would be an inestimable feather in her cap in the event of an election, besides his status as a suitable target for revolutionary hatreds. Perhaps they should give more attention to breaking into the Office and finding out where he was truly hiding. Her standing would then be very high indeed, certainly, she thought, far above the banks of a common river.

It was at this point that Enipeus flowed into the room. He saluted stiffly. "Greetings, comrades!" he snapped. "May I inform you that a meeting of the Wardrobe has been convened and your presence is required forthwith." He had clicked his heels and vanished again almost before the Olympians had realised he was there.

"I'm damned if I'm being called 'comrade' by a piddling little river," bristled Poseidon. "Bloody cheek, if you ask me." He waddled out in pursuit. Hera simmered. Really, that demigod was getting too uppity

for words. He would soon have to meet with an unfortunate political accident. Perhaps if he could be persuaded to borrow vast sums of money to buy a river bed in Olympus or something of the kind, in return for political favours. In a swirl of indignant robes, she and Artemis swept out after Poseidon, followed by the invisible Hades. Apollo and Ares remained where they were, the one gloomily repairing his bow and the other pressing a cold poultice to his burnt face. "I don't want to go up there looking like this," he explained.

"Yes, I'm sure the others will thank you for it," said Apollo. "Oh dear. I feel less than perfect, which is never good for my constitution. Perhaps I could sing to cheer us up?" He brightened, but then his face fell. "Except that it's probably illegal now, as a type of individual expression, and I'd get arrested by Kithairon and his minions," he added morosely.

"You could buy your way out for a song," said Ares indistinctly.

"Ares! Was that a pun?"

"No, a song also means a small amount of money," explained Ares patiently. Apollo slumped back in his chair. "That is cruelly disappointing, Ares," he said. "You'd falsely raised my hopes of your development as a literary talent."

When the Olympians arrived, Prometheus was already pacing the circle of thrones, attempting to converse with the demigods, who plainly found his words hardly revolutionary enough to merit a reply. He rubbed his hands together as the gods took their places. "All here?" he asked jovially. "Oh, no Ares or Apollo? What a disappointment. You must allow me to excuse Athene, Prime Minister. I'm afraid she's had to visit

Asclepius at Epidaurus for trauma treatment and bereavement counselling after what you did to Attica."
Hera graced him with her sweetest smile. "Thank you so much," she said. "How kind of you to mention it." She cast a swift eye at the number of Olympians present, which did not look favourable in the event of a vote between them and the demigods. Hades would never vote for her, Poseidon would follow Hades, though he would most likely get lost along the way, and Prometheus was unspeakable, which only left her with Artemis. Disdainfully, she looked around the assembled company. "Will someone be so good as to tell us why this meeting has been convened?" she asked haughtily.
"Certainly, certainly," said Prometheus, leaping to his feet.
"Does it have to be you, Prometheus?"
"I'm afraid it does," he said, with an expression of selfless nobility on his face. "Politics is a thankless and lofty calling, which is not to be ignored."

He moved to the centre of the circle and gave everyone a happy smile. "Friends, Wardrobe members, honourable ministers male and female, visible and differently-visible, rude and cultured, suave and unsophisticated…"
"Oh, get on with it," said Poseidon. "I'm bored already."
"Considering you have the attention span of a newt, that's hardly surprising," said Hades.
"Look who's been distracted now!" crowed Poseidon.
Prometheus went on loudly. "I have an announcement to make that will be of grave theological and existential importance to you all, and indeed to the whole of Olympus," he said. "You may recall the institution of the Golden Touch Experience on earth, the building of

the runways, the massive publicity campaign before we launched the scheme, the extensive building works here in heaven to accommodate the tourists. As you, and your bank balances, are well aware, the scheme has proved an unprecedented success. Visitor numbers are up again this week, and even the pickpockets have reported a new surge in trade."

"The point, Prometheus, come to the point."

Prometheus turned on Hera, affronted. "Surely you know by now, Hera, that it is mandatory for all politicians to spout so much verbiage that if by accident they say anything remotely resembling the truth, it is effectively disguised in the wastes of their words?" he asked. "I was only trying to do the right thing."

"Well, try harder," said Poseidon. "And if you could try at a little less length, I'd be grateful."

"My point," said Prometheus, "is that grave abnormalities have been observed by the engineers at the Worship Works. According to their estimates, we shall have only a few weeks' worth of Worship left in the reservoirs if the current fall in sacrifices and prayers continues. This situation is not yet serious, but this trend must be arrested at all costs before our reserves run dry. Without such a reversal, consequences will be grave for us all."

"Are your facts correct, Prometheus?" asked Hera, though she was uncomfortably aware that he had put into words what she had sensed but had not perceived. Her sacrifices at any rate had certainly seemed less numerous and more insipid over the past week, perhaps explaining why she felt out of sorts.

"You know they are," he said dismissively, "you all do – but you can read the engineers' report if you wish. Come on; think back over the last few days. Count up

your libations – haven't you all been going rather thirsty? What about your sacrifices? Be honest, it has been a hungry few days. Have there been any festivals or games offered up to the gods? None that I have seen – mortals are too busy in our bars and paying our wages. And, after having had a close look at us, I can't imagine they have very much respect for us either. No, don't try to protest," he said, raising a hand at a demonstrative demigod.

"Why the hell not?" demanded the river. "I don't see that this has much to do with the rest of us. I only get about three sacrifices a year at the best of times – the only people really hit are going to be you Olympians." A rumble of assent followed his words.

"It is time to forget our political differences, I am afraid," said Prometheus, "for in the end, this may consume us all. I am gifted with foresight, and I know of what I speak. Sacrifices have fallen away, disappeared, been all but swallowed up. Do you know what that means?"

"It means we get off our backsides and give the insolent buggers some good old fire and brimstone," said Poseidon with conviction. "You *are* right, come to think of it. Well, it's quite clear we have to show them who the bosses are. We can't let them think they can get away with this. Let's get 'em!"

Prometheus rubbed his chin, as though trying to charge the already-tense atmosphere with static electricity. He looked round the circle expectantly, perhaps seeking permission to continue. Hera motioned for him to go on. She had not yet dared to contemplate the consequences of the situation he had described, and knew that whatever she did at this stage she must not antagonise him. His mind, with its convoluted

brilliance, might be all that stood between them and oblivion.
"There are two problems with your approach," mused Prometheus. "Perhaps a simple example will serve to illustrate the first…. go on then. Show them."
Poseidon grinned. "What?" he cried. "Right now? At last – no more boredom!" His trident materialised in his hand as he leapt up. "Come on boys, up and at 'em!" he yelled. And froze.

The circle of the Wardrobe watched incredulous as his huge form struggled against some unseen force. His coiled muscles twisted and bunched; he strove to shake his trident, which remained immovable in his hand. Finally he shifted backwards and collapsed shaking in his hand. The trident clattered to the floor. "Now what, in the name of the god of buggery, was that?" he whispered.
"Haven't you realised?" said Prometheus. "Can't you see that we have imprisoned ourselves in a labyrinth of rules and ineluctable mandates that constrict us and curb our will to act? Have you forgotten that we are gods? Don't you see that through the enforcement of your petty rules, of your obsessive extension of personal hatreds and resentments into legislation, you've curtailed what we are able to do? For we define the nature of reality, and we have altered it. It is now such that we can only act as we have prescribed. Didn't you see that by sacrificing all for freedom we have sacrificed freedom itself? Gods, listen to me," he implored. "Forget about enforcing equality, your bureaucracy and your committees, forget about image and media, about spin and profit indeces. Remember who and what you were, before you committed crimes against your natures. Do you want to sacrifice your

divinity for some tortuous piece of verbal clever-dickery, concealing any truth you may have perceived with self-congratulatory and self-advertising rubbish? Do you wish to spend your immortalities slavishly worshipping economics; things created without form in the universe of our souls? Something that drugs you with mass entertainment and hollow material satisfactions? I suppose we cannot see that we give money its power, that it should be our servant, not our master. We cannot – and so money is our new god, with more power than the gods themselves. And so we are satisfied with false explanations of our reality and the divine condition, with comforting baby talk and senseless, cheap ideologies. You're more obsessed with revolutionary and economic hypocrisy that with living as you were meant to live. The selfless revolutionary is a myth; I fear that they desire the levelling of others so that they may rise, colossi, above the herd, lofty in the exposition of their ideals, squalid in their hatred of their unconscious betters, driven by the monster of the economy, that Leviathan willing only to seduce and all too ready to overmaster its creators should they loosen its lead. Gods! Can you not see that we have fettered ourselves to what will destroy us unless we master it; that in our quest for freedom we have enslaved ourselves?"

But such a truth is never easy to accept. Prophets and philosophers have found this throughout the ages, usually reaching this conclusion as the fires crackled around their feet, or when they were offered a hemlock cocktail. The human and the divine do not desire truth, they want entertainment; and what fails to entertain will be cast onto the flames. Prometheus had at least spoken his innermost thoughts on his last day as a Wardrobe

Minister – his swansong keener to his heart than any he had delivered before.

Poseidon frowned. “So you mean I can’t go and beat the heck out of mortals to make them sacrifice to me?” he asked.

“No, you can’t,” said Prometheus.

“But what about Ares and Apollo?”

“Ah,” said Prometheus with a wolfish grin. “Their action against Attica was perfectly justifiable under the laws of our new and improved logic. Firstly, it was undertaken as an attempt to apprehend our fallen monarch, who represents a threat to our state, so we are told, a threat to freedom and theocracy itself. Secondly, the attack was a deliberate device often used by institutions, intended to erase political divisions within the People, to focus loyalty on the State and defuse a politically fragile situation. Unfortunately, the use of force to create revenue or generate worship is permissible neither through the logic of the economic system, nor the political. Thus, we can’t do it.” He studiously avoided Hera’s gaze while he said this, for which she thanked him in her heart. In his position, she would not have been able to resist a triumphant, “I told you so.”

“And may I say, while we are on the subject,” went on Prometheus, “That the strikes against Attica – which may have been justifiable and even necessary politically – could have led to economic suicide? Thankfully, and through no efforts of the gods involved, the cost in human life was fairly small. But nevertheless, dozen of villages have been razed. It does strike me as a little odd for us to get a system such as the Golden Touch going one day, and then obliterate the customers on the next,

blowing up our own source of revenue. It's carrying divine eccentricity too far."

Hera was uncomfortably aware of the accusatory stares emanating from the other gods. She attempted to assume an air of nonchalant concern. "Prometheus," she said, "why has there been this sudden decline in sacrifice? Where its cause?"

"Oh, that's quite simple," he said. "Mortals have stopped believing in us."

There was instant uproar. Gods on either side sprang up, their voices clashing and ringing indistinguishably, fear and fury written in bunched brows and in the lines of open mouths. "Don't shout at me," Prometheus protested. "It's perfectly true. I don't mean they've stopped believing we exist. They can see us every day through the fences that ring their pleasure ground, on their guided tours through the private parts of the city. They've stopped believing because they *know* we exist. That's an important point – you can't believe in something you know. Mutually exclusive."

"Explain!" shouted someone.

"It's the fault of the Golden Touch experience," declared Prometheus. "Mortals now come into daily contact with us, and we have therefore lost our mystique. Previously, we've restricted manifestations to a couple of people at a time, or to the odd girl, so that there was always a little margin of doubt for the belief to fight and grow stronger by so doing. But now mortals have seen us and spoken with us, which stand up in most courts as existential proof. The belief structure works perfectly as long as the gods are regal presences in the shy, but when they find out that the Messenger of the Gods picks his nose and that Dionysus is an alcoholic flatulent…"

“I am not an alcoholic flatulent,” objected Dionysus, peering round the wall of demigods behind which he had previously concealed himself.
“That’s what it sounded like to me when we were down on earth together,” said Prometheus. “The people thought so too – you could see by the looks on their faces, crowded into that little temple in Euboia. I’d told you not to have all those kebabs the night before.”
“There was absolutely nothing wrong with those kebabs,” said Dionysus. “I got them on special offer in Boiotia with my chariot card. And as for being alcoholic…”
“I’m saying that we are in an impossible situation,” said Prometheus.
Exactly where I wanted us, he thought with a tiny surge of self-pride. If I can now push them all the way, to break the balance and draw him back… “Our much-needed source of income is proving dangerous to our status as gods, leading to the crumbling of human belief, without which we shall cease to be true gods. Without it, we are merely immortals.”
“Best plains lamb they were as well. He said to me, ‘mate, they’re five obols each, but to you with that card, I’ll give them away for three’.”
“The only course of action I can presently see is to offer the mortals an inducement to believe in us. Either that, or we forget the scheme completely and withdraw from Earth. Otherwise we shall be in the ridiculous position of having to admit that in some ways mortals are more powerful than the gods.”
“You could offer them free wine,” suggested Dionysus. “And we could hand out kebabs at temples.”
“The sort of people interested in your kind of kebabs would be red-nosed dipsomaniacs in imminent danger

of death from fatty degeneration of the heart and in no fit state to sacrifice," said Prometheus. "Even entering into a client relationship with them is perilous – it's impossible to force someone to believe in you, and if you did, their worship would be worthless and have to be recycled. This isn't a case of mortals hating us but that they are now actually indifferent to the problem concerning our existence. You know what that means?"

It meant the hollow emptiness of a divine soul ungladdened by sacrifice; dry, empty days of dreary immortality without desire or purpose. Belief to the gods is as time, space and freedom to mortals – the children of earth are the surest guard the Immortals have found against the dreadful, all-consuming horror of eternal life without relief. It meant the disappearance of distinction between the gods – no more would there be deities favoured by this city or by that, spirits of the rivers implored to flow or agrarian goddess begged to be fruitful. Now the gods saw dimly the terrible blow struck by a child leaving its parents' house, carefree and without a backward glance, never to return; they felt the appalling indignity of the author who has granted his characters some knowledge of his existence, when the creations of his pen indicate that they really couldn't care less if they are shadows of ink and paper and aren't at all interested in him either. It was in their nature to be worshipped; without it, they would sink into a nightmare of worthlessness and self-denigration.

"And once the gods become existentially uncertain, then you really are up a gum tree," said Prometheus. "It really isn't good publicity for religion if the deities start asking what they're for."

"What I don't see," said Artemis "is why we had to bring the bastards to Olympus in the first place.

Wouldn't the whole idea have worked just as well if we'd sent them to the Hesperides instead? Or to the Gates of Dawn? There're plenty of exciting places that aren't swarming with farting gods."
"Whose idea was this Golden Touch experience anyway?" asked Kalea suspiciously.
"It was Enipeus'," said Poseidon firmly.
"It was not!"
"You said as much in that beautiful speech of yours."
"I stole the idea from Prometheus," said Enipeus, acting as any good parliamentarian. He had swiftly grasped the protocol of appropriating ideologies while they are in vogue and quickly abrogating them once they fall out of favour.

All eyes swivelled accusingly towards Prometheus, who stood in the centre with bowed head, examining his toenails with every appearance of absorption.
"Yes, and he wanted to stop me eating kebabs," said Dionysus. He was annoyed with Prometheus' interruption of his gastronomic tour of Hellas. "And he wanted to suppress their distribution among mortals – to the detriment of their production industry."

There came a roar of outraged voices at this dastardly move, solid evidence of the old god's malicious intentions. Hera sensed a tide of anti-Prometheus feeling rising on the strand of the Wardrobe, one that might overwhelm the approaching waves of anti-Hera feeling, and for this reason, after a brief tussle with her conscience, she could not resist stirring the waters.
"And," she added, realising as she said so that she was raising a pertinent point, "Prometheus appeared to the people of Earth in his physical form, when he might have carried out his operations invisibly. Doesn't this

indicate that he desired this calamity? He is a traitor!" Another cry of indignation.

I am afraid I am, thought Prometheus. I am a traitor to the Olympians, to the great gods. And I am a gambler, above all. Forgive me, Hera, but I had to find a means to break the power of the highest Immortals, and the only way I could do this was through the mortals who had done so much to elevate you. I do hope this disaster is temporary. Listen to me, if you will. We must bring Zeus back to Olympus, for only he remains untainted by the consuming desires that now dominate our thought. Only he could now be a theocrat, which I think is rather a nice touch, considering his past. But he cannot return if you remain in power – my only hope is that he will come back to us of his own accord if all other hope has faded, if Ploutokratia threatens to consume earth as well as heaven, if the crisis swells to the critical point. I may be wrong, but I pray otherwise. Listen to me, if you are willing to hear my thoughts. This is what I have worked for in secret.

But Hera did not perceive his thoughts. "Worst of all," she declaimed, "he took Dionysus with him! Doesn't this confirm his guilt? How dare he let our worshippers see how Dionysus really behaves?"

At this there was a positive eruption of furious shouting, not least from Dionysus himself, who appeared to disagree with her sentiments. Mountains rose like intercontinental ridges, shaking dolerite fists, rivers flowed to their feet and nymphs shouted discreet insults. Green with fury, Enipeus advanced on Prometheus. "You're going down!" he screamed. "It's all your fault!"

Looking at the demigods, from face to face, Hera saw that every eye was glazed by the same greenish film

that had blotted out the vision of Enipeus when she had tried to meet his gaze, in the first meeting after the attack. She looked at Prometheus, who stood as though oblivious to the clamorous sea that broke around him. Prometheus whom she had never understood, whose talents she should have tapped, who though unfathomable was, she sensed, now doomed. And although she did not intend to, she now found herself shouting with the rest, gesticulating as they did, at the god they blamed for their troubles, drawn involuntarily into the cacophony of hatred for the appointed scapegoat.

Quietly and with a certain calm, Prometheus consulted his foresight to see what the immediate future held. Of course, he could not perceive his own fate, but the future actions of those around him looked quite clear, and also familiar. "Oh dear, it all seems to have gone rather wrong," he said to himself, and sighed. He raised his eyes to the spotless dome of smooth-polished lapis lazuli above him. "I'm sorry, Athene," he said. "Zeus, I tried my best. Hopefully I have done enough now for events to take their course without anymore help from me." He sighed again. "I have a feeling I'm going to be a little tied up from now on."

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Heracles stumped gloomily up the steps to his modest, unpretentious palace, tucked away on the northern side of Olympus. Before he went in, he poked at the flowerbeds flanking the door with the handle of his club, uprooting a few determined weeds. Such was their determination that they crawled back to the beds once he had gone, and reinserted themselves into the soil.

As he entered, Hebe of the slim ankles, his wife, carefully hid the scientific treatise she was composing on the motion of neutrinos through matter, and turned to the loom where she was weaving a coverlet for their bed. She always felt it would be too much of a shock for poor Heracles to discover what she really did in her spare time, and knew he would feel much more comfortable seeing her engaged in the traditional tasks that mortal women had carried out while he was on earth, such as weaving, water-carrying and discussing domestic matters with the servants. It was for similar reasons that Heracles had never brought himself to show his wife his philosophical treatise on the motion of the heavenly bodies, the composition of matter, and their relevance to mortal existence. He felt she would prefer him to remain a lion-pelted strong man and was careful not to destroy this illusion. The arrangement pleased both of them and showed no signs of altering.

"Hello Hebe," he said as he sat down, stroking her golden hair absently. "That is a lovely pattern."

"Hello, Heracles," she answered. "Thanks very much. Did you have a nice time at the Wardrobe meeting?"

He shook his great head sadly. "It was all very confusing – so much so that I could not understand. Why do they behave like this?"

Poor fellow, thought Hebe, how can they expect him to keep up with their complicated discussions? He's doing well if he can walk and talk at the same time…

I was thinking of other things, reflected Heracles. As the atom is the heart of matter and the focus for its whirling particles, bound to its will, then if it is true that the image of the large lies in the small, then the diverse whirlings of gods and men should, in the light of this example, be directed around the epicentre of a massive

motive force, inescapable, which gives order at some level to motions that may appear to be without direction. If only there was not so much I did not understand…

He gave a heavy sigh. “Athene was not there,” he said. “And a lot of the talk was about kebabs.”

“That was nice then?”

“I don’t like kebabs very much. And there were laws passed to enable Olympians to purchase them at any time…they said they represented freedom and their purchase should be compulsory…that we should wear kebabs as tokens of our patriotism and fly them from ourwindows….”

“Well, I don’t suppose you’ll have to buy them if you don’t want to,” said Hebe comfortingly, running her fingers through the warp.

“And worst of all,” he went on, “they all turned on Prometheus. I’m not sure why, it all happened too quickly, but I think it was something to do with his ideas for the tourist industry.”

“What’s happened to him?” Hebe was fond of Prometheus, who had helped her to make her first cornucopia in the garden when he was minding her on her sixth birthday.

“He has been arrested,” said Heracles worriedly. “He is being held in prison till he can be tried for high treason against the Republic, for plotting to undermine belief, seeking to restore the monarchy, undermine the economic structure of Olympus, advocating individual action and seeking to suppress the free purchase of kebabs. I wanted to break into the prison to release him, but I found I couldn’t – not even swing my club; some force restrained me.”

“I expect it will all come out in the wash,” said Hebe philosophically. She hugged her husband, who held her

like a fragile doll in his huge arms. “Hebe,” he said, “why is no one praying to me any more?”

“You have felt it too?”

His shaggy head nodded. “No prayers, no sacrifices,” he said. “I used to like answering prayers…I could go on helping people on earth even after my death…pretend to be like father Zeus. Now there is silence. Why?”

“I don’t know, Heracles,” said Hebe. She did not say how afraid she was, how she had already felt the weakening in their divine limbs as the pillars of belief that upheld her above the common gods cracked and tottered. “I don’t know. But there is nothing we can do, not even pray or sacrifice, because there is no one to hear us.”

*

Along the invisible tendrils he had inserted into every divine mind, the green miasma that was Argurion felt a tremor run. With a clinking of coins he crouched low over the city, determined not to relinquish his hold or allow them to wriggle free. No, they must earn and spend, earn and spend, forget that there existed a world beyond this consumptive cycle of profit and despair. Their dreams must be filled with images of sated wealth, riches beyond desire or imagining that should still prove insufficient to slake the devouring lust for golden satisfaction; the passion for the godhead of riches must be their sole delight. Wealth alone must give meaning to their immortality, not wealth whereby to achieve, but lucre to burgeon and swell the confines of a divine heart till it should burst and spew the cancerous corruption upon the world, a vile contagion of striving obsession and desire. Terrified, Argurion felt the stream of frenzied shoppers falter, sensed

consumption falling, seen the wavering in the hearts of the million financiers spinning their numbers in the voids of their lives. Yet more firmly did he squeeze his prey, for he sensed that nothing makes a plutophile more conscious of the divinity of money than the fear of the waking kraken of recession. And in the fibre of his soul he felt his mother's thoughts, a mother who did not use that name or speak distinguishable words, for to do either would be to acknowledge personality and to defeat her own endeavour of obliteration. Love for what you are is but the first step, she said, a love for wealth that blinds the soul to a love of what makes them free and what gives them life. Let their wealth dry up, their sacrifices pall, in a masterstroke to the distinctions between them. For some are richer in mortal adulation than others, the Olympians and the great gods more than the spirits of the rivers and the trees. Remove the discrepancy of sacrifice, and their riches shall remain their only distinctions. Let us consume their writhing personalities in the great welter of their identical longings…Only those enslaved to passions can be truly free; only those at the mercy of ephemeral yearnings can be liberated or recognise their inner selves; so they will think. Keep hold, Argurion. For obsession with you shall focus their minds and shield them from the dangers of their situation, till they will no longer have the individuality to perceive it.

Feeling was running high against Prometheus. His attempt to prevent the free circulation of kebabs was seen as representative of his deep desire to suppress the freedom of the gods, and was indicative of his contempt for the gratifications and indulgences so absolutely necessary in the forward-looking republic. This caused an uproar in Olympus, as insulting the memories of

those who would have martyred themselves to the republican cause had they been able to. It was rapidly becoming clear that he was an enemy to everything the republic had come to stand for. Even those on weekend breaks hurried back to the city to join in the fun. Such breaks were becoming increasingly popular with the people – although those who did get away from it all consistently failed to notice that in doing so they had inadvertently brought it all with them.

Prometheus languished happily in his cell while Olympus raged in righteous anger outside, only waiting for the moment of his trial. With infinite contentment he had erased all his worries from his mind. Instead, he turned his attention to a colony of divine ants, who were ruled by an escaped swear word and dwelt in the crannies of his cell. He found them very diligent and willing pupils and much more tractable and eager to deal with than his divine brethren, or even mortals for that matter. Perhaps the gods had made a mistake in focusing all their attention on the bipeds. Already, the ants had learnt the secret of fire; later he intended to teach them Greek and perhaps introduce them to the wheel and the lever. That night he laid down the foundations of a solid training in mathematics, music and poetry, and became quite distressed when he was summoned to appear before the Olympic court on the following day, just as he was engaged in teaching the rudiments of quantum mechanics to his dutiful pupils. Many months later, when he returned in search of his friends, he was distressed to discover that they had vanished without trace. He would have been gratified to learn that when their remote descendents were discovered by astronomers in the mid-twenty-first century, they created a scientific furore and provided

conclusive, irrefutable proof that life had indeed evolved on the Red Planet, where their colony beneath the crimson crust showed incredible similarities to anthills on earth, though it was remarked that their shower head fittings had much less tendency to fur up than most modern models.

Chapter Fifteen

In the aftermath of the re-enactment, the Sacred Objects were reverently displayed, the Sacred Hymns reverently sung, and the priests retreated into the Holy of Holies to complete the Mysteries, after which everyone was invited to join them in the front hall for coffee and biscuits. There a communal Bacchic revel was begun, where Sacred Wine was distributed and everyone became irreverently drunk. They were aware of the mystic power of wine to liquefy consciousness and enable one to commune with the divine.

Under cover of the Sacred Chants, sung reverently but indistinctly by the initiates, Zeus exchanged whispered and hurried words with Demeter. Melitta, her head in his lap, slept uneasily in the dim light before the dawn. More than anything, he desired knowledge of Olympus, something to wipe clean the clinging cataract ruining his sight, some words of comfort or reassurance that all was well. But Demeter could not give him what he desired.

She told him of the ravages wrought on Earth by the demigods, as they turned from their tasks and fled to Olympus, drawn by the irresistible lure of advancement and by dreams of boundless wealth. Rivers dried – Enipeus had ceased to flow altogether – trees in northern Greece drooped, bloodless and brittle, fields and mountain slopes, once bright with a spectrum of flowers, remained bare. A madness of desire had fallen upon the gods, and Demeter went no more to Olympus. Zeus was silent for a while, struggling to speak over the hollow in his heart.

“But what has caused this ruin?” he asked at length. “What has driven the gods to abandon all they held dear?”

“You know the Enemies of whom I speak,” said Demeter. “You remember that you fought them long ago – Titans and Giants and children of Chaos. They are returning to the world, Zeus. Hera has opened a way for Plutokratia into the minds of the gods, and through her spawn Argurion she has driven them to abandon whatever made them divine. Argurion must be controlled, my brother. He cannot be permitted to run free and unfettered through the souls of the gods, for without check or curb, he is laying down the pathway for Plutokratia to re-enter the world she abandoned so long ago, and to reclaim it for her own. If Olympus falls, then falls the world, and we shall be once more beneath the dominion of Chaos.”

“But what can I do?” Zeus asked her desperately. “Is there anything I can do? I’m completely powerless, you know that?”

Demeter shook her head. “You will never be powerless, Zeus,” she said. “In Theocracy, Hera has taken a thing of great power and beauty, and wrought some good in Olympus before Argurion overtook her. There lies our hope, in your skill to lead, not to command, in your gift to make others love and follow you. It still exists in Olympus, though twisted by desire for wealth and the inability to accord value to those who have it not. If you return, then it is in Theocracy that you will find the strength to do what you have to do.”

“Demeter, I can’t go back. Haven’t you seen what they did to Attica? How many they killed on my account? And I can’t leave Melitta. I must keep her safe, above all.”

“What would she wish you to do? Save her, or her world?”
“I’m not going to make that choice – it doesn’t even come down to that,” he said fiercely. “She’s my only friend here, but if it came to it, I’d get out and let them have me if it came to it. I need to find somewhere to think, to prepare something…”
“Do not let yourself grow to love her, Zeus,” said Demeter. She looked down pityingly on the girl’s smooth shoulders, rising on the cushion of her breath, at her barely-parted lips and heavily lashed eyes. “I know what it is to lose, and I would not wish that pain on you or her.”
“Do you think I don’t? Remember Semele and Callisto, poor Latona before she died. I have lost as well. And…I think it is too late to draw back.”
Demeter shrugged in silence. “Know that while she is hidden now, Hera has in her grasp a blurred image of her face, which will grow clearer even as we speak. Once it has become as crystal, there will be nothing any of us can do to protect her.”
“Well, what do you want me to do?” hissed Zeus. Melitta stirred in his lap. Never had he felt so utterly impotent and helpless. “Do you want me to walk back to Olympus, into their thunderbolts?”
“The Office will hold the systems of the world in place for a time,” she said. “But Argurion’s power grows, and he overmasters the weak through the flaws of Theocracy. But Prometheus is your true friend, Zeus. He has striven endlessly, abandoning hope of finding you, so as to leave a window through which you might return before the end. Hera is all but undone. If at her fall you return to Olympus, it may be that your strength will suffice to wipe the blindness from the eyes of the

gods, allow them to master what has sought to subdue them, and stay the advances of the Chaos-child. The powers of the Olympians cannot triumph against this enemy – it fears only you. So you must consider where your duty lies. Otherwise, dissolution awaits us all."

"So what am I supposed to do? Flap my wings and end up in Olympus?"

"When the time comes, I shall find you. You are touched with my mark now, that only I may perceive. I shall find you when Olympus has need."

"I'm glad you have so much faith in me. Neither you nor anyone seems to understand that I'm an utter has-been, and that this girl is all that's keeping me sane. I'm beginning not to care what happens to Olympus, to be honest. Bugger them all. I'll head for the Hesperides, or the Blessed Isles, Gates of Dawn, anywhere. Chaos won't have everywhere."

"Perhaps not," said Demeter gently. "But it will win the earth, and her children, whom you love; it will win the woods and the fields, the cornflowers in the new grass. It will triumph over the stars and moonlight on the waters of the Saronic gulf, and dry the waves washing on the pillared shores in the morning sweetness, and descend over town and village, over voices and song and feasting, over quarrel and friendship, faith and pity, over all the mortal simplicities and idiocies that you hold so dear. Remember these when you sit in the last light of the sun on the shores of the Blessed Isles, for in your memory alone shall they survive."

Melitta woke to the sound of their voices, and lay for a time in silence before she spoke. A great melancholy was come upon her, a longing for sunlight upon the edges of the leaves, framed in gold above her against the sky, for the endless days that she and Zeus had

passed together under shallow wind and silver-speckled night. She had known even then that horror might lie ahead, for she had not been deaf to the fates meted out to the loves of Zeus in legend – though she had never been keen to hear about his ex-es from his own lips. She could have left him, she supposed, lying with her head across his thighs, smelling the sea-tainted tang of his skin, overcome the parting, married, birthed and died. But she was a part of his fate now, and he of hers; she had given him her word and she would not break it lightly. Merely to be with him was a pleasure, to witness his wit and his folly, his strength or woeful, senseless ignorance of matters where he should have shown more cynicism. She loved him, for all his faults and follies, and though his path might lead him into darkness, she would go with him there, and perhaps even lead him out on the other side.

"We should make for Mycenae," she said at last. "In a city that size, we'd have room to lie low and wait till you're needed, and I could wait there if you needed to slip away in secret." I'd be a better target there, as well, she thought. "We'd be less likely to be noticed, there."

"Greetings, daughter of earth," smiled Demeter. Melitta smiled back at the goddess. "That seems wise to my ears. Let me be of some assistance as regards your appearances."

She held up her hand, fingers outstretched, and brushed the brow of Zeus. She made him seem shorter and sturdier, altered the shape of his limbs, and as a craftsman trained by Hephaestus and Pallas Athene puts a graceful finish to his work by overlaying silverware with gold, she endowed his hair with strands of white and grey, till he was heavy with age and mortality.

“I hope you haven’t made me horribly ugly,” he whispered. “I’ve got a reputation to keep up.”
“You go on telling yourself that,” Melitta told him gently. Demeter passed a palm over her; and lightened her hair, drew her up and added to her height, altering the shadows on her face.
“I shall take you as far as the Argolid,” said Demeter. “Thus you will avoid the Isthmus of Corinth, which is surely guarded. Further than that I may not come, for my business is now with Attica.”
“I can’t thank you enough,” said Zeus. “If I ever return to Olympus whence I fell, I shall show my gratitude.”

The goddess laid her hand upon his arm. “As Ouranos fell, so did Cronos; as father falls to son so have you. But are you not reassured that you have fallen only so far as earth? Perhaps there is meaning in your fall. Reflect on the Mysteries you have witnessed, brother Zeus. For a god who dies such a death, there may come a renewal. Remember that even the gods are subject to the Fates, who allot good fortune, good and bad alike. It may be that they have some intention for you before the end that I have not perceived. Bear your own misfortune as the mortals bear all the vicissitudes of their lives – to despair is to allow the void to overcome, whilst to endure is the noblest action one may perform. More depends on you that your own happiness, I fear.”

She rose, and as she did so, laid sweet Sleep who cures all upon their eyelids. One last look she cast around the Telesterion. “It was pretty good this time,” she admitted to herself. “Nice tasteful sacrifice, good dancing, excellent pyrotechnics. I suppose that’s it till the autumn, then.” No one saw the dewy cloud that

wrapped itself around the goddess and her companions, leaving only their empty seats when it lifted.

Like the curving spine of a mighty sea-creature, the land lay motionless, washed by the smooth touch of the waters, dark against the pale sky. All was grey-hued in that anticipatory moment before the dawn; the black ship creaking as she rocked in her cradle of ripples; the sea a bath of dull mercury. But now the sun shifted above the rim of Ocean, Helios' horses burst upon the ways of heaven and fired the sky to sapphire. Colours leapt to fill the shadows, chasing the gloom and the gloaming away, to paint with pastel brightness the silver-green wave of olives, the glowing earth; and to dance across the Saronic gulf from shore to shore, racing the dawn wind, dousing the sea with light. As the ship's sail flapped and strove to fill with the almost imperceptible breeze, a misty cloud wandered light-footed towards her. The oars clopped softly into the waves and the cloud settled on the deck by the mast, before encircling the ship in farewell and drifting back towards the brightness of the shore. Invisible to the crew, the two new passengers slept in the early sunlight. The sea lifted gently, like the slowly shifting breast of a cerulean giant in sleep, soothing the ship's keel with the breath of its motion. The waters, parted by her prow, ran back sparkling upon themselves, as she floated, tranquil and serene, towards the line of land across the Gulf, sandy gold and green, that was the Argolid.

*

The trial of Prometheus was well attended. Numerous deities made it a family day out, and arrived at the Olympic Court loaded with provisions, deck-chairs and sun-creams, all supplied by PanHellenic Stores, the result of a recent merger between Heaven's

two biggest competing chains, on which occasion there had been yet more ritual consumption of the protesting smaller firms. A snack bar was doing a thriving trade beside the Gate of Heaven, and Silenus had set up a makeshift taverna in the arena, covered by a canvas awning, where bibulous gods all expressed their opinions loudly and at length, usually at the same time. A swaying, bustling crowd crawled over the open space and swarmed up the seats, but it was a crowd with even less diversity than before. Despite the Olympic uniform of patterned garments, over every face lay a vertiginous sheen of similarity, a unity of desire and interest, an assimilating green glow that only saw fit to tolerate difference when there was none.

The hubbub of exuberant gods died down as the column of Wardrobe members, from Hera herself down to Daphne the water nymph, processed solemnly towards the circle of thrones. Each member was weighed down by several stone of voluminous white robes and large bushes of laurel, which were in danger of completely concealing their faces, making each of them look disconcertingly alike. Heracles and Ares alone were distinguishable, purely on account of their size. In their midst, to the accompaniment of boos and shrieks of derision, staggered Prometheus. So loaded with chains was he that he could barely walk, and it was considered very significant by those spectators who were near enough to see clearly that his bonds had concealed the designer's name on his tunic, leaving that potent charm without any power over his prosecutors.

The public always love a fallen hero. He is the political equivalent of the bouncy castle; provided by doting parents for their offspring at birthday parties and are given such a pounding by the little dears that they

are never again fit for active service. So proceedings were held up while the crowd roared a long and involved anti-Prometheus chant in drunken voices, dropping their "t's" and "h's", as was the current fashion, making frequent use of anaphora and repeating certain key phrases, such as, "What a dodgy minister!" to emphasize their displeasure at his conduct. Immediately the chant died down, Hera seized upon it as an example of the sudden flourishing of bubbling creativity in the new forward-looking Republic, and hinted at her indirect responsibility for such genius. At once Enipeus asserted that his claim to authorship was stronger than hers, for he had in fact written it himself; whereupon Apollo heaped scorn on its lack of rhyme, poor metre, confused scansion and commented on the pedestrian nature of the tune. The spectators cheered loudly, more out of a desire to silence the debaters than to express their approval, and the trial began.

The judges were to be the Wardrobe Ministers, who would of course refer their decision to the People, whose trial it was, in their own Court – the trial of a god who had grievously wronged them. The People welcomed the announcement with more riotous cheers, though they knew perfectly well that the Wardrobe didn't give a toss what the People thought, and wouldn't act on it if they did. But such is the nature of all Wardrobes. It was, in any case, good theatre, and the People had come to be entertained.

The charge sheet was brought in by half a dozen mountain gods, reeling under the weight of its tons of clay. "You've got enough there to build a jail," commented Poseidon. "You're not intending to incarcerate the poor beggar here and now, are you?"

“These are the charges against the prisoner,” said Hera stiffly.

“Seems an awful waste of good clay to me,” mused Poseidon. “Wouldn’t it be simpler to say, ‘You’re iced, man!’ or ‘Hasta la vista, baby’ then zap him? Bang!” He emphasized his words with a well-aimed kick at the colossal teetering pile of clay tablets, which collapsed with a heaven-shaking roar upon the prisoner. Various hollow groans emanated from beneath as the dust settled.

“Poseidon!” screamed Hera in a fury. “Exactly one thousand nymphs have spent the last day copying out those charges!”

“So you’ve been wasting good nymphs as well, have you?” asked Poseidon. “It’s criminal, that’s what it is, keeping them chained to their desks copying out charges. Imagine all the fun I could have had with a thousand nymphs. Makes one come over all faint, it does.”

“Sit down, Poseidon,” said Hades’ dry voice. “Shall we dispense with the charge sheet, Hera? Or perhaps you could just read one of the fragments…the essence will still be legible, I’m sure. After all, we want to give him a fair trial, even if we do already know the verdict.”

As trials go, the hearing itself was conducted with extreme alacrity, for a trial’s duration seems to be in inverse proportion to its importance. In order to ensure that there should be a completely unprejudiced Court Official to preside over the case, after long and careful thought Hera had appointed herself to this position. At Hades’ injunction she came forward bearing a large water clock of complex design, which she placed beside the two voting urns, labelled “innocent” and “guilty”. After adjusting the clock, she faced the crowd and

addressed them loudly. “The prosecution and the defence will have an equal length of time to state their cases,” she announced. “I shall speak for the prosecution, while the defendant will be permitted to represent himself.”

The defendant groaned once more. Shards of pottery cascaded from him as he sat up, ochre-red dust and fragments clogging his hair and beard. “How very kind of you, Hera,” he said. “Most democratic. Everyone will be pleased.” The Wardrobe led the subsequent applause. Hera set the water clock in motion, and began to speak very quickly. “The Prosecution have incontrovertible evidence that the defendant, Prometheus, is guilty. We know that he intends to rob us of our freedom and restore the monarchy, undermine the economic security of our state, remove your wage and restrict the free circulation of lamb and pitta based goods. So the Court must find him guilty.”

Trickling through the clock, the water dripped to a halt as she ended. Wild cheers greeted her indictment of Prometheus. A chorus in the audience began to chant an ode praising her verbal assurance and technique, her felicity of phrase and her fine arguments, as was wise after a pronouncement by a Wardrobe Minister. This the People had learnt to their cost.

Now came the turn of the defendant’s plea. Hera kindly helped him to his feet after she had started the water clock, inadvertently kicking up a voluminous cloud of earthenware dust, which wracked him with painful coughing. Panting, he gazed theatrically at the audience, drew a deep breath, and began the speech for the defence. “I didn’t…” he began.

“Time’s up!” shouted Hera. The last drop of water meandered through the workings of the clock.

“Oh,” said Prometheus in a disappointed voice. “Is that it?”
“I’m afraid so,” said Hera. “We gave you the opportunity to defend yourself, but you didn’t take it.”
“I couldn’t have hoped for a fairer trial myself,” said Artemis archly.
“Pity I can’t compose you a funeral march,” said Apollo darkly. “*Prometheus furibundus*, or something like that. Only then I’d be prosecuted for daring to suggest that I’m better able to write music than some other people.”
“Don’t I get the chance to make a moving appeal for my acquittal?” asked Prometheus. “To bow down low and beseech you with my tears to release me?”
“No,” said Hera.
“What about my children – can’t I drag then all out and parade them in their suffering before you, crying, ‘Great ones, if ye delightest in the cry of the lamb, hear the cry of my son and have mercy. Or, if thy tastes lie in other directions, let my daughter persuade thee’.”
“I didn’t know you had any children, Prometheus,” said Hera.
“I don’t,” he said cheerfully. “But I’m sure I could have borrowed some.”
“You have heard the case,” said Hera to the assembled People and the Wardrobe jury. “Now I, as Court Official, shall pronounce my verdict, to await your approval.” Imperiously, she held out her hand to one of the Minutes, who was desperately shuffling through her pile of clay tablets. In the stillness Prometheus’ voice became audible. “…Unfair, I call it. I was looking forward to a heart-rending performance in the Thespian tradition and what do I get? Not a whisper of applause. I’m sure there’s a law against it. It’s surprising they didn’t want me to grovel – would have given them a

real sense of importance. They don't deserve my theatrical talents, that's what it is."

"I…I can't find it," twittered the flustered Minute. "I thought I'd picked it up along with the other pieces of evidence you were preparing at the same time, but I must have left it on the desk…"

"Well!" said Hera indignantly. "How in heaven do you expect me to remember a verdict I wrote all that time ago if you don't bring it with you? I took some trouble over it, as well. Really!"

"Disgraceful, I call it," said Prometheus. "What's this legal system coming to? It must be against the law to deprive a prisoner of his verdict. I'm dreadfully disappointed. No doubt it was composed in the finest verse and was the product of long and careful deliberation. We shall all be the poorer for not having heard it."

As Prometheus began to shout for his rights in a loud and stentorian voice, the Wardrobe Ministers had a hurried conference, during which Hera remembered the verdict. "I have it!" she cried. "The tablet said Guilty!"

A great cheer went up from the People, and Prometheus gave a satisfied nod. "It is an honour to be indicted in such sublime terms," he said. "Now, O people of Olympus, do not stoop to acquitting me! Will you ever be able to look yourselves in the face again if you do, or sleep soundly with your families and children with a monster such as myself roaming free through the darkened city? You see before you a blackguard of the deepest dye, who would die rather than allow a motion such as this to cloud the reason behind his dastardly attack on your divine freedom. He only thirsts to return to his subversive designs. Guilty, I say! Guilty!"

As the voting urns were passed around, it became clear that his moving words had been taken to heart. The "Guilty" urn returned overflowing with pebbles, while the other rattled with a mere handful. Hera confirmed the verdict, and declared the Court open for discussion of a suitable penalty. Defence and Prosecution were each to produce their own, whereupon the Wardrobe and the People would choose. Prometheus spoke first. After striking an attitude of grave contemplation as best as he could, considering his fetters, he announced his suggestion.

"It is the prisoner's belief that there is only one punishment dire enough to serve him justly for his sins, only one penalty so severe as to destroy any personality or fine qualities he has, only one that will degrade him to the level of the beasts of the field, the crawling, sightless worms in the pit, and place him, imperious, over capricious People, whom he will grind into the mud with his heel, and who will grind him in their turn. A punishment that will hammer him into the mould of a grovelling lickspittle, an eternal actor, a god of hollow promises, false words, empty vainglory, and viler deeds. Yes, o People of Olympus," cried Prometheus, his voice raised in thunder, "It is the Prisoner's proposition that you should elect him to the position of Prime Minister of Olympus!"

Another great cheer welcomed these words, which throttled itself as a number of gods had an opportunity to reflect on what Prometheus had actually said, chewed it over mentally, and decided that perhaps it would not meet with the full approval of the other Wardrobe Ministers, who were, after all, not chained up and were armed with thunderbolts. Hereupon, the cheer

seamlessly metamorphosisesd into a chorus of boos, leaving the field clear for the Wardrobe to air its views.

"Vultures!" yelled a demigod.

"I always felt their talents were wasted on him," mused Apollo. "And he was constantly praying for release when he was in the Caucasus. It grew very tiresome. Besides, you wouldn't believe how peaky the poor birds looked after a while. Just think of it, raw and bleeding liver every day…"

"I don't think such an outdated punishment would get off the ground any more," said Hera disapprovingly. "Isn't that so, Hades?"

"Oh, yes," said Hades, his voice brimming with false enthusiasm. "You'd never recognize the Underworld now. Fancy that – all our birds have been retrained and rethought their careers. No more is the great colony of vultures on their ranks of perches…a very sad state of affairs."

"I think," said Hera with relish, "that we should put him in the Community Service Department."

"Oh, surely that's too severe!" protested Hades. "Really!" A stunned silence lay over the Court. All present knew of the horrors of serving the community, and the unimaginable tortures that it involved lay like a shadow of fear over every Olympic wrongdoer.

"Perhaps," reflected Hera, "you could assign him to a prominent position on the Offal Counter in the Underworld's butchery."

"What?" protested Hades. ""But it's staffed by vultures!"

"Precisely," said Hera. "If you don't want him in the shop, you can always put him in the delivery room."

Knowing that it was well to sustain the illusion that the choice was theirs, the People dutifully voted and the

trial was concluded. With an armed guard surrounding him, followed by Hades himself, Prometheus was conducted from Olympus to his new life of Community Service. He went amiably, refreshingly unconcerned, wondering whether he might meet any old friends among the vultures, and whether his new feathered acquaintances would be very interested in comparative religion.

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Alone once more in her office, Hera reviewed the day's business and found that, in her opinion at least, they were good. Everyone, including Prometheus, appeared to have enjoyed the trial, in which she felt she had acquitted herself extremely well. There was a drinking festival coming up, in addition to a number of team brawling events with preliminary ball entertainments, always good tonics for the economy. Under cover of the anti-Prometheus torrent, she hoped to address the fluctuation in supply from the Worship Works – which without the fretting of the elder god seemed no more than a convoluted plot to weaken her grasp on Olympus. She must above all re-instigate pursuit of Zeus and renew the war, and divert all the mighty resources of her inimitable mind to find the woman he had seduced, to focus upon her shadowed face with all the clarity of the noon sun on the desert sand and conjure her identity from the half-formed realisation of her image. Hera hoped that wherever Zeus was, he would know this intention was in her mind, and would be afraid. For she knew him well enough to predict he would not leave her. Let it be his undoing, and the girl's as well.

All thoughts of messy and unimportant undertakings such as democratic elections should by now have

vanished, she felt. Not, of course, that she feared defeat – how was that possible for a leader so overwhelmingly popular? – but an election would cause the People unnecessary worry and prove too great a disruption for their society.

Thus she found herself considerably put out the following morning when she read the early edition of *The Helios*, in which she was quoted as wishing to call a general election within the next few weeks. She was not entirely sure where or when she had delivered the impassioned speech, reproduced in full, demanding a truly free, liberal and democratic state, unfettered and unimpeded by hostile forces. The front tablet, she was irritated to discover, bore a coloured image of Enipeus, who had gone to some considerable and not entirely wasted effort to appear handsome, directly beneath an exhortation to vote for him. Hera clicked her tongue in exasperation. She ought to have gained control of this upstart newstablet long ago.

On a blank tablet she scribbled notes for her upcoming election strategy. There was no sense in ignoring what was to come, even though an unruly river could pose no possible threat. It would be as well to go through the motions. As Enipeus seemed keen to have an election, to the extent of remembering speeches that had not been delivered, she would give him one. *The Helios* could work for her as well. It was time to capture the real prize, which would establish her forever in the minds of the People as the champion of theocracy; time to capture Zeus, the symbol of monarchy and all that had passed away. If Artemis could be persuaded to revive the trailing interests of her hounds, she might be amused to resume the chase where force had failed. She would surely see reason once the danger of the

Olympian's situation was made clear. Hera reflected that the time had come to remind her of promises made in the balmy days of the early republic.

Had she stopped to reflect, Hera might have questioned her insatiable desire for a god who posed no immediate threat to her realm, and who had all but passed from the minds of those she ruled. But driven by the spark of her wounded soul, spurred by a hatred of ancient days, she was unable to perceive her folly; that her strength was too great for the powers seeking to overthrow Olympus to enter fully therein while she held sway, that through the channels of the rivers Argurion now sought a passage into heaven, that he too feared Zeus and the potency of the elder god. Hera willed above all for Zeus to fall before her onslaught – but she could not foresee that perhaps she was not alone.

Inspired by republican zeal, roughly to be equated with the eagerness felt by a candidate living in fear of electoral failure, Hera set off to visit Artemis. The ex-Goddess of the Hunt – now the Deity to Promote and Preserve Organo-vegetal Heritage for the Purpose of Generating Income from Those who wish to Return to It – kept a small apartment not far from the Central Bank. By the standards of the Olympians it was modest and unpretentious, being a mere sixty rooms, with the odd hall and throne room idly tacked onto the perimeters. It architectural design had caused many raised eyebrows and voices among the more radical members of the Wardrobe, as it seemed dangerously individualistic and not entirely orthodox. Its pillars were formed of living trees; whispering ascanthus leaves rustled at their woody capitals; verdant pediments shimmered with foliage and supple branches intertwined and bowed over the entire structure in a latticed roof. Within, closely-

growing trees clustered in long ranks as walls, whilst every room was filled with the hush of a forest clearing, the moist grass underfoot and the soft shadows of the thickets conspiring in the mellow gloom to draw the visitor away from the marble of Olympus, and into the ancient woods that had been before and would remain, endlessly renewed, after the city was no more. It was rumoured that Artemis staged mock hunts through the different rooms of her apartment, the unfortunate victim being pursued from the mountain-heights of the waterfall in her bed chamber, through the hill country and the cedar groves of the uplands in the boudoir, and over the plain in the ballroom till he was ritually slain in the Great Hall, ringed by a denser, deeper forest than any other. But no one gave much heed to these stories, partly because they had never been able to find any trace of the victims.

Artemis she found seated beneath a cypress in her morning room; and the goddess made no move when the hounds at her feet rushed to greet the newcomer, with the clear intention of sampling the fare supplied by her ankles. They quailed, however, before Hera's stern gaze, as she read then their rights, and went on at rather more length to inform them of her right not to be bitten in greeting. Mollified, the dogs slunk away into the forest.

"Still cutting up rough about my dogs?" asked Artemis bitterly. "Surely you can't blame them for being peeved after your hunting legislation."

If but one aspect of her character gave Hera cause for pride, it was her humility. With customary graciousness she prostrated herself verbally before the other goddess. "I am sure you will be delighted, Artemis, to do your theocratic duty in helping to apprehend the tyrant Zeus,"

she said officiously. “Failure to do so will indicate your abrogation of your office and result in your vilification in the press, the end of your career, and worst of all, the laughter of your neighbours.”

Artemis flushed. “You’re not going to try and make people *laugh* at me?” she protested.

“I won’t have to,” said Hera. “The idea of anyone missing the chance to serve the republic is amusing enough in itself.”

“And sufficient cause for indictment, it would seem,” said Artemis. “You know, Hera, I don’t mind coming to your meetings, I can cope with your silly legislation, but I really cannot believe that you have the cheek to flounce in here and give me orders after you’ve banned the one thing I really loved.”

“No,” agreed Hera. “I can’t believe it either. But as belief demands the absence of facts and evidence, and I am undeniably doing so, then this fact must annihilate your belief and render it into knowledge. May I sit down?”

She did so. Artemis looked out of the window; her lips compressed, and expelled a contemptuous breath. The two sat in silence for a time.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Artemis eventually. “Supposing I have the freedom to accept, of course.”

“Hunt, in a word.”

“I thought it was illegal.”

“No, it’s only illegal to hunt animals. The hunting of gods and mortals is perfectly legitimate. The editor of *The Helios* seems to do it all the time,” she added, with a hint of bitterness.

“Is that so?” asked Artemis, with noticeably more animation. “So you mean I could have been roaming the

echoing groves with my dogs all this time, in pursuit of bare-footed Achaeans?"
"I think we should bear in mind one of the few sensible things Prometheus said – that these mortals are supplying a considerable proportion of our Gross Domestic Product," said Hera. "But in principal, yes. Though we should encourage them to visit us."
"They seem to be growing bolder, you know, and leaving the confines of their resorts," mentioned Artemis. "One looked into my boudoir window yesterday when I was changing. So I changed him into a stag."
"Where is he now?"
"I think Silenus caught him in the river and the satyrs ate him."
"Oh dear…how tiresome. What a terrible thing to happen. I must have words with them. I'm sure we outlawed the capture and consumption of livestock last week. How very annoying."
"What exactly does your plan entail, coming back to the point?" asked Artemis.
"I want you to pick up the trail of Zeus where it was lost by Ares and Apollo," said Hera. "Till I have in my mind a clear image of his lover, then this is all we can hope for. Once you have found it, I presume you and your hounds have sufficient skill to hunt him down."
"And if I should refuse?"
"One's capacity to do so has lessened of late," said Hera thoughtfully. "Apollo, Ares, satyrs, yourself…I do not hold with denial myself, especially self-denial, as this would be in your case. It is irrational and economically unsound. Personally, I have eliminated the word 'no' from my vocabulary."

Artemis gave a rueful grin. “All right, I’ll do it. I’m missing my hunting. It will be a fine thing to feel my bow sing in my grip again, and smell the foam of blood upon the air. I don’t expect you considered that I might refuse to hunt down my own father though, did you?”
Hera smiled, a horrible mirthless smile that split the beauty of her face with a dread slash of crimson, like gore trailed across a field of snow, and shook her head. Artemis trembled at the terror in her eyes. “You suggested it yourself, albeit in a moment of emotional excitement,” Hera reminded her. “Compunction is not common among the gods, I have observed. Filial devotion tends only to be felt by parents.”
“Hera, I sometimes wonder what makes you behave like this, how you contrive to act as you do, forcing those beneath you into things they might regret.”
“Very early on, I made it my ambition to be obeyed in everything,” said Hera blandly. “I have been at my own beck and call every since.”
“It didn’t work where Zeus was concerned.”
“Zeus made it his ambition to be impermeable to advice. He made this decision after I had strongly urged him to accept mine.”
“I can see his point. Advice is like offence – both are too easily taken.”
“I fear that the offence for which Zeus was exiled to earth would not have befallen had he paid more heed to me. Or been more faithful.”
Artemis looked at the other goddess, a tight, thoughtful smile on her lips, and saw such strength and malice that a shiver ran once more up her back, dancing with icy fingers under the delicate curls of hair at her neck’s base. “You could hardly say he was at home long enough for you to advise him with any success,” she

said. “Well, you may cast yours before mine without any fear of being disobeyed, I expect. I don’t have a choice, do I?”
“Of course you do,” said Hera. “But the freedom to choose is so much more pleasurable to exercise when there is only one available option.”

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Had Zeus and Melitta cared to remain asleep a little longer – somewhere in the region of three thousand years – they might have been somewhat disturbed by what would have confronted them on the beach. It is hard to empathize with the armies of sun-lotioned tourists who now lounge by the sea in varying degrees of unpleasant, sagging nudity, nor is the abundance of blubberous flesh much of a replacement for the ancient Greek ideal of the perfect human form. In those far off days, of course, the gods might have provided a simple solution in prosecuting the guilty parties for defiling an area of outstanding natural beauty. Sadly, we have not such a conscientious government today, so the jostling ranks of grotesque, peeling monstrosities are given free rein in the general confusion, leaving governmental officers with no means to prevent corporal misbehaviour, or even the gross indecencies of the privates.

As it was, when Zeus opened his eyes he was not confronted by the human equivalent of the Atlas Mountains but by a swathe of beach so smooth and empty as to seem untrodden by the foot of man, which it should have remained. The foot of man has an alarming tendency to leave unpleasant traces wherever it falls, like families who breed large numbers of dogs. Those diligent entrepreneurs who have done so much to improve our transport systems have never reflected that

if current trend continue, those places on earth still above water will be absolutely identical and not worth visiting either.

Melitta lay beside him on the silken strand. Below them, the colours of sea and sky ran together and merged, dousing the golden-white glow of the sand, the azure only cleft here and there by the strips of land laid gently on the unruffled waters. The grassy slope beyond the beach rolled under the eaves of the knotted olives, coppery light slicing their shadows into lacy patterns; on the crests of their wave rose the occasional cypress, craning on tiptoe to peer across the gulf.

Zeus blinked, yawning languorously. He had not the faintest idea how they had arrived, but felt most disinclined to move on. In the early morning sun, gossamer-smooth and rich as velvet, the sea implored him to break its silken surface. He wished they didn't have to waste such a day in saving their skins, and shook Melitta awake.

The girl uncurled with a feline arch of her back. "Morning," she said. "You still here? That must be almost the first time since we've been together that I've gone to sleep with you and still found you there in the morning." She gave him a wicked smile.

"You came with me this time," Zeus pointed out. "We now appear to be on the other side of the Saronic Gulf."

"Really? So you agree we should make for Mycenae?"

"I think so," said Zeus cautiously.

"Excellent – I've been wanting to visit it for years. Though I had hoped I'd be able to go with someone whose financial prospects were better then yours," she said critically. "If you're not careful, I'll go looking for a bloke with deeper pockets to go shopping with."

“I might be able to get a job of some kind,” he said doubtfully. He had no desire for her to go in search of someone with deeper pockets and, no doubt, a softer belly. “But I’m not sure I’d be any use at anything. Prospective employers would think I was lying if I told them the truth.”

“I wish my dad could come with us – he would have loved it,” she said, smoothing her fingers through her hair.

“Yes,” said Zeus, tight-lipped. “So do I.”

“He’s still talking with bated breath about an omelette he had in Mycenae twenty years ago”

“Twenty years? That’s a long time for an omelette to hold anyone’s attention. It must have made quite an impression on him.”

“Quite the other way around, by all accounts. Dad’s flings tended to be short-lived. Meaningful, yes, but we’re not talking life-long devotion here. Typical really. Once you take a girl out to dinner, you think it’s all over. Let them get their teeth into you and that’s the end. Still, dad was pretty broken up afterwards – a shell of his former self.”

“Swift and sweet are best,” said Zeus tactlessly.

“Talking of eating,” she mused, “when did you last take me out to dinner?”

“Um…was it in Sounion? The Keramikos?” he floundered. “I’m really sorry, my love, but it’s all been a little nightmarish recently. I’ll make it up to you in Mycenae.”

“You’d better not forget – ‘cos I won’t,” she warned him. “While on the subject, what are you supplying for breakfast?”

Zeus considered. “It’s too early in the year for olives, and I’ve got nothing to fish with…” he began.

“And I wouldn’t eat either for breakfast,” Melitta chipped in. “If this is the way you treat all your girlfriends, I’m not surprised most of your relationships are so short.”
“Ah, but you see, you only spoil a girl when you’re after a quickie,” responded Zeus, with a grin of Promethean guile. “When you intend to form a steady, long term attachment you can stop being nice.”
“I don’t recall you ever started,” she needled.
“I did!” protested Zeus. His voice ascended by several octaves, so he forced it down once again. “I was very nice to you for a long time. And yours was the distinction to lie in the arms of Olympian Zeus.”
“From what I’ve heard, it’s more of an achievement not to, if you’re female and aged between sixteen and forty,” she shot back. “And seeing as you’re not Olympian any more, all I seem to have done is get involved with an empty-headed strongman who’s wanted by the gods for war crimes.” She tugged at his beard. “Come on, you’ve got to come up with something more flattering. Knowing you, I admit it’s unlikely, but you could at least resort to an inspired lie.”
“The Muses oversee inspiration,” he reminded her. “And they’re not writing to me any more.”
“What, no mail until you return to splendour, is it?”
“Melitta, sometimes you really annoy me.” He rolled her over on the sand, overpowered her struggling, and tickled her mercilessly, till she was breathless and gasping.
“I know I do, “ she panted, with a brilliant smile. “But I’m sure I’m not as bad as those other gods would be if they caught you.”
“Shall we get on the move? Perhaps it would be wise.”

“Are we going to eat at all today? Not sure if this figures much in your divine plan…”

Zeus shook his head slowly. They might flee from the wrath of the gods, from fire and thunder, only to be brought up short by a stomach. No doubt a few strong paternal genes were making their presence known. Breakfast? What was he supposed to do? “Would a village be ok?” he hazarded.

“Well, perhaps not a whole one,” she considered. “Though my father did mention they went down nicely with a drop of oil and some thyme.”

Zeus sighed. It was going to be a long day. He took her hand, and together they made their way up the beach towards the hill, already shimmering in the sun. “Maybe we should just go,” he suggested. “We’re both recovering from the shock of our experiences, and I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to keep anything down at present. If we find anything edible – including small villages – we eat it. That all right with you?”

“Done,” said Melitta.

Soon the winds would fill their footsteps, and leave the trees gazing intently at whatever spectacle held their attention in the sea of sapphire, undisturbed until the first coach load of tourists took them unawares, to decorate their beach with tasteful patterns of banana skins and beer cans.

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A desert of ash lies beneath the pitiless sky. The cornfields are empty, blasted by corrupting flame, filled with a ruinous, choking dust that eddies like clouds of dried vomit spewed from stony entrails, sluggish over the plains; gaunt hollow houses are black against the fire-ruined soil. Strange twisted shapes of withered tree trunks line the crests of hills, stark against the burning

heavens. Of Attica but a shadow is left, and the long miles of meadow and field are no more. Only Athens itself remains.

Not far from the city, ash rolls over fragments of burnished metal, half hidden in the scattered earth. The rim of a battle-scarred shield juts from the soil; close by, a spear's shattered shaft is all but buried in the consuming dust. A golden helmet, serpent-crested, has been flung aside, dented and spurned into the earth. Soon the shifting winds will bury the armour and the weapon, and their brightness shall no longer mirror the sun. Nor will and plunderer bear them away, for these were borne by one of the divines, and beyond the strength of mortal men to carry.

Athene sat on Mount Hymettus, cloak wrapped tightly around her. She did not move. Attica and its people had been everything to her. Like a distant lover she had watched its blushes in the long-distant dawns, seen its shy adoring smiles under the summer sun. In the glowing autumn their eyes had met with understanding, as though across a room, brimming with secrets that no other knew. But now it was as if she had begged it to fulfil her desire, and found only winter's chill in answer, or worse, a cool dismissal of the offered love, ignored and turned aside.

She had failed Attica. Not through her own fault, but that could not change what had passed, nor alter how the survivors would remember her. Athens had been saved, but this could not atone for what was lost. She could feel it in their prayers – prayers now offered up anew in hopeless resignation, whose form was unchanged but without the fire that gave them life, destroyed in flames of heaven's bearing. Prayers not spoken expecting a return, nor even from a sense of

duty or despair, but simply as being all that was left to do; prayers such as a god is sickened to receive. And Attica was perished, irretrievable and lost, as one inaccessible and beautiful who gave o sign that one's proffered adoration was returned, so was Athene undermined, her very self undone from within.

What was one supposed to do? Of course, there was the cycle of self-pity and disgust, wallowing and recrimination…and for the mortals? Memories from past and future flitted into her divine mind. She could strike the heroic stance, declaim gloriously on the richly deserved anger of the gods, and sing chants telling of their power and majesty – hollow words, now that any mortal could buy a ticket to see how the gods behaved at home. Or perhaps she could go for the caring, feeling approach, which would be bound to score points in the new age. She could weep profusely as she walked over the battle fields, tracing her paths through the white bones and the torn and tattered limbs, stepping over gouts of roasted flesh and the viscera of those blasted in the fires; she might squat down beside vile-smelling children and cry over them, interspersing her tears with inane grins at her publicity crew and facile statements…"We shall end your pain…even though it was I who ordered the fire that smote you from above…" Being a modern god was so very exhausting, as well as requiring prolific tear ducts and an ability to lie convincingly. Athene wondered in distraction whether it really did any good, either to the people or their rulers, for them to see a leader prostrated in grief over people they had plainly hated not a year before. Surely, they would reflect, if it's hit them so badly, why did they go ahead with it in the first place – or why did we elect such a wimp? But of course, as the leaders

would tell them, it is the easiest thing in the world to feel pity for people one has never met. It is only when we come to know someone truly, to share a bed or a home, that we can really begin to dislike them. And only then that true friendships are made.

She would not return to Olympus, nor take up again the symbols of the craft that had been hers. But Earth held no attraction for her now. Knowing what was expected of her made it no easier to fulfil. So in the end, she herself did nothing. Frozen, her phantom huddled invisible on Hymettus, while her divine spirit moved wearily over the land.

New springs bubbled through the soil in villages crammed to overflowing with refugees; fatted flocks sprang miraculously from the wilds. Through ash and cinder in the cornfields pushed fingers of green, like leafy fingers run through thick sable hair. Near many villages that had received more than their fair share of the homeless, there sprouted new and unusual plants, petals uncurling like wrapping paper from opening presents. The bemused inhabitants found plump bundles of freshly grown tunics nestling in their fronds, or batches of cakes and swelling loaves ready to be plucked. This munificence, they avowed, had clearly been sent by a god, for free distribution to all in their hour of need. No doubt the bounty of heaven was to be as the air, plentiful and intended for all. Accordingly, a number of Attic businessmen held a hurried conference in Athens, and interpreted the signs as was their wont. Clearly, they indicated, the goddess would wish the distribution of such gifts to rest in safe hands, for economic disaster would fall upon the country were such goods to be made freely available. So within four hours the survivors of the divine scourge found

themselves required to pay for the largess of the gods at specially constructed distribution booths, and on attempting to wash or drink from a miraculous spring, discovered that the waters had been piped away to reservoirs owned by the conglomerate, only to be meted out at a price. It was not economically sound, they were told, no modern business such as Olympus could afford to give away goods that were truly free, and such entrepreneurship must have been expected, if not absolutely intended, by Olympus. And the businessmen had no intention of finding themselves in financial positions that might necessitate their forfeiting weekly holidays to the heavenly Pleasure Beach.

Athene regarded them stoically. All their wants she had satisfied, all their hungers replenished. If one section of humanity decided that the other sections should pay for the gifts of the gods, it now troubled her little. She did not intend to interfere. Having held out her hands as far as she was able, now she believed she was entitled to withdraw. To withdraw as the sea foams down over a pebbled beach, with a long melancholy sigh of falling and parting waters.

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The mindless cloud of Ploutokratia stirred contentedly over the city of the gods. Never before had Argurion been so mighty, nor she so assured of triumph. All were now firmly set on the rails of their destiny, running rigidly into a fresh future of her making, hers and those who desired her dominion, though they knew it not.

Chapter Sixteen

For the vast majority of its citizens, Olympus became a confusing place to live during the election campaigns. The long-suffering People had grown accustomed to the chariot-trains of mortals who ascended to them with monotonous regularity, and treated the tourists, by and large, with the disdain they deserved – so often mistaken for quaint local shyness by the naïve traveller – but their immortalities seemed positively wearisome since *The Helios* had announced a general election. Whenever one wanted to go to work, or out shopping, to a drinking binge or a bladder match, a barrage of vociferous maniacs appeared. These individuals spoke loudly, passionately and earnestly, especially, if they belonged to opposing parties, in which case they spoke so loudly and passionately, both at the same time, that their poor audience was quite unable to discover what they were saying, and frequently sidled away to see how far the bladder had been kicked towards one of the goals.

To the discerning observer, it was clear these campaigners were divided into different camps, although the Olympic practice of fighting fiercely with one's closest friends and relations made it difficult to tell whether they were allied or not. In order to clear up the resultant confusion, the one party took to wearing purple sashes, and the other, yellow. It emerged that the purple-sashes had greater numbers of nymphs, naiads and agrarian nymphs in their ranks, whilst the yellows tended to be urban deities.

But to an ordinary, run of the mill god, trying to hold down a good function and keep the tax-god happy, bring

up his 2.4 children, consume the stipulated quantities of alcohol and unhealthy food, attend the compulsory bladder match each month and take his family on the requisite two-week break to get away from it all, this campaign was disturbing and confusing in the extreme. His freedom, he felt, was being compromised. Take these political leaflets, for instance. There was the case of Carmodius, an innocent god overseeing a field in Thrace. On coming to his entrance atrium one morning, the poor god had been completely buried beneath several tons of clay leaflets bearing drawings either of Hera or Enipeus, which had been zealously rammed through his door to the great detriment of its panels. He was only discovered after a week's torment beneath the monstrous pile, when he had been driven nearly mad through seeing the sentence, "The future isn't written yet. Help write it with me!" stuck before his eyes every time he opened them. Or what about Xenoctetes, a minor river god? Having leant against a wall to doze in the warm sunshine, he awoke to find that he had been pasted to it by dozens of posters bearing political slogans, as the campaigners had been too intent on their noble task to notice him in their way. The poor demigod then became the target for the violent wrath of the bill-stickers, for in extricating himself he emerged from a crucial part of a sentence which, they claimed, was rendered unintelligible by the hole left in his wake, although most of those who had attempted to read the sentence beforehand declared that it had been pretty unintelligible to begin with and was now, if anything, easier to understand. The party thus insulted threatened to sue, saying he could at least have had the decency to remain where he was until after the election, whereupon the opposition party decided to heal the breach by

sticking one of its own posters over the unsightly hole, a solution which to their surprise did not meet with the approval of their adversaries.

Now that the Olympians found their lives so crowded with wage earning, consumption of goods and the pursuit of pleasure, they discovered the opportunities for simpler pleasures that did not require such a massive capital outlay had mostly disappeared. It was now more common to meet a friend in a market queue than in a restaurant, or to rediscover an old acquaintance while beating them over the head with a bottle at a bladder match. Despite these constraints on conversation, the intelligentsia did exchange worried words whenever they could, under the pretence of standing in queues, sitting at their desks, or even daring to speak during drinking sessions on Saturday evenings in the tavernas, where their illegal confabulations appeared to go unnoticed.

Political fever seized the city. A fever, that is, which radically affected those being paid to campaign. Everyone else made strenuous efforts to avoid them. Beyond the whitewashed, vine-fronded walls of this particular tiny taverna could be heard the raucous shouts of campaigners accosting passers-by. But the tiny square of garden remained peaceful, its walls brushed by the faint blush of the fading day, and its single table huddled close to the veranda ad though fearful of the microscopic beasts roaming the grassy forests within the crumbling enclosure. A solitary drinker sat at the table, a naiad with a certain faded prettiness.

The dark wooden door into the street wheedled plaintively to the prospective customer who sidled in. It is not a simple matter to sidle when the ratio of one's bulk to that of a normal god is about that of a

cumulonimbus cloud to a packet of cotton wool, but Heracles achieved it. Timidly and sadly he smiled at the satyr who owned the taverna, and signed in, receiving a chit in exchange. Even Wardrobe Ministers had to abide by the dictates of the government, such as the regulation compelling Olympic citizens to attend a place of alcoholic purveyance at least thrice weekly, and there to consume a stipulated quantity of said substance. Failure to produce one's chits, especially for Saturdays, resulted in the offender being plunged into a vat of wine until they had drunk, and paid for, an appropriate quantity.

Heracles sat down beside the naiad with a shy word of greeting. Had it not been for his height, she would have failed to recognise him, so wasted did he appear. Bony cavities opened in his cheeks, drawing dark smears down from his eyes, half-hidden by straggling hair. The muscles of the shoulders that he upheld the sky for Atlas and been the death of Geryon were shrunken, his parched skin clinging tightly to the bones of his mighty frame. "What's the trouble?" asked the naiad sympathetically. "I'd see Asclepius, if I were you. You look pretty run down."

Heracles nodded grimly. "So do all the Olympians," he said in a hollow voice.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked, with that disarming tone of the concerned who are unable to avoid superfluous questions.

The god stared blankly into his wine cup. Finally he raised expressionless eyes to her face. "The sacrifices have stopped," he said.

"I know. It hasn't made much difference to the rest of us."

"I don't entirely understand it myself. But Enipeus says it is a sign from the Fates that the time of the Olympians

is ending, that it is time for us to lay down our power. He claims the Olympians are now crippled and wasted because at heart all gods are equal, and our elevated status is only a result of human belief and sacrifice. Long ages ago, after the Titan wars, when the Cyclopes first built the Worship Works, there were so few deities – mostly the children of Cronos and their children. And I think they became more and more dependent on the Worship, which flowed to them more than to the younger gods - better publicity, in a way. It made them stronger, yes, and emphasised their greatness, but left them more vulnerable were that Worship removed. As a child of an Olympian, even I have grown used to replenishing my strength from sacrifice, and it is not long since my mortal self died and left the world. Enipeus says that this is a judgement on us, wrought by our own actions."

"How do you mean?"

"It only began after Olympic Airways began to operate. A huge crowd of tourists – mortals, from Earth – were hanging over my garden wall last week, while I was lying in the sun reading a scroll, and they were taking tapestrographs and saying 'Wow, that's Heracles!' and then when I went out for a walk they followed me. Because I was agitated I missed my footing and fell into the river. Then they laughed and took more tapestrographs. I did not want to smite them, but it was a little hurtful. They went back to Earth and told all their friends, who came up themselves. So now whenever my name is mentioned down below they don't talk of the Gardens of the Hesperides or the Hound of Hell, or the monsters that I freed them from – they say, 'Heracles? Saw him fall into a river last week. Made a heck of splash!' All the Olympians have similar stories, some

much worse than mine. And the mortals do not believe. How can they be in awe of those they feel they know, and those whom they know are fools?"

He looked on the brink of tears. The naiad patted his hand kindly. "Don't let's talk about it. What do you think of the elections? What's the inside view from the Wardrobe?"

"Poseidon and Dionysus tried to set up their own independent party. They called it the 'Free Booze 'n' Birds' Party'."

"How disgraceful!" said the naiad. "What about we ladies? Why no mention of bronzed gods to attract female voters?"

"That's what the dryads said." Heracles sipped his wine, holding the cup delicately between finger and thumb. "So they changed the name to 'Free Booze, Blokes 'n' Birds' Party'."

"I take it their election promises were summed up in their title."

"Mmmm. They seemed very popular as well – looked as though they'd scoop most of the vote. Poseidon claimed he had discovered a sound democratic principle – that you offer people what they want in exchange for yourself."

"I would need lots of booze and many blokes to be able to put up with Poseidon," said the naiad primly.

"Well, seeing as he is so dazzlingly handsome he said he would supply the 'bloke' part of the promise," mused Heracles. "That was when the whole venture started to crumble. And Hera threatened to sue him for using the term 'birds', and someone else paid some of the Birds who were campaigning for him to come forward and accuse Poseidon of abusing them when they were young. Then Hera discovered a law saying that

independent parties were illegal, which seems a bit odd to me, but you can find a law forbidding practically anything now. So they had to disband it."
"Poor Poseidon."
"Yes. He said he'd only come up with the plan because his generous nature had prompted him to share the Birds – they were some of your sisters, and some mermaids – with everyone else, but Olympus had had its chance now and could shove it. He and Dionysus took them off to his house and none of them have been seen since."
"So who has your vote – Hera or Enipeus?"
Heracles considered. "I dislike them both so profoundly – it is not an easy choice," he commented.
"No," agreed the naiad.
"In fact, I might go so far as to say it is a positively difficult one."
"Quite," said the naiad.
"I mean, each party is offering so much," he pondered. "Hera takes the credit for deposing Zeus and says she will increase the minimum wage, the number of bladder matches and other opportunities for imaginative gratification, and will legislate for greater personal freedom. Whilst Enipeus claims he will be responsible for deposing Hera and promises to enlarge everyone's pecuniary potential, increase the frequency of adversarial entertainments and communal indulgence time, and enlarge social theocracy to embrace everyone in Olympus. "

Once more each of them felt as though they had been noticed, and their conversation settled, despite their efforts, into specially prepared channels. It felt uncannily like reading one's own words reported in a biography.

“It is not an occasion to be taken lightly,” avowed the naiad.
“No,” agreed Heracles. “So much is at stake; this a once-in-an-immortality chance.”
“Isn’t that what Hera said when they set up theocracy?”
“Yes,” nodded Heracles, “but they tell me that to be a good politician you must develop a complete ignorance of the past, and the ability to deny every statement you have ever made, or preferably, accuse the other side of having said it.”
“I don’t know who I’ll vote for,” reflected the naiad.
“There is such a bewildering array of choice,” complained Heracles. “One is at a loss over which to favour. Each party promises that voting for them will win you innumerable benefits, but that voting for any other party would be catastrophic. If they didn’t all say the same things about each other it would be easier.”
“Indeed.”
“But then, as we have seen, their policies are so different.”
“Just so.”

Heracles sighed. “I don’t see much evidence for the Greek zeal for politics any more,” he said. “Where is the cut and thrust of debate, where the passionate arguments, where the shouting and waving of arms? Poor old Poseidon was doing his best. He was the only one really trying to live up to the ideal of the calculating, self-promoting candidate, steeped in cunning, self-confident and unashamed. I don’t se any great public interest in this election, as there was in the first.”
“No,” concurred the naiad, “but that’s because there are now so many other exciting and more important things to do.”

A short silence breathed into the gap left by their words. Fiddling with his wine cup, Heracles said uncomfortably, “But don’t you feel you *know* which way you are expected to vote?”

“Yes,” said the naiad uneasily. “For the party who promise unlimited freedom, power to the people, wealth for all, more shops, and bladder matches every day.”

“Oh, you mean for Hera?” Heracles asked, surprised.

“No, the other lot.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Because Hera’s government has made such a mess of everything: her taxes are too high and people tell funny stories about there being ministers in her Wardrobe.”

“Really? How many were there?”

“I am not sure,” admitted Heracles. “I did not understand the rumours when I heard them, but they sounded most offensive.”

“Quite.”

“Worst of all, she does not bang her podium as hard as Enipeus when she makes speeches.”

“No.”

“And she never wears yellow.” Heracles shook his head sadly, as though he had finally despaired of seeing the joke in the complicated sketch of existence. “We don’t really have any choice, do we?”

*

Recently, the Wardrobe had become even more violently polarised than before. Between Hera’s supporters and those of Enipeus had opened a rift as wide as the generation gap, bringing with it all those tender emotions which those thus divided harbour for each other. Only Ares seemed untouched by the rancour. As an individually elected head of state he was clearly less important than the First Minister and had

been permitted to retreat into his cocoon of dreams, which since his foray into Attica were become even more confused and purgatorial. Apollo too had grown silent and morose, choked with self-loathing at an act he now regarded as beneath his thwarted poetic genius. Hera was annoyed with him. Anyone who has the weakness to fall back on remorse, she felt, should not be allowed to hold political power. But even she wilted with the strain of her position. Like all the Olympians she felt the draining of mortal belief, stripping away the layers of her multifarious identity laid down by the ages like the rings of trees, to leave behind them only the raw kernel of what she had been long ago, now spiced by the tang of futility. Whether Prometheus had foreseen this end, or had unknowingly launched them all on a path that would encompass his own destruction as well, she was not able to guess. None of their efforts had succeeded in restoring the flow of sacrifice and adoration; she had optimised the performance of the Worship Works and petrified its engineers to no avail. The loss of belief to a great god, she was finding, is what a redundancy cheque would be to an ant. Existence might be a little pointless afterwards. Worst of all, the lesser gods showed no loss of vigour or obnoxiousness.

The full force of her inexhaustible will had been directed towards restoring levels of belief, even making it an election promise, though she knew it was a hopeless battle as long as the economy depended on the mortal tourists. Every chariot load who swarmed into the heavenly city was bombarded with free leaflets and an endless series of competitions, scratch tablets and other guaranteed inducements to worship, from purpose-built shrines on the artificial beaches to complementary sacrifice packs in hotel bathrooms. If

anything there had been no revival in mortal derision rather than religion. She had been particularly put out when it transpired that a significant number of drunken mortals were using the shrines for purposes other than that for which they had been erected.

Yet at present, there seemed little cause to care for anything. Hera glanced listlessly from the matted hair, cavernous cheeks and shadowed eyes of the remaining shrunken Olympians, to the supercilious ranks of odiously confident demigods who now dominated the Wardrobe, and found that their plight no longer troubled her. The reins of control were slipping through her weakened fingers, and her lassitude enabled her to surrender them without regret. As a parent finally sighs in contentment and closes the door on a child who has surpassed all their most hideous fears, so did Hera dismiss certain cares from her mind. These problems could now trouble someone else – she had listened to their complaints for long enough.

Zeus, the glittering prize to restore her might as First Minister, was the last lonely light glimmering in their darkness. It was with the commendable desire to obtain the fallen tyrant for the Republic's good that Hera finally dismissed Artemis to Earth in his pursuit, after a blazing publicity campaign in Olympus. Artemis had been less affected by the ebb in mortal favours than many because, she guessed, most of her worshippers were rustic bumpkins who couldn't afford the trip up to Olympus. She departed from heaven in a state of great excitement, her hounds following close behind in a state landau, specially sponsored by Olympic Airways.

The city expanded in the hard, glittering sunlight. Money flowed along its arteries, swollen and pulsing with the throb of molten gold. Perhaps the sudden and

all but unexplained loss of faith might at another time have troubled the demigods; the mountains, the rivers, the trees. But prudently they followed the examples set for them by so many troubled men who consume quantities of poison at the first sign of trouble – though the poison of choice is rarely effective after the first dose, requiring regular re-administration. A rift had opened between Earth and heaven; though for the first time mortal feet had sullied the city of the gods, yet each new visit brought it no closer but drove it further in to the reaches where the human mind does not wander, into regions forgotten, remote and irrelevant. Does a man who attempts to step from one small boat to another and finds himself in the water between ever reflect it might have served him better to remain in the one, rather than to reach out and thereby lose both?

Wrapped in the opulence of their hotels, served at poolside bars by lovely maidens, reclining on the artificial beaches or shopping in the West Side, mortals could see who was truly important in Olympus, and, presumably, on Earth as well. Love and affection was accorded to those who had his aid, and those without his blessing were shunned, as people barely worthy even of scorn. Shrewd words were exchanged, weighty conclusions were reached. Truly, those who visited Heaven came away changed men and women. As a youth who visits Amsterdam for questionable reasons, so did the mortals return bearing the germs of their own destruction, which they distributed generously, spreading the contagion far and wide.

Until politicians evolved among us, few had given any heed to the problems posed by the most dangerous and subversive of all activities, which has been responsible for more ills than the curse of Adam.

Without it, half the burdens of the human race would never have been born, peace would reign here below, and all would be sweetness and light. This terrible human trait has caused more trouble that any other, and we should be eternally grateful to those members of our ruling classes that they now do all they can to suppress it. For they perceived long ago that thought of any kind is the root of all our woes, and ever since have nobly fought to eradicate it from our heads. In our enlightened modern age, it has even been eradicated from education, which is truly a triumph of progress. Thought is an odious habit and quite contrary to the doctrine of pleasure, happiness, and maximising returns.

Unfortunately, Mycenaean civilisation was in such a state at the present time that no effective measures were taken against it, and it is sad to record that much thought could and did take place. In Argos, Tiryns and Sparta, in Mycenae, in Athens amid the desolation of Attica, in sandy Pylos and Nemea, many mortals thought long, and, to coin a phrase, hard, about what they had seen or heard in the hallowed places of the gods.

It is one thing to lavish adulation on someone from afar, but when you get up close and find that the object of adulation has bad teeth, suffers from piles and reads "News of the World," you need to be prepared to adulate fairly lavishly to conceal these defects. Usually in vain – for the physical blemishes of dentistry and digestion may be overcome by a love sufficiently ardent, but love would have to be, not just blind, but deaf, tasteless and mentally deficient as well, not to realise the fundamental flaws in the character of a person who chooses to read something that only serves to remind the rest of us just how much we have to hide.

Disillusionment is the important word. It was to avoid this elixir, fatal for the gods, the Zeus had followed his careful policies of subtlety and intrigue, never leaving a mortal absolutely convinced of a divine vision. Had it been the Thunderer, or merely a lightning-fretted cloud? A swan? A bull? Or merely a large mortal who'd really set his heart on getting me into bed? For Zeus had known the secret of the paradox underlying all religion – you've got to keep the buggers guessing, otherwise they'll lose interest. Prometheus had equipped their brains with Imagination, which they sometimes liked to use before John Logie Baird had his bright idea. Armed with Imagination, they sallied forth to battlefields of Stigma, Heresy, Schism and Dogma; but it only flourished in the presence of Doubt. Zeus knew that Imagination plus Doubt equalled Belief, which was what he wanted. And Familiarity minus Imagination equalled Disgust.

But the mortals, as appeared slowly and ponderously from their conversation, arising like an antediluvian monster from the primal ooze of their minds, had an idea of the new hierarchy. What, they had asked, is the use of gods if you can't believe in them, and find they're pretty ineffectual at their jobs? Yet as they had seen, those who had been so privileged as to stand in the city of the gods sensed a god far greater, higher and more austere than the feeble insignificant Olympians in whose desiccated worship they had wasted their lives. Truly there existed a god behind the gods, whose power directed their lives, their very motions and thoughts, whose imponderable influence pervaded gas-like into the every endeavour of the Immortals and of mortal human kind. In Olympus, the inhabitants of Earth had finally seen the true power of this holy being; there the

scales had duly dropped from their eyes and they had beheld him in all his glory.

He was a mighty god, so titanic in his majesty that the very gods scurried to win his favour and bowed down in awe before him, to do him reverence and hoard up his physical extensions for themselves. Benevolent and magnanimous, his was the gift to bring bliss to all who followed him, to distribute benefits and blessings, to stand with open hands, arms brimming with opportunities of indulging the body and turning off those annoying parts of the mind which tried to interrupt by suggesting that perhaps this wasn't the right way to behave. And thus the Light came first from Heaven unto Earth, brought thither by that agency of the clement gods, tourism. And lo! the mortals perceived the mind of the Immortals, that they had seen fit to share the bliss they knew by communicating the truth's wonder to mortal man, bowing low that they might walk over their immortal backs to the realms of airy paradise, of purity and delight. Where else should this enlightenment have flourished but in Greece, holiest of lands, cradle of our civilisation? Here was made the first revelation of the insufferable might of Argurion himself, the greatest of all the gods, who demands only total subservience and dedication to his worship in return for his mercies. Money, by whose means all things may be accomplished, and all souls saved, or at least bought; if we can find a currency that heaven will now accept.

And lo! it was at this time that mortals who had beheld the Light came to understand how wise indeed were the gods, that they loved so greatly this giver of all blessings who yet remained unseen and aloof, choosing only worthless chips of metal to do his bidding in binding all men's souls to him. And at this time there

was in their own souls a place of emptiness, held lately by the gods of Olympus but by them vacated after frequent holidays to Heaven and the disdain now harboured for those petty beings, sunk so low as to ingratiate themselves with mortals for the sake of Argurion. And it was into this place, where once resided the gods they worshipped, that Argurion crept and made his own.

So it was that the temples of the gods now fell to ruin and were forgotten. Instead, men laboured in the fire of summer to erect new shrines to the new god, whom they now knew had mastered all the rest. To Argurion the Leveller, whose power it is, like the waters, to float scum to the airy surface of life's pool, to submerge the decent and wash the honest from their thrones in the bubbling cataract of competition for his favour. The first shrines to Argurion rose swiftly to the blazing sky. Even to this day, the descendents of those early temples survive among us, though to our children they go by different names.

Those remote regions of Greece that survived the unslakable thirst for the smiles of his favours, or evaded the blight of the divine thunderbolts, worsting, perhaps, the blasting storms of divine neglect and passing nurture as the gods turned from their purposes to devote their immortalities to Him, were become the refuge of desperate gods, suffocating in the deluge of tourists pouring into their homes. They were, they reasoned, far less likely to be accosted by day trippers on the Peloponnese than in Heaven, where now even the simplest shopping trip was spent dodging tapestrographs and crowds of giggling mortals. Furtive deities crept through the rustling shade of trees drenched with the green of summer; padded invisibly on the

tufted crests of stony windblown mountains; and bathed secretly in the liquid pools of sky that shimmered in the glassy bays.

Part Four

"So Apollo too will become a pupil of Love, and so too the Muses in music, Hephaestus in metal-working, Athena in weaving, and Zeus in the government of gods and men." (Plato, *Symposium*, 197 b)

Chapter Seventeen

The way to Tiryns was a swell of dreaming land, where the emerald leaves were rimmed, every one, with fluttering saffron halos, scattering flickering sparks against the rich shadowed hollows of their parent trees. Dim with distance, the shaggy sheets of olives wrinkled over the crests and valleys, hunched in their earnest, hissing conversations, bowed and twisted, or stretching upwards as though stiffly waking from sleep.

There was the warm, rich smell of dust heated by the sun and stirred by passing feet, the heavy haze of sweetened pollen, the living scent of flower and tree, and the salty daze of sweat glistening like plated crystal on brazen skin.

The brazen skin upon which the sweat was glistening like the aforementioned plated crystal belonged in this case to the only to individuals in the Greek peninsula, it seemed, who had not had an opportunity to get away from it all that summer. Instead, whatever it was had been pursuing them with relentless insistence. It is fortunate they met no other travellers along the way, for even witty conversationalists who ask where one is going on holiday this year are always at a loss when the reply is 'nowhere'.

Zeus was unhappy. He could recall being unhappy before, usually with his wife, but these periods of gloom had hitherto been easily overcome by swift bouts of energetic fornication. Now what had begun as a swift bout had lengthened itself into a stable long-term bout that was beginning to look uncannily like a marriage. Marriage, he knew, was simple and effortless. The ceremony only took half an hour. It was living with them afterwards that caused problems.

Inexplicably, none of the love songs he had heard ever made any mention of work or washing up, rows or recalcitrance, not to mention the appalling chaos after the children started to turn up. This seemed an oversight on the artists' parts, as he reflected that one was in much greater need of deep and blinding love when changing an unspeakable nappy than during intercourse, which by general consensus was actually quite pleasant. And apart from the unreasonable terror inspired by Hera and the knowledge of what she would do to Melitta were she to catch up with them, Zeus felt dimly aware of what Melitta could not sense, that an immortal could not bind with a mortal for more than the briefest of moments. To attempt otherwise would be simply to drag the one to destruction through the years endured by the other, for him to watch her slow degeneration and decay, to witness her final and irrevocable loss into the eternity of the Underworld. And the longer he spent with Melitta, the more he found himself liking her and wishing he didn't. Though she remained characteristically impossible to read, as impossible to pinpoint as it is to find white light in a prism, he felt that at some level she concurred in her view of him. With increasing clarity, he was beginning to see what a terrible mistake he had made in seeking refuge with her. Not only had he

wrought ruin on her home, but he was now also leading her to an end he could not see but could quite easily imagine.

Whether she knew this too, and chose to disguise it, he could not guess, though her teasing about curtains was becoming a little bemusing. The very idea of setting up home with anyone, especially a mortal for whom he had great affection, was unthinkable. He was wrong for her, and whatever he might feel, this he must not forget. Love is about walking away – walk away, let her free, and hope she would be happy with someone else rather more normal, no matter how painful it might be for him. Besides, he had never set up home with anyone in his life. Home was simply a place to sleep in between affairs.

Finally, he interrupted in an awkward tone. "Melitta, I'm very afraid of this not working…you and me..."

"Of course it can't," she said, as though surprised it had taken him so long to work it out. "What d'you think I am, dumb?"

Zeus sighed. He really did think it was unfair of the girl to be so persistent in confounding expectation. Couldn't she have the decency to act in character for once? "Because I'm immortal and you're not," he floundered on. "It wouldn't be right; after a few years…"

"Oh, till death do us part, you mean?" supplied the girl. "I don't think that's a problem. We just know which of us he's going to take first, don't we?" She grinned at him.

"How can you be so blasé about it all?" he said angrily. "I'm being serious."

“So am I.” She took his hand. “Look, forever’s a silly word to use. I can’t have you forever. I just want you as long as I can.”
“But I thought impermanence meant futility and meaninglessness… How do you mortals have the strength to go on, to continue with your useless, bizarre habits, when you know that in seventy years you’ll be dead? Why do you bother? Have you any idea how absurd human life looks to an outsider? I really can’t comprehend how you manage to go on when you know you’re going to die.”
“Most of the time we pretend we aren’t,” she said. “And if we do remember it, it makes it all most urgent and enjoyable. Being here is much more important if you’re mortal. Existence really is a matter of life or death. How do you have the courage to continue, when you know you’ll never die?”
Zeus scratched his head. He hadn’t thought of that before. On reflection, he supposed that he didn’t have the courage to continue but found himself doing it out of habit.
“I know it’s not going to last,” said Melitta, screwing up her nose as though it tickled, “but that doesn’t mean to say it’s not important. My dad can find meaning in a kebab, and you should see how long they last once he gets his hands on them.”
“Don’t you mind that things don’t last?”
Melitta shrugged. “Would be pointless if I did. I’d rather do something breathtaking with my time, in that case. Most of the girls back home don’t share my views, though. I tried to get Althea to argue over whether actual events are very important or not in human affairs, seeing as our time is spent either looking forward to something or reflecting on it afterwards, but you seem

to by-pass the happening itself. Bit like sex, really," she went on. She gave him a sly smile. "You spend days waiting to give her one, it's over in thirty seconds, and you spend the next eighteen years looking after the results."

"I have always managed to avoid that part," remarked Zeus. "I'm more worried about my relations and what they are planning, what I'm supposed to do, and the hideous mess I seem to have made of everything. I don't know what to do, Melitta. Everything I've touched, I've screwed up…"

"That's an improvement, surely," she interjected. "By all accounts, you usually forgot to add the last word to that sentence."

"Melitta, I really am more useless than you can imagine. Perhaps I should give up completely, and we could run away and forget whatever's happening here…I can't face trying to sort anything out, and I don't think I'd be able to."

"What, after everything Demeter said to you?"

"Oh, you were listening?"

"Did you think I was asleep?" she said archly. "You, listen to me, and stop being so defeatist. You must have been worse off than this in the past."

"Rarely. I've never been powerless before. And I don't understand what I'm supposed to do – walk back into Olympus and get blasted? Sing my way out of trouble?"

"We will find out," she promised him. "Think of this from a mortal perspective, Zeus. We have to carry on. We don't have the leisure to give up if we feel like it. Every hour saved is another victory, every day you go on living is another challenge won. Giving up isn't an option for us – and it shouldn't be for you. If you give

up, you've lost. And you don't get another chance, not if you're mortal."

Zeus found he had nothing left to say, for his half-formed fears were too entangled to be unravelled in words. He looked at Melitta and knew, blindingly, what he felt for her; knew also that it could not, should not be. There was between them a wall too adamantine to breach, which he nevertheless desperately longed to scale. He had sought her out to save her, and himself; instead, he had turned the dangers back upon her and lost himself as well.

Weaving between the mottled creeping shades of the languid myrtles, they both heard the sudden tremble in the air and felt it shiver through the soil. Melitta stopped with an exasperated snort. "Is this another crew of gods bearing down on us?" she asked. "Come on, tell me. I want to know whether I'm supposed to scream in terror and leap into your arms or not. Bit discourteous of them, I call it. Couldn't they leave us to have a little stroll together?"

Zeus scrambled up the hill, easing himself through the undergrowth on the ridge, crouching there breathless. The crumbling earth around the clinging roots jumped and bounced, sprays of dust spurting from cracks and bubbling in puffs around the gesticulating bush, waving wildly as though it had just spotted a fond friend disappearing over the horizon. From the wooded dell rumbled a throbbing roll of hooves, their drumbeat drowning the bang of his blood. With a crash and a splinter of shattering, tearing twigs and leaves, the first of the cavalcade exploded from the thicket. A dozen more burst out on his heels. With a staccato stutter of regular, straining strides, they coursed up the hill towards the god.

Zeus turned and rolled himself into a ball, tumbling through the tufts of razor grass streaking his somersaulting back with crimson. Revolving rapidly, he grabbed Melitta as he swept past her and they landed together with the ripping of foliage and the cracking of twigs and branches in the tangle of bushes in the deep. Zeus held her beneath him as he peered out through the trellis of broken stems. “Well, dear,” she remarked in a muffled voice, “This is all very romantic and sudden. What is it this time?”

He gestured for her to be quiet, lifting a trembling finger to the ridge of the hill. The rumble of terranean thunder vibrated deep into their entrails, shaking their stomachs with unearthly tremors. Together they looked up, and saw him, black in his vastness against the staring sky, outlined on the crest of the hill. Then like sable froth spilling over the rim of an overflowing cup, the tide poured over and down. Right over the thicket they leapt, great shaggy hooves pawing the ground, tearing out handfuls of dust with their shattering blows; mighty veined muscles moving visibly like the swell of the sea beneath smooth sweated hide. Beards waved huge as sleeping dogs upon their glowing breasts, or flailed in the wind of their speed over the pitted strength of their shoulders. No pupils lurked in the orbs of their eyes, only pearly-coated blankness glared out beneath their looming brows with the blue chill of shadows on snow. Their galloping rush was wild, uncontrolled, frightening in its extravagance, but their eyes belied their chaos.

“Centaurs,” breathed Zeus. The shaking torrent shuddered above and around them.

“Can’t we watch from somewhere else?” she asked in a piercing whisper. “This isn’t the most comfortable bush you’ve ever bundled me into.”
Zeus hissed back at her. “These are *centaurs*, I said. You don’t mess with a centaur. You don’t even get close enough to say hello.”
“Why not?”
“They’ll rape anything female for a start.”
“Oh, relations of yours, are they?”
“You’re at it again! We’re stuck here at the bottom of a bush with fifty murderous centaurs galloping past, and you still can’t shut up!” The ground shuddered, and the bush was whipped by slicing hooves. Melitta peered laconically upwards. “Never seen one before,” she remarked. “Aren’t they supposed to have horse’s hindquarters?”
“They do.”
“Then why’ve they got three hind legs?” Zeus gave an embarrassed cough.
“Look, you can see it quite plainly,” she insisted, jerking her thumb upwards. “Why?”
Zeus told her.
“Cor,” she said.

The final cloud of thundering flesh sailed overhead; the rumble was swallowed in the crackling heat of the silence and was lost. Angry and frustrated that he had sunk so low as to hide from a centaur, Zeus pulled himself roughly from the sheltering leaves. “What on earth are they doing this far south?” he wondered. “Thy never usually come further than Thessaly. I pity the poor buggers in the villages round here – they’ll be attacked any day.”

“What happens when they attack a village?” Melitta’s dusty, inquiring face emerged brightly from the bush. “Is it women and children first, that sort of thing?”
“No,” replied Zeus gloomily. “In my experience it’s usually a case of women first and children only if the women are unlucky. Centaurs aren’t renowned for their finesse. Very virile blokes. No culture, of course, no manners.”

Melitta removed a myrtle leaf from her hair, along with a small twig, which seemed anxious to prolong their brief acquaintance. “Oh, so they’re entirely unlike you dashing gods, dripping with style and debonair, who sweep young ladies off their feet with the force of your scintillating conversation?”
“I resent that comment,” said Zeus in a dignified voice. “At least the gods know what morals are, even if they haven’t got any. Centaurs haven’t heard of the things.”
The girl wrinkled her nose. “Isn’t it better to be amoral than immoral?” she asked. “Surely if you don’t know you’re breaking a rule it can’t be that bad? I’m sure no one would approve of the rule-makers being the rule-breakers in their spare time.”
Zeus gave her a thin-lipped smile. “Ah, but you see, we never actually made any of those rules,” he told her. “Mortals only *think* we did. That’s what’s important. “
“What rules did you make, then?”
“One of my favourites was that mankind would learn through suffering,” he said gloomily. “I should have done more background research before I came up with that chestnut.”

With a ruthless entrepreneurial opportunism, the centaurs had howled into the devastated Attica like a rapacious and sexually insatiable North Wind. Like entrepreneurs, they had made deals and plans, bought

shares and managed by objectives – dealing out the villages perfectly fairly, by lot, distributing them equally among their peers and keeping a conscientious tally of every one they knocked off. Indeed, the only respect in which they had the edge over the businessman in the dubious scale of moral turpitude was that they were utterly open about it. Attica having been thoroughly pillaged and its women thoroughly raped, the centaurs were now moving off to victims new in the densely populated Peloponnese. In the true multinational spirit, laudably emulated by their latter-day successors, they were extending their field of operations.

In the folded hills the lanes of olives thinned and opened, stroked here and there by glossy-leaved orange-groves, they too widening into the tumbled grass and brush lapping the eaves of the leaning pines. Clustering and shaking brittle branches over the soft dust at their feet, they wandered over the hill crests as a dark and arid thatch of hair – a green and particularly unruly mop belonging to a giant who had indulged too freely in the delights of Dionysus the night before, now roused at four in the morning to find someone has stolen his hairbrush.

The fragile, pale china-blue of the evening sky was streaked and darkened by veins of trees rising around the two walkers. As they moved through the reflective forest quiet, the metallic sting of the trodden needles in the nose grew stronger, more intense, filling the silence broken only by the passing of their cushioned feet. Slowly the night deepened around them, the still gloom of the trees rolling out into the sky, pouring from the mountaintops to drown the land in their velvet darkness. The moon was a trembling pool of silver behind the

moving leaves, and its light striped the path they followed, breath coming quickly, struggling to keep up with the pace of their feet.

The trees and the darkness made for endless disappointment. Each time the rising ground finally seemed to make up its mind to go the other way for a change, it perversely chose to gather itself up once more as though it had simply been resting and decided that the hill was not, after all, quite high enough yet. Lacking in courtesy and astuteness, it had not thought to test its product for consumer approval before its launch.

But when the sky was the smooth blue-black of the girl's hair, they saw it open beyond the palisade of trees. Idling down into a deep, cloven well of darkness, the pine-strewn ridge slopes fell away beneath them, curving into a confluence with another ponderous limb of the mountain, jagged with pines against the stars. Far away, down in the blackness, almost beyond their sight, the moon flowed flickering in a brief glimpse upon the surface of a stream, in the distance to the left of the leaning hills. Between them and the river, another lower ridge hauled itself into the air, hardly half as high as the crest on which they stood. The lopsided hills inclined steeply to their left, towards the gentler ridge of shallow slopes where other trees and flowers found their homes. So steep were the doubled pools of night in the valleys that all the outpourings of Selene could not fill them – impassively, her light was swallowed; beamed down continually, but lost without trace. Melitta held his arm. "Very beautiful," she said.

He felt for her slender fingers, warm and living in his grasp, and almost shrank from the touch he desired. Hardly closer could she come, the scent of her hair mingling with the pines. His unhappiness bubbled up

like a spring to flow between them. Zeus cursed his law, cursed his pride and his godhead that while he owned it had kept him from seeing as did the fleeting children of dust and shadows on the earth.

"I wish I wasn't immortal," he said suddenly. "It's a bloody drag and it makes things terribly inconvenient."

"If you weren't you wouldn't be with me. You'd have died thousands of years ago."

"Because I am I shouldn't be."

Melitta clicked her tongue impatiently. "You're far too gloomy," she admonished him. "Look at the romantic view. What you need is sex. It'll take your mind off all this silly sighing you go in for now. There's nothing like a bit of you-know-what to take your mind off what you think you should be thinking about."

"Yes," agreed Zeus. "I found that out just before I got kicked out of heaven."

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Silent as a sliver of moonlight, a white figure whispered through the trees at the foot of the hill they had scaled. Tall as a pine she came, her spear hung heavy in her hand, the bluish glint of bronze streaking the darkness. About her, the quiet padding of her hounds grew fainter as the crescent of hunting dogs fanned out in a wide arc to encircle their prey. Loping low, close to the needled floor, they moved as shadows among the shadows, faded, and were lost.

Artemis was alone. Her bands of nymphs who had long ago roamed the sacred groves and hidden valleys of Greece had all found employment in bureaus, bars, banks and emporia. Only the unbending spirit of the goddess herself remained, every vestige of her fierce will focused on her task, all else, even her own identity, forgotten and subsumed in the urgency of the deed.

Artemis hunted as a drowning man spits out waters – without the effort, one might as well not be alive.

Mortal men now hunt for pleasure; beasts to kill, which has for some reason always been held as a morally superior position. But for Artemis only the hunt itself has any meaning, the quarry a mere abstraction, a victim offered up to her, the goddess of the forest-green eyes, a just and fitting sacrifice. Look into her eyes, and there you will see the reflected, accumulated horror of every terrified creature that has ever died, as the yellow teeth fasten in its throat. Her horn is an antler, hollowed and carved with arcane sigils too ancient to interpret. Signs which nevertheless would pierce through the lenses of mortal eyes, through civilisation and sophistication, to those raw layers of humanity which confront us in the silent woods when we hear the baying of hounds in the hollow hill beneath the moon. To let us live and die again in the morning of our race, to hear the crash of pursuit and the thudding of feet, smell the mingling of earth and sweat and blood. Her horn is silent as she sounds it under the huntress moon. You cannot hear its blast, but you can feel its echo. And its echo is fear.

It is the horn that has driven every desperate, tormented beast ploughing through impenetrable thorn in its madness to get away. But in the thunder of its music, if you listen carefully, you can hear the goddess laugh, because they never succeed.

Artemis, spirit of the woods, only truly alive and being in the glens and the ravines, deep-sounding hidden valleys, in the forests that were ancient before the first mortals awoke on Earth. As she moved between the sorrowing trees, her form trembled and wavered between all she was and represented. Now a silver-

coated hound slid softly through the darkness, now a graceful, slender hind, whose horns waved in a fountain of intertwining rays of moonlight. Artemis was hunting again; this was all she realised, all that delighted her. That her quarry was her father was of no concern. Prey has no personality, so for those who pursue what they love, the action is of greater worth than the object.

Pan inspired terror simply because he was strange and wild. Artemis inspired rather more terror, for in addition to being strange and wild you could be fairly sure that she was out to kill you. Acteon, wretched mortal, could have told you this, had he lived. For he stumbled innocently on the goddess as she bathed, who transformed him into a mighty stag as punishment for his mistake. Or as the beginning of his punishment – for as he sued for mercy, willing to offer her sacrifice to atone for his error, she accepted his prayer, decreeing that so keen was his desire to offer her a victim, she would grant him his wish. The very hounds he had trained did not know him, and they hunted their master to his death in the naked mountains, ripping out his viscera with those mouths that he had fed. Some say Artemis transformed herself into a great dog and delayed the pack to prolong the pursuit, leading the hounds herself on the heels of the deer, never far behind, never grazing his hooves, until exhaustion overcame him. She was present to preside at the sacrifice, as a silent, whited roe deer in the velvet of the night. Her brother, Apollo, would doubtless admonish those, such as Acteon, who might protest at the judgement, for the good we get from the hart is not what we learn from it but what we become through it. From the hunter to the hunted, a suppliant to a sacrifice. For what other end live the things of earth?

Only when they were ready did the hounds make a sound. Two sharp and brittle barks from either end of the line, like hatchets cleaving into stubborn wood. Into Artemis flooded the trembling, eager draught as she and her love were reunited. Only then did she raise her horn to her lips.

And on the ridge of the pine-woven mountain, in the still, expectant night, its blast pierced the mist of complacency that had surrounded Zeus, as he heard what mortal ears could not. Swift and sudden as a creature of the field jerked from sleep, he started up in disbelief as an empty void opened beneath him, into which he felt his stomach fall down beyond his sight. Hard and fluid beat his blood in his brain. Without warning, there oozed a damp surge of sweat, beading his forehead; to pool and trickle from his temple. "Oh shit," he said. He dragged Melitta up.

"What...what is it?"

"*Oh shit*," he repeated. And swept her into his arms as he ran.

Pincer-like, the crescent of hounds pressed forwards through the maze of trees, slivers of darkness whose only features were the glint of moonlight eye and tooth and claw. Better a quarry that fled than one who stood and fought. From above, the hugest hound sliced arrow-like through the night. Head held low, feet barely brushing the carpet of needles, yet casting spiralling storms of pine-laden dust behind him. Up the hill panted the second, wiry sinews coiling, contracting, tongue lazily jogging from needled maw. Three, four, five, there came, bursting at once upon the crest. They needed no eyes. No vision, no sight of what they sought. And they made no sound. No bay, no bark, no growl. For these are for the triumph after the kill.

With Melitta in his arms, Zeus could barely control his catabatic course down the slope. Strides that were desperate leaps, staggers, rolls and reels. He glanced off a tree, whose prickled side and pitted bark tore the flesh from his shoulder. By and by flashed the pillared trees, barely guessed in the darkness of his speed. Panting moans broke from his breast, heavy, ripping breaths. The tang of blood in the nose, the red-hot breath biting into his lungs, the fallen, twisted twigs slicing his legs, scattering filigrees of crimson across them. The thunder of the heart drowning the despairing tattoo of the feet. Springing into looming menace, the glowering bole of a tree in his path. And behind them, silence.

Artemis stood where they had stood. A second time, she sounded her horn.

Into the lap between the two rolls of the hill. Changing direction, Zeus careered to his left, seeking the long, sloping curve into the valley. Melitta's fingers dug into his neck, her body slippery in his aching arms.

And the silence shattered. Ahead, the darkness swung into shape. Dragging dark filaments from the shadows of the trees, a coiling cloud burst from a thicket. Green and burning, its eyes seared the night. Ranks of teeth, jeering, tore into sight. A bark, so deep, long and grating that it was almost a roar, cascaded into their ears. At its crescendo, it blended with the girl's scream, and the god's, sliding seamlessly from triumph into terror.

Zeus wheeled, bouncing into a trunk, staggered, turned, and fled again. Up the hill, over the ridge. Behind them, the last hound grinned sardonically, and followed them slowly.

"Not Artemis, not Artemis. Why Artemis?" Rambled, slurred words slipped from his lips. He found

he was weeping. Shaking, his legs swayed beneath him. King of Gods and Men. Father. He couldn't run any more. The girl – he must keep her safe. The girl. Artemis, his daughter. Terror let him run. Could hear them now. Closing in through the brush.

A torrent of silver, a single band of light in all the shadow of earth, the river cut the darkness ahead. Deep in the valley it ran, levelling the hills, widening in the lower lands to the left. His knees curled, buckled, and gave way. Bowed, beaded with blood and sweat, the god crumpled gently to the ground. Melitta rolled to her feet, turned to run, turned back, knelt beside him. Vainly pulled his arm, called his name. But Zeus saw only darkness. The girl heard the patter of running feet, and the terror that ran before them.

Artemis raised the horn for the last time.

And Melitta pounded the soil in impotent anger. Fear swept into fury, wildly she struck the earth, seized dry fragmented handfuls of needles and pine-steeped loam, flung them away. She called on the sleeping spirits of the trees, and cursed the goddess who pursued them. She called on the gods whose names she had known longer than her tongue had known speech, and they made no answer. They had forsaken Earth.

Her tears rolled down, and were lost in the dusty soil. Closer panted the hounds; she saw their images in the trees.

Over the mind of Zeus the veil shifted. From whatever distant region where he stood, lightning-crowned in his awful majesty, there alone removed and remote from the passing, dreamlike world, his voice spoke. "*Oros*," he whispered. "*Gaia*."

Mother Earth, who slept and sorrowed, silent and forgotten, who alone could not forget the children

sprung from her breast, whither in a moment of time their dust would return. Earth, who felt Melitta's tears soft upon her back, and who spoke for her child.

As the tightening circle of dogs paced towards them through the trees, it happened. Melitta covered her eyes, kneeling beside the fallen god. Smooth and unruffled seemed the bed of needles between them and the hounds. But swift and sable an unseen hand shot a line of deeper blackness between them. Along its edge, the needles trembled; tumbled into the breach as it widened. Steaming breath poured coiling from its depths. Vaguely in the dimness, two lips of soil formed along its edges. They flexed, and spoke, in a voice deeper then mortal ears can imagine, older than the parents of our race. Older than the gods themselves.

"Did you want something?" it said.

Zeus stirred. His eyes, drowsily, hung open. "Mother Earth," he breathed. On the brink of the abyss the hounds hesitated, surging forward in a pack, delaying on the crumbling edge, pushing forward and back, feet slipping and sending flurries of earth into the void.

"Greetings, Zeus," said the voice. "So you have come back to me. To Earth, whence sprang even the gods. Well, if you wish to escape, do so. The river is not far away, though I will not answer for what befalls you on the other side."

Already two hounds were slinking round the edge of the mouth moving in the soil. The leader was wiser. Retreating several swift steps, he sprang as though a creature not of the earth but one blessed with wings. Lithe and sinuous towards Zeus and Melitta. The vast mouth trembled. Forefeet extended, the dog reached for the solid ground ahead. And the mouth yawned wide. With a horrific wail, the animal disappeared into the

maw of earth, which snapped shut, cutting off the howl with terrible finality. When it wrenched open again there was silence. The dogs were frozen. Melitta helped Zeus to his feet. Together they limped towards the depths of the valley.

Artemis swept down from the hillside above them.

Before them, the stream gurgled about a tangle of tree roots. Smooth and clodded soil had been washed from between them, leaving a medley of woody fingers dabbling into the passing water. The cold closed about their feet, bubbling up and cascading down their legs. And with a torrent of barks the hounds, driven by their mistress, thundered round the grinning chasm in pursuit. Into the splashing explosions of water, shaking heads, lolling tongues into the stream. Bursting upon the opposite bank – to find no god, no mortal woman; no quarry, no object of pursuit. Artemis stood in bewildered anger knee deep in the river.

Chapter Eighteen

The Earth hung in a pool of darkness, suspended over the stars. Slowly, the shadows bled from the sky, its dimness paled and flushed. Heaps and billows of tightly twisted cloud wrapped the horizon, hiding behind their milky greyness the living glow of dawn. Lilac washed the rim of the world, pouring higher into heaven, its hues changing and shifting, growing ever brighter, till the pale purples of the night were drowned in the piercing blues of day. On the hills, the pine forests stirred in the dawn wind that stroked the hissing grass and heather by the eaves of the wood. The river flowed in a lush tangle of flowers, winding down into the widening valley.

The only thing worse than waking up is the growing realisation, as sleep peels away from the drowsy brain, that in another few minutes there will be no excuse not to get up as well. It was this feeling that stole through the waking mind of Zeus, who was encouraged in his disinclination to abandon sleep by the unusually violent levels of pain brought by his waking. He kept his eyes tightly shut for as long as it was feasible, till he was forced to open them by an insistent spray of sunlight lancing through the leaves. Close by, Melitta lay curled in her bed of broken grass, inclining blades brushing her cheeks like green eyelashes, trembling with her gentle breath. In the dark smudge of her eye, a brief light glinted as she looked at him, and her face wrinkled into a smile. “Feeling better?” she asked. “No bites overnight? They’re most irritating when you’re on holiday.”

Zeus rolled over onto his back, biting his lips when the prickled grass stems grazed his raw shoulder. He looked up at the shifting mosaic of pearly-blue sky framed by golden-rimmed leaves. “Where are the dogs?”

“Obviously not here.”

“But Artemis never lets anything get away. Nothing at all.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to lodge a complaint somewhere if you’re really bothered,” said Melitta. “She’s your daughter, isn’t she? Um…isn’t that a bit odd, you know, for her to be hunting you?”

“Maybe she’s letting me know she thinks she had an unhappy childhood,” said Zeus. “I expect Hera has been encouraging them to let their feelings hang out.”

“She did a good job,” admitted Melitta. “Very efficient lady, your daughter. But not the kind I’d like to meet in a wood on a dark night.”

“I used to be a keen sportsman in my youth,” said Zeus. “I’ve got my set of antlers on the wall, and the bearskin in the reception room.” He sighed. “But now the anti-hunting lobby has my full support.”

Getting unsteadily to his feet, he peered back across the stream, next to whose waters they had collapsed in the dark. He frowned.

“Why didn’t they come after us?” he puzzled. “All we did was flounder across.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I feel cheated,” protested Zeus. “They denied us our full money’s worth. I’d just got myself mentally prepared to be torn limb from limb and taken to Tartarus, and then what? A bitter let-down.”

“If that’s what you want, the next time something’s chasing us, you just let them know you’re mentally

prepared and so on, and while they're tearing you limb from limb I shall find pressing business elsewhere," said Melitta. "Between mortals and the immortal gods lie many gulfs, not least of which is that I wouldn't survive being torn limb from limb, no matter how much you'd enjoy it."
"Shall we find out where we are?" he suggested.
"On the other side of the river," she supplied.
"Yes, but don't you think that is a little odd? I mean, where are the dogs? And Artemis? Why didn't they follow us?"
"Maybe Gaia stopped them."
Zeus did not reply immediately. "And take a look at the light," he commented.
"How so? Bright, sunny, glaring?"
"That's not quite what I meant. Take a look back over the river."
"Oh, I see. Yes, that is rather unusual, isn't it?"

On the other side the trees and the curving swell of the hill were frozen, motionless in a deluge of grey. There, no colours blinked and flashed as on their side – a dark glass seemed to be suspended between them and the place whence they had fled, through which they could see but dimly. It was like looking back into the opening sequences of "The Wizard of Oz" after the Munchkins have arrived.
"Very strange," remarked Zeus. "I can't say I remember anything like this from my days of omniscience. Still, we mustn't let it worry us. Perhaps we should try to find something to eat. I dare say there's a village somewhere along this river."

They set off with the customary eagerness of those who have been travelling, in their opinion, for far too long, and who have little hope of breakfast to enliven

them. The day unfolded around them like the gilded petals of a flower – the zithering ring of cicadas, after a few experimental rattles, settled down to a steady trill; the dew flashed briefly in the damp grass and dissipated into the quivering air. But apart from the stream and the cicadas, a heavy, dreaming silence imbued the valley, full and liquid. The trees on the slope of the hill curling round to their right barely moved in the softest current of a drifting breeze. Further into the vale, where the trees grew closer and the grass and flowers thicker, the rising hills broke off in an abrupt and pitted wall, laced with climbing bushes and a tangle of thorn, its foot dusted with a tumble of boulders and mossy stone. It was in this pale wall of earth and rock that they saw the entrance to the Cave.

Before its black mouth was a grassy sward where no trees grew, trembling with tiny winged insects and butterflies drowsing in the sun. At once Zeus and Melitta halted, as though they knew without realising that this was where they ought to be.

As they watched, they saw the shadow filling the mouth of the Cave diluted and thinned, as though a delicate mist were drawing itself into shape. Clearer grew the white form advancing through the blackness, till finally it reached the entrance to the Cave and looked out into the world. A man stumbled out into the sunlight.

His steps were reeling and unsteady, as though his first attempts to walk were re-enacted for the watchers. One hand he held clasped over his eyes, partly, it seemed, because of the brightness, partly through fear at what he might see. His whole frame trembled violently, his thin, brittle limbs shaking like aspens. The thick curls of his hair were black as the shadow he had left; a

sickly yellow-green tinge clung to his skin, sallow as the harvest moon. And the two watchers knew that he had crept from a darkness he had inhabited all the days of his life.

Blinking, rubbing his eyes, the man reeled from the door into the world below, staring at the reflections in the running stream, then looked up – saw the trees, the flowers, rocks and grass, turned to gaze at the hill behind him; fell to his knees and seized a handful of soil and earthy roots, all with such an expression of awe and terror in his face that it seemed he had had no knowledge of even such a humble flower, or had hitherto seen only its shadow. Then with a great cry of fear mingled with wonder, he turned and fled back in to the comforting velvet embrace of the Cave.

Wordless, Melitta and Zeus followed on his heels. The floor of the Cave was smooth, running straight and steeply down into the earth, bathed by a twilight glow near its mouth but plunging into a dark impenetrable sea. Deeper and deeper they descended, leaving behind the warmth of the day, the pathway straight as an arrow but for a single sharp bend, doubtless designed to prevent any light of day seeping from the world above into the realm of night below.

But deep in the clammy cold of the rock-hewn tunnel, they saw another light before them. Far ahead, a burnished orange glow, a throbbing flicker of crimson flames as of subterranean fires. A shadow moved between them and the reddish light, wavered, and was gone.

As they drew closer, they saw the tunnel branched into a huge rectangular Cave longer than a temple, but that between the Cave and the tunnel was a sheer drop of some fifteen feet. Along the lip of this cliff burned a

dull, smouldering rank of hissing charcoal, casting a dim but clear crimson glow upon the opposite wall of the Cave. And the two saw the fire was fed by several sweating labourers, who in addition to heaping new fuel on the flames, paraded back and forth, teetering on the very brink of the precipice, between the fire and the Cave. Silent and sombre, these dark figures held strange ensigns in their hands, whose shadows were cast, magnified, sharp and black, on the far wall of the Cave. Only when they came close enough to the fire to feel its warmth could Melitta and Zeus see what they held.

One man carried a pole over his shoulder bearing a flat piece of wood so cut as to resemble a walking male figure; another followed him with the shape of a woman; a third bore cut-outs of children, animals, and birds hovering above them. The three passed along the edge of the cliff, and the silhouettes of those things they carried loomed on the smooth wall, cast by the glow of the flames. More bearers moved from this side to that; shifting shapes of trees, flowers, shadows of mountains or of ships, warriors with spears tall as pines and nodding plumes in their helmets, proud horses, chariots, wagons, humble donkeys and baskets laden with the fruit of the earth on its way to market drifted by in a silent procession across the face of the cavern, a tide of shadows cast by shadows, images of what was in the world above.

Penetrating the gloom and the fine skein of smoke, came low, hurried voices; rising, it seemed, from the deep well beneath the cliff. When Zeus and Melitta moved closer to the brink, edging round to see down to the floor of the Cave none of the stokers or those who bore the images seemed to see they were there.

Directly below the fires, a long line of pale, jaundiced shapes squirmed in the blackness. Melitta started with horror, for they seemed like vast, slowly moving maggots, staved of air and sunlight, till in the blood-red glow they recognised them as human forms. But each one was chained by wrists and ankles to the wall at their backs; chained facing the wall on which there flickered the ever-shifting shadow play, a weird never-ending procession of shades. Leaning over the very brink, close to the sides of the tunnel where no flames burned, Zeus and Melitta saw row upon row of faces bathed in an unearthly glow, all staring with horrible fascination at the moving shadows before them. Some gazed avidly, with excitement, others with the contempt of familiarity, some with grotesque enjoyment. Only in one place was there commotion, only here an abnormality, here an exception so glaring that even their eyes could perceive it. An outsider, incredible to behold, for those with him in the pit, a man who stood on his feet and – terrible to tell – faced away from the wall of shadows.

The two watchers recognised the man they had seen at the mouth of the Cave. They could feel the bubbling hostility foaming up against him form those who sat chained against the wall. Not that he stood and was free, but that he dared to think his state was better than theirs. His voice clove the darkness, his frantic appeals that grew stronger and more earnest; his shouts of frustration that rang in the enclosed space. For he told his companions that he, like they, had once been bound to this wall, only finding a way of escape after many years. He told them that until ten he had thought the shadows were all that existed in the world, all that gave meaning to his life, having known no more than the unspeaking

ranks of silhouettes parading through the flickering light. He told them that in fear and wonder he had climbed from the pit, and to his amazement had seen that the shadows were but ghosts of the real images that cast them, and for many days had lain on the lips of the chasm, motionless, blinded with astonishment that he had seen a truth unknown to any of his fellow; that all they knew and spoke of were not real in themselves but merely pools of darkness sired by moving cut-outs. Overwhelmed and burdened by the weight of this enlightenment, he had berated himself for his blindness, his folly, and his inability to see the truth while chained below. Until he had wandered in to the darkness…and now his voice cracked and trembled, as the voice of one who has seen the faces of the gods and lived…

He had stepped out of the Cave, emerged from the darkness of unknowing. Tears welled and glistened on his burnished face as he spoke of his entry into a world of golden light, an unguessed paradise, a land of indescribable wonder, unimaginable to those who have only known the poor reflections of the things that are. He had held – here sobbing overcame him – a daisy in his hand. Not a shadow of an image, nor an image that begat a shadow, but the reality that is unchanging, the truth whence sprang the fictions that they had known. He had been beyond the shadows cast by shadows in the light of unreality, and he had seen the things themselves.

Torn by sobbing, he sank to his knees before his silent, disapproving listeners. And he had returned, he gasped, from this land of truth and reason to bear the light of the outer world and the knowledge of its great beauty to his companions who dwelt manacled before the play of shadows, that they too might be free. That

they too might travel out of the Cave to see the things themselves, and to see at last the Light, the golden light that was the source of all vision.

In answer, only sullen silence, till a grumbling undertone of anger and discontent rumbled through the ranks of the chained. This man was mad, they claimed, insane or possessed. That he should imagine there existed anything besides what was clear for all to see, that they had seen and known as long as they had lived! What of this false nonsense of images and the things that were, when there could be no more things than those they saw and knew? Anger stirred like a waking monster in the deep as the man protested, cursing their fixed, their blinkered rigidity; their protest rose in answer, for they knew they were not wrong and must guard against the folly of those who sought to persuade them otherwise. Fiercely the argument raged, but they were many, and he was alone. From the writhing pallor of their limbs, a hand reached out, wound serpent-like about his ankle, dragged him struggling and shouting into the morass. It closed briefly over his head, his cries were stifled, his body crushed beneath the slithering weight of their crawling, suffocating bodies. The comfortable silence re-settled over the hollow, and the captives composed themselves to contemplate their play of shadows undisturbed. The body of the man who had dared to look for more lay huddled to one side, indistinguishable from the darkness.

Outside in the sunshine, Melitta and Zeus blinked. Periodically, a man or woman would appear from the Cave and wander about for a few moments making noises of incomprehension before bolting back into the darkness. But these apparitions grew less frequent and finally ceased altogether.

There was an old man walking in the striped shade of the tree trunks. He was wearing robes that had once been white, and was short, with a face of such outstanding ugliness that it was almost attractive. He was muttering to himself. On seeing the two sitting side by side, he came up and muttered to them. "Wisdom on one leg, they asked me. *Gnothi seauton,* I told them, know thyself. Pah!" he said.

"Understandable," agreed Zeus.

"Don't you think," asked the old man quizzically, putting his head on one side and darting quick, birdlike glances from the god to the woman, "that wealth and virtue are so opposed that if they were placed on a scale, they'd always incline in opposite directions?"

"Quite."

"So when wealth is valued, virtue is valued less, and so what is valued is practiced and what is not is neglected," said the old man with an air of triumph. "That's the crux of my argument against the oligarchic state, where they know the price of everything but the value of nothing. I said as much to Plato. At least, I think I did. Perhaps I'm going to if I haven't yet. Or maybe I will not have been doing…Dear me, it is too easy to mix up one's tenses here…"

He wandered away and entered earnest discussions with an olive, which he said had the necessary mental apparatus to construct a square whose area was double that of a given smaller square.

"What a nice man," remarked Melitta. "Although…a little easy to misunderstand."

"He looks as though he could make a career out of it."

"Zeus, what on earth is this place? What is going on?"

"I have no idea," he confessed. He found he was growing comfortable with ignorance on many fronts,

and was able to accept this new area of confusion with equanimity. “We may be better off not knowing. But no one seems fierce yet, which is an improvement on last night. I don’t think it is a hostile place. No, it just feels…” He paused, and sniffed the air. “It feels enormously confused. And incredulous, don’t you think? I can cope with those.”

Both sensed it was time to leave, so they got up and made their way on through the grove. As the trees grew thicker, making the bars and pools of sunlight that shivered through them all the brighter, they passed several more men, some in groups, others meditating singly. Beside a smooth, polished pool of dark water, two old men stooped, gazing earnestly into the depths. When they noticed Zeus and Melitta, they spoke. “Thales thinks that the basic constituent of matter is water,” said one. “But I believe that the material cause and first element of things was the Infinite.”

“That is because you are a miseducated boor,” said the other in a tone of self-effacing politeness.

“Your argument, Thales, is hardly watertight – if you pardon the pun.”

Thales smiled at them. “Please excuse the old fellow back there,” he said, pointing at the distant figure vaguely visible through the trees, now avidly scratching lines and angles in the soil. “He shouldn’t really be up here with the Pre-Socratic Naturals, but he’s important enough to be able to go where he likes. And of course, the Caves are up here.” Having given them sufficient explanation, he turned back to his pool.

Further on, they passed a wild old man who told them in a very loud voice that they were to eat no beans, and then demonstrated a theorem he claimed to have discovered before drawing a tetraktys on a writing

tablet. With him were two younger men, one of whom was trying to tell him that the perfect cannot be born of the imperfect, while the other was speaking rapidly about Achilles, a tortoise and moving arrows which were, he claimed, stationary "It's absolutely true," he assured them eagerly, waving his dangerous-looking bow and a brazen-tipped arrow in their faces. "I assure you that it is a logical impossibility for this arrow to move from point A to point B when I release it. For between them lie an infinity of points, at each one of which the arrow will be stationary, and since an infinity of zero velocities do not come above zero, there can be absolutely no danger. Now if you will be so kind as to stand against that tree…"

Zeus took Melitta's arm and led her firmly away.

They both jumped violently when another old man leapt down in front of them from the folds of a particularly convoluted olive. "Reality is one," he stated. "We must not confuse the concepts of being and existence. For of course what is, is, and what is not, is not, even though its existence must be presumed. Man," he remarked, scratching delicately behind his right ear, "is the measure of all things. At least, so Parmenides tells us."

On the other side of the olive yet another man crouched sullenly in the bushes. His clothes were filthy, his hair and beard so entangled that it was only with difficulty that one could make out their individual strands. "I wish to remain Obscure," he told them gravely. "For there are many bad and few good men. However, opposites are unfortunately necessary. Just remember that everything flows, and that it is impossible to cross the same river twice."

“Thank you,” said Zeus. “I shall most certainly bear it in mind.”

Beyond the grove, they saw the cluster of a village, with a wide agora and several large public buildings, including a temple whose squat, broad columns crouched fatly under the gabled roof with all the complacency of a managing director. Clouds of white-robed men and women drifted in the open spaces, along the river, and between the buildings. Feeling somewhat bemused, but on reflection more hungry than curious, Zeus and Melitta made their way down towards the marketplace.

The taverna opened directly onto the agora, framed by two fig trees between which a group of portly men, also robed in white, reclined in comfortable chairs, drinking wine. The fattest of these well-nourished gentlemen leapt up to greet them. He bore a battered chaplet of laurel leaves perched incongruously on his white curls, as a teenager wears a garment of absurd cut and colour because he feels it is the right thing to be seen in, even though he feels – and looks – rather amusing.

“Welcome, welcome,” he cried. He kissed Zeus lavishly on both cheeks, straining on tiptoe to do so, and kissed Melitta even more lavishly, allowing his hands to slip wistfully down her back, lower than was proper, as she reminded him with a sharp tap. “*So* good to see you,” he enthused. “We’ve been expecting you for *so* long. At least, I might have been. Or should have. Or we will have been once in the future, or yesterday…perhaps it was Tuesday lunchtime…”

“If you’ve been expecting us, I presume you have some food ready for us?” interrupted Zeus.

The man motioned for them to sit down. This they did, as the other gentlemen beamed at them, the man with the wreath continued his unstoppable speech of welcome, and the tavern-keeper scurried to bring in breakfast for the visitors. “I was only saying to Empedocles yesterday, or was it this morning, that we might not once have been able to have hadden the ability to contain our excitement, but I said, or was it you, Democritus? That as soon as you’d arrived we’d…”

“What *is* this place?” asked Melitta firmly, fixing him with a piercing gaze that arrested his torrent of words. The other men looked startled. “I mean, it’s quite nice and all that, but it’s very odd.”

The man looked worried. “Oh, I’m sorry if the Naturals bothered you,” he began.

“I thought those were people who didn’t like wearing clothes.”

He clicked his tongue. “Not again,” he sighed. “Anaxagoras, will you and check on the other Naturals, please? This young lady says they’ve been taking their clothes off again.”

“No, they were wearing clothes,” Melitta reassured him. “That’s a horrible thought…though if they’d all been much younger…”

“Eh!” Zeus admonished her, his mouth full of bread.

“Of course, it’s not the best way to enter the School,” worried the chapleted man.

“There is no other way to enter the School,” the man called Democritus reminded him.

“I didn’t say there was,” said the first man meekly. “Just that there could be a better way.”

“We’d have trouble with Heraclitus if there was,” warned Anaxagoras. “Him and his taking his pitchers to wells…”
“It’s crossing rivers that Heraclitus likes,” corrected another man.
“No, it’s pitchers.”
“Rivers.”
“Pitchers.”

Melitta looked from one to the other with an incredulous frown creasing her face. “What are they going on about?” she inquired.
“Forget them,” mumbled Zeus, who had by now reached that happy Nirvana where any event, no matter how bewildering, assumes minimal importance. He could do no more than abandon hope with resignation. “Just eat while you can,” he advised her. “ They may be very clever and so on, but the more interesting the things they say, the less easy they will be to understand, till you’ll reach the point where what they say is so interesting as to be too unintelligible for them to bother.”
“And I suppose you think that made a whole lot of sense?” she asked, before giving her attention to the platter of cheese, bread and stuffed leaves that the tavern-keeper had set before them. While they ate the men argued idly about rivers and pitchers, till someone found in them a model for the Universe, as it was constructed of the void, which was infinitely divisible, and the atom, which was not. This held their attention for a while, till the conversation drifted off onto more mundane topics, such as whether something that exists can be eternal, for nothing can come of nothing, they said, and someone else – probably Leucippus – reminded them that if this was so the Universe must be

homogenous and motionless, there existing nothing outside itself. During this conversation, the man with the chaplet, who appeared to be in charge and possessed the defining characteristic of those who occupy responsible positions, in that no one pays them the slightest attention, talked loudly and volubly. Another, rather younger man with a worried expression and very broad shoulders continually tried to interrupt, telling his elders there were more important questions and repeatedly asked, "How should I live?" in an unhappy voice, but was roundly and vigorously silenced by the others.

When Zeus had finished eating, he wiped his mouth and thanked his hosts for an excellent breakfast. "Now," he went on disinterestedly, "tell me the whole truth, omitting nothing. What is this place and who its people, descendents of which far-flung race of gods? I am Xenos son of Cronos, and in all my wanderings I have not seen a country nor a people like those I now behold."

The chapleted man beamed. "Very nice to meet you, Xenos," he said. "We've been expecting you…no, I've said that already, haven't I? I am Eidon, son of…" There was a pause. "I'm sure I used to know who my father was, but I can't immediately remember," he continued breezily. "Haven't you guessed where you are?"

"No," admitted Zeus. A rumble of good-natured laughter rose from the other men. Eidon rose to his feet. "Why," he said theatrically, "This is the Philosophy School!"

"What do you do, then?"

"What do we do?" Eidon spread his arms in a dramatic gesture. "We prepare these people for Life." He

frowned in sudden thought. “Or we prepare life for these people. I haven’t quite decided which.”

*

In Olympus, over the imposing lintel of the Central Bank hung a placard bearing the legend, “Polling Station” Setting the trend for all subsequent polling stations ever to be opened in any land at any time, it was completely deserted.

Earlier in the day, the Olympic square had been crammed with busy gods on their way to the stadium, crammed so tightly that a number of mountain gods had been forced through the wall of Number Ten, much to Hera’s annoyance, though she was feeling so lethargic that she had done no more than frown at them severely. But she found she was able to take little interest in Olympic affairs any more. Each day was an effort of will against the numbing, soothing darkness.

The sacrifices had ceased. Never before had the gods been so completely cut off from the mortals below. Worse than the severance between mother and child when the cord is cut - for those few of the gods who could see what the many could not, saw that as the mother they were now hollow, sucked dry, devoid of meaning or purpose. The gods remained as anachronisms, or quirks of memory, for the children no longer needed them but turned to their rising lives under the protection of a new god.

That day, those who were to play in the cup final bladder match had been bought in the player-market by Anthrostratopedon United and Neostratopedon United, the two rival teams. Each side was desperately attempting patch the holes left in its ranks by the ritual brawl at the end of the previous game, where the supporters of either side streamed onto the pitch, glad to

get on with the real business of the day after the amusing little hors d'oevure with the bladder. These players, who had risen higher than any other through the morass of idolised divinity, had been carefully trained and moulded into an instantly recognisable form. Whether athletic mountain gods or Herculean agrarian gods, they all conformed to a rigorous pattern of behaviour laid down by the player-dealers. Each player dutifully consumed the stipulated weekly quantity of alcohol and conscientiously took part in riots and binges in expensive hotels, ritually trashing rooms and inciting their supporters to do the same. In between these exhausting mental activities they roared about the city in flashy self-propelled chariots, seducing any female who crossed their paths and many females who actively strove not to. Training for bladder matches, which were strenuous, involved the players kicking the bladder and, more frequently, each other, and banging their heads against a specially prepared wall. For their coaches were of the opinion that the brain, being the heaviest organ in the body, would not only slow the players down but was quite obviously superfluous to any aspect of the game. So it was clearly the players' duty to rid themselves of these annoying growths as quickly as they could. None of them seemed to object when they were bought and sold like cattle at the whim of the dealers – how could they be slaves when they were paid to play? But this question, of course, never crossed their minds; probably most of them had ceased to have such things.

The rulers of the Theocratic Republic had attempted to show their close involvement with the People, as well as their easy rapport with their subjects, by holding the election on the day of the cup final. What effect they had hoped to achieve thereby was debatable, though had

they wished for a zero turnout the scheme had proved rousingly successful. Enipeus, manning the ballot boxes, was beginning to be of the opinion that the Polling Station was in the wrong place – had casting a vote been made a prerequisite for entering the stadium, then he wouldn't be waiting here in a quivering heap of nervous anger. He was no longer sure if he was still a "he" and not a "we" instead, but nonetheless remained sure that whoever he was, he had intended this election to be an outstanding triumph. So far it had failed to live up to his expectations.

Enipeus stormed staggering into the street. His steps were erratic, for he was finding it increasingly difficult to coordinate his movements. The Olympic Square remained as deserted as ever, apart from a lone figure who stumbled as jerkily as the river, if not more so.

Stirring deep behind his green-glazed eyes rose a faint tremble of recognition. Enipeus had seen this individual before, and the knowledge seeped like slowly moving slurry back into his mind. This was Tithinous, the mortal man beloved by the Dawn-Goddess Aurora long ago, the man who had been granted eternal life but not, to his understandable annoyance, eternal youth, with the result that the state of his physical repair was not enviable and he would have been unable to satisfy Aurora even if she had been able to stomach it. When he met Enipeus' eye, he was reeling through the square, dragging his left leg behind him as though it were held in place with tintacks, which it probably was.

Enipeus rushed up to him. "You must vote!" he greeted him.

Tithinous turned towards him a face papered with brittle, flaking skin, ashen grey, from which glared two purple-veined eyes, expressing extreme displeasure with

the world in general and the god who had granted him immortality in particular, which displeasure, he made it clear, he was generously prepared to refocus on Enipeus. “What?” he asked dully. He moved his mouth by means of a dirty piece of string attached to his jawbone, which ran through a small hole in the top of his head and down to his hand. By pulling judiciously on this cord, he could waggle his wasted mouth up and down to create the semblance of speech.

Enipeus pulled a bursting bag of gold from his robes, which he was fortunate enough to find therein. “I’ll give you this if you vote,” he wheedled.

“Money,” said Tithinous in a hollow voice. “Money can’t buy you happiness, they told me. Can’t buy you eternal life, they said. Well, you can take it from me, you can take eternal life and stick it so far up your rectum that you find it difficult to swallow…”

Enipeus seized his arm and began to drag him towards the voting urns. The man continued to speak. “Can it buy death? Can it? Could I bribe someone to push me out of here? But then I suppose I’d spend the next century just putting all me bits back together…” It was at this juncture that Enipeus realised his voice was growing fainter. Looking down, he saw that while he held Tithinous’ hand fairly tightly, the man seemed to have reneged on the understanding that he would also hold tightly at the other end. He returned to the man and gave him back his arm, for which he was touchingly grateful, and propelled him to the Polling Station.

“All you have to do,” said the river breathlessly, “is out a pebble into one of those urns, marked ‘Hera’ or ‘Enipeus’, which is for me. But if I were you, I’d put it in my one.”

Tithinous picked up a pebble. He dropped his little finger and stuck it back on absent-mindedly. “What’s in it for me?” he asked morosely. “Will you do your level best to kill me if you’re elected?”

“Yes, yes!” said Enipeus eagerly. “I’ll set up a think tank to discuss the problem. We’ll have a Decent Death Committee launch a public enquiry and conduct an opinion poll on the matter. It’ll be in all the newstablets. We’ll launch a special board of executives to conduct closed talks with you on the subject. We’ll allocate you a specially trained team of doctors and nurses - after an appropriately long wait, of course, as we have to see to the patients with money first. We’ll strive to cut waiting lists and give you free admission…”

“Liar,” interrupted Tithinous. “You’re all the same, you lying, cheating, scheming, sucking bastards. Why the hell did we bother to fight for the freedom to vote, just to have the chance of electing a lying shit like you? To pretend that we live in a theocracy, when the rich rule and the politicians lick shit from their arses?” He sighed, and dropped his pebble into Enipeus’ urn, with the air of one voting not for the glittering candidate but in some lonely defiant gesture in honour of those long ago who fought for the freedom now corrupted by greed, deceit and mendacity.

“Thank you,” said Enipeus.

“When will you know who’s won?” asked Tithinous, without the slightest indication of interest. “Not that it’ll make the remotest bit of difference.”

“We’ll break the urns open tomorrow morning,” the river answered. “If we do it before the Polling day is over the results will be invalidated.”

“Oh.”

“Goodbye then.”

“Bugger off.”

Tithinous fell down the steps with a rattle, re-attached his leg with the tintacks, and ambled away. Enipeus executed a wild and private dance of jubilation around his urn, and then knelt to kiss it lavishly. It was while thus engaged that he became aware of a coarse, dry rasping sound, punctuated by soft thuds. He looked up into the unprepossessing countenance of the voter Tithinous.

“Can you give me a hand?” he asked apologetically.

“Why?” asked Enipeus. “Did you leave one here?” He chuckled at his own wit.

“No,” considered the man. “But I think I dropped my finger in that urn.”

*

Everyone who attended a bladder match remarked that the most pleasurable thing about it was the sense of community and group solidarity. One developed, as it were, a sense of oneness with the rest of the crowd, in which individual thoughts, cares, or problems ceased to be worrying or even meaningful. To begin with, everyone was packed so tightly together that if someone so much as belched at one end, the shockwaves were of devastating force by the time they reached the other side of the podium. When the match started, of course, the real business of the crowd began. Their voices merging in disharmony, they roared songs of support for their team and songs of abuse for the opposition, the latter being more frequent, effective and of greater artistic merit. A waving mass of scarves, rattles, balloons and blow-up bananas swayed on the back of the crowd, like multicoloured fur on the flanks of a monstrous caterpillar. The Presidential box was reluctantly occupied by the President himself, toying with a spent

thunderbolt, the First Minister, and one or two other disgruntled ex-Olympian Wardrobe Ministers. In the silence of the box, the atmosphere prickled with a taut, sharp tension. None of the Olympians spoke of the unstoppable, ponderous momentum of Olympic affairs, or of what they guessed was taking place, but they knew each other's thoughts and sensed also that what they had begun was now overtaking them. Hubris had been their sin, the pride said by mortals to bring down the anger of the gods, and they saw their Fate in the eyes of the crowd. Ares, sullen and morose, like a slow-witted bull who has reached the end of his prime; Hera, proud and unbending yet still not proof against the clamour of the mob and the numbing blindness descending on all their vision. At the back, Heracles, Poseidon and Dionysus sat and talked.

"Look at them," moaned Dionysus, mournfully caressing the diminishing folds of his once-considerable belly. "It makes my soul creep within me. Twenty-five thousand amphora of wine we sold today."

"Aren't you pleased?" asked Poseidon. "Even I can't drink that much on my own in one day."

Dionysus manoeuvred his haggard features into an expression of aesthetic discontent. "It's the principle of the thing," he said. "This tragic devotion to pleasure at the expense of art. I object to being treated as a wine-salesman. These gods today, even my erstwhile friends the satyrs, none of them has the slightest sense of the dignity of insobriety or the decorum one needs to exercise in getting drunk. Look at them! The rabble. Where are the scented garlands, the roses, the ivy-wreaths and wine-reddened gowns, where the dancing satyrs and the wild Maenads? All my damned satyrs are running big businesses or tourist resorts and my poor

girls are working in bars or wearing aprons and bending over tables. All the magic has gone from drunkenness." He gazed at them with tear-brimming eyes. Poseidon hunched his barnacled shoulders. His stubborn refusal to don designer-wear and token striped scarf made him even more incongruous than his weedy beard, his trident and the Ocean Crown, which he insisted on sporting despite its anti-democratic associations. "I'm sick of it all too," he said. "Constantly have people telling me what to wear and what to do, otherwise I'll never get anywhere, they say. If I hear one more group of executives squabbling about who has the higher salary I won't be responsible for my actions."

"You never have been," pointed out Dionysus.

" I just make damned sure the buggers never come near me in the Ocean, but it's a bit lonely down there, now that the Tritons and naiads are swanning up here looking for jobs and leaving me with all the currents to see to on my own. Can't be bloody rude to people 'cos they'll sue you, and I can't be rude to Hades 'cos I hardly see the old fool any more. All this regulation, this craziness about working and salaries…it's no way for a god to behave, I tell you. If something doesn't happen about it soon, the only way I'll be able to shock people is by being good."

"They'd have found that enough of a shock in the old days," mused Dionysus.

A deep rumble indicated Heracles was preparing to speak. "I miss Athene and Prometheus," he said. Poseidon nodded. "I do too. They used to get so annoyed with me. It was great. But even Hera doesn't care what I say to her any more. Gods! Olympus is a dump nowadays, 'specially since they let the scummy mortals up here."

“They are paying your salary,” Dionysus reminded him. “Did I ask them to?”

The roars of the crowd reached a throbbing crescendo, penetrating through the walls of the Presidential box. Neostratopedon had scored the winning goal, which was the signal for battle to begin between the gods supporting either side. Tattooed and painted mountain gods thundered down the raked seats towards the pitch; spirits of wood and field, wind and water buckled on their knuckle dusters, gripped their empty amphorae and curled their coloured scarves about their necks, preparing for the noble fray in defence of teams fully worthy of their imminent sacrifice.

Yet before battle could commence, weaving between players weeping with adulation or despair, another god ran onto the playing field. This was not unusual – the gods were most frequently naked and waving a team scarf, in seeming recollection of some ancient fertility rite – but seeing that the god in question was actually fully clothed in tunic and cloak, the warring crowds halted their advance, silenced in confusion. The god’s trumpet call for silence was strangely unnecessary.

Hera peered over the edge of the box at the diminutive figure on the grass far below them. “It’s that despicable little dribble of a stream, Enipeus,” she said, pronouncing his name as though it were a distasteful and obscure affliction of the bowels. “Always popping up where he isn’t wanted. Who does he think he is, President?”

It appeared, however, that this was remarkable close to Enipeus’ present self-conception. “Ladies and gentlemen, friends, enemies and Olympians, your attention please!” He paused dramatically. Whatever he

was about to say, he could not yet tell. A tool of the system, he knew only that he had achieved a desire he thought was his; the power to enforce the freedom of the state he was to rule.

"A sign," he bellowed, "has come from the Fates. The Voting Urns have broken open and lo! in Hera's there are no stones. Yet in mine, revealing the unequivocal support behind my Party and myself, were found *one hundred per cent* of the votes cast! A clear and lucid revelation that you, the People of Olympus, have said Yes to change and reform! You want to cut yourselves free from the past and sail into a new dawn, a new Olympus, a full, free, frank and fair theocracy, under no other leadership but mine. The noble Tithinous, an impartial judge, counted the votes. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you look upon the new First Minister of Olympus, ready to lead you into a New Age. Olympus is mine!" he flung back his head to stare unblinking at the glaring sun with his unblinking eyes, a terrible fixed smile wrenching open his features, both arms cast wide in triumph.

There fell a bewildered silence. The crowd, unused to such situations, was puzzled, and moved uneasily like an enormous beast of low intelligence, perhaps a cow torn between food and sleep, wavering and unable to choose either. Amphorae were tossed from hand to hand, tattoos absentmindedly scratched, earrings twiddled. One after another, their eyes turned to the royal box where sat the President, a hollow, detached shell, and Hera, stiffly unmoving in her pride.

For long seconds she said nothing. She felt more tired and worn than she could ever remember. So this was the end: all her work, planning and machination undone by a river, driven by the unstoppable force of

titanic momentum she could not define. Then slowly, peacefully, with dignity and relief, she saw escape. In one breath her troubles fell away, her bitterness receded into the haze of her memory. She had fought for what she had won and held it close despite the struggle, now she could find release. It was so blessedly simple. A deep, airy sigh escaped her lips as she opened her hands and realised, finally, that what she now let slip away was not really of very much importance. And she laughed, a laugh of great lightness, such as she felt had not been uttered since the morning of the world when the darkness of the Titans had passed away.

"Olympus is yours?" she asked. "You're bloody welcome to it. A lot of good it did me. Take it, Enipeus. Have fun with it. But don't deceive yourself that you're in charge, or pretend you know what is passing in your realm. Remember that for the rulers of the Gods, forever is not as long as it used to be."

The members of Enipeus' party cheered. Those who were not members of the party, whose numbers were considerably superior, shouted slogans, for they had found that unless they gave voice to meaningless noises at fairly regular intervals, their critical faculties and motor neurones failed. Happily they resumed their progress, streaming down on either side of the new First Minister to resume their interrupted fight, which would be carefully patrolled and supervised by the police in accordance with government regulations.

This left the Olympians in the box somewhat nonplussed. Like an audience unwillingly taken to watch a foreign language film by a lank-haired intellectual friend, they sensed that somewhere along the line they had missed an important part of the plot and cast around for someone to explain it in plainer

terms than the intellectual friend, who would do not more than sigh at them in exasperation. Ares hummed a few bars of a tune, confident that the honour of his office would be left to him, despite the ministerial change. Poseidon made several pointed and well-chosen remarks about demigods and their questionable suitability for high office, or indeed for any office at all. Apollo called for a recount. "That won't take very long," remarked a cracked voice. Tithinous appeared, carefully pinning himself to the box so as to have a complete view of the afternoon's entertainments. Enipeus shouts struggled up to the Olympian gods through the web of rising cries, "I am Lord of Olympus! I, Enipeus, have been chosen by the gods and by the Fates! Glory be to me, O People of Olympus!"

Hera gestured imperiously with a languid hand. Whatever else the gods had lost, they still retained a power rare enough to give Houdini envious ulcers. A small goblet filled with strong alcoholic liquor appeared in her hand. "Bloody fool," she said, and drank deeply, the goblet trembling slightly. "The gods help Olympus if he's in charge."

But he was not.

As the two armies raged into each other like embattled winds, their tide balked, swirled and swayed into stillness. For the stadium shook under a colossal footfall, endlessly repeated in the echoes of their ears. And they felt, oppressive, the overwhelming presence of a god greater even than the Olympians, whose force had permeated every last cranny of their lives, in whom and for whom they had lived, with little realisation till this moment. As one the gods fell to their knees, bowed their heads to the ground; ears started to many eyes with the terror tightening in their bowels. Only in the Olympian

box did they remain seated, confused, horrified, and filled with a wrath mingled amply with fear.

From the West Side he came, taller than a hundred piled trees and green as their waving leaves. With every step he clinked like a thousand coins or a torrent of gold sifting through the hands of a conquering king. The distant, divine countenance, passing so high above the roofs of Olympus, was smooth, calm and unperturbed, a faint smile curving the bow of the perfect lips. Yet the cowering gods could see, as he approached the stadium, the heavy bejewelled crown clinging to the vertiginous flow of his hair, and the piercing light struck from the unblemished, polished golden orbs of his eyes.

The god stepped over the stadium wall into the scattering crowd of mountains, rivers, fields, dryads, nymphs, satyrs and naiads, as though the earth itself drew back to prepare a holy place for this greatest of the gods to stand. A beatific smile now wreathed the sacred visage. Beside his sandaled foot a small group of mountain gods circled uncertainly. They had raised Enipeus shoulder-high in celebration and were now unsure what to do with him, as someone more important seemed to have entered the political arena. Enipeus himself goggled open-mouthed at the titanic god, crisp and perfect, green and gold, as he blotted out the sun.

"You kneel rightly, gods of Olympus," he said. His voice was metallic, filled with a nasal sting, and on his breath floated the smell of gold slippery in avaricious palms. "For I am he whose presence you have felt among you, whom you summoned back from the wilderness of Chaos and the Outer Darkness to take up my place as ruler of all that is in Heaven and on Earth. I am Argurion." At the sound of the holy name, a great moan rose from the prostrated gods, to smite the sky's

saffron-plated dome. “On me have you called, and no other has been lord of your hearts these long days. So from the hidden depths of Chaos I have come and heard your call; have answered your prayers that no other might rule you, no desire fill your hearts and minds but that of Argurion alone. To Argurion you bow, Argurion, more god than the gods themselves.”

Poseidon peered out of the box, rubbing his nose. “Who is this tosser?” he asked belligerently. No one answered him. His voice, grumbling about the tasteless extravagance of the Titan’s dress sense and choice of colours, was a lone mumble of dissent in the silence of conformity.

Argurion’s glittering face swept the crowd, his smile unchanged. A hand wider than a double door brushed back the heavy golden curls from his brow. “For long have I heard the voices of my People,” he stated, his voice honey-smooth and rich as a chiming bell. “Now in answer to your cries I am come to take the place prepared for me at the helm of your illustrious state, and there to assume final and complete control to prepare for the coming of She who will follow me, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to undo. In my labours my Ministers shall assist me, attend me, and keep clean my holy orifices with their noses.” He smiled more broadly, inclining his hand graciously to indicate the unique quality of this privilege. “Now that I have revealed my true self, we may at last begin the levelling of thought and aspiration, focusing all desire upon me, and the sublimation of all personality in my worship. If we can but ensure that the minds of rich and poor alike are intent on contemplation of me, your god, and on my holy service, then we shall have conquered. For individuality is personality, personality inequality, and

inequality pain. You, People of Olympus, have seen that only by the dissipation of self can we attain true bliss, and lose oneself in a plethora, a medley of blended souls. If you love me, you shall obtain dissolution of your nature, and thus through me find eternal happiness.

"Once Heaven has been truly converted, our labours on Earth must begin, in the minds of men and women, and the lands they inhabit; for there yet linger many in the sunlit lands who value other things, passing dust and shadows, more than Argurion. Raised shall be the seas, the mountains levelled low. An equal plain shall the world become, where homogenised men and women shall dwell in nirvana, devoted to my worship; till they may realise that life without an ever-rising draught of Argurion is not worth the living, and surrender themselves to the blissful arms of non-existence."

The People had by this time become inured to speeches and were well trained, like Pavlovian dogs, knowing what was expected when the speaker shut their mouth. A rolling cheer tumbled round the stadium confines till Argurion lifted a vast hand for silence. In the lines of his face welled a shadow of concern. "Yet I have seen," he continued, "that the People and your illustrious First Minister Enipeus are still harbouring in your city a cancer, a mould, a seething barrel of rotting corruption, a stinking brackish current in the fresh stream of your lives. You have allowed the remnants of your old aristocracy to survive the purge."

"Oh, what a surprise, he's being rude about us," shouted Poseidon angrily. "You unripe oil slick, you – see this trident? It does all manner of unpleasant things, any of which I should be happy to demonstrate to you if you step up here."

Argurion pointed a shining finger at the Olympian box. “There,” he cried, “is the growth –“
“You’ve got a nerve,” yelled Poseidon, “calling people growths when you’re the size you are.”
“- the growth,” went on the Titan, “that has kept Olympus from true equality and the realisation of its goal. They have, in many ways, rejected my love and remained oblivious to my charms. These gods in heaven, and the fugitive god on earth, must be destroyed, for they are a threat to my noble and sacrosanct person. The President we shall spare, for he seems to have served me well. But let the rest be taken to the House of Hades, and there confined for eternity.”

There was stillness for a second in the stadium, whereupon a tetchy note crept into Argurion’s voice. “Well, get on with it then,” he urged. He stood and watched as the tidal wave of deities, now barely distinguishable one from the other, whether god of mountain or ocean depth, clad as they were in branded tunics and bright team colours, swept towards the Olympian box.

The dispensation of homogeneity did not, for some reason, extend to the contest in the box, where true moments of glory emerged from the clinging darkness. Poseidon’s eye and hand, honed by years of practice in spearing sausages, proved a deadly combination, especially when they got together behind his trident; Apollo and Artemis found some release from their anger and frustration, scattering flashing arrows into the crowd. Such was Hera’s monumental contempt for those who broke into the box that she feigned complete ignorance of the discourtesy, and made such absent comments about the weather that none of her assailants dared touch her. Dionysus, much as he would have liked

to fight, found himself occupied with a pressing problem. He knew that most important characteristic of a gallant last stand was that it should be remembered by posterity, and bearing this in mind he selflessly appointed himself as the one who should survive, against all his wishes, to chronicle this tragic day for succeeding generations. But to his dismay he had got no further than planning the first three words of the introduction when he was apprehended trying to escape through the lavatory window. The crowd poured on, unstoppable – those who fell were merely trodden into a shapeless mass by those who followed.

Heracles fought so violently that after a while he found himself wanting an adversary, for the crowd divided and flowed around him as though he were a rock in their stream, claiming they had pressing business with the other gods. So to console himself he decided to take the initiative and attack, rather than to remain the complement of a passive verb.

Hephaestus was apprehended at his palace; Demeter cornered in her garden and placed under house arrest. Hera was discovered, long hours later, still sitting stiffly in the ruins of the Olympian box, and graciously complied when asked, politely, if she would mind coming along. A bewildered Ares found himself sitting in parliament with a Wardrobe emptied of Olympians, at the foot of a shrunken Argurion who had taken the Air Throne. Aphrodite had long since vanished from Olympus, and no one knew her whereabouts or, it seemed, had any memory that she had ever existed. Finally, with the exception of the elusive Hermes, only Heracles remained free, stubbornly battling as he had on Earth, neither protesting nor questioning, as though he guessed the potential answers and did not wish to hear

them. Argurion granted him a divine pardon for having reduced so many other gods to the same level, albeit the ground, and in recognition for his services in maintaining an Olympus for Argurion to occupy.

*

Helios slipped beyond the steeping mountains, silhouetting them against the pollen-coated sky, falling gently into the lifting metalled waters of the western seas, drawing his colours in his wake. Following on his heels, the turning sky seemed dusted with pale filaments of misty, cloudy light, a soft bridal veil of brightness between the golden and the blue. Beneath the rim of the world, Helios leapt into his executive chariot and drove at a not inconsiderable speed towards his palace at the Gates of Dawn, where Aurora was holding a party. The annoying business of the day being over, he could now give his mind, or what remained of it, to more important things.

The entire Olympic Police Department, and indeed most of the citizens of Heaven, turned out to bid an emotional farewell to the Olympians. It was thought that their erstwhile rulers would appreciate such a gesture, even though the presiding emotion was one of jubilation. However, most of the gods now felt too apathetic to care one way or the other, but had made the effort to attend through a sense of duty and apprehension as to what would happen if they did not.

The Olympians, members of the Royal House of Heaven, Children of Cronos, Offspring of Earth and Sky, Quellers of the Titans and the Giants, had little to say on their bumpy journey through the upper airs before the armoured chariot in which they were held plummeted down through the earth to the chthonic protectorate of Tartarus. Even Poseidon could not

summon up an insult, which, considering that he was in close quarters with his relations, gave some indication of the extent of his gloom. One prong of his trident was broken, his eyes blackened and bruised, and he had noticeably fewer teeth than usual, but he had carefully concealed the Ocean Crown in some fold of his clothing or – Hera shuddered at the thought – some crevice of his body; and he now set it upon his untidy head in an attitude of lonely defiance.

The chariot sped through the mandatory bank of black cloud that indicated the approach to the Underworld, emerging suddenly into a space like a colossal hangar, glittering with such chromium-plated glassy glory that it quite outshone Olympus. Such was the glare that it penetrated the solid walls of the chariot, illuminating faces morose, resigned, or too bored to care any longer.

Gold-rimmed wheels hissed over the shiny suspension bridge spanning the clear River Styx. Manning the tollbooth were several pink and glistening individuals, possessed of lengthy coils and mouths whose configurations of teeth would have occupied a place of pride in any handbook on dentist's phobic dreams. The supervisor of the grinning creatures exuded an air of such grandiose discontent that one would have struggled to pass him without weeping in sympathy. Even a transsexual feeling he has been born in the wrong body could have little conception of the pains wracking Charon's immortal soul, for he felt he had been born in the right body but had been forced to change it by employer discrimination. Not only had he been forcibly and comprehensively bathed for the first time in twelve thousand years, but he was also compelled to change his suit every three days and so

found himself unable to build up that companionable relationship he liked to establish with his clothes. His under tunic, he recalled fondly, had become quite talkative towards the end.

So it happened that the Olympians who had brought about so many great and enlightened changes did not see the triumph of their ministerial term that was the House of Hades. They did not see the polished glass and marbles, the bright arc-lamps or the vents in the domed ceilings where crouched young winds, who blew cool breezes through the waiting rooms for departed souls and over the reception desks, bristling with entire tropical jungles of strange plants, which were interbreeding rapidly and producing new species every week. They did not see the ranks of mighty desk ornaments on the receptionists' desks, which were also interbreeding, resulting in odd contraptions of spinning magnetic balls, small perpetual motion wheels on wires, and the denizen of one particularly interesting desk, behind which sat a large and very self-conscious metal rack from which were suspended five gleaming balls. From time to time one of the balls would reach out and give a little tap to the ornament on its desk, which consisted of five secretaries attached to wires, who swung rapidly back and forth hitting each other whenever they were touched.

The Olympians did not see the elegant signboards hanging from the whitewashed walls, with their attendant daemons pointing the visitor to different departments. The chariot took the corridor labelled "Deepest Tellus", which led steeply down into the basement, clinically clean and heavy with the smell of disinfectant. Along the way they passed a disgruntled soul in torment, who paced a huge wheel like a

treadmill linked to a generator; another man rolled stones up and down a slope to power a perpetual motion machine, and a dissatisfied group of young ladies poured endless streams of water into a vast engine driving a steam turbine.

Deep in the furthest reaches of the Underworld, further below the very roots of Earth than man has dared to imagine, deep in the unholy realm of the dead, was the place of punishment prepared for the Olympians, most despised of all the gods. Their fate was to be worse than Ixion's, pacing on his endless wheel, more futile than Sisyphus', more harrowing than the Danaids'. For their doom was such as mortals shrink from imagining, seeing as they do a faint reflection of the horror at Christmas time – to be confined in an enclosed space with their relations.

The room was bright, glaringly bright. Against one wall were two strange machines, crowded with buttons, garish pictures, and little paper cups, all of which appeared to be at least second hand, and quite possible eighth or ninth. An enormous fern hunched in a corner. Bizarre paintings hung on the walls, blurry, pastel images that could have been anything from landscapes to fluorescent pizza toppings. Ranged along the wall opposite the machines was a rank of little cubicles, each provided with a desk, tablets, a communication tube and, worst of all, a small pot-plant, which doubled as a desk toy, or a desk toy that was attempting to disguise itself as a pot plant and was clearly one or two leaves short of a bush.

Even the mighty Poseidon, once the Earthshaker and Lord of the rolling Oceans, quailed and blanched at the sight of the hideous hells that awaited them. Apollo broke down and sobbed – only Hera was able to

maintain her composure, dignified to the last. Silent giants hustled the pallid, enfeebled gods to their seats of torment. One by one they were strapped into the torture chairs, bound and left in silence. A silence never complete or soothing, broken by the erratic hum of the machines, each of which had a different tone and whose clashing, irregular whines were consciously out of step, tearing the nerves of their hearers apart. At their desks, the gods found a never-failing supply of figures to be entered into little charts and passed on to their neighbour, who was to enter the results on further charts, till the numbers circulated endlessly from god to god, dancing fruitlessly between new grids, old wine in new bottles, each draught progressively more sour. And the gods found their communication tubes were never quiet. At intervals, intervals never of the same length, so that they were ever braced to seize a tube that as yet sat silent, the tubes rang, demanding attention. Once they had raised them, try as they might the Olympians could say no more than, "Hello, Underworld Trust Management, how may I help?" To which the speaker at the other end would respond with a torrent of abuse. The Olympians could muster no retort beyond a courteous rejoinder. After some time it grew difficult to say which voice they grew to detest the more, the abusers' or their own polished tones. It is trying for the pathologically rude to hear themselves being polite. Of course, it was clear that their job was abidingly necessary and absolutely essential for the smooth running of the Underworld, and was as such abundantly fulfilling and life-affirming. But along with most necessary jobs, it was so tedious that by comparison, mere boredom would have seemed like gripping entertainment.

Poseidon laid down the communication tube with a shaking hand. Sweat sped down his nose, winding rapidly into his beard. Veins stood thick on his temples. “I don’t think much of the accommodation down here,” he whispered. “What’s happened to the vultures? Whose bloody idea was this set-up?”

A dry, clipped voice spoke from an apparently empty booth, startling the gods writhing in their agony. “It wasn’t mine,” it pointed out. “Though I believe the director of the development plan is here with us today.”

A shaken Hera had just replaced the tube after her fifth call and was lifting it to deal with her sixth.

“Hades, you old bugger!” said Poseidon in delight. “I was just wondering if you’d escaped, and thinking, ‘I’m damned if that bastard’s getting away if I’m down here’.”

“You are damned,” Hades pointed out. “Though I confess I am not unduly surprised that the fact has eluded you. We never did appreciate you for your intelligence.”

“You never appreciated me at all,” said Poseidon sadly.

“Believe me,” said Hades earnestly, “we tried hard.”

Apollo emitted a strangled cry at the expectant tinkling of his tube. “I can’t take any more!” he screamed.

“Don’t worry,” said Hades with relish. “It’ll be coffee break time soon.”

“Thank the gods.”

“You won’t when you see what comes out of those machines,” reflected Hades. “And just wait till the Managers come in with their Dead Lines. Excruciatingly painful they are – the most exquisite torture imaginable. Can’t think what happened to the

idea of death as a blessed release. People won't commit suicide for this…"

With a whirring and clicking of bolts the door of their chamber opened. Through it passed a trolley on swiftly moving legs, which halted by their booths, followed by a giant, doubled up, wearing a tight pinstriped tuxedo. Tityos was barely recognisable in his new garb, although considering that his most memorable features in former times had been his attendant vultures, this was hardly surprising. But none of the Olympians expected to see the tall, bowed god, clad in an identical suit, who now sidled half-shamefacedly into the room.

"Prometheus!" cried Hera.

Prometheus smiled. "Hello Hera," he said, "It's always nice to meet old friends on holiday."

Poseidon raised a sweat-filmed face from his tube. "If this is your idea of a holiday," he said, "I'd have serious words with your tour operator."

"Oh, it's not so bad," protested Prometheus. "The hours are good – endless, in fact – so the salary is phenomenal."

"We get paid, do we?"

"Well, yes," he considered. "But we only receive our salary on the thirtieth of each month, and the calendar here remains static on the twentieth."

He busied himself with the load on the trolley. Marked, 'Meats and Comestibles – keeping Good Food Good For You', it was loaded with small meat pies and ready-made paste sandwiches wrapped in fig leaves. Half of the trolley was concealed beneath a gingham cloth. "Another thing – we all have to smile and be polite down here," he remarked. "Otherwise you have to do Over Time, hanging above Cronos."

“Oh bugger,” said Poseidon disconsolately. “I’m going to spend my entire life working.”

Prometheus moved the trolley over to the booths. “We’re only here till Zeus comes back,” he said. At this he removed the cloth, revealing two innocent-looking vultures holding a plate on which steamed a pile of liver so fresh the blood still quivered through its flesh, and moisture oozed from its dripping surfaces into the air. As he whipped up the cloth, Prometheus exposed the hideous, ragged rent in his right side, its flapping lips fluttering as he breathed. He fixed his eye on Hera as he asked, “In the meantime, would any of you like to try one of my sandwiches? They’re very good, especially my liver pate. It’s home-cured, so to speak.”

Chapter Nineteen

The bars of sunlight slanting between the shutters woke them, illuminating their whitewashed room with the bluish glow of early morning. Zeus nodded at Melitta, curled into a tousled heap in the bed.

"'Morning," he said. She made a noise of greeting in return.

"You know," remarked Zeus, "I had absolutely no idea this place existed."

"Strangely enough, neither did I."

"But I should have done. I used to be more or less omniscient."

Melitta yawned. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters," said Zeus reproachfully. "I start every day feeling as though I've been blinded and deafened, when I remember what I used to know."

"I meant if this place wasn't here, we'd have gone to the dogs. So I shouldn't ask why it is, otherwise it might not be."

Their conversation, beginning to show dangerous signs of bordering on the existential and the intelligent, was thankfully cut short by Eidon, the illustrious director of the Philosophy school, who burst through the door like a giant marshmallow fired from a field cannon. If those in a relationship begin to have deep and meaningful conversations, it is usually a sign they should either start looking for someone else or for a place to get married.

Eidon beamed. "Good morning, good morning," he enthused. "Slept well? Good." He rushed on without waiting for anything as unnecessary as an answer. "I thought after breakfast you'd like to have a look around

the school. I'm doing a tour of inspection, and you can accompany me, if you wish."
"If you wish", it emerged, was a favourite phrase of Eidon's, whose meaning translated roughly as "Look, I've told you what you're doing, and you haven't got a choice, mate." However, most of the staff and pupils at the Philosophy school had learnt that, if ignored, Eidon would soon find someone else to ask. Without the benefit of this experience, Zeus and Melitta soon found themselves hustled out into the crisp morning, into the lanes of shade in the grass, dotted with trees and clearings where lessons were held. Eidon talked rapidly, only pausing for breath when his face became puce and his words strained.

"When we set up the school," he told them, "the Authorities and I perceived that the single root and cause all unhappiness and earthly problems was the inability to see or perceive - whether objects or ideas - or that the insight people did possess was over no more than a narrow field, precluded by the criteria they employed to judge the situation, having inherited these criteria from others, which fact they rarely saw fit to question. So we decided to open the minds of men and women."

He paused beside a colossal piece of convoluted sculpture bearing some faint resemblance to a head, nestling on the edge of the wood. Melitta and the god regarded it with interest. "This is?" asked Zeus.
"A memorial to those noble natural philosophers who were the first to volunteer for our mind-opening experiments," said Eidon sadly. "You see, many naturals maintained that in the absence of a transcendental human spirit, the mind must be opened by physical means." He nodded several times.

“Certainly, their minds were wide open by the time we had finished, though their owners seemed to have reached a state of such absorption with their own thoughts that they never spoke again. I did mention at the time to Leucippus that he might have used more delicate tools than the bar and the hammer, but still…other philosophers denied the existence of the physical altogether, claiming words alone were sufficient to open minds. But many of our subjects disagreed violently with the words we used, or said they found them offensive or politically incorrect, and after we had shouted very loudly into their ears for some time, they pretended not to hear anything else we said.” He gave a sigh. “It was then that we decided neither course of action was entirely right or wrong, but determined to combine the best qualities of each method.”

“So now you shout at people while splitting them open with hatchets?” Melitta inquired innocently. Eidon appeared not to notice. “We created a series of practical, working models, where our very ideas assumed flesh and substance, to be observed and dissected by the students.”

“Like the minds of the volunteers?” asked Melitta.

“That’s it! The very thing,” said Eidon in delight. “You are clearly a very able young lady. It is only in seeing these concepts in observable reality that we can find words to describe them, and so allow our ideas to be modified and clarified by both. I believe you have already seen the Caves? Yesterday, was it, or the day after today? I’ve forgotten which.”

“Yesterday,” confirmed Zeus.

“Yes, yes…the Caves are the idea of the broad-shouldered young man you saw with us on the terrace.

A strange fellow, but no doubt quite gifted, quite gifted indeed. He insists the Caves are a model of the way in which we think and live, and that the vast majority of us have an intrinsic hostility to the suggestion that the reality of our situation may not be exactly as we perceive it. I don't altogether understand it myself, but I have great hopes, great hopes."

"That you will understand it?" asked Melitta.

"No, I just said that I had great hopes. I wasn't talking about the Caves," said Eidon in surprise. He gave a knowing smile. "Ah, I see. You expect logical continuity. I see logic, my dear child, as a comfortable house where we have lingered far too long. There is a world of irrationality waiting for us in the garden. Just go up into the woods there and have a chat to the naturals. They're all perfectly logical, and perfectly bananas most of the time. Look at Zeno and his paradoxes. If logic can tell you that an arrow in flight is stationary, that causes me to have severe doubts about its practical benefits. Yes, all his arguments about zero motion at infinitesimal points of time and distance are very clever, and he is most persuasive on the subject of infinite divisibility and the nil sum of an infinity of zeros. But he used up any number of my students by getting them to stand in the paths of moving arrows, which he maintained were stationary and then trying to tell them it was a logical impossibility they were dead. Now, you can come and see some of our practical demonstrations, if you wish."

Zeus and Melitta followed him meekly towards the pool of light filling a grassy clearing in the distance. Two groups of white-clad philosophers were present. Those closest to them were young boys and girls, sitting attentively in a semi-circle around a venerable bearded

sage, engaged in the dispensation of knowledge to his students, drafting complex figures upon a blackboard fixed to a tree. As Eidon and his guests approached, the children laid down their writing tablets, where many had been assiduously scribbling, and stood up in greeting. Eidon smiled and nodded his head, whereupon they sat down again and the bearded gentleman resumed the lesson. Retreating into the vivid shade, Eidon began to explain the lesson in a low voice. "Now this, you see," he said, "is the traditional system. Observe the teacher – set *apart* from the students, creating a false impression of his superior knowledge and fitness to teach."

"Surely his knowledge *is* superior?" remarked Zeus. Eidon clicked his tongue.

"Where did you come by such an antiquated idea?" he scolded. "Nonsense, complete nonsense. It's ideas like this that lead innocent children to think quite dangerous and damaging thoughts. Surely you should know by now that the only prerequisite for a good education is ignorance?"

"Wouldn't it be an idea to fill the ignorance with something?" suggested Zeus. Eidon shook his head in exasperation. "Only if you know that you do not know can you ever learn anything. I really cannot tolerate this appearance of division and inequality between the teacher and his pupils."

"They're not unequal, they're just different…" began Zeus in protest, but was quelled by a severe glance.

"They are very well behaved," commented Melitta.

"Ah, but you haven't seen the half of it, " said Eidon darkly. "We have performed extensive tests on these children, and what goes on in their little heads is quite deplorable, terrifying in a way." His voice sank to a

hollow, grating whisper. “Do you know that they have allowed their personalities to be crushed and moulded, and their personal creativity and self-realisation has been stunted, by the imposition of some outlandish moral code, hammered into them by their unscrupulous, scheming elders, who thus seek to perpetuate their system of control? Do you know that...” here his voice trembled with the extent of his emotion, “that they are actually *obedient*?”

His two listeners saw bright tears brimming no the lips of his eyes. He shook his head sadly. “It chokes me to think of what these children might have become without the malign influence of adults,” he said. “But come, now you shall see a school as it should be in an ideal world, as, I believe, all schools shall one day be run.”

As they neared the other group of white-robed figures there seemed little difference at first between the two schools. Here also, they could discern a ring of children with a taller shape in their midst. However, as they drew closer, it became clear that the spectacle here greatly gladdened the heart of Eidon, as he appeared to rejoice within himself, rubbing his hands together.

The noise of children’s voices beat on their hearing, jarring and buzzing in their ears. Some were studiously occupied in the destruction of their writing tablets, scribbling vulgar words on their desks, or, more frequently, each other. Two boys rolled in a violent scuffle at the back, biting, poking, and occasionally struggling into a position to launch a few ill-timed punches. Three little girls at the front seemed to be emulating the students in the first group – seeing this, a small boy had thoughtfully organised his peers into a tightly-knit band, who discharged missiles and insults at

the little girls, clearly out of an altruistic concern for their well-being, determined they should not fall into the same errors as had their models. Here too, a venerable bearded sage took the lesson. Standing likewise beside a large writing tablet pinned to a tree, he was, with strained face, attempting to explain something of great beauty and complexity, doggedly raising his voice when he reached an important point, but nevertheless unable to drown the clamour of the children. From time to time he bellowed, "Shut up!" which remark appeared to have some witty significance, for all the children laughed loudly immediately he uttered these words. Plainly on the best of terms with the sage, the children were eager to confide in him whatever problems occupied them. Odd phrases leaked from their cacophony – *Sir, Katerina's got my stylus…Sir, Giorgios was writing on my tablet and it won't come off, and sir, he's just taken my sash…Sir, Andros keeps hitting me and poking me, sir, tell him, tell him…. Sir, tell Dendros , he said I was a fat trout….Sir, Pheidippides and Menestratos are fighting, sir, and Agathi's crying, sir….* As these remarks were fired at him, the sage grew ever more wild-eyed, looking from side to side in desperation, till at last he screamed, "Shut up!", provoking another colossal burst of laughter.

He turned to the large tablet, having first pleaded with the children to copy what he wrote thereon. His plea fell unheard into the uproar. As he wrote, one of the boys walked up to the tablet and picked up a spare stylus. Leaning under the arm of the sage, who failed to notice him in his concentration, he wrote, "Hello" in the lower corner of the tablet. The extent and pithiness of his wit proved too much for the class, who screamed and howled in a roar of such thunderous mirth that all

their previous efforts paled in its shadow. Spurred on by these shouts of delight, the boy wrote again. This time he inscribed, “Mr. Kartepellis has a Kut-off penis.”

A wave of laughter even greater than the last erupted from the children. Mr. Kartepellis – for it was he – turned from his work at the tablet. He was crying. He noticed the boy at his side. “Phillipos, what are you doing here?” he shouted. “I am taking this lesson. Go back to your seat.”

“Why should I?” asked the boy. “Make me.”

The sage lunged towards him, but the boy held up an admonishing finger. “Touch me, and I’ll sue you for everything you’ve got, Mr. Kut-off penis,” he said. “I know my rights.” The other children cheers loudly as he strolled back to his desk and the philosopher collapsed, weeping copiously.

“What a heart-warming sight,” enthused Eidon. “What a truly enlightened and liberal lesson in the finer human arts. What an example of how a school should function in our freethinking and forward-looking modern age.”

“Do you have any conception,” the sage expostulated to his class, “how difficult it is for me to teach with fifteen separate conversations taking place at the same time, with constant fights, interruptions and shouts of ‘sir’? Can’t you show any consideration…”

“Sir!” called a boy.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Sniggers from the class.

“…consideration for anyone but yourselves?”

“We don’t want to be here, sir,” pointed out one child. “It’s boring.”

“I don’t give a damn if you think it’s boring. Do you think I want to be here either? But we’re going to get through with this lesson whether you want to or not.”

There were cries that the children knew their rights, that nothing compelled them to be there against their wishes, and Phillipos began a chant of *Mr. Kartepellis has a Kut-off penis*, which was eventually taken up by the entire class. After a while the children drifted off, leaving the sage convulsed in a fit of sobbing.

"Excellent, excellent," said Eidon. "Did you observe, above all, how happy the children were? How personally fulfilled and able to develop themselves, rather than along lines laid down by self-interested adults? But happy, most importantly, happy. That's the main thing."

"Doesn't it bother you that they don't appear to be learning anything?" asked Zeus mildly.

"Oh no, of course not," protested Eidon. "*Learning*?" he gave a fatuous laugh. "That's not the purpose of education at all. We want them to have fun. If we started to teach them facts or ideas we'd have no end of problems on our hands. The children might begin to *think*, for gods' sakes. So we teach them about Personality Studies and Socially Integrated Behaviour Courses, and run classes on Spending and Consumption and Peer or Pupil Pressure – How to make Advertising Work for You and get What you Want; how to make and wrap sandwiches and design mousetraps, above all having fun and not being restricted. So they'll grow up into good little consumers, too busy slavishly devoted to wealth generation ever to reflect on their situation. They'll be certain to uphold the economy with their incessant spending and, with any luck, be absolutely incapable of rational thought."

"Well, I'm not going to send *my* child to a school like that," said Melitta. "It's disgusting. How can you

pretend it's the proper way to bring up children, or educate them?"
"I don't," said Eidon blandly. "I just try to keep an open mind and see the advantages in a system, and more importantly, to realise for whom it is advantageous. This system here is clearly beneficial for the consumer-dominated oligarchic state, where the rulers require the electorate to be in a state of permanent gullibility and open to easy manipulation by both visual and verbal means. This mode of education has its exact parallel in our Political Demonstration Department. It provides the optimum conditions for the perpetuation of a very few types of states."
Zeus frowned. "Perhaps I'm being a little slow this morning," he said. "Shocking, I know, but it has happened before. I thought I got the impression you agreed with this type of education?"
"No," said Eidon. "I don't agree with anything."
"Has anyone ever told you they find you confusing?"
"Possibly," he reflected. "But there's no shame in that. No doubt I should find myself confusing if I knew what I was talking about. But enough of education. Let us go for to the Religious Reflection Department."

He led them away through the trees. On the way they passed several groups of children – it was break time, Eidon explained. Two adolescent boys and a girl crouched together under an olive, conducting an activity Zeus would have been alarmed to find on the syllabus. He stopped and spoke to another boy who was waddling towards them, while Eidon and Melitta went ahead, arguing volubly. "Excuse me," he said, "but why…why…" Metaphors failed him, and he fell back on a loose simile. "Why are you walking as if you've got a melon up your backside?"

“Because I have,” said the boy flatly. He waddled away, leaving Zeus vainly searching for a suitable reply. Another boy approached. “I put it there,” he explained.”
“Why on earth?”
The boy shrugged. “You do things like that at school,” he said. “You know, wedging, eyebrow-shaving, bog-flushing, stripping and beatings…”
“I never went to that kind of school,” said Zeus cautiously, eyeing the young maniac with apprehension, lest he pull out a melon or make any sudden moves with a garden vegetable. “Is…is he *enjoying* it, or something?”
“Shouldn’t think so.”
“Why doesn’t he take it out then?”
“I told him what I’d put up there if he did.” The boy gave an exasperated sigh. “Look, I’m easily three weeks older than him and he owes me respect. At least a melon isn’t sharp and four feet long.”

Zeus watched, bereft of speech, as they moved out of sight. Perhaps his ideas of education were antiquated and out of date, perhaps they really did have no place in the modern Mycenaean world. Considering that he had received instruction from nymphs and Cyclopes, alone on the island of Crete over a hundred thousand years ago, and a large proportion of said instruction had consisted of the best ways to topple Cronos and rule in his place, he suspected the opposition might have a point. In the golden half-forgotten days of the Heroic Age, his only commandments to mankind had been for them to honour the gods, their parents and their guests, that hubris would be punished and that no mortal should seek to overreach what the gods had ordained. And to the gods he had commanded little besides fulfilment of their charges, acceptance of sacrifice and honour for the

Olympians, himself above all as the instigator of order and peace from his seat on the awful lightnings of the Air Throne, cloaked in cloud and wreathed with storm, king of gods and men. He looked down at himself now, hidden in the green scented shade, at his torn and filthy tunic, and sun-blackened flesh scarred by thorn and grass, trees, arrow and spear. The thought that he had once sat on the Air Throne would be almost funny if it didn't make him feel so sad.

There was a group of children nearby kicking a bladder between two pairs of trees. The bladder, driven by an aimless foot, landed close beside his feet and on a sudden impulse he set off, running swiftly between small defenders, to lob it gently over the valiant head of the keeper. One set of small boys crowded round him, cheering, whilst the other group retreated, declaring it wasn't fair, he was too fast, they weren't going to play if he was playing. So he stood at the side, watching, beside a small girl who was solemnly engaged in sucking her finger. He gave her a genial smile, which she did not deign to return, but continued to gaze at him critically and unblinkingly till he became uncomfortable. At length she gave her attention back to the game. "Your clothes are dirty," she said.

"Yes, I suppose they are," said Zeus. For some indefinable reason he felt this lacked a certain something in order to qualify as a witty and elegant response, but he found he was unable to do better.

"You run fast," said the girl.

"Yes, but I'm a lot bigger than the boys."

"I bet I could beat you."

Zeus felt on firmer ground here. "I bet you couldn't," he hazarded.

"Could."

“Couldn’t”
“Could.”
“Let’s see then. Race you to that tree!”

He ran slowly, keeping level with the small child, whose pattering legs were barely visible with her efforts, and only reached out to touch the tree at the last possible moment. As he turned, opening his mouth to speak, he saw her some distance away, sprinting back towards their starting point. “And back!” she shouted over her shoulder. This time he ran as quickly as he could, but the girl was waiting for him when he arrived.
“Told you,” she said.
“I didn’t know it was back as well,” he protested.
“I still beat you.”

As the game progressed, he discovered to his discomfort that she was still subjecting him to close scrutiny and did not appear to be very pleased with what she saw. “I’ve got a cat at home,” she told him at length.
“It’s called Giles.”
“Really?” said Zeus. “That’s nice.”
There followed a brief silence, during which the girl sucked her finger reflectively, as though hoping to extract inspiration from its depths.
“I’ve got a birth mark too,” she remarked eventually.
“On my arm here, look.”

Zeus looked, attempting unsuccessfully to find some logical connection between her statements. Children, on the whole, scared him, particularly if they were his own. He found that a mere few minutes of her conversation had left him bewildered, disorientated and feeling as though his brain had been pulled out of his ears and knotted behind his neck. “That’s a very nice birthmark,” he said. The girl bounced up and down.

“I like you,” she said, whereupon she grabbed his wrist and gave him a lopsided smile. “You’re my daddy.”

“Am I?” asked Zeus anxiously, a hunted expression passing over his face. In his experience, such claims tended to be followed by requests for maintenance, and it was his policy never to believe them with out the relevant paperwork. Though as he admitted to himself, it was never safe to deny these things out of hand.

“Because I don’t have a daddy and all the others do.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” He wondered who her father was, and what had happened to him. Once he could have seen the man’s face in a moment and commanded his appearance, but now he only felt the impotent knot in his stomach and the crushing blindness behind his seeing eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He suddenly remembered he was supposed to be on his way to the Department of Religious Reflection and leapt to his feet. “I really must go now,” he said. “Nice to have met you – perhaps I’ll see you again some time? We could have another race.”

“’Bye,” said the child. “Bet I’d still beat you.”

“Goodbye.”

He glanced back as he hurried away through the trees, at a tableau unaltered by his passing presence. Eidon and Melitta he discovered quite close by, discoursing on the subject of a large boy, whom they had surprised in the act of causing grievous bodily harm to another, somewhat smaller, boy.

“How can you stand there and say he’s not badly behaved?” protested Melitta. Her eyes, very clear and unswerving, were fixed on Eidon, and spots of colour had risen in her cheeks, which, together with her ruffled hair, made her look even prettier than usual, though

Zeus was sorry there had been no opportunity to warn Eidon that seeing her in this state, while memorable, did come at a price. “If he was mine, I wouldn’t let him get away with it.”

“You haven’t quite grasped the enlightened way things work here,” Eidon assured her in placatory tones. “Telling a child he is naughty has deep, severe and unguessed effects upon the poor innocent’s psyche. How can we know its full damage? Such a practice is a burden to society, a cruel branding of a misunderstood minor by a harsh, exclusive group of elders. The intelligent way around the problem is quite obviously the invention of a number of maladies such as Excessive Aggression Disorder, or EAD, from which this poor child suffers. To control the illness, he takes pills.”

“Looks at though he forgot to pop them today, doesn’t it?”

Eidon soldiered on. “The apothecaries who make the pills are happy. The boy’s parents are happy, for they see him now not as an antisocial to be corrected but as an unfortunate sufferer to be cured, and hope they will be spared the effort of disciplining him. The boy himself is happy, for he is not disciplined in any way and is free to hide behind the screen of his illness.”

“What about the others that he beats up?”

Eidon waved a hand. “No solution is perfect,” he admitted. “No doubt in time we shall develop a pill for them that will disguise the untoward side effects. Now, we have almost reached the Department. You can see its members ahead.”

Scattered across the slopes, bristled with blistering grass, were a number of men and women, confined to small square areas indicated by ropes pegged into the soil. Each performed as though to an audience, despite

there being few others present beyond a group of youthful trainee philosophers, who moved from square to square making notes on wax tablets. Eidon did not pause for them to take in any more, but hustled Melitta and Zeus to the first exhibit, which consisted of two men. The first, and more energetic of the two, stood upon a pedestal, striking a series of fearsome postures, his features twisted into various expressions of protest, anger and discontent. “This,” said Eidon, “is exhibit A (i), and together with his fellow A (ii), is one of our proudest possessions. It is an example of a type so frequently found in modern life, the False Atheist. His is a deep cosmic dissatisfaction that the gods have not offered him good service. Being so actively concerned with his religion, he is more religious than most believers. For he believes so strongly in the gods he makes a special point of not praying to them.”

“You do move in some pretty peculiar circles,” commented Melitta.

“Unfortunately, his arguments are not very coherent,” admitted Eidon. “Besides which, he still believes in ghosts and sees them regularly. He keeps a rabbit’s foot for luck, avoids walking under ladders and throws salt over his shoulder if he spills it. When he sees a full moon, a shooting star, or a four-leaf clover, he makes a wish. He even dances naked on Black Sabbaths.”

“Does he?” asked Melitta, with what Zeus considered was a little too much eagerness.

“Though to be fair he was pissed out of his mind when we caught him at it,” confessed Eidon, “and I think the naked witches might have given him a little extra inducement.”

“Doesn’t their religion make these people happy?” asked Zeus, looking along the line of exhibits. “At one

time I might have had a controlling interest, for feedback purposes. Why do, or don't, they have any? Isn't it supposed to be a comfort and a solace?"
Eidon sighed. "Questions, more questions," he said. "They are two-edged swords; at once the proof that we are human and alive, being the gateway to truth and knowledge, yet also the way to the pain of that truth. Sometimes I reflect that people were happier before they started asking whether the gods exist or not."
"I'm sure the gods were too," said Zeus.

Eidon bustled them past the Aestheticism department. "Here are those," he said, "whose gifts and desires to indulge them are so great that they are willing to do so without the certainty of obtaining wealth thereby. Of course, in an economy such as ours, this is so ludicrous as to be laughable. Further up the hill we have a group of similar artists who have reached a higher state of enlightenment, and so adapted their art as to make it appealing both to themselves and to a vast audience. There, the laughers do so no longer, but part with their money to possess what these people produce. More people are happy under such a system."
"Are the artists?" asked Melitta.
"I cannot say," replied Eidon. The laughter followed them through the trees as they moved away.
"Is it demeaning to make beauty for the masses?" Eidon mused. "Or should beauty be the preserve of an elite? Is it not presumptuous to presume that another cannot comprehend one's creation? Let it be remembered that without the producers to support them, the creators must die and pass from the world; but let the producers remember those who give their lives sweetness at the same time. I should not wish to see the subjugation of the useless things."

“Such as?” asked Melitta.
“Poetry, for example. Something that has absolutely no practical use or function whatsoever in a modern society, unless, of course, it makes money. Even then its very existence rather interferes with the smooth running of the state, as it may encourage questions, which as we know are most unhealthy.”
“I always thought poetry was extremely important,” she began. Eidon interrupted her. “Oh, of course it is,” he said. “That is because it is completely unnecessary. ‘Necessary’ is not the same as ‘important’. Most necessary things are not important in the slightest – like money, businesses, stock markets and consultants. Our systems need them, but we do not. To be human is to know the importance of the useless things. And above all, never to be serious for longer than is absolutely necessary.”
Zeus pricked up his ears. “That sounds like an excellent policy,” he said.
“All evil is born of taking oneself seriously, as I am doing at the moment,” said Eidon sententiously, demonstrating an expression of enormous severity. “All evil, whether of the bully in the playground or the dictator on the throne, is incapable of laughing at itself. And in the end, laughter is all we have, the only quality, at root, which distinguishes us from our bestial ancestors, our only action not sprung from the cycle of reproduction and survival. It is laughter that makes us human, being blissfully and utterly useless, without price or quantification. It is born of the realisation that we cannot understand, that we are more foolish than we shall ever know, that we cannot win the great game of our existence. For this reason, I spend some time laughing at myself in the mirror each morning.”

“Where do you find the energy?” wondered Zeus. “I barely get round to brushing my teeth.”

Chapter Twenty

After Argurion had left them, strolling away into the West Side with the warning that he might be some time, the new Wardrobe sat in poised indecision as they awaited his return. When the poised indecision began to pall, someone suggested they mediate it with brief bouts of decision-making, which proposition was duly scrutinized, debated and discussed. Violent arguments raged for and against, and eloquent speeches were delivered on the folly of the Wardrobe being converted into a decision-making body. Eventually the motion was voted into operation. Beneath the motionless, statuesque shape of the silent Ares, still pathetically clutching a thunderbolt in wordless confusion, the proud democratic institution of the People's Wardrobe attempted to exercise the full force of its legislative power. But there did not really seem to be anything relevant for it to do, apart from searching for various topics of discussion and reform whereby it might justify its existence. Its members were conscious that under the rule of Argurion, nothing might come to pass without his blessing. Its much-vaunted newly democratic nature also resulted in a continual stream of gods who wandered up to the Olympic Courts. Their presence made debate somewhat challenging, and many Ministers gave up completely, listening instead to complaints, demands, speeches, and, in the case of Kithairon's wife, a lengthy argument about his washing.

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Argurion stood atop the highest swaying tower in the West Side. Below his feet, adoring him, worshipping him, toiled endless myriads of gods, worker ants slaving

for his queen. Arms uplifted, he loomed within a series of unholy sigils carved into the flat roof's smooth cement – around a vast digrammaton representing a gothic X and L. The ashes of budgets, progress reports and marketing strategies were ritually scattered thrice around the circle, and the CEO of a multinational company was set, lifeless, in a seven-armed candelabra before Argurion, burning fiercely, his fat fuelling his flames. Lowering from the darkness of the sky and the turbulent clouds sucking the tower like a loose tooth, a ghoulish light struck down towards the steadily-burning torch, as Ploutokratia spoke to her son.

"Highest and mightiest, Ploutokratia my mother, compeller of worlds and obliterator of minds, hear my voice. Zeus is no longer a threat to you. He is powerless beside me…every living thing in Olympus gives me life. From me now stems all pleasure, all relief from pain, beyond me lies no desire or fulfilment. There can be no other way of life – all now live beneath my dread eye. All efforts, all belief, all desire and love, is focused on me, and through me, to you."

Yet I still desire him. Even though powerless, naked and blind, he and his essence remain the final sparks, the last ripples in the stillness. He is the child of those ancient gods who overcame me long ago. Only when he is set with the other Olympians in bondage shall I rest content, for only then can Earth herself fall under our dominion.

"The people are now one in their slavery, and in their desire for you…but if it's happiness you're after, I've had a couple of ideas for the South Side Amusement Arcade. There's this ride, you see, the only one in the world with a vertical ascent, that shoots you twenty-five thousand feet straight up in the air…it's called

Cognisance…I had a go on it myself and it was pretty good….” His voice trailed into silence. He sensed that his mother was less than impressed.
Why?
“Um…not really sure…but I’ll think of something to say in the adverts. And there’s this new club, Es Paradiso, it’s got a happy hour and dancing girls…”
Will these make one happy?
“I think so. They’ll make people spend money to find out, at any rate.”
Happiness puzzles me. What is it that it may be found in so many places, yet continually eludes Me?
“So how about it? I’ll let you in half-price.”
You want me to attend these places?
“Well, you might be a bit of a draw. And you might have fun?” he hazarded.
I think I’ll pass this time.

*

Aphrodite pursed her lips in the cosy, breathing gloom, and applied a little more powder to her alabaster face. Even in the absence of a conventional body, there was no sense in letting her spiritual standards slip. Exhaling critically, she stretched her legs and rose to ease the cramp in her calves. Despite her prolonged solitude, her carefully wrought shell of frivolity had proven too ingrained for her to drop, so she had given up the struggle. She had little idea of what was going on Outside, but found she didn’t really care any more. As it was, all her abilities were devoted to the task in hand, even though she was not entirely sure what it was, despite making her place of retreat a more comfortable place, and hoping that her presence there remained welcome. Her first few days had been extremely cramped indeed – not that she minded being twisted into

unusual positions, but she had never yet had to hold the same one for so long.

As her spirit moved into him, she felt him shrink from her touch, like a virgin from an embrace laden with longing and repulsive fear. Entering Zeus, pushing though his encircling, protective mesh of confusion, recrimination and desire, she had wanted to take him on her lap and hold him, to reassure his twisted soul that there would be a happy ending, that in the morning his fears would no longer seem so real. But she knew also that in his imagination he already stood at the ending, stood in the morning's brightness, filled with a sickening, blind courage, facing the conclusion that should not have been, before a monster that fed on the light and faded no longer. With all her heart, if she could keep them from this end, she would; if he could resist the temptations of despair and not allow his love to waver, and to realise that however the story scarred the people and the world he loved, if his loving remained unaltered…then something should be saved. Much lost, much ruined and destroyed, but something should remain beyond the borders of perdition.

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A very short distance away, Eidon lowered himself into the shallows of the lake with a deep and contented sigh. Ripples bobbed beneath the lilies' waxen goblets, shifting them up and down like bone china cups at a tea party. The water coiled gently round his ample stomach, striving to compete with the glaring blue of the heavens, leaving his top half curiously disembodied between the colours of water and sky. "Here," he said, "is our final working model – the Good Government Game."

Children played happily on the sandy strip lapping the lake. One much larger than the rest appeared to be

their leader; the kind of child whom others instinctively follow, who pulls himself to the top by virtue of his longer arms. In his eyes, no doubt, the mound of dung and compost whereon he sat was a throne; the twist of ivy about his bows the badge of his kingship.

"Monarchy," commented Eidon laconically, chewing on a reed. "He may be the best person to hold power. May not be. But it's been an outstandingly popular form of government nevertheless."

"Especially with the kings, I'm sure," said Melitta.

"I wouldn't bank on it," said Zeus gloomily.

The child on the throne hung garlands of twisted ivy wreaths, dark and dry, about the necks of several of his companions, who joined him on the slopes of the throne – either because their efforts to please him demanded it, or because he would have ended up in the lake if he hadn't. Together, they compelled the other children to form a line before them. "Oligarchy or aristocracy, 'οι 'ολιγοι and all that," said Eidon. He spat out the reed stalk. "Power becomes connected with necessities such as money, for the potential of the ruler shifts from being connected solely to his or her own personal abilities, and becomes more dependent on the power of what they own. It opens the door to those who had less of it before."

As they watched, the children in the line, who had been whispering and jostling each other, suddenly ran up the slope of the mound. They pulled down the garlanded children, stamping their wreaths into the ground, seized the chapleted boy and threw him into the lake. After milling around uncertainly for a time, one of their number addressed them, with much vigorous arm waving, to be greeted by cheers and shouts. The others

pushed him to the top of the mound, where he blinked owlishly but with a certain satisfaction.

Several lily leaves held Eidon's attention. He plucked one, and took a judicious bite. "What they call democracy," he said indistinctly. "A system of many advantages. Its flaws, however, break my heart. For the demos seems to give little thought to what someone is really like if only he or she tells them they wish the people well. And once elected, by marketing themselves, by sweet-talking, lying, playing on their fears, desires and gullibility, they will strive by any means possible to fool the electorate at every turn. And they rarely have a hard job of it, either."

"Give it a chance," said Melitta. "It's only little."

They saw tears once more in Eidon's eyes. "I have worked so hard at the School to understand," he said. "I used to think the world was run by rational, responsible people, who cared for the lives and dreams of those beneath them, that while adults seemed incomprehensible they must have wise and admirable reasons for their actions. But I see now that this is not so." He took another melancholy bite from his deep emerald lily leaf. "It fills me with a democratic despair – do we trust the wishes of the majority or of the few, the informed or uninformed? What if the majority is wrong? How are they to make an informed decision when their only sources of information are themselves controlled by big business and the government, their content dictated by what will sell?"

Neither Zeus nor Melitta could find any words of comfort for the sobbing man.

"What can we do," he appealed to them, "with an electorate that is bullied, deceived and exploited?"

"This is the fate of all electorates," said Zeus at length.

“Well, it should not be,” replied Eidon stubbornly. Dashing away his tears, he said, “Otherwise the next stage of the model gains in strength.”

The children swarmed aimlessly about the mound. Some swam, some fought, some slept, some ate.

“A model of a society whose citizens have the freedom to be anything but free. They are enslaved to this ideal. How can one be free in a society that demands collectivism?”

Eidon rose from the water like a surfacing whale and strolled up the bank. He smacked the two boys who were fighting, awoke the sleepers, disturbed the swimmers, and after a brisk scolding sent all the children running back towards the village through the tangle of trees. “And there you see what the society must inevitably become – the child of licentious and diseased democracy,” he said, now beaming. “Whose only remedy is a quick dose of Tyranny.”

“It’s all very interesting,” said Melitta cautiously, “but I’m still not quite sure what you’re trying to teach your students.”

“Nothing,” said Eidon brightly. “The last thing you want to do to a student is teach them anything. You’ll restrict their learning potential if you teach them things.”

He settled down beside them again, dabbling his feet in into the slumbering water. “Did you meet the Master in the woods when you first arrived? He’s keen on trees and knowledge and things like that.”

“But what is the point of it all?”

“Socrates maintained…or will maintain, if he hasn’t already done so…that what is important is to ask the question, not necessarily to obtain an answer. Which is just the sort of helpful advice you’d expect from

someone who made the acquisition of ignorance the prime goal of his life. According to him, the less we know the better, for the more ignorant we are, the more fulfilling our lives will be. In his selfless, dedicated pursuit of his goal he enjoyed unparalleled success, not only confusing poor academics like Gorgias and Protagoras – who are now living in the village, by the way – but setting out to teach his abject ignorance to the youth of Athens as well, doing much the same thing, in fact as modern schools. Unfortunately for him, the Athenians were still rather backward at the time, and still clung petulantly to the entirely erroneous notion that education should teach some kind of knowledge. At this point in his inevitable trial, Socrates interrupted and launched into a lengthy monologue about the nature of knowledge, whether it was teachable or not, and, if so, whether anyone would recognise it if they did not possess it already? It is recorded that the great man ended his life talking avidly to a group of confused students, inadvertently drinking copious quantities of poison. As he might have put it, you can never obtain true knowledge about what hemlock does to you until you have drunk it."

There was a brief silence.

"Your point being?" asked Zeus politely.

"That it doesn't matter if they don't learn anything so long as they know how to think."

"Why did you use the past tense?" asked Melitta accusingly. "I thought you said that was all prophecy."

Eidon smiled gently. "I was never properly educated," he said. "Well, you have seen the school now, and I believe you are now as safe from pursuit as you are likely to be, for a time. I suppose you'll be wanting to

go soon. We'll give you whatever you need to help you on your way."
"Thank you for your kindness," said Zeus. Eidon whistled nonchalantly. Over the cool dewy face of the lake the sweet, heavy scent of the lilies passed like a mist of filmy nectar, wrapping them in its silence. The sun's heat shimmered above them, the sultry bronze of skin mingling with the flowers. "Um… before you go, you wouldn't mind if I practiced a little therapy on you?" asked Eidon suddenly. "We're planning to set up a small therapy department, you see…"
"Does it hurt?" asked Zeus suspiciously. "Or will I need an open mind for it to work?"
"No," relied Eidon. "Not unless the truth does."

Zeus reflected on what he knew of the truth, and came to the conclusion that it had already done him as much damage as it was decently able. So, despite his doubts as it its decency and clemency, half expecting it to launch a pre-emptive strike, he allowed Eidon to question him.
"What I think one does," said the man, "is lie on a couch and talk about sex."
"Only talk?" sniffed Melitta. "Is that supposed to make him feel better? It's talking afterwards he has problems with."
"Oi!" said Zeus. "That's private."
Eidon shrugged. Turning to Zeus, he asked abruptly, "Have you ever had sex with your mother's cousin's wife's sister?"
Zeus considered. His was a convoluted family, requiring not so much a tree as a four-dimensional quantum crystal lattice in order to map it. He couldn't quite remember who his mother's cousin's wife's sister was, or even if he had one, but he had had sex with so many

women it probably wasn't safe to say no, though in front of Melitta it seemed doubtful whether assent was a safer option. Besides, he had no wish to hurt by reminding her she was not his first. "I'm not sure…I may have done when I was drunk," he confessed shamefacedly. "What about it?"

He was aware of Melitta's tight inhalation of breath and studiously aimless foot tapping, so he carefully avoided her face, being quite able to visualise the precise purse of her lips. "Don't know," said Eidon dismissively. "I think it's supposed to have some significance of you have."

"Oh, thank you very much," began Zeus, but Eidon interrupted again.

"In your private life, are you obsessed by the need for order? A desire to control others? To determine their behaviour? In other words, a desire to order the world and its inhabitants as you see fit?"

"I suppose so, yes," agreed Zeus. Eidon leapt to his feet.

"You do know, I presume, that you are exhibiting all the characteristics of a politician?" he demanded. "In other words, you want to be a god."

"Yes, I do rather," said Zeus. "It's what I do best, you see."

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Beneath Heracles' window, the plants shuddered, rustling. Looming over the garden wall crouched a furtive mountain range where there had been none before, contriving to look as though it had been part of the horizon for some time and achieving a modicum of success. The tiny ripples of the stream running stealthily through the flowerbeds shivered into smoothness as the river sensed divine eyes upon it, then it resumed its furtive passage to encircle the house.

They were coming for him, Heracles knew, and he was not sure why – what remark or unguarded thought he had let slip in meeting or conversation. But he knew also that in Argurion's Olympus there did not need to be a reason. In the darkness, he sat beside his window, waiting for them, the shutters rattling in the night breeze. His fingers flexed on the haft of his club, and he drew the lion's head down over his own.

A deep, puzzling melancholy struck him, weighing him down with his inability to comprehend the minds of his enemies or what they hoped to win through his downfall. He had sent Hebe to safety in the Gardens of the Hesperides, but despite her warnings he had felt he must meet them here, to make a last stand in the Olympus he had learned to call home. He liked the sound of a last stand. On Earth, the opportunity to make one had never been kind enough to come his way. Every time a last stand appeared to present itself, it emerged that the opposition's calculation of Heracles' prowess had been lamentably inadequate. But with a certain grim horror, he realised that no such error would have been made this time. Outside the window, the river grew a little wider in the night.

Beneath his calm seethed the elemental wrath of the conscientiously good-tempered. The old ache came upon him again; the deadened throb of ancient grief, for his mortal family and his lifetime of unwilling toil, for the days and months spent in labours he detested for monarchs he despised. The magnitude of its injustice left him wordless, mourning, and perplexed. Now he had lost Prometheus, and Athene had not returned to Olympus. As ever, Heracles remained alone, alone with his Labours, alone before the wrath of the gods even though he had joined their number.

The mountain god Enforcers, peering over the wall, scuttled closer before attempting to disguise themselves as a view.

Well, he would not go without a fight. If they had seen fit to send a range of mountains for his arrest, he had no intention of disappointing his audience. Within him, a quiet pride bloomed, which suddenly hung its head shamefaced, as he turned his mental gaze sharply upon it, burying his face in his hands.

That was what this was about, wasn't it? Poor, dumb Heracles, the mightiest man ever to walk the Earth, the greatest of the heroes and the unconquered warrior. This lonely pride buoyed his soul, unnoticed and unconscious. But now in the darkness of his folded hands, he saw it for what it was.

As a humble shepherd long ago, before he had even known Zeus was his father, he had chosen between the Goddesses of Virtue and Vice. And he had tasted, throughout his life and even in the moments of his death, the bitterness of the virtuous path followed with no hope of reward, the grim struggle between loser and vanquished where both must perish, but one at least may pass more peacefully from strife. He wanted to fight and die gloriously, did he? Heracles uncovered his face, and smiled into the blackness of the unlighted room. The dying was out of the question. And the glory could wait. But with any luck, the forces waiting for him would not deny him what he most wanted.

He saw now that if he fell as he secretly desired, if only out of his longing for peace and an end to his struggles, then the last link of the resistance in Heaven was severed. He could not abdicate from his duty, even though there might be relief in an honourable fall. That honour was worth little in comparison to what he might

do if he stayed on his feet. He thought of Aphrodite, of the fugitive Hermes, and his father in hiding on Earth, and knew that he had been offered a chance to draw them back. It would have been easier, he reflected, if there was not always a gulf between what he wanted and what he had to do.

Heracles stood, uncoiling his massive frame foot by foot. His mind was decided, and it was with a certain pleasure that he realised there could be a last stand after all. Only it would not be his. He hoped the rivers and the mountains were ready. Striding to the hallway, he flung open the door. Its hinges gave way, and it tore loose in his hand.

Lapping at the threshold of his doorway flowed a broad river. He noted to his annoyance that it had completely swamped his new rose beds. Skulking on the surface was the river's god, who had been given the unenviable task of reading Heracles his rights and had been screwing up the courage to knock on the door before it had been ripped away. All knocking, the river god surmised, must now be firmly out of the question, though what was approaching him from the doorway did not really class as an improvement.

"Did you want something?" Heracles asked sweetly. The river god backed away over the water, stirring its surface with his toes. "Only to read you your rights," he murmured.

"Are you suggesting I couldn't read them myself?" Heracles rammed his club into his belt and cracked his knuckles. His expression was that of a man savouring an appetizer before a long-awaited lunch.

The river god kicked the waters of the stream. At once, its surface boiled and twisted into vast anthropoid shapes, gaping mouths drooling scum and water weed,

dendritic arms whirling as the river phantoms hurled themselves at Heracles. With a bellow of rage, he leapt into the parting waters.

Blinded, battered by the thunderous blows of the waves, strangled and suffocated by the choking arms of the phantoms, he charged sightless across the riverbed. The stream strove to hold him, but could not; its hands slipped useless from his legs. Boulders struck his arms and back, cast by the current, tree trunks bore down upon him only to be swept away lies flies. Unstoppable, flaming with fury, he bore down upon the hapless river god, bursting from the nether bank like Poseidon exploding from the sea. The river god clung to him, wrapping him in weedy arms, squeezing his barrel chest in desperation, but was torn free and slammed into the soil, where he lay senseless, as the feet of Heracles ground him into the dirt, inadvertently raising the water table in his garden by several inches.

But the mountains awaiting Heracles at the gate were not to be overcome so easily. They were ranges he had known and loved on Earth, hills that had been his friends and companions. But he could not let his wrath cool in the wash of regret, for his fury alone would drive him to freedom.

Pelion lumbered towards the hero, a billion tons of forested flanks and stony-sided slopes. Even Heracles could not stand before his might, or before the silent ranges who clustered in police uniform, blocking his escape.

At the last moment, Heracles cast himself backward before the mountain's advance. He would have prayed to his father, but there were no words that could help him now. Rolling till his feet pointed skyward, directly beneath the mountain, Heracles thrust upwards, and the

sinews of the back that had upheld the sky knotted, strained and cracked with his effort. Olympus shook, and its cloud plateau heaved.

His feet caught Pelion under his foothills. Stumbling over the fallen god, the mountain trembled, and with a scream of terror was hurled into the air. To be out of contact with the ground is anathema for a mountain, and his brothers started back in fear.

In the shadow of the flying colossus, Heracles whipped upright, crouching low beneath him, bracing arms and head and back…and his universe vanished, engulfed in the darkness and thunder as the mountain landed on top of him. Pelion screamed again, flailing his limbs in his efforts to touch the ground. Frozen, the other mountains heard the scraping of teeth on teeth, the grinding of bone on immortal bone, and the hissing of muscle and sinew drawing themselves together.

Heracles, veins pulsing like throbbing serpents on his face, his legs and arms and back trembling with his efforts, stood with the mountain on his shoulders.

The ranges before him were not given grace to appreciate the magnitude of his feat. Reeling towards them, with the last vestige of his strength Heracles cast the mountain at them. They scattered as Pelion crashed into the flagstones of the street, driving through the road into the foundations of the city. Before the mountains could move, Heracles lunged forward, sprinting up Pelion's slopes, and threw himself far into the air.

Spinning over the edge of the heavenly city, he thought he had escaped till he felt the shiver of the wind about him. Wrapping the immortal in blue-white cloud, Boreas the North wind materialised before him, his face etched into the wall of cumulus.

“Sorry, Heracles,” said the wind. “They thought you might try something like this.”
“They were right, weren’t they?” said Heracles, panting. “What are you going to do about it?”
Boreas lowered his voice. “I don’t know about that lot down there,” he sniffed, and swirling streams of cloud spurted from his wavering nostrils, “but the Winds aren’t in the mood to be pushed and pulled where another pleases, if the hand of Zeus is not on our reins. I don’t hold with Ploutokratia’s pollutants. The longer I can keep them out of the air the better. So I’m afraid you’re going to have to beat me as well, Heracles, and I’ll gallantly fail to stop you escaping.”

His face melted into the cloud’s surface as Heracles scythed through the wind, driven on its wings to freedom.

*

A cavalcade of amicably wrangling philosophers came down to the river to wave them goodbye. Various fragments of animated conversations drifted through Eidon’s speech of farewell, arguments as to the composition of matter, the immortality of the soul, or the cyclicality of the dynamic conflict between Love and Strife. Eidon embraced them both warmly. “I am very sorry to see you go,” he said. “But I don’t think it is fated for you to remain here, not yet, at any rate, while Elysium is still unmade on Earth. If you are determined to go, then here we shall say goodbye.”

Melitta and Zeus paused on the brink of the stream, and looked back. The brimming tide of confusion and incredulity they had been holding in check since their arrival now broke over them in a torrent. What, who and why the men were, they could not guess, and found they did not mind. Ignorance was the only necessity for a

good education. For a moment, Zeus thought of staying. Then again, he doubted whether Eidon's particular branch of insanity was tolerable, after more than a few days, for those who did not share it. Listening to the other philosophers, it was absolutely clear that the reason they seemed so happy was because they did.

"Goodbye, and thank you," he said.

"Goodbye," said Eidon. "If the gods are kind, we may meet again some day. If not here, then perhaps somewhere else."

If their meeting depended on the kindness of gods, thought Zeus sourly, then they probably wouldn't be seeing each other for a considerable length of time. Melitta's tactful splash in the stream reminded him to keep this reflection to himself.

"That was a little superfluous, Eidon," remonstrated Anaxagoras gently as they moved away through the river. "If we don't meet again here, then it's logically bound to be somewhere else, isn't it?"

"Well," said Empedocles ponderously, "that is if you subscribe to your view of the Universe. Personally, I prefer to believe that Everywhere is one place…"

"Distance itself does not exist," maintained a voice that, above the tearing wash of the river about their waists, they recognised as Zeno's.

"How are they crossing the river then?"

Zeus and Melitta turned and waved for the last time.

"You can't cross the same river twice."

"Strictly speaking, you can't cross the 'same' river once. Because that would be implying that it had some measure of identicality with something gone before, whereas its form remains the same, its essence being manifestly different…." Then silence.

The two waded through the waters. On the bed, the smooth brown stones shivered, coiled and writhed with the rippling of the passing current. For ten or more paces they seemed to draw no closer to the mud-smoothed, root-chocked bank, where the stream plated the drooping reed and grass with iridescent silver, then it was upon them suddenly, like a deer breaking from cover underfoot.

And they looked back. Behind them, on the other side, lay a pine-bristled, needle-dusted slope, hillocking up into the rising folds and curves of the darkly green mountain arcing into the piercing sky. The bank was skidded and grooved, as though many hastening feet had thundered down the slope and into the stream, and of philosophers and school there was no sign.

They said nothing for a long while. Then Melitta said, "Doesn't it exist after all?"

Through the whisper of the trees and the incessant, drawn out, sibilant breath of the stream came an echo, a reflection, a murmur that might have been words…confuse being with existence…or only the imagination weaving images with the music of the wind. Zeus shivered. "Let us go while we may," he said. "The way is easy from here."

*

In the cool mountains the spring lingers long, clinging with verdant fingers to the soil, slipping late from its caress into the grip of the summer sun. Behind them lay the river and the woods, but they had passed from the Vale of Tempe to a land blasted by gold. It was late afternoon when they struck the Royal Road. Almost directly at their backs, the liquid brazen shield of the sun wheeled in the open sky. On the land ahead he cast his riches, burnishing the warmth of the reddish, sandy

earth, hot and vivid, staining the soil with shadows of clustered brush and grass and thorn. The lowlands near the distant river were a hazy, dusted saffron, fallow with the shards of fallen cornfields crouched in sleep till Demeter should recall them to life, through the touch of winter rains and the toils of human hands. Scattered over the knees and skirts of the slopes huddled a hundred thousand houses, mud-red and glowing in the early evening light. Even from where they stood, they could hear the voice of Greece's richest child – the blended breathing of a myriad voices, the deeper tones of wheels in their thunder sparked and lightened by wailing brays or bursts of shrill admonition.

But against the darkness of the mountain behind, brighter than a jewel in a setting of night-velvet, prouder yet more futile than the mightiest of human kings, crouched upon its crag with all the golden coiled power and splendour of a lion more titanic in its majesty than the shouldered clouds that spiral before a storm, the rock of Mycenae rose. Its towers tall enough to peer loftily over the bastions of lesser citadels, its walls so immense in their grandeur as to seem fused to the very stone from which they sprang; at its crest the palace, faced with gold and crowned at its summit by the entangled pinnacle of lion and eagle, striving in flaming bronze, where had dwelt Agamemnon, highest of the high kings of Greece. They saw the strength and glory of Mycenae in the hour of her prime; for now her temples are uprooted, her theatres, agoras and towers are dust, her palace now unroofed beneath the unaltered sky.

"Wow," said Melitta. "What happened to the idea of nothing to excess?"

“Pretty nice, isn’t it?” said Zeus, with a faint air of proprietorship.
“Yes, mister landlord.”
“I used to own a hell of a lot more than that,” protested Zeus hotly. “You should have seen Olympus. And the rest of the Universe as well, for that matter.”
“Don’t keep reminding me!” she teased. “How do you think I feel, going around with a penniless has-been?”

Zeus assumed an expression of mortification. He did not, he felt, deserve such a brutal broadside into that part of his psyche, which, in anatomical terms, would correspond to the gonads. His psyche duly reeled, wounded. Melitta observed his expression, and patted him on the hand. She was, at heart, a kind girl. “Only joking,” she soothed. “You’re very clever to have brought us all this way.”
“I don’t really have much of an idea where to go from here,” he confessed miserably. “I don’t suppose you’d care to come with me to the Blessed Isles after we hide out here for a while?”
“Don’t be like that,” she said. “Not after what Demeter told you. You can’t just give up and walk out on your responsibilities like that.”
“What responsibilities do I have?” he burst out. “None. I’m utterly useless. I can’t even pull a rabbit out of a hat any more.”
“I do wish you’d shut up with your moaning about how pathetic you are,” she said angrily. “Do you think I’d be with you if I thought that? Though you’re doing a pretty good job of convincing me, I must say.”

Zeus did not reply. He felt an irrepressible urge to slump down on a convenient rock, which was sure to be found somewhere close at hand. After some careful searching, he located such a rock, and duly slumped.

Melitta remained standing before him, her head cocked at a determined angle, hair hanging glossily on her bronzed shoulders. “Zeus,” she said more gently, “This is where you must pull yourself together. You may not be able to conjure up thunderbolts and shape change, but the rest of the world hasn’t changed. Those things are gone – nothing else has.”
“What do you mean, Melitta?”
“That you are just as able as you ever were,” she challenged. “You can’t give up, not here, not anywhere. I don’t know how I can help you, but I will do anything I can, even though I don’t really understand what’s going on or what you must do.”
“You’re not the only one,” said Zeus. “But I am tired, Melitta, and broken. There seems nothing left but you. Everyone else has left me. If I go back to Olympus, I shall be utterly defeated.”
“You won’t be fighting Ares,” she shot back. “A child of Chaos instead.”
“Oh, that makes things so much better! It was hard enough when I was young and incomparably powerful, and now they expect me to stand up in front of a daemon, make faces at it and bowl it over? Why me? Why not Athene or Poseidon, someone with a bit of grit? I didn’t ask for this, and there’s no way I’m up to it.”
“I thought Demeter said that normal forces were powerless against this thing, but that you could face it because of who you were, not how strong you felt,” said Melitta quietly. She turned away. “I didn’t ask to be here, Zeus, or even to be alive. But I am. Try to feel like a mortal, Zeus, and you may understand that whatever lies in store for you must be done, whether you like it or not. I don’t know what it is, nor do you. I’ll do what I

can for you, but if she was telling the truth, then sooner or later you must go back to Olympus. I'd come with you if I could."

Zeus rose, approached her, and tried to take her arm, but she pulled away from him, anger in her untamed eyes. "We mortals have to carry on," she said. "We don't have the leisure to give up if we feel like it. Every hour saved is another victory, every day you go on living's another challenge won. Giving up isn't an option for us – and it shouldn't be for you. If you give up, you've lost. And you don't get another chance, not if you're mortal."

She turned and began to make her way towards the city. Thoughtful and sad, Zeus followed her example. Now they had reached Mycenae, and driven by her words, Zeus felt once more a sense of loss rising in his throat, as he had experienced when realising he had counted every hair on the donkey's neck in Thessaly, or when he had finally reached Melitta in Dekalia.

"Melitta, it's true, I don't really know what we're going to do next," he said, "But thank you." He felt tired, indescribably so, and old beyond belief. Her put his arms around her, and she resisted no longer, feeling their proximity and the distance their dual natures could never close. "I don't want to think about it quite yet," he said. "Not more than a few minutes into the future. It's too soon. I still can't believe what is happening. But you're all I have now."

"I could say the same to you," said Melitta dryly. Zeus pushed her to arm's length and held her there, gazing at her. Through the sun-blaze, the dust, and his tangle of drooping locks over heavy brows, she stared into something that had seen what she never could, into a power that had held her destiny, and those of thrones

and palaces, cities and empires, in its hollowed hand. And within it, she saw a vision of nothing.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The girl shrugged. "I'm not complaining," she said. "We're helpless in the eyes of the Fates. I just hope the gods are having lots of jolly fun in the games they play with the lives of men. Or with you, for that matter. You have to accept that, like I've got to accept I won't always be here. Do Cronos and the Titans accept what happened to them, I wonder?"

"But they were monsters," said Zeus miserably. "I had to overcome them. You know I made this place? I remember when that rock over there was a knot of bushes, when the first tribes cut them down and built a palisade where the walls now stand. I made Mycenae. Hera and the others never understood. Of course I was cruel in the beginning. I was hotheaded and excitable, and I did many stupid things. But I hope I learnt as well. I tried to be a good king – clearly not as good as I thought. All that's left is an immortality I don't want." He gestured violently at the spectacle of golden magnificence before them. "Look at it. Wonderful, isn't it? It's a kind of hopeless, glorious pride; in the face of everything that works to undo anything mortals create. Stubborn, mortal pride, all the greater because it is all for nothing. If it weren't so great, so high and so noble, it wouldn't be so sad. But tragically, human blindness to their own futility and insignificance leads to all their achievements, and despite itself, to their own destruction. When I was in Olympus, at least I could do something to help. I could make new cities rise from the cinders of the old, immortalise some of the good in your human spirit even through the horror of your wars, in song and myth and legend. But now I am here, among

the dying generations, as if I had died and gone to Hades. Those I love are going to fade and die, and I cannot. I will watch you fall into autumn, and still be trapped here, enduring forever, unable to escape. I may live through the lives and deaths of a thousand civilisations and be able to do nothing."

Melitta, after careful consideration, opted for the soothing approach as being the most efficacious in comforting a distressed god suffering from Universal Ruler withdrawal symptoms. She commenced the soothing process with a delicate shrug. "I shouldn't worry about cities and empires," she said. "Cities seem to happen by accident…it's part of the application procedure. Individual people really matter, and they don't change very much. And you're in just as good a position to help one or two individuals now as you were then, in some ways. If, of course, you actually want to. I imagine you get more kudos for saving a city," she added, despite her better nature.

A kind of animation brightened the face of Zeus, an almost human emotion. "D'you really think so?"

"I'm positive."

"I've never heard a mortal say that before. Usually you're too out of breath with running to kill someone. You really think people matter?"

"I suppose my opinion is ever so slightly biased," she considered, "but I would risk a definite yes on that one."

"Good," said Zeus. "I once bet Ares half a million tripods two to one on…though I suppose I won't be able to claim them now."

"Not unless you went to a temple of his and advertised. He might not realise it was you."

Zeus pondered. His opinion of the intellectual prowess of Ares was not high, being on the best of days

at the same kind of level as a Pacific Deep Sea vent, but he remained convinced that such an enterprise held its hazards. “He’d probably recognise me,” he said doubtfully. “I mean, he’s not very bright, and all that, but I’m pretty sure he knows what I look like now. Being his father and so on.”

“But he wouldn’t be able to see you properly,” she pointed out. “Because of your blocking programme.”

“Ah, yes, the Office.”

“Why ‘s it still working?” she asked. “Won’t it run out of juice at any point?”

“It hasn’t yet,” he said defensively. “It’s worked very well since before the creation of humanity, and it has some wonderful little games to help you pass the time when you’re supposed to be working. I suppose I run it…I set it all up, an injected a lot of the old divine spark into it. The Office is like a surrogate god, taking care of all the routine …and it left me with a lot of spare time to…”

His voice trailed off as he realised the emotional minefield into which he would drop himself were he to give any details of the activities with which he had occupied the free time thus obtained.

“Ah,” said Melitta, tight-lipped. Zeus hastened on. “And it must still be working, because otherwise they’d have caught us. Which is why they seem to be looking for you.”

“I see.”

“So presumably it wasn’t affected when I lost my divinity…and unlike Ouranos and Cronos, something remained after I was gone.”

“Quite.”

Amicable as the girl’s reply had been, there is something about the word “quite” which makes it

difficult to cap. Even a bucolic shepherd, trained in the singing of amoebic verses in reply to bardic challenges, would have found it hard to compose a reply sufficiently eloquent to match it. This perplexity, however, did not entirely account for Zeus' abrupt halt, nor the glassy stare filling his eyes, nor yet the incredulous expression of disbelief that came upon his features. It was an expression such as would grace the countenance of an unsuspecting holidaymaker who, after enjoying a substantial and nourishing meal of Kalbsbrann, is told exactly how they make it.

"Melitta!" he said in a peremptory tone. "My Office!"

"I'm sorry, I don't have it on me."

"If the Office is still functioning…" he gave Melitta the benefit of his glassy state, which she seemed cruelly indifferent to receive. "I poured gallons of divinity into it, absolute oodles. The whole system is awash with it, and it's plainly still working."

"What," she enquired, "is this stuff?"

Zeus waved an inexpressive hand. "My divine wotsit," he explained cryptically. "Divinity. Δυναμις. Power, if you like. What seems to have been blotted out. But it used to be like a cornucopia – no matter how much you took out, the horn was always full. If I could get beck to Olympus, perhaps I could inject it, or something…."

"Yes, perhaps," said Melitta. "I'm glad to see it's given you a little incentive, but the chances of you getting up there with a defeatist attitude like yours are about as high as the Minotaur becoming vegetarian, so we might as well carry on and find somewhere to sleep."

"Pragmatism," cried Zeus, waving a theatrical arm. He felt slightly unbalanced, possibly as a result of the wave,

and fell over. “All this interminable pragmatism. Can’t a fallen god dream?”
“Idealism’s all very well,” said Melitta, “but it won’t cook your lunch or wash your underwear.”
“Who said anything about washing underwear?” asked Zeus darkly.
“I did,” replied Melitta, with a certain pointed tone in her voice.

*

Orestes, son and avenger of the mighty Agamemnon, and murderer of his mother Clytaemnestra, carefully placed the small wooden boat with which he had been amusing himself on the side of the bath before settling down in to the water with a bubbling, contented sigh. There was a pause, during which Orestes drew a deep breath, one that he intended to emit soon in another bubbling, contented sigh. For some time he had suffered from an inexplicable desire to avoid baths, or only to approach one wearing heavy armour, habits that gave the servants much cause for thoughtful reflection and even more cause to find duties that took them to the other end of the house, but to the delight of all concerned he had at last overcome his phobia and retreated to the comfort of his bathroom whenever the urge came upon him to blow bubbling, contented sighs and to meditate on Life. Baths allowed him to escape from the tiresome business of being Mycenae’s king. Life had grown unaccountably difficult recently; for crops were failing, trade plummeting, and demands from progressively irrational gods increasing, leaving the people restless and uneasy, thus the bath in question was one of particular magnificence. Foam swirled about the royal knees and tickled the royal chin. Pink bubbles floated gently across the surface of the water. Nothing,

Orestes reflected, could ever seem really dreadful when viewed from the perspective of eight inches of warm water. Unless, of course, one happened to be lying face down; and even then, Orestes saw, there is the consolation that nothing will seem really dreadful for very long.

The king was taking his bath in the courtyard, his limbs soothed by the warm, soporific sun. Two maids stood helpfully at hand, should he desire a towel, more hot water, or find that his toy boat had drifted out of reach. Previously, on occasions when the desire to bathe had moved Orestes, he had asked for the other government officials to join him. As they sat together in the morning sunshine, he had particularly noticed the uncomfortable silence and their disinclination to enjoy their baths as fully as did he. The Lawagetas[1] had mentioned the weather to some of the Telestai[1], and one Hequeta[1] had attempted to drown himself, but to a man they had remained unresponsive when he had attempted to engage them with the spectrum of colour in a bubble floating away into the afternoon sun, and had appeared positively unwilling to join him in looking for the soap beneath the foaming surface. On the whole, he thought, the palace hierarchy had demonstrated a most deplorable attitude towards personal cleanliness. Had they found their duties as taxing as Orestes found his, they should have been delighted at any opportunity to wash away their care to the Blessed Isles. But

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[1] Names of positions in the Mycenaean bureaucracy - civil and military - taken from Linear B tablets

apparently their sorrows were either light as a bubble or ingrained as dirt between the toes.

Very frequently since his accession, Orestes had longed for the simple life he had lived during the twilight of the Heroic Age. His murdered father was, despite all obstacles, moral and otherwise, duly avenged, after Orestes had reluctantly obeyed Apollo in exacting the appropriate penalty from his mother. As a result, the Furies pursued him; being a perceptive and compliant young man he had realised where his duty lay and ran away. Purified and acquitted at Athens, he returned to Mycenae as king, since when his life had become complex and troublesome, filled with a seemingly endless procession of Telestai who wanted him to sign tablets, of Hequetai to inform him he had signed the wrong ones and to complain they were not Telestai, and one or two Lawagetai sometimes popping in to complain about lassitude in the army, and to make pointed comments about all these able-bodied Hequetai and Telestai who ought to find more useful employment. Orestes found himself plunged into the quagmire prepared for noble, kingly men when they actually become kings, only to find that there remains nothing noble or kingly for them to do apart from opening the council of the Kerousia with a noble speech or signing his name with a kingly flourish.

As he lay back in the water and thought, sometimes on the subject of Life but more frequently on a topic even dearer to his troubled heart, which was Nothing, two strangers approached the citadel, passing between the tholos tombs up to the megalithic portal of the Lion Gate itself. Both were ragged and extremely dirty. The guards at the gate looked upon them with suspicion, but

old habits die hard, and the laws of Zeus towards beggars, at least, were still obeyed in Mycenae.

The lions over the gateway were glossed with the finest sheet of hammered gold, their diamantine eyes glaring sightlessly into each other as they strove to overmount the pillar raked by their ebony claws. Slowly, the doors of smooth bronze, solid and without a visible seam or bolt, swung outwards at the guard's command, causing the beggars to gasp with well-rehearsed wonder, till the magic of the moment was somewhat sullied by the language employed by the slaves pushing the doors. The captain of the guard did not like beggars, but he was keen on observing ancient traditions when beggars visited the king, and conscientiously waited for them to leave the palace before he assaulted them.

Mycenae's citadel was best seen in the sunshine. Making their way up the gentle ramp leading to the palace, bearing slightly towards the northern wall, they noticed a substantial quantity of gold – facing buildings like plaster and roofs like tiles and beams. Ornate red pillars thrust forest-like from flanks and corners of the palace, upholding high airy balconies and lofty galleries. A wild-flower field of colour poured over even the outside walls, a glazed fresco of tall armour-clad warriors who were beset by a quite disproportionate number of gorgons, harpies, Minotaurs, centaurs, sea-serpents three-headed dogs and an assortment of wild animals. None of the parties concerned seemed particularly eager to talk about their differences. A number of people were about, looking distressfully affluent in comparison to the beggars, wrapped in a wardrobe of tunics, chitons and cloaks in the brighter primary colours, principally yellow. But

they all seemed exceptionally busy and troubled, and so paid the vagrants little attention. At the gateway to the palace stood a guard. Upon his head, set with a nodding horse hair plume he bore a high bronze helm, which was sensible, as it would have looked a little odd anywhere else. A spear tall as a tree and a shield like a tower were in his hands. But he let them pass.

"I hope this is a good idea of yours," said Melitta. "It's all a little formal here."

"I don't have ideas," said Zeus. "Don't trust them. Impulses are far healthier. You always know where you are with an impulse, even if you're in the wrong. Besides, I know Orestes. He's a nice kind of chap. Had a bit of a shitty start, some of which was my fault, but Aeschylus will get to write the Orestia about him, which is a pretty nifty little work, and I did have a point to make when I was screwing up his life."

Melitta was able to judge Orestes' quality for herself at that precise moment, for they had entered the exceptionally beautiful courtyard where he took his ablutions. Pretty flower beds and herbaceous borders twined around the walls, shooting out little spurs to form interesting little nooks and bowers, in which nestled marble statues. In the centre of the courtyard was a colossal statue of Zeus, forged of dark bronze with eyes of eggshell ivory, crowned with lightning and holding a thunderbolt in a raised hand, next to which monument was a bathtub where Orestes was lying. He sat up and smiled as they approached, followed dutifully by the guard.

"Good evening, your majesty," said Zeus. "Please excuse me if I do not go through the ritual of clasping your knees and praising your ancestors – "

“That’s quite all right,” interposed Orestes. “It might look a little inappropriate at the moment.”
Zeus nodded heartily. “Too true, too true. Well, the thing is,” he went on, “I was a friend of your father’s and gave you yourself aid in the distant past when you were a child – and, may I say, followed your early career with great fascination – but I have now been most tragically ejected from my kingdom by my crazed people. With my wife I have escaped and come to you, the greatest of the Argive kings, to seek asylum”
“Seeking asylum are you?” Orestes exhaled with relief. “For a moment I thought you were native beggars, in which case I could only have given you limited help. But if you’re seeking asylum, that changes things. I’ll commandeer a section of the citadel for you right away, and sack a few people for you to take their jobs, if you wish. Till then, please consider yourself the guests of the state.”
“You are most gracious, Orestes,” said Melitta. He smiled at her kindly, letting his eyes rest on her for longer than Zeus cared for. “Lost your kingdom, have you? Terrible thing to happen. Well, I suppose it was the will of the gods.”
“You could put it like that,” said Zeus, “But there’s no need to rub it in.”
“I entreat you,” said Orestes, wiping bubbles from his beard, “to remain here with us. Let it not be said that the king of Mycenae has let fall the precepts of Zeus or turned inhospitable eyes towards his supplicants. Here shall be your home for as long as you have need. Take every advantage of our assets. And may I recommend the plumbing? We inherited it from the Minoans.”
As if to demonstrate the point he pulled the plug from his bath with an extravagant wave. The water

vanished in a gurgling swirl of foam. One of the maids, with the accuracy and skill born of long practice, flicked a towel onto the wet body of the king as he stepped out. Orestes beamed. “You and the lady shall have an apartment in the palace,” he pronounced. “And I have no doubt that tonight, as the sun goes down and all the ways grow dark, you shall dine with me in the great hall.”

Zeus thanked him. “Did you mention Zeus a second ago?” he said wistfully. “I notice you’ve still got his statue up.”

“Zeus?” asked Orestes. He looked at the maids, who tactfully vanished – an interesting accomplishment. The king’s regal manner drained away like the bath water.

“Between you and me, there’s been a frightful mix-up over bloody gods,” he said. “I really don’t know what the hell’s going on. All these package tours going up from the airstrip on the south of the city, wealth draining away to no purpose, and people coming back with the most peculiar reports. I hear booking numbers are plummeting, and horrible things are happening in heaven. Demeter promised me a meeting this week – she’s been on very good terms with me for a while – but I got a message from her via a nymph that she was unavoidably obtained. Didn’t make much sense to me, at any rate.”

“What did the message say?” asked Melitta.

“It was for a man I was going to meet,” he said, looking shrewdly at Zeus. “I was to say, ‘She had fallen; so has the city. The time is now.’ A little facile, really, seeing as the time is always now, but you have to allow the gods their little foibles. Being around that length of time’s enough to turn anyone’s mind. But I don’t want any of this getting out yet. As it is, people have been

streaming away from the city all week. They say something terrible is coming upon us."

"They're still going to Olympus?" mused Zeus, half to himself. "I can't believe the gods were so foolish. It's completely potty – don't they understand elementary theology? The whole system will be up the spout. Oh sweet Fates…"

Orestes and Melitta helped Zeus to the pedestal of his statue, where he sat breathing weakly. "Whoever invented relatives," he said after a while, "should be shut into a small room with one of mine. Just one. That's all it would take."

"Couldn't agree with you more," said Orestes. "Though I can't help wondering what it would have been like if I hadn't been fated to kill most of mine."

"Your statue's still here though?" asked Zeus tentatively. He had no wish for the bronze foot behind his back to disappear into his imagination. "And don't go into a long philosophical treatise on your perception of its existence but the difficulty posed in your having no exterior evidence to prove the accuracy of your sensory perceptions," he said to Melitta, seeing the suggestive light in her eyes.

"I wasn't going to," said Orestes, surprised.

"I think he was talking to me," said Melitta.

"Well," said Orestes, "we've all heard the rumours of his deposition and that his statues should be pulled down or be rededicated to Ares. Can go to Hades, as far as I'm concerned. Got nothing against Zeus myself, he's always been fair by me, even if he did have an odd way of showing it. Anyway, I thought being king of gods and men was pretty much a job for life, so to speak."

"So did he," said Melitta. Zeus stuck out an ungodly tongue at her.

Orestes sniffed. “I find that being a king is a much overrated job, in my opinion. The business tycoons do all the oppressing and the executions nowadays, and all you’re left with is paperwork and undeserved insults.”
“You’re damned right there,” said Zeus savagely. “All you ever get is a bunch of salivary-jowled ingrates drooling down you’re neck, even if you keep a low profile. Put any one of those bastards near a crown himself, d’you think they’d be able to turn it down? But you get saddled with the thing and can’t give it up, while the entrepreneurs stamp in people’s faces in secret, but everyone’s too busy hating you to notice.”
“No, they’d be like teetotallers getting drunk for the first time if they put it on.”
“Or like a celibate,” suggested Melitta, with a lopsided grin at Zeus, “When…”
“What is a celibate?” asked Orestes with a puzzled frown.
“Someone without so many bloody problems,” said Zeus bitterly.

*

Two shapes drifted over the wasteland of Attica in the evening cool. Little remained to please the eye on the blasted ground, but Hesperus, God of Evening, did his best in the sky. Shade upon shade was smoothed over the fading sky, daffodil, aqua, the palest blue-green, colours seemingly too delicate to exist in this world of passing shadows, fit only for a mind of an artist, for the liquid colours of the canvas.

The two shapes paused, framed darkly against the sunset. One was constructed on an excessively generous scale and appeared, in silhouette, to have two heads, till one realised one of them had a mane and rather large teeth, whereupon it became clear that either that this

person would be very useful in a bar fight or would at any rate profit from major surgery. The other appeared to have an enormous, flightless bird attached to each foot.

Heracles had found Hermes in a Dacian bar. As one of his boots was nesting comfortably under a table, clucking protectively as Heracles entered, and he located the other leading a proud clutch of tiny Winged Boots around the yard outside, Heracles deduced that Hermes had been there for some time. If there had been need of any further collaboration, it was found in the complete lack of any customers, proprietors, or alcoholic beverages behind the bar, and the extent of Hermes' drunkenness, which was considerable. Heracles was forced to restrain him during the ensuing hangover.

"If anyone though I was going to stay in an Olympus run by those misfits, they were sadly misinformed," said Hermes. "We didn't work for millennia to have it all screwed up by a bunch of fattened gods desperately trying to get fatter at the expense of anyone but themselves. What the hell Hera thought she was doing I don't know. Bloody Chaos daemons crawling in through people's minds. It's not healthy."

"That's what I said too," said Heracles. "He added, for he was a truthful god, "Though I didn't say 'misinformed'. But I thought if there was any chance I could find you and Athene, I should, as I was pretty sure you hadn't been taken to the Underworld."

"Absolutely!" said Hermes. "It'd take more than a rabble of saggy-bellied businessmen to take me down. If we can get hold of Zeus, we can launch a full scale assault before its too late."

“We do not have much time,” said Heracles. “The shadow is moving towards the earth. All round the feet of Olympus as I left, the mountains were bleached white as it fed upon them. And Argurion has proposed an alliance with the Giants. The only way to find Zeus is to look for his shadow…for what he causes or does. We still cannot see him.”

“Problem,” said Hermes. “What about his girlfriend? I heard Hera had a pretty good idea of what she was looking for by the end.”

Heracles shook his head. “Apart from a general idea in a Minute, she kept it to herself. And she would never help Argurion, who seems to want Zeus as well, though I can’t understand why. I’m sure Zeus was never unfaithful to him.”

“I wouldn’t rule it out,” warned Hermes darkly. “Every time you think you’ve got to the bottom of grandpa you find there’s some horrible depraved depth you never saw before.”

“The Peloponnese is our best chance,” said Heracles, manfully ignoring his father’s convoluted sexual history, though it was indeed so twisted that were he to put it behind him he would most probably find it curling up in front of him again like a climbing bean. “He was last seen there with Melitta, when Artemis lost them.”

“And what are we going to do when we find him?”

“I don’t know. Ploutokratia is unimaginably powerful. The whole of Olympus is filled with zombies under her control. I’ve been trying not to think about it. Besides, I haven’t had much time.”

They both looked away into the sunset, as though posing for a cigarette advertisement. Heracles sighed. “It all used to be pretty,” he said. “And simple. You cannot tell whom to fight now, and who is fighting you.

I fell we have…made such a great mistake, taken such a wrong turning. We must hope it is not too late to turn back."

"We're still here, Heracles," said Hermes. "We'll take it back. Remember, I spend much of my time taking things from one place to another. You couldn't do much better than the God of Thieves if you tried. While we're free, we're in with a chance. Does it matter if the mortals have forgotten us? Is that what makes us gods? I don't think so. There's still something left, something lean and hard. What Zeus was like when he fought the Titans long ago. So much has gone wrong because of people swallowing what they've been told, not being allowed to question or because they think it's all inevitable. Hera believed in her own propaganda, in what Prometheus told her. He knew she would – and you saw the change in her. He though he could take her place, but something else got there first. I still believe in us, even if the mortals don't care any more."

"So this is where it ends," said Heracles. "No belief, no rewards of song or story."

"Those are nice extras," said Hermes. "You never cared for them yourself."

"No," admitted Heracles. "I had to do as I did because it was the right thing to do, even if no one ever heard or knew. But what we face now is more difficult. People don't want to be told that what they believe might not be right. They become scared and angry, cling more closely. So I had to leave, to find you, and escape before I too was arrested. I knew we must find Zeus."

"I hope Argurion doesn't think the same way," said Hermes.

"He does," said Athene's voice. "So I hope you don't have any money on that one."

Turning round, they discovered that Athene's voice came, reassuringly enough, from Athene. Her aspect was not one of wild hilarity. She exuded the atmosphere of an Amazonian rainforest who has confronted an executive from MacDonald's in a bar.

"Glad to see you, Athene," enthused Hermes. "We thought you'd be somewhere about."

"You were right."

"You, um, appear to have a little mud on your armour…and there's a shrub or something on top of your helmet, if you don't mind me pointing it out. Camouflage?"

"I threw it all away. I decided I didn't need it any more."

"But I see you have it back," pointed out Hermes, for he was an observant god.

"I changed my mind. So," said Athene, making her point abundantly clear, "I picked it up again."

"Ah, that explains it."

Athene greeted Heracles. "We're going to need you badly," she said. "Argurion has thought of a method of finding him. Why Hera didn't reach this conclusion herself, I can't imagine. But no matter. We must get ready quickly. You know who Argurion has contracted to root him out?" She paused dramatically before saying, "The Giants."

Hermes sighed. "Yes, that fellow has no sense of proportion," he said. "Why the hell? It took the whole of Heaven to bring them down."

"It seems glaringly simple to me," said Athene. "Zeus only designed this mechanism to disrupt the signal received by third-generation Olympian gods. We see in different ways from the Titans and the Giants – but they were the first deities who had similar powers.

Presumably they've known where he was all along. But I guarantee you they will not miss an opportunity to bring him down if they have the slightest chance of release from Tartarus."

"You know what this means for me," said Heracles wearily. He strung his curved Scythian bow with an elaborate twist of the fingers. "Great acts of daring and heroism, I expect."

Athene nodded. "We must move now," she said. "I don't know whether Zeus will be in a fit state to help us, but he himself is of more importance than anything else now. Otherwise," she said, with a last, sharp and bitter look about her, "we shall lose more than Attica."

Chapter Twenty-one

Let the eye coast into Olympus, gazing down from an immeasurable height upon the city of the gods. Note the ruined palaces, the glittering grey towers scuttling away from the Central Bank into the stalagmite cluster of the West Side; each tower filled with crawling gods scurrying through convoluted chambers, secreting wealth from their dominated spirits into the endless vessels that fed the hive's brooding queen. United in their preconceptions and desires, for them the forests and the fields, the days when sunlight had passed untrammelled over the faces of their rivers or trembled on the forests of their leaves were forgotten, a childhood memory erased by chariot trains and the pleasures of production. Schools orbited like satellite planets around the throbbing black hole of the city, pupils poured like living fuel into its pulsating heart, while parent drones toiled in the colony corridors to provide the expensive educations training their spawn to excrete more wealth than they. Upon the city's other side, the airports hummed like summer flowerbeds, brazenly denying fears of recession and tourist horror at the feeding creature overlying the city's western side.

Upon the roof of the Central Bank gathered those mightiest in the city, the theocratically elected Wardrobe. Though they sat together, few words were exchanged, for their spirits were far away, directing their empires, patrolling the borders of the mind through which renegades might seek to break free; yet any pupil wishing to glean pearls of wisdom from their lips might have prayed for them to speak. Here was Enipeus, CEO of the Helios Group, whose newstablets and broadcasts

now reached every home in Olympus, and whose newly-marketed daemons, inserted into the ear, ensured a continual flow of Wardrobe-directed news deep into the convolutions of the brain. Here sat Kithairon, swollen and silent, Director of numberless construction companies and Head of the Enforcers, who had replaced the old Olympic Police Department and oversaw the Wardrobe's minimum consumption dictates inflicted on the People. Daphne sat beside him, the strings of her mighty fashion empire resting lightly in her hands, as she manipulated the gnawing craving for belonging conferred by purchase of her myriad of designs. Kalea was absent, Kalea, CEO and Executive Director of the Image Consultant Behemoth, whose all-pervasive emissaries pedalled Image Projectors, small crystals which, when activated, bathed the purchaser in transcendental light, lending them the appearance of beatific beauty and to their arguments the element of incontrovertible force. In addition, the Image Crystals fogged the brain of the client, inducing money to bleed from their accounts as though from open arteries, coiling crimson into the veins of power.

Argurion stood in the financial district, a Crystal strapped to his breast, though he had little need of making people love him. Cracking like a lightning conductor, he glowed as threads of undiluted energy traced their way across his body, earthing themselves from their sources all over the city. In an uninterrupted stream, a sparkling green column ascended to the curving weight of Ploutokratia, her myriad tendrils inserted, thirsting, into the city. Over Olympus her umbra hovered, her piled fumes lying in endless folded bastions layered on further mountains of cloud, her crouched back scraping the passage of the stars and the

glossy firmament itself. Spilling over the sides of the city, experimental fingers sank into Earth, moving like prehensile members into the world of mortals. Those villages and towns in the north of Thessaly, nestling by the Olympic range, had long since emptied, their inhabitants fled south, out of sight of the lowering dome obscuring the sky. Had they remained, they would have witnessed the tendrils from Ploutokratia wriggle deep into Earth, filled with poison to drive mad the minds of men. Starved of thought to dominate and desire to inflame, they fed instead on the obstructive world, for nothing could withstand Ploutokratia, infused with Argurion and fattened on Olympic souls. Wherever her filaments penetrated the earth, the surrounding soils grew pale, colour bled from the mountains and the forests drooped, bloodless, like flowers on the edge of a field nicked by a passing plough, whose necks grow limp before they wither and are lost. Slowly, the massif faded, light and freshness bled from the plains, and long arms of wilderness stretched all around, infected and ingested by the cancer from above. But no one saw the mountains transparent against the falling horizon, like vast sheets of flimsy gauze as their very fabric was consumed, returning to the elemental chaos whence they sprang.

Argurion lowered his arms. The lightning faded, and he turned away.

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It says much for the combined efforts of the Wardrobe in making everyone very conscious of the tacit inferiority of certain minorities by indicating how few of them there were, the consequent need to be nice to them, and also for the efforts of every pleasure-giving industry in Olympus, providing means of distancing

oneself from potentially worrying things, that the presence of the Giants on Olympus went practically unremarked. But such is the way with minorities – you spend generations fighting to keep them out, and then eventually welcome them with open arms. Which, in the case of most minorities is a very good thing. However, the Giants had made it conspicuously clear that their sole interest in life was the utter destruction of Olympus and the overthrow of its gods. In this case, welcoming them home was not a little like injecting oneself with an unpleasant and incurable disease.

Apart from arriving, however, they hadn't done anything ferocious. They had merely taken up positions in pink deckchairs on Pleasure Beach for their meeting with Argurion, while a rather younger giant with a notebook went around looking at the city's defences and noting that what he saw was, from their point of view, good. But the Helios Group had performed its task of Giant integration and acceptance faultlessly. No one would ever have though of objecting. And no one would have listened if they had.

"Well, as long as you're all perfectly happy with the terms of your agreement, I believe that's settled," said Argurion pleasantly.

"Yes," agreed Alcyonus, holding up to the light the pale blue gin he intermittently sipped. "We should all be delighted to assist you, and I'm sure we all have bones to pick with Zeus."

"I've bagged all the left ribs," said Otus anxiously. Alcyonus ignored him. "It is most refreshing, I must say, to be able to stretch one's legs again."

He did so. His legs duly stretched. The enormous vipers' heads upon which he walked bubbled in the virtual sea, which did not appear to please them, and

didn't go down too well with the sea either. It formed a little area of dry sand around them.

No one had ever made clear to the Giants the disadvantages of legs you had to feed separately, or the evolutionary possibilities in limbs you could walk on without having to clean mud out of their teeth. Although Giants, making their way through parks on the colossal, knotted snakes that served as lower limbs, were seldom bothered by small yapping dogs. Alcyonus smiled, a loathsome grin into which a bus might have manoeuvred with ease, as long as the owner of the mouth made no objection, quite apart from the passengers on the bus. He glanced down at the row of his gargantuan companions, Enceldaus, Ortus, Ephialtes, Porphyrion, Otus, and several others whose names he had forgotten. It was nice to be free again. "It is beautiful here," he mused contentedly. "I feel as though I could stay here forever."

"So do I," confessed Argurion. "And I very probably shall," he added.

The Wardrobe he was leaving to their own devices, which they handled reasonably well, seeing as most of the decisions they took were of monumental political unimportance. Only one member accompanied Argurion of the beach, this being no other than the President, Ares himself, still immersed in the confusing, numbing, trance-like dream from which he had given up hope of waking. From the occasional glimpses of Olympus he had recently witnessed, he held the opinion that this was not such a bad thing. He looked on the Giants without a qualm and without recognition, and accepted immediately when Argurion offered them leadership of the strike force soon to be despatched to Earth, the army to end all armies and quite possibly the search for Zeus

into the bargain. He had even accepted a glass of blue gin, which his stomach was telling him had not, at any rate, been a good plan. But Ares was deaf even to that mighty organ.

*

It would be untrue, and perhaps even insulting, to accuse Mycenae of bustling in the afternoon. Nor did it hum, thunder, roar or churn. But various noises did drift through the honey-sweet air to the veranda where Melitta and Zeus sat with their books on the northern side of the citadel. Drugged by distance, cloyed by the soporific warmth, or enfolded in the russet petals of the day, the voices – children, parents, calling of creatures, bird and beast of burden, odd and isolated, yet repeated and replayed, so twining together into a faint, background music; the heartbeat of a living, breathing entity. From the acropolis the eye could play through the city, see the avenues of almond trees and orchards of pear and apple slide though the seasons; imagine those lanes flowing with vivid green or the blooming, snow-drift cream of spring time, see the countless feet curling through the fallen petals, cosseted by their shade. Or see them now, trees dark and heavy, verdant with the rustle of summer, vortices in spinning lives where the stream of voices was constantly replenished. The air was wrung with words, whether fantastic boasts, recounted to admiring but disbelieving listeners, only to be capped by others even more fanciful from the gathering at the taverna; whether scandalous, concocted stories or violent verbal battles delivered with vigour and precision, whose beginnings were lost in memory's confusion, could not be told. Only the agora, the market place, raised a definable sound, for the murmurs and orchestras of the tavernas could only be heard, not

interpreted. Through the channels of the city moved an incessant skein of colour – young girls in blazing, flowered tunics, whose progress past the tavernas was marked by a barely-perceptible wave of approval; or the gleam of military patrols – for Mycenae's army was her pride even in times of peace.

The rooms Orestes found for his visitors faced a tangle of garden overlooking the northern wall of the acropolis. Orestes joined Zeus and Melitta, and together they sat on the vine-latticed terrace drinking wine. The king was enjoying himself more than he could remember since his accession. He had told jokes delighting Melitta – and could not help noticing that she really was exceptionally pretty – and had even brought a smile to the grim face of Xenos, as the fallen king called himself. He entertained them with wild and incredible stories of his exploits, of his conversations with the Furies, his bandying of insults with his pursuers in the chase of his youth, and his clever ruse in Tiryns where he had got an entire bar drunk, switched identities with another man, became involved in a brawl and was beaten and left for dead, only to discover on waking that the Furies had eaten the man wearing his clothes. He spoke with a quick, self-deprecating humour, sharp and acid, but riotously amusing. His conversation with the fallen Xenos was honest. Frankly, he held Xenos to be in a better position than himself – for the king has everything to lose, whereas the state of the dispossessed cannot get any worse. And only in such a position, he maintained, can a man employ his native wit and guile to working his way up again, and is able to display his indefatigable spirit and genius of speech. He cited Odysseus as an example.

"I've met him," said Zeus.

“Have you?” asked Orestes with interest. “He stopped in earlier this year on his way north. Carrying an oar, I seem to remember.”
“He’s still got it,” Zeus told him. “Though he won’t thank you for telling him.”
“No,” Orestes mused. “He’d laid out half a dozen of my guard by the time I had a chance to say hello. One of them had asked what he was doing so far from the sea with an oar, or something. So he proceeded to show them.”
“He’s very handy with it. Nice locked wrists, swinging motion from the waist, straight arms, good drive with the legs and so on.”

This reminded Orestes of a good story involving three Sirens, an oar and a deaf Cyclops, which engaged their attention for some time, till Orestes recalled with a sigh that he had to go and see a man about some tablets concerning deliveries of grain and livestock, and left them till supper. There was a brief, exhausted silence before Melitta began to laugh again.
“You like him, don’t you?” said Zeus.
“Oh, come on, you’re not jealous, are you? Don’t you like him as well?”
“Yes,” said Zeus gloomily. “He’s certainly a very good talker.”
“So were you once, before you became such a depressive.”

Zeus opened his mouth. He shut it again. Having repeated this tactic several times, he spoke. He did so with eloquence and, he thought, some justification, and the various reasons for his dejection.
“And look at the maniac they’ve put in my place,” he finished. “How could they make someone like Ares president? He only uses people for war games.”

“Well,” said Melitta reasonably, “how could anyone like you have stayed king? You only used people for sex games. Really Zeus, sometimes you are quite intolerable.” And Zeus fell silent.

An immortal soul is deeper than the human mind can guess, more fraught with everlasting desires and fears than we can imagine. Our mortal lives and passions are less than shadows of the immortal fires which give them birth, but seldom, if ever, does the will that drives these implacable powers ever look within itself. Zeus looked, through the mirrors of her eyes, and saw. He was silent for a long time. Then he said, “No, you’re right. How could I have become king?”

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said, putting her hand on his. “It just makes things a little raw, sometimes.”

Zeus looked up at her. He wrapped his fingers around her hand. “No, it helps to be told,” he said. “Thank you, Melitta. For everything.”

She knew in that instant what he had resolved, and the clarity of the decision to which he had been driven by her prompting and the struggles of his conscience, and knew also that a strange kind of peace was come upon him in this acceptance, though neither of them wished for that time to pass. He saw the realisation in her face. Though she willed him to do so, still her mortal sensibilities struggled to concur, and she could not release her own grip on his fingers.

“You must go soon, Zeus,” she said. “Take the Chariot train – it will carry you straight to Olympus.”

“Come with me,” he said. But she shook her head. “I can be more help to you here,” she said stubbornly. “You think they know who I am, what I look like, and are tracing me, not you. As long as we’re together, they’ll find us this way. So it must be fated – this is

your one chance. If I stay here, this is where they'll come."
"I can't leave you if that's going to happen."
She gave him a lop-sided grin. "I don't know what's waiting for you up there, but by the look of things it sounds much nastier than anything I'm likely to meet," she said. "It makes sense, Zeus. If I stay here, and they assume we're together, you may have enough time to get up there and do whatever you must."
He leant his head onto her shoulder. "I don't have the license to be afraid," he said softly. "And I don't know what it is that I have to do."
"I'm sure you'll find out soon enough," she said.

Zeus embraced her, felt her tremble against his chest, and her hands tightly clasped behind his back as she struggled with composure, as he too fought off the daemons of weakness sapping his resolve. "I don't want this to happen," he said desperately. "I didn't want any of this to happen."
"If you were mortal," she whispered, "you'd have got more used to that."
"I will come back for you," he said. "I promise."
"I know," she said. But despite her efforts, she knew he saw her churning, dread sickness; the stomach-wrenching burning of finality. "I will wait for you." She blinked, very hard, turning away before she smiled at him. "I'll go to some temples and wave a flag so that they notice me. And if you're as long as you were last time, I'll get very cross indeed."
He smiled down at her. "That's a far more terrifying prospect."

They fell into silence, while around them, the trees glowed orange green, unstirred by wind from their dreamless sleep. Below, the acropolis wall, the palace,

and the mathematical sweep of city stood vivid against the dark cloud on the horizon, stained with the honeyed warmth of deep afternoon. And they began to talk.

Long afterwards, Zeus would strive to recall what they had said, in solitude and reflection. Sometimes, as in an echo or a dream dissipating on waking, he felt he had recaptured some essence of what passed between them, but the memory remained only like a fading blossom, drifting into dust in tarnished loveliness. He knew they had rarely spoken in this way before; knew also this moment would not come again. He felt the old, imagined presences of gods – of Dionysus who through his earthly potions gives humankind the voices of the divines, of Hermes, spinner of words and fantasies of speech, of Aphrodite moving within his soul. The god and the mortal woman abode for an instant, or maybe for an hour, in a cradle of time where time has no meaning. Melitta sensed their presences too; reached out in a desperate effort, in vain. Their hands, though close, she knew should not touch, though touching, never unify. Into eyes older than her race her glances stole, to see the unfathomable in sorrow that it was forever beyond comprehension. But wound around with the magic of words they two drifted together into that highest of human realms, where speech is starlight in the void, binding star to star, bridging, if it may, for the briefest of times, the ineffable gulf between the wandering galaxies, a breach no other spell can span.

It was sunset over Mycenae. Together, they saw the rim of the world delicately smoothed with shades of roseate gold, trailing plumes of cloud criss-crossing the wispy, filmy web of coral mist sweeping over a sky of the palest mauve. A slivery disc of moon swung slicing the glowing pink shadows of the fading sunlight, whilst

grey islands marched across the sea bordering the daffodil horizon.

The evening air was keen with the breath of lemon and cypress. Through its stillness came a shivering rattle, as black against the chilling fire in the west rose a chariot-train, filled with holiday makers bound for the beaches, sights and shops of heaven. A gong rang out – the signal for dinner.

Entering the great megaron of Agamemnon's palace, they were dazzled at first by the hissing fire burning brightly on the circular hearth in the centre, hurling the swaying shadows of the crimson pillars against the running frescoes on the walls, barely-discernable images of warriors, shadows of ships, horses, spears dolphins, citadels and racing waves against the sky. On either side of the fire were tables, and they were escorted by a servant to sit beside Orestes, who welcomed them from the throne of the high king. The mixing bowl was passed around, the water and wine mingled, and through the smooth acid breath of scented wood smoke the king called for a libation, to immortal Zeus and to all the other gods in their turn.

Zeus ate and drank mechanically. He seemed both to observe more keenly than ever before, and yet to sink more deeply into a trance-like, comfortable warmth. Around him, figures appeared motionless, stilled in the midst of their moving. The flash of light upon Melitta's teeth as she laughed; the glint and oily-charcoal umber succulence of the meat; smooth grain of cedar table stained by a thousand nights of wine; deep-shadowed lines of mirth dividing Orestes' face; the waves of words, of laughter, speech and murmur, song and rumour; all these wove together over and around him, captured in his mind with piercing clarity. He looked

across Orestes at Melitta. Saw her tumble of hair, a heavy blue-black in the shadows, golden as the corn where the light struck it, honeysuckle sheen on skin, lips round and full, cynically skewed, human in a way unattainable by pure perfection. Saw her as he perhaps had never seen before. And he became enfolded in that rarest of melancholies, where we discover that no place is lonelier than this, no more complete is isolation than when jostled at either elbow and spattered with a stream of words addressed by others to those you cannot see - the more furious the action, the more frozen the frames in which we perceive it. Zeus gazed as though never blessed with sight before, looking at the bright, the sharp and piercing images, the players who stride through their parts as though unknowing that they walk in the greatest drama of all time, once alone to be enacted, never to be slowed for those who miss or disregard a scene. He felt the ache of transience, of moment after moment slipping irrevocably from his grasp, fleeting like light between fingers shielding a flame. He looked across at the woman he loved, saw her smile at Orestes, the mortal man, from humorously frowning eyes, the flash of laughter, a brush of fingertips, two voices joined in imitation of the bard whose hand now stole sweetly across his lyre in the shadow of the fire; he met Melitta's eyes, and she smiled. And he knew, finally, what he must do.

For Orestes, at the close of the feast, he had few words, of thanks, of exhortation, of farewell. But with Melitta it could not be so simple.

Long after the banquet was ended, after the last note of the bard's trembling voice had died, they met in the garden. Dew beneath their feet stung cold as frosted silver, stars sprayed the sky more brightly than the

shatter of sea-foam on a sable shield. Heavy, the air clustered cool about them – citrus filled, touched by dark cypress and drooping cyclamen.

For a long time he held her close, her hands gripped tightly beneath his shoulders, as he confronted what he had always known, buried far beneath the surface. Struggling in the grip of a desire he knew he should not feel, Zeus saw his path led but to grief or to sorrow, whichever way he chose. His hatred for himself held up its mourning face – he could not see what other course he might take and still accomplish what must be. She had asked for nothing but him, and he had taken nothing but her. Between them he had felt some strong and binding strand, fragile in its purity, not to be grasped lest it fade away. But he knew that it could not be, could not last, and should never have taken place. Better the dream; allow the beginnings of the flower to form, but preserve it cold in crystal, untouchable, imperishable, to exist forever in the far-off regions of what might have been, in the immortality of the potential. As he held her, Zeus knew that he had plucked what he should have left, had withered the flower by desiring it too strongly. An immortal could never bind with a mortal. Let her go to her own kind.

Wordless, together, he felt almost for the first time the bitter, metallic taste of the urgent moment as it fleeted by, invisible in its speed, incomprehensible in its magnitude. Thus did mortal lives flash by, bearing all they loved and hoped for into the night. The huge weight of the past and the airy depths of the future clustered, pressing, upon this one moving point of time. Within a few, a very few minutes, it would be over, and would never be the same. The intense, searing vision of the happening, the pace of time that slows behind its

wall of glass. He felt the present as he had never felt it before, a brittle, fragile quiver of flickering intensity; the moment now, that in another moment would be forever then. The flood of time was like a race, a desperate, blinding rush of speed, resting nowhere, straining towards the finish. Its aim only to be ended, yet when it is, again and again the runners struggle vainly to relive the ghostly seconds of their flight, never to be lived or tasted again. All the essence of that time was gathering together into a peak, into a trembling wave poised above the present, at any moment to tumble down, drowning those days forever in the cascade of the past. It was the tangible ache of completion.

And Melitta closed her inner eyes against the truth she had sensed all along but could not confront. That her mortality and his deathlessness stood forever between them, an affirmation of the reality no human mind can fully comprehend. In his arms her illusions of her own immortality were spun, unravelled, torn; the deception of her permanence finally, blindingly clear. And she knew also, knew in terms she could never have put into words, that any measure of permanence would destroy the wonder, and lay bare the worthlessness of a human love that was forever. But this dim and blinded mist did nothing to ease her pain.

He lowered his eyes to hers. “I am sorry. For everything. You cannot know how sorry.”

“No,” she said. “I can.”

For the briefest of seconds he bowed his head on hers. Perhaps he too wept. In after days he could never remember. But it was then he whispered words to he that he had never spoken to any woman, mortal or immortal. And Zeus finally saw; for if he loved her, he

must let her go – the closer he wished to hold her, the further beyond him must he set her free. For the very reason she was now so close, even stronger was the need for him to stand back, uncurl his unwilling hands, peeling away the layers of self and his desire, to feel the cold air between them and watch the warmth of her shadow pull away from him. He loved her, held her, and knew he must not; for his very love forbade him. If you love her, let her go.

Zeus opened his arms. Slowly, they fell unfeeling to his sides. "Remember, if you will," he said. "In your memory alone may there be perfection, something saved from perdition. Go to Orestes, Melitta. To your own kind. But I will return to you, and I will not forget you."

Much later, in the blue-grey shade of starlight, the sound of her tears dwindled into stillness.

*

"Do you really think these will work?" asked Hermes, glancing doubtfully at the long, bulky package he was wrapping with string.

"I'm fairly certain they will," said Athene, hoisting another package, round and flat this time, onto her back. "But Zeus needs to wield them. Coming, Heracles?"

Heracles waved his club uneasily, staring northwards with pursed lips. "There is something on the wind," he murmured. "I hope we have not waited too long."

Once more, the night was drawing in. Faint upon the air came a breath of summer thunder. In the north dark clouds boiled and squirmed across the sky.

"We ought to be leaving," said Hermes anxiously. "I'm fairly sure where he is now, as we got such a good fix on her earlier."

But Heracles did not move. "I think we may be too late," he said.

"What d'you…" Hermes followed his gaze. "*Holy shit…*"

The earth hurled the three gods into the air as though it had taken a sleeping policeman at an illegal speed. On the hills, the olives rippled from silver to green as the soil writhed beneath them like the sea. Clouds poured southwards, stretching long arms of shadow from Olympus. A hundred times faster than a heartbeat, the air pounded around them. The earth did not so much shake as bubble, like a film of soil scattered over water in a heated cauldron.

And they were upon the gods. Swirled in cloud they thundered past, hurling the three spinning. Vague glimpses were all they had of their passing; serpents and hair and coiled muscles and eyes, and teeth and sweat and lightning. The clamour subsided, and they were gone.

Heracles struggled to his feet. Extending a hand, he materialised his bow with a *whump*, together with his quiver of Hydra-poisoned arrows. "Here we go again," he said, shaken. "*Giants.*"

"Which way were they headed, exactly?" snapped Athene.

"Same way as us," said Hermes.

The gods swung burning into the air like reversed shooing stars. But their speed could not match the Giants'.

*

Above Mycenae a pebble bounced and leapt down the hill. Zeus watched its progress moodily, slightly disappointed that it did not collect in its wake a number of huge boulders, one or two trees, and finally most of the hill, and decided not to kick another one. Having failed to catch the last chariot train of the evening, he

had no choice but to wait for the morning. And though she was invisible below him in the city, he felt comforted by the knowledge of Melitta's closeness, by the thought of her in the palace overlooked by the god on the ponderous hill. He missed her, and did not want to tear himself away.

He had spent much of the late evening fruitlessly sending pebbles to their doom in the ravine below, filled with a sense of acute disillusionment at their failure to convince any more sizeable pieces of the hillside to join them. To alleviate his feelings of dissatisfaction, he took to kicking pebbles at the small shrine behind him, hewn into the hill, where he intended to spend the night before slipping aboard the first chariot train in the morning. Having sent several small stones between the entrance pillars by was of greeting, he moved morosely inside.

He was met by a colossal and very flattering statue of himself, which sat regally in the anteroom, lit by four oily and spluttering lamps. As he stood admiring the workmanship, he noticed strange markings of some black substance, possibly charcoal, on the blank and distant face. Looking closer, he found two circles were drawn around the statue's eyes, linked together by a bar across the nose, and joined to each ear by another horizontal line. For some unaccountable reason he felt vaguely annoyed.

"You have seen," said a voice laden with melancholy in his ear. Zeus jumped. A small and ancient man, the strength of whose odour was in direct proportion to his age, stood beside him. "The young people of Mycenae defiled the statue. No good would come of it, I told them, but they laughed at me. Yet still I cursed them."

"And?"

“They said if I told anyone they would come back and throw bricks through the window. At which I thanked them for their generosity, as this holy place is poor and humble, and they had, it seemed, perceived our need of good building materials for repair. Perhaps the god would forgive them this sacrilege, I said, should they throw a sufficient number of bricks before him in supplication. Then they said, no, in fact, we will come back and break your legs, old man. Which I cannot see would help the god, but if it is his will, so be it.”

“Have you tried to clean this stuff off?”

“Many times, noble master, but to no avail. I can only hope the god will be merciful to those young men.”

“I’ll be very fierce with them if I catch them, if you like,” said Zeus. “Have you ever thought how angry the god would be if he came down and saw himself with rings around his eyes?”

“There is a prophecy, sir, that if ever the god visits his shrine, it will never again need bricks thrown through its windows to repair it.”

Zeus made a noise somewhere between a sardonic laugh and the sound he might emit while trying to cough up a particularly large and recalcitrant fly. “Well, you can throw away your brick appeal tablet,” he told the man.

Having been informed that suppliants of the god were welcome at all times to repose within his shrine, Zeus performed the bizarre ritual of offering a generous sacrifice to himself, the benefit of which he entirely failed to receive, and drank as much wine as the priest could produce as quickly as possible, as he had no wish to pass a sleepless night.

Thus it was that he felt the tremors of the mountain only in a dream, and his sleeping mind lulled and

soothed the crackle of thunder. In the cave, he did not see the livid fire scorching the night sky, hear the airy blistering breath of flames collapsing inwards to their bellies, or see the white-hot walls of the golden city burst and spiral into a whirlwind of ash. To him the shaken earth and the terrible, tearing convulsions wrenching the towers apart were no more than the swaying of the ocean in his darkened brain. He never saw the titanic shapes against the stars, dyed with a florid flush of howling flame, never felt the mindless, animal panic as the city wavered, belaboured by the blows of earth, tottered to its knees, and fell as Troy had fallen, settling into the blinding red and white and gold to the drumbeat of the earthquake.

Towers quavered, cyclopean walls shimmering in a mirage, till the image crumbled and dissolved; walls slid, pinnacles tumbled in shards of splintered stone. The ground rippled beneath the moon like a shaken counterpane, and along the crest of the wave the houses busts into swirling vortices of spinning dust. Greedy, eager flames wrapped the citadel; and a white river of gold burst and spewed hissing along its ways. The fire coiled around the palace, and its tormented roof, buckled and bruised, gave way with a roar of tearing breath ripped from the throat of some fire-belching daemon. Down upon the moist tablets in the Chamber of Records the flames coiled, baking them solid, as they would be found more than three thousand years later, when the hill of Mycenae stood open to the winds and the sun, unremembered and forsaken.

The Giants had sensed the god they sought in the city, wherein they hoped to perceive him more closely. But it seemed that a blindness was come upon them, as they sought amid the scurrying mortals, feeling his

presence yet unable to discover him. Armed with Ares' thunderbolts and Poseidon's trident, they had burnt and blasted the proudest city of that age in no more than an hour. But the god had made no sign, had not appeared, was nowhere to be seen. And the titans felt cheated, especially those who had taken no part in the sport. They kept their vigil by the stricken city till one of their number remembered the city of Tiryns nearby, and Corinth, Sparta, Pylos and Argos. The thunder strummed beneath them as they swept over the mountains and away.

*

The priest's voice cut blearily through the web of Zeus' dreams. Only one word reached his consciousness – the name of his ancient enemies, the Giants. His waking dream settled softly in the shadows.

He was once more upon the Air Throne, drifting high above the world. Only dim light trickled from the moon's sickle, swinging among the stars, for he had ordered the sun to hide below the horizon till the great battle was fought. And silence smothered the earth, heavy, expectant, and watchful. Like a half-sleeping creature it turned uneasily over Olympus.

Zeus gazed out over Greece. This way and that swept his eyes. For despite the silence, he knew they were on the move. The legions of Earth's last defiance against the gods were waking. And there was silence. Nothing moved, only the darkness.

The Olympians were grouped around the throne, for once their quarrelling quelled in the face of a single peril. For if this battle were lost, then Tartarus would gape for them all. Not a word was spoken, no eyes met. All were on Zeus, the blacker shape against the dark, open sky. Here and there moonlight tinkled from the

jagged thunderbolts slung in readiness from his mighty shoulders. And they knew that even he was afraid.

On Earth, Heracles, mightiest of all mortal heroes, breathed deeply in his sleep. A knotted hand felt blindly for the bow at his side, and tightened around the grip. The battle for which he had been born was at hand.

Around Olympus, the darkness moved. The silence stayed, but the gods felt its fear. Clamour would have been less terrible.

They never saw the Giants till they were upon the slopes of the Mountain, for as darkness against darkness they had crept across the land. Suddenly the silence started up, springing in terror from its watch, and sent a high shrill scream of abject horror searing up to the stars. Zeus looked down, and his heart crawled with fear.

Our stories tell us that Giants are stupid, for we do not wish to remember the truth. Olympus, once impregnable, stooped in the face of their stratagems. They had torn up the mountains Ossa and Pelion from their roots, and swept across Thessaly, bearing a hundred billion tons of rock upon their shoulders, and they only the vanguard.

"Athene," whispered Zeus. "Fetch Heracles. The hour of the Giant-killer is come." His throat was cracked and parched, sweat beaded upon the smooth thunderbolts. The first giant reached up towards Olympus…

And Zeus leapt. The air crackled and flamed as he spiralled from the heavens, burning like the hugest firework ever made. The hands of the first stretched towards the tiny, blazing figure. Fingers huge as trees, claws longer than swords shredding the air. Far below them, the flames flickered on eyes vast as pools and

were lost. Vile, steaming breath spurted upwards, as from a mouth large enough to engulf a house came the earth-shaking explosion of laughter from the entrails of the world….

"Giants!" screamed a voice. Zeus was struck a heavy blow on the leg; the vibrating thud of falling stone drummed him into waking. Emerging from his dream he tumbled, his hand in the grip of the priest, from the falling shrine, shaken to their knees on the very mouth of the cave. Zeus had no time to think. Before he was barely aware, he was running, running, running, down towards Mycenae.

In the city the fire still boiled fiercely, painting the ruined walls with scorching sable, bubbling fragments of fresco and twining through crevices in fallen stones. Against the background of rose and daffodil a racing shadow moved, his ragged breath blending with the hiss of dying fire. Before him raised a sheet of shifting, dancing gold, blistering in its heat; he paused, faltered – and ran through it. The flames hissed beneath his feet, the air crackled with the smell of his burning flesh; flesh that burnt and smouldered but was not consumed.

She was still alive when he found her, half-buried in a corner untouched by the blaze, immolated beneath the ruin of the royal house. Abraded and bleeding, he tore heedless at the rubble till he could no longer sense his hands, and when he drew her out his blood mingled with hers as he held her. Melitta looked up at him for a long moment, but she did not speak again. Never had he felt so utterly, completely powerless, crouched helpless with her cradled in his arms. Once, he could have saved her life with a word; now he could only watch as slowly her breathing softened and then faded into silence.

*

High on the mountain above Mycenae, there rises a low cairn of crumbled stone, half hidden by grass and thorn. The lonely memorial looks out across the empty, sun-baked valley, over the walls, stark and bare, of the forgotten and deserted city, facing the verdant sweep of olives on the distant hills, gazing towards the silver-blue streak of the remote but ever-present sea. Buffeted by the south wind, each year the careless rain has worn and harrowed the fragmented stones. Now it is impossible to see without a search, but if ever a solitary wanderer happens upon it, they will find a flat stone set crookedly on the crest of the crude pile. In a certain light, with some imagination, they might make out rough letters, which had at one time been deeply graven in its surface, a single word, no more – a name, perhaps; or they might dismiss the marks as the workings of wind or water, and leave the stone behind, perched forlorn upon its pile.

Chapter Twenty-two

Had the sun risen on that morning, his rich light would have drifted, soft and yellow as pollen, over a smooth and gently stirring sea of cloud. Perhaps his rays would have painted liquid pastel shades across it, swirled and intermingled, tracing the wave through falling indigo, crimson and salmon, washing cool currents of ever-changing colours over the fallen cities beneath. The fumes of Mycenae, of Argos, Sparta and Tiryns, of Corinth, Pylos and the ruined cities of Greece shaken as a veil across the sky to hide their shame, would have wavered, uncertain in the sunlight, reflecting back into the sky the azure glow of day.

But the opportunity for such an extravagant display of colour and ethereal pyrotechnics was sadly lost. Why the sun did not rise was not immediately clear to the inhabitants of Earth, but all would have been easily explained were they subscribers to the Olympic *Helios*. There had been no grand public piece of legal entertainment since the trial of Prometheus, and the Wardrobe considered it was time to remedy its descent into lassitude by drumming up just such a grand public action. Kithairon, Enipeus, Kalea and Silenus between them now owned virtually the whole of Olympus, but since the rationing of air and water had been introduced, during which a meter was strapped to the lungs of every citizen and read at regular intervals by the Enforcers, they had found it hard to boost their profits any higher. Difficult, that is, till Enipeus and Argurion had regretfully come to the decision that Helios and Selene were guilty of gross infringements of divine rights in their realm at the Gates of Dawn, and that the thought of

the supply and control of natural light being in such tyrannical and volatile hands was a liability for Olympus and its entire future. Something had to be done for the sake of the People, if only to free the demigods held in servitude on the margins of the world. Fortunately, the annual audit found that Helios and Selene had not kept up with the compulsory levels of consumption, seeing as they never visited Olympus, which gave the Wardrobe all the necessary justification to invade. Helios and Selene capitulated overnight, and their light-sources were impounded until provision could be made for their controlled distribution by means of subscription to the Wardrobe's "Lighting up" scheme. The two gods sat bound, waiting trial in the Olympic Court. The sun and moon themselves had been confiscated on the previous night, and at the present moment sat, rather incongruously, in two specially constructed asbestos docks on the roof of the Central Bank.

And had there been a second sun prepared to ascend in Helios' stead, the Office would have been powerless to raise it. Its screens stood blank and quiet, buttons dark, their flames extinguished. Without the hand of its creator, traumatised and thrown into despair by what it had witnessed, the Office lay silent and dormant, its thousand-year programme finally abandoned.

Not every soul had perished in the sack of Mycenae. Orestes himself led the survivors into the hills, from whence they would return one day to rule in a shadow of the ancient city, to cling with slipping fingernails to the cliff-edge of their dying civilisation, before the Dorians came from the north. Menelaos and Nestor, fallen both together in the fires of Sparta and Pylos, passed in comradeship to the Isles of the Blest over the

western sea. The darkness, punctuated by stars whose faces were wont to be blinded by the day, whose alien dances were never seen on Earth, cloaked the silent mountains and valleys of Greece. No chariots rose comet-like to heaven, no tourists streamed to the beaches of pleasure above, no wealth poured into the coffers of Olympus. On Earth in the darkness, the Giants whistled untunefully, strolled through valleys they remembered of old, wondered what they should do next, and if it would be as much fun as the evening's work.

And Zeus crept as a shadow in the shade, huddled in a fold of Mother Earth from whom he sprang and to whose embrace he had returned, crawling sightless with tears into a cave in that dreamlessness which is most to be desired; the sense of final peace, of passing, of the ending of his part in a vanishing whole. He had come home to her, in a final union of sky and soil, hidden in a cave where he had been worshipped – his shrine destroyed; he now sought sanctuary at hers. His was not despair, for that is the counterface of hope, but a mindless precipitation into a state where hope had no existence and was absurd. All he had striven for had failed. Where he had sought to save, he had doomed, lost what he sought to protect, and brought death where there had been life. There was no further cause to move, for he had nowhere and no reason to run.

But as he waited in - savoured – the darkness he desired, he felt something slip from within him, was aware of a presence in the shadows. Someone he might have known at some unimagined, distant epoch in his past, when there were such things as sunshine and poetry, wine and water, speech and cloudless sky. He

was not surprised when Aphrodite first spoke, yet could not frame a reply.

But her voice was insistent, writhing the shadows over the walls with the soft radiance of her immortality. By its light he could see that her body seemed ravaged as though by great pain or age, and trembled around the edges as though she was barely able to maintain her existence in our dimensions. She appeared freshly created yet of immeasurable antiquity, like a painting of an ancient ruin, just completed – a copy of her former self, eroded and diminished. He had not wished to see or hear of her again, but now he found no anger within himself, no surprise, only an ability to form disjointed words, spinning directionless away from him.

"Why have you only come to me now, Aphrodite?" he asked.

"Zeus," she said gently, "I have been with you all the way. Otherwise the others would never have found you. I have called them; Heracles searched for me and found me. They are coming for you now, to take you home."

As she spoke, the shattered lips of the cave frosted with pale light. Athene's tall helm, the vastness of Heracles, and Hermes in a flurry of wings, stood before him. He looked up at them without surprise, their dimmed brightness deepening the furrows on his face, painting dark the grime and blood upon his skin.

"Melitta is dead," he said. "Her father too, I think. Mycenae fallen, and the world in darkness. What else have I done? Have you come to tell me? Do you think I want to hear everything laid to my name?"

Athene knelt before her father. "We found you through what you held within you," she said. "We searched not for you, but for Aphrodite, for the Goddess of Love

never left. Remember that, Father, though all else be taken away. We have come to take you home."

"So you say," he replied. "Perhaps you will tell me where that is, and what has happened there, and on Earth."

When she had finished, Zeus was silent for a long while. Then he whispered, "What did I do? What did I do wrong?"

The gods made no answer. "Why did they all turn against me?" he went on. "Had I ever hurt or harmed them? Had I not been the drive behind their existence and success? We fought together against Cronos and the Titans, for we thought them evil. Then my children and my sister cast me down for the same reason. Who was right?"

Athene said, "If you had seen the gods as you see mortals, perhaps it would have been better."

"But I could never make them understand my decisions. Nor do I understand theirs. What you see and the reality itself are never the same. I tried, and failed. Why can't people say these things?"

"There are some things you cannot say. Quite often not until it is too late. Or if they are ever said or written down, they're spoken in secret or scribbled on a stray tablet and hidden away. Some things are not easy to face. But come – it is time to go."

"And what if I don't want to?" said Zeus petulantly.

"Not *want* to?" burst out Hermes. "How can you not want to?"

"Why the bloody hell should I want to come back?" protested Zeus. "What earthly use will I be, for a start? I'm completely powerless. No more than a mortal who hasn't even got the consolation of death. Olympus didn't want me, and now I've decided that I don't want

Olympus. You can stick it wherever you want as far as I'm concerned. I just want to forget. They didn't want me, so I see no reason for going back now." He glared up at them defiantly.

"Zeus," said Athene softly, "I don't know if you can hear them any more, but they are still praying to you. The mortals, humankind. Not to any other god, but to Zeus, whom they still trust. We want you. The other gods need you, although they can't see it themselves. You do care, I know. If you return, perhaps you can recreate what is lost."

He squeezed his eyes shut, tightly, striving to still the trembling in his voice. "But I can't bring back the dead," he said. "Can't you understand? *There is nothing left.* What have you told me? Olympus enslaved, the gods in Tartarus, Greece fallen, the cities burnt, and Gaia saturated in the blood of those whose fathers fought at Troy. Where is my place now? The cause of it all?"

"Olympus needs you," said Athene. "So do the gods. Maybe not to rule them. Perhaps just to be…to remind them that there is something more than their pernicious self-interest, their superiority, and their money as the means to achieve it. To remind us what does matter. We need no more."

Zeus looked suspiciously at the bundle under her arm. He gazed from face to face, seeming to struggle as though in the teeth of a terrible decision. "Are you sure there is no more?" he asked.

"Well…" began Hermes. Zeus interrupted. "Oh, I know. You want me to fight Argurion, right?"

"Um…up to a point."

Zeus got to his feet. His face was now resigned, impassive, statuesque, emotionless as marble. "Thank

you for coming for me," he said. "I suppose I don't really have any choice now. Not before it is ended. Do you really mean me to fight this Argurion? Like Typhon?"
"Yes."
"In a mighty battle upon which the future of men and gods depends?"
"Sort of."
"A conflict whose like shall never be seen again, whose magnitude the minds of mortal men cannot comprehend, to which I must go forth, heroic, as the final defender of all we represent, to stand or fall as the Fates decide?"
"We were thinking along those lines," confessed Hermes. "If you'd rather one of us…"
"No," said Zeus. "I was just getting things straight."

The gods moved to the back of the cave. Hermes pressed a switch on his wand, whereupon a gleaming, paper-thin blade sprang from its shaft. "I know I'm not supposed to do this," he said, "but in these exceptional circumstances…"
He slashed at the air in front of him. As the blade swept down, a visceral, tearing roar seared into the darkness. Before them, a blue-lined fissure swayed and trembled in the fabric of reality.
"I'd prefer to come out in the Office, if possible," said Zeus.
"Easily arranged," replied Hermes.

Zeus paused at the wavering laceration, looking into darkness so complete and solid it sucked at the eyeballs, not so much darkness as the antithesis of light itself. He bowed his head; moved his foot slightly, to feel the gritty floor beneath him, of the Earth that had been his refuge. He found he did not want to leave.
"It is time, Zeus," said Heracles.

Zeus drew a deep breath.
And stepped out of the cave.

It was into utter darkness that seemed to call the very existence of matter into question. Here was no heat, no cold, no space or breadth or time, nothing but oneself. It might be possible to remain here for an eternity, for a hundred times the age of the universe, yet still emerge almost before the shadow closed on one's heels. Zeus had no sense of motion, felt no surface upon which to stand, no air or cloud or fluid about him, nothing but solitude and, after a long duration, a voice.

"Hello," said the voice.
And Zeus imagined that he wept, for he thought the voice would understand. He wept for the girl and her father, for everything he had made or believed that was now lost, for what he could never have articulated and barely understood. He wept with sorrow for himself, for what he had wrought in his vanity only to be the reason for its undoing.

He spoke to the Voice, if only because it sounded like the sort of person from whom he might get an answer. "Who are you?" he asked.
"That is a challenging question," said the Voice. It seemed to consider for a moment or two. "I don't know whether I have ever regarded myself as an 'I' before," it said. It appeared satisfied with the result. "Usually people only fully understand their identity when they sense, or feel threatened, by others, and as you have no doubt perceived this is not an overcrowded spot." It paused. "I am a spectator, I think. And I do a bit of writing in my spare time."
"Oh, really?"
"Yes – I…um…wrote the Scroll."
"The Scroll?" asked Zeus. "The Fates' Scroll of Years?"

“Yes, that one.”

Were he not so unhappy, Zeus might have felt a certain sense of anger that most reasonable people would have deemed justifiable in the circumstances. As it was, he controlled himself and spoke again. This was, he reflected, not an opportunity that presented itself too often. Reverse publicity had, over the years, created any number of people who would have been only too happy to attend such an interview with the Author.

“Why did they have to die?” he asked flatly. “Melitta and her father, all those people whose names even I never knew.”

“I am sorry for you,” said the Voice. “And for them. But sometimes people have to die.”

“*What?*”

“Just as you must do what is asked of you,” went on the Voice impassively. “In the world, Zeus, there is no justice but of your making, no arbiter to right the wrongs you fail to correct. To live you must face this truth. And for you there is no respite or reward, no release at the dissolution of the world, no comfort but the knowledge you have acted rightly and the world is better that you have passed through it.”

“No one deserves what happened to them.”

“It is not a question of desert. That implies a cosmic justice, and as you know, Fate is blind and indiscriminate, dealing out good and ill fortune to the deserving and the undeserving. There will be those who die whose deaths will change the world and become the greatest stories ever told, as inspirations and wells of hope for multitudes. To live is to die, Zeus, which an immortal cannot understand. And since, while they live, mortals believe they are immortal, neither can they.”

“What about you? Aren’t you immortal?”

“To be immortal is to be intransient, to be in opposition to mortality. I am death without mortality. Here there is no time. Zeus. I had no beginning.”
“But those people, they were important…I loved her, and she died because of me…”
“Do not forget that, Zeus. Never let her pass from your mind. For the thinker’s greatest curse is that he sees, or tries to see, only the big picture - he talks in abstracts and ideals, prophecies and fantasies, never realising, perhaps, that the big picture is not really important. Now you may see this, if you will.”
“But she will be dead forever.”
“That even I cannot change,” said the Voice. It seemed truly sorry. “Every play has a meaning – it is not up to the characters to understand it, but to perform as best they can while they tread the stage. Nothing is achieved without sacrifice, for it gives meaning to what is won. And in a true sacrifice what you lose must be worth as much to you as what you win.”
“I don’t see what we have to gain, why it has to be this way.”
“This whole story, Zeus, has dealt with the mighty, with the self-selected creators of history. To construct a picture of the past or present you select those events you believe are important. The day Troy fell will be remembered for the rest of time. But does anyone remember, does anyone know, that on that same day a small boy on Lesbos found a hidden cove, of whose existence he had hitherto been unaware? That on that day he swam and bathed in his secret bay, that this place will be the maker of his imagination, that he will revisit and return to it for all the days of his life? He shall sit here upon the sands with his lover and find his death in those deep azure waters when Poseidon’s undertow

beckons him home, mingling his white hair with the veins of foam upon the waves. What did he care for the fall of Troy? Who declared that he should?"
"You're just confirming that her death mattered to her."
"Of course. It mattered more than anything you could ever know. For human life is a greater tragedy than even the cruellest Fate could compose. Why do you expect it to be otherwise?"
"It's not fair…"
"You will not find fairness beyond the confines of your own mind," the Voice told him. "If a playwright creates pain in their imagined universe, no pain is felt in the real world. So is there wrong done in making their characters suffer, even though they do not seem real? In the same way, none of you matter in the slightest, Zeus, but you are all important."
"I don't understand. And I still don't think it's fair."
"Even the gods are only tiny cogs in the great wheel. To ask 'why me?' reveals arrogance and miscomprehension. Why not ask 'why me?' at your good fortune? But every one of you is necessary. Each one of you is an infinitesimal step in the long run."
"Well, where are we going? And why?"
"Never ask for pudding when you're half way through the first course. Part of what makes life bearable is not knowing. Ignorance gives you the two great gifts of hope and imagination."
"So where are we going?"
"I really don't know," confessed the Voice. "But I shall be interested to find out."
"I thought you wrote the Scroll."
"I do. But I don't make it up. It is more of a record than a prediction. We may not know the significance of the

events I record till eons have passed. So be careful in what you do."
"I'm not impressed with the way things are run."
"Then change them. You are all indispensable parts. Some of you work harder than others, drift across the face of the Tapestry for longer. But you must remember that while the head may be mightier than the hand, without the hand it would never have become what it now is."
"I still don't understand you. Is there meaning, or none? Are we individuals or bricks in a building worth more than its parts?"
"Both are true. Imagine that the most insignificant deuterium atom in the heart of the brightest star in the arm of a vast galaxy had consciousness and conceived of its own existence. Now would that atom comprehend or look beyond its own immediate reason for existence, fusing with another atom to produce helium? But it is not the whole truth, which is huger than its entire being, too colossal for it to understand. All it can do is to be what it is; to perform its duties as well as it is able. For all the time of its existence it may never be aware that it is part of a star. Or ever know, perhaps, that it is helping the star to shine: and that its light, travelling through darkness for a hundred years after its death, may fall upon the eyes of a poet trying to capture in words some essence of what I am trying to say.
When you are within a pattern, how can you hope to see what it looks like from the outside? Only once outside the world can you examine it fully. It is only through wonder that you may reach beyond your sphere, so glimpsing some shadow of what may be beyond, or even within."

“But what can one particle, one person among millions of other do?”
“It is senseless to worry over your standing in relation to millions. You *are*, which is privilege enough to begin with. But every particle can dream. It may be better in one sense to look up at the stars while wallowing in the muddy ditch, but damp soil is closer to home and solid truth. Stars are only beautiful at an immense distance, whereas you know where you are with mud. And lying in the ditch, wondering about your place in the big picture, you may come to realise that it does not, in fact, exist; that there are only a multiplicity of small ones, where it is possible to make a difference. It is daunting, I know, to listen to those on their pedestals declaiming on how best to change the world, and yet so many of you never realise that you change the world every time you breathe.”
“I think I see now.”
“Well, Zeus, our period together is all but over. I am sure we shall meet again. But now is your time. Remember, king of the gods, that to change yourself is also to change the world.”
“Thank you. I shall.”
“It is almost as difficult as getting someone to change their politics.”
“Will I regain what I have lost? My divinity?”
The Voice paused. “It is true that the cycle is changing,” it said. “No more will father fall to son in perpetuity. But this I cannot see. And now, I must leave you. Farewell, and best wishes.”

Zeus was on the point of saying he didn’t understand, but as he had used these words in a variety of different guises far too frequently during the conversation, he decided not to. At the same moment he

span out of nothing into the relatively secure confines of Chaos, and very swiftly plummeted through its clouds to strike a complicated knot of pipes with some force.

The pipes encircled a gigantic, revolving structure that appeared incongruously solid in the otherwise disordered swirls of primeval gloom. Chaos tolerated its presence, it seemed, by overlooking it snootily and pretending it did not exist. Zeus crawled manfully around its shell, which was soon shaken by four consecutive impacts denoting the arrivals of the other gods, till he found the small maintenance hatch on its underside and wormed his way up into the Office.

Insofar as it is possible to have a relationship with a machine, Zeus had a touching commitment to the Office, both tender and beautiful. His reunion with the dormant screens, with its buttons his hands had worked for so many centuries, with its banks and systems and walkways, was involved and touching. Wistfully he swept away the dust and cobwebs, absently began to touch tiles here and there, initiating the first beginnings of the reprogramming so long delayed. And under the touch of its loved one, the Office itself whined and, metaphorically speaking, sat up and panted like a puppy.

When the other four climbed in, they found Zeus in the central chamber, with the control throne tilted backwards to reveal a large and purposeful-looking stopcock. His aspect, begrimed, stained, bloodied and ragged, was that of an amateur burglar contemplating his first safe and wondering whether it is alarmed. “I don’t know if I should do this,” he said. “I thought that, seeing as I had put so much of myself into the Office, I could try and reabsorb something of it. But that would mean draining the Office…and I don’t have any means

of refitting it if it doesn't work. The programme protecting me will fail, and gods will see me from afar again."
"Oh," said Athene sourly. "So you're turning this into one of those narrative counterpoints where the hero has to make a terrible, irrevocable choice?"
Zeus said, "Um…"
"Get on with it," said Athene. "You're wasting time."
"All right, all right," said Zeus peevishly. "Can't you allow me any theatrical posturing at all? He seized the stopcock with both hands, tugging violently till it span round frantically. With a liquid roar the handpiece spurted into the air on a column of shimmering, shifting icy fluid, which wove upwards to remain frozen in a scintillating, blue-white spiral of iridescent smoothness. Men would have fought and died for what glowed before the gods. Bloodier wars than any of the modern world would have been waged, more souls destroyed, more rivers stained with crimson than would have flowed through a thousand Trojan Wars. For this betokened more than immortality. It had no substance in the world, no matter in which to appear to mortal eyes. It was a manifestation of what made a god divine, given form and shape and colour by those who strove to see it, providing a framework within their minds where its visual image could subsist. Men would desire it, for they could not know what possessing it would entail.

Without pausing any longer, Zeus knelt by the pipe and put his mouth over the opening. Instantly his body burned with the same light, brighter and brighter till at last he reeled away from the spout with a terrible cry, a roar of anguish and agony, the light of the divine firing in his eyes. Around him, and audible sigh went up from

the Office – its lights, its life and driving force were drained; it darkened and settled into silence.

Zeus the Thunderer, King of Gods and Men, Cloud-Gatherer and Compeller of Storms, stretched out his hand, envisaging the livid thunderbolts he would twist from the air, entwining it in lines of beaded electricity about his fingers. The others watched in awe, trembling at his majesty. After several minutes, the novelty of watching in awe began to wear off, followed swiftly by the excitement of trembling at his majesty. The thunderbolt failed to materialise, and shades of horror and desperation passing over his face, before settling in to comfortable and familiar despair.

"Are you going to do anything special?" inquired Hermes.

Zeus said, in a flat, emotionless voice, "That seems to have made one hell of a difference."

"You're joking."

"No, Hermes, that's why I said it in that tome of voice," explained Zeus. "I was trying to imply that I meant the exact opposite of what I said."

Through a huge effort of will Zeus suppressed the curses rising to his lips. "I suppose I'd better go and get on with it," he said. "It will be nice to see the rest of the family again, even if it is in Tartarus."

"Wait!" said Athene. She pulled the wrappings from what she carried. Beneath her fingers' touch shone a polished bronze shield, mirror-bright, and a long sword, unadorned but for a twist of gold at the hilt, stark and powerful in the simplicity of its design. "These are the only weapons, I believe, which may defeat Argurion," she told him. "The Sword of Art and the Shield of Aesthetics. We forged them together."

Zeus strapped the shield to his arm and swung the sword experimentally. It balanced nicely, so perfectly that he almost forgot the idiocy of what he was about to do. The fact that his onslaught would be as glorious as attacking a tank with a potato gun was prominent in his mind, though he was increasingly filled with a bizarre sense of caring very little any more, that it was all inevitable, and he might as well go and get it over with.

His eye fell upon a neat row of jars beneath the control panel. Jars that seemed to have nothing in them – literally nothing, space that was the essence of the void. On impulse, he collected several and stuck them into the girdle of his tunic. They would be useful to throw, and the consequences would probably lend some amusement to what otherwise promised to be a bleak afternoon.

Zeus sighed. “Shall we go then?” he asked.

Together, they left the Office.

His palace he found largely unchanged, the only signs of desecration being those wrought by the Olympic mob long ago. Since then, neglect alone had visited the Central Bank, since its offices and distribution channels were all below ground. But when the gods materialised silently onto the Olympic Court above, Zeus sank to the floor in disbelief, for he looked not upon the Olympus he had known.

Lit from the level of the Air Throne, fifty yards away, by the ghastly interplay of the captive sun and moon, it was a seething, writhing city of ghoulish light and inky shadows where none were cast before. Vivid lightnings scarred the fermenting cloud lowering over the city, and where he had thought to see the seven-peaked shoulders of the Olympic range, there sprawled instead the neon-burning, toiling West Side. And his feet and eyes, unaccustomed to Olympus since the days before his fall, felt what the others could not; perceived what gradual change had made imperceptible to them. "The city," he breathed, "It's not straight – its keeling over." Unsteadily, he stood. Olympus slanted away beneath him, at an angle so steep the fringes of the West Side brushed against the holy mountain. Like the deck of a ship frozen in mid-roll, the city's slope drove into his reeling stomach with tight fingers of nausea. He swore, tottered, and glanced at his companions. "Damn everything," he said. "Let's get on with it. I really don't care what happens now."

He loped towards the circle of thrones and the New Wardrobe, through the arena of spectating gods, and spiralled with faltering steps up to the very foot of Ares'

throne. The Deity to Superintend Hostile Humano-Divine Interrelations sat listlessly by the empty Air Throne, paying little attention to the drone of the prosecutor arraigning Helios and Selene, crouched in chains beside their chariots, and he did not appear to notice Zeus until he was tapped on the knee. Bleary-eyed, he looked up into the eyes of his father.

"Round Two," said Zeus.

Ares, the War God, leapt from his seat in a funnel of flame, risking the charge of interrupting court proceedings, which stopped abruptly, as their main players realised something more entertaining was on the schedule. The War God laughed, sunken cheeks twisted into a bizarre grimace of pleasure, a hollow travesty of mirth that had rung in the ears of the Trojan heroes as they died. Finally, after all the toils of bureaucracy and greed, all the trammels of democratic lies and forfeited devotion, he was presented with a chance to do what he had always done.

Zeus fell backwards as a thunderbolt glanced from his shield, scorching his arm; and another crackled away into the dark sky, deflected from its rim. Ares stood before him, framed against the blazing sun and the pitchy dome of heaven, lightning in his hands and triumph in his eyes. Zeus sighed. Ares had always been far too melodramatic, he thought, to be a decent War God. Unhurriedly, he laid his sword and shield on the floor. "Ares, I surrender," he called. "Do with me what you will, my lord."

From the Wardrobe arose a great cheer, for they had finally recognised the tyrant king, at last dazzlingly freed from the numbing blindness of the Office, now stripped and broken away. Ares approached him with a swagger. Zeus folded his arms, fingers tightening

around the cold glass of the jars. As he raised his hands in a helpless gesture, the tiny vessels flew away from his opening grasp in a delicate arc.

With a barely-discernible tinkle, they shattered at Ares' feet, their contents spread in a shimmering pool about him, reflecting the hideous lights of the captured spheres for the briefest of seconds. Before Ares saw his danger, the paint had dried and beneath him opened an unimaginable, Infinite Space.

The fading echoes of his horrible scream circled faintly around the Olympic Court, far longer than the cries of one falling down the deepest well on Earth. A memory of his voice still tore the air as Zeus wandered over to the place where he had stood, gazed down into Infinity, and with an air of abstraction scraped the paint away using the tip of his sword. He sighed. "Poor Ares," he remarked to the circle of frozen faces about him. "He never was a strategist. Though I warned him repeatedly, he was always far too interested in blood and physical violence, which is not what fighting is about. But he never learned."

Kithairon and Enipeus tried to rise to their feet, in denunciation of the transgressor in their midst, but their cries for Enforcers were silenced by a stern look from Zeus. "What are you demigods doing in those thrones?" he frowned. "Those are Olympian chairs. Get out – go on, shoo. Get away." Vaguely, he waved them away. They scurried to obey; Zeus poked a couple of discarded thunderbolts with his toe and motioned for Heracles to pick them up.

As he did so there crackled a reverberating drum roll of thunder, and Heaven was shaken to the roots of its curling cloud. Olympus pitched like a sinking raft, turning steeply and irrevocably upon its western side,

leaning further and further towards the mountains below, inclining like a knife-edge upon their peaks, hurling the gods and demigods into sliding heaps, cascading towards the West Side. The city lurched and trembled. Captive light, previously shielded from the earth by heaven's disc, spilled westwards and blazed upon the shapes that were climbing into the city, keeling it over with their gargantuan weight. The Giants had returned. Returned to the heavens they could not breach before.

"Zeus," said Athene, "this is the time. Lead us against them."

But Zeus did not speak; likewise no sound arose from the stunned thousands who swayed in bemused confusion in the arena seats. Olympus shuddered under the first titanic footfall, with a silence, but for the crunch of mighty steps, far more terrible than any laughter would have been.

"Good afternoon, Zeus," said the voice of Argurion. "How nice of you to call. I have been expecting you for some time." His vast green shape, golden at head and collar, now sat glowing primly on the Air Throne. Zeus looked from the unholy, distant monsters climbing into the city, highlighted horrific against the darkness, to his enemy upon the throne, and was silent. Then slowly he turned to the four Olympians who remained. "I cannot come," he said. "My place is here. You must lead the people against the Giants." He raised his voice. It rang, hollow, defeated and dead, across the city; yet filled with a blind, despairing determination to pursue his folly wherever it lead, and to find a grimmer glory the more bitter the defeat. "People of Olympus, I speak to you not as a king, nor yet a god, but as a man who might write the history of these days a hundred ages hence.

Forget your madness. The Giants have laid foot in your city. They know no mercy, no pity, no sense of sorrow. It is for you to cast them down. We cannot do so alone. The city will stand or fall according to your choice."

From the New Wardrobe, scattered but still strong, a murmur arose as the city juddered beneath their feet, under the snake-twisted thighs of another Giant. Cries went up, growing in volume, drowning even the crack and splinter of marble as the leviathans waded towards the palace. From the executives of the Wardrobe came swift suggestions. They wanted to set up a committee to discuss the problem, and assess the potential damage to the real estate and the businesses they owned in the area. One or two consultants shouted loudly about the economic folly of defence, while Kithairon squabbled with other CEO's over the companies that would receive reconstruction contracts. Dionysus' palace and his distillery exploded in a shower of flame under the onslaught of the Giants.

Zeus stared. "Are you all *completely* crazy?" he asked. "These are Giants. You know, big, nasty guys who hate gods and couldn't give a shit about your contracts. And you want to set up a committee to discuss them? What do you want me to do, negotiate a deal with them that makes you lots of money?"

There came a mumble of assent. Zeus swayed between the motionless Argurion and the advancing Giants, and snapped. "Right!" he shouted. Dimly, he heard his voice as though from a great distance, watched himself with interest as he threw aside his sword and shield and advanced on the cowering Enipeus and seized him by the beard and horns. "I'm absolutely sick of the whole lot of you! I don't have to be here, it's not my business any more, you never paid me a bloody

penny and I can just leave you right now to get stuffed if I want to. I've had enough. You can fight your own monsters from now on. You can all go to hell as far as I'm concerned, and if you go on sitting here you bloody well will."

He threw Enipeus towards the Giants as hard as he could.

As the river god circled through the air, images sleeted through his dominated mind, visions of the city spinning beneath him, of water and sunlight, of the hopes and desires that had lead him to this pass. He landed with a stone-splintering crash directly before Alcyonus. Dazed, the river dragged himself up, stared at the lashing vipers and the scythed hands, and shook his mind free of the dimness clouding his waking senses.

Enipeus waved a hand. An amphora appeared, but the wine he threw down his throat did nothing to quench the rising rage bubbling inside him, that he had been cheated, fooled, used and cowed. His eyes glittered, and his darks pupils contracted with fury. He swung the amphora experimentally in his hand as the Giant advanced.

Zeus saw Heracles flash past him, with Athene, Hermes and Aphrodite, followed by a trickle of mountain gods, one or two rivers, trees and hills, satyrs and Maenads, joined by spirits of wood and field and fire; then whole ranges, seas and oceans poured upon their heels. Soon the Court had emptied – there remained only the chained and burning Sun and Moon, the shapes of Helios and Selene unmoving in the dock, and the waiting Argurion on the throne. Zeus picked up his shield and turned to face him. Argurion rose in answer.

Warily, the two gods circled each other, their long trembling shadows staining the marble beneath their feet, shifting and ever fleeing the sun's blinding brightness. Without warning, Argurion flung up his hand. A stream of blazing Consultants hissed towards Zeus, wrapped in flame, spinning lethal brief cases in their gloved hands. Faster than a mortal could focus, they were parried by the Shield of Aesthetics, and as the Sword of Art swept through them, the Consultants changed into great hulking Oxymorons, who wheeled in the air and turned snarling on Argurion. He beat them off with a vast Annual Progress Report, and then, eyes firing with malice, hurled it high above his foe. In the blackness of the sky it shrank like a falling star, only to explode in a shower of Cumulative Frequencies that shook Olympus with their vibrations, and heavy, blunt-headed Budgets, which shuddered into the flagstones, bringing Zeus to his knees. As Argurion leaped forward, waving a great double headed Tax, Zeus rolled away, and crouched on his side he released the tremendous volley he had been preparing.

An entire Movement, rotating and multi-coloured, took Argurion in the stomach, hurling him backwards before the Rhythm drummed him to the floor. Snapping Arpeggios nipped his heels, and belaboured with Bars and whining Semi Quavers he covered his head – in vain, for a huge Cadence burst over him, showering him with burning sparks. Zeus advanced, sword raised, but was himself attacked by a furious onslaught cast from the other god's outstretched hand.

Upon his left, a dark Merger advanced, cloaked in black, swinging a dull but sinister Corporate Takeover in its clawed hand. Beside it, a host of Shares, evil-eyed, baring keen, avaricious teeth. Behind them, most

terrible of all, loomed a Striker, and Zeus paled before it. For he could see that it bore an income Tax, lethal and engraved with horrible sigils. Swift as a fleeting cloud, he danced aside, brandishing the Sword at the oncoming rabble. And against them he launched a mighty blow.

His vanguard was of Stylistic Features; hard-voiced Alliterations and crafty Assonances, flanked by mighty Allusions, whilst overhead a sable-winged Euphony hovered. As the forces clashed, it dived upon the enemy, tearing with talons and perfect beak. After them rushed twelve eager Verses, armed with pentameters and brandishing Rhyming Couplets, linked about their left hands. At the last moment, he recognised a Unit Trust among their number, cunningly placed there by Argurion to catch him off his guard; so he countered it at once with a Double Entendre. No sooner had he done so than the warring forces destroyed each other with a visceral roar of subterranean power, and he faced Argurion himself once more across the smoke-blackened battleground. Now the sun was behind him, the light in his enemy's eyes, and he could tell Argurion was weakening. Immediately he loosed a storm of spinning Palates, whose rotating primary colours sprayed a shower of mingling shades over Argurion, branding the groaning god with an Artistic License and belabouring him with incessant brush strokes. A slim Perspective hurled a Horizon Line around his ankles, drawn tight by an Impressionist, but Argurion, in a final, desperate effort, cast it off and hurled a heavy Merchant Bank in their direction, that blew a hundred shards of National Insurance over them like shrapnel. Yet it was clear that Argurion's hordes were beginning to degenerate into corruption. As Zeus whirled his sword,

his adversary was attacked by his own forces, - hit by Backhanders, harried by Embezzlers, lashed by Audits and thumped into submission by looming Takeovers, which now moved to Zeus' command. Stealth Taxes dived at Argurion from behind as a welter of Pre-Tax profits fell on his head. And drawing himself up to his full height, Zeus, King and Father of Gods and Men, struck the final blow in the mightiest battle of his reign, struck for all he had loved and lost and could not hope to regain. A shimmering net flew from his hand; the Essence of Being that descended inexorably upon Argurion. As he struggled in its silver coils, a surprised philosopher, accompanied by a heavy leather armchair, shot from the Sword of Art, hit him in the stomach and knocked him off his feet.

Olympian Zeus strode forward. The Sword streamed flame in the iridescent light. He stood over his foe, drew back his arm. He did not look into Argurion's eyes.

But the fallen god spoke, and as he did so, a terrible fear stirred in the heart of Zeus. For Argurion used words whose form were known to him; words fated to be uttered by mortal lips in a country far from Greece and the Age of Heroes, words that held a power over the gods themselves. And he sensed their might as their framework settled over them.

"This is my own desert," said Argurion. "I make no appeal. Enjoy the fortune which falls to you…I beg of you, take pity on Ploutokratia in her old age, and restore me, or if you prefer it, my dead body despoiled of life, to my own people. You have conquered, and Olympus may see me hold forth my hands uplifted in defeat. . Stretch not your hatred further."

Zeus stood motionless, but his eyes were restless, and he checked the fall of his right arm, as he knew he

must. And now at any moment the pleas of Argurion, already working in his mind, might have prevailed on his hesitation, when suddenly, there before him, he saw Argurion's belt hung over his shoulder, emblazoned with the names of those he had brought low. His fury kindled, and, terrible in his rage, he said: "Are you to be stolen hence out of my grasp, you who wear the names of those I loved…" he struggled against the poem, in vain… "It is they, only they, who by this wound which I now deal make sacrifice of you; they exact this retribution, you criminal, from your blood." Saying this and boiling with rage he buried his blade full in Argurion's breast. His limbs relaxed…and they escaped the poem…

"Well, I'm glad that's over," said Argurion. "You can take it out now, if you like."

Zeus stared at him, at the Sword of Art, driven up to its hilt into his chest. Something seemed fundamentally wrong, yet he seemed powerless to correct it. "No, please do," begged Argurion. "You've won…at least…no, that's the wrong word, you haven't won. But it may be your time again now."

"What do you mean, Argurion?" asked Zeus. On impulse, he withdrew the Sword, sliced through the strands of the Essence of Being and helped the other to his feet, trying to ignore the unpleasant hole over his heart. Argurion smiled sheepishly. "Shall we sit down?" he suggested. "I haven't got long, and I don't know when we'll have another chance to talk face to face, as it were. History isn't very kind to us, on the whole."

"I say, I really am sorry about, you know…" Zeus made a contrite gesture with the Sword of Art before he dropped it shamefacedly. Argurion waved his apology aside. "Not your fault at all. It had to happen for the

symbolism. Bloody characteristic of the whole damned story, if you ask me. But we have a few minutes before it catches up with us now. To talk. I…I'm feeling rather overawed, you know. *Zeus*. I've known about you all my life."

"I'm sorry I can't say the same about you. But pleased to meet you anyway." They shook hands. Zeus smiled, rather grimly, into what were surprisingly frank green eyes, set in a face now boyish, young and untouched by care. "I'm very sorry for what has happened," said Argurion. "I think I have hurt you deeply."

"Not just me," said Zeus.

"I am sorry," Argurion repeated. "Up to a point, I couldn't help it. I've been Outside for a long time. Watching. Till I had sufficient strength, till people believed in me. But it wasn't long before She took over, as she always does. I've got a bit of breathing space now – a few moments to be myself." He grinned.

Zeus frowned. "But I needed to fight you, they said. You were the personification of all the evils that have come to pass since my fall."

Argurion shrugged. "The evils come from those who use me," he said. "If they choose to request blessings, I can provide them too. I'm not the root of all evil. There's more evil within the minds of people than I can begin to comprehend. And yet at the same time they are capable of unimaginable sacrifice and virtue. It is their lusts that have wrought what you see around you. I just did what people made me. I didn't *have* to feed Ploutokratia." Zeus made no reply, so Argurion went on. "Perhaps I am a personification," he admitted. "But to begin with I made the people of Olympus happier than they had been before, in a way. They did stupid and evil things not because of my nature but because of

their own. I didn't force them to do anything. I simply am – the effect I have on people depends entirely on who they are."
"How did I defeat you then, now that I am powerless?"
"You are Zeus," he said simply. "Your nature is such that I cannot touch you; you are indifferent to my strengths, though you could use them to your own ends and remain untouched. You are the essence of the Heroic Age, and over you Argurion has no power. But you must remember that in the minds of men greed for me will always outweigh desire for you."

They were silent for a while. Beneath them, the city shook and the sky flickered with a sudden thunderbolt. Somewhere, another battle was being fought.

"Listen to it," said Argurion. "We are all that is left. There is nothing else. The Giants are in your city, the gods have fallen, and the sun and moon are stolen from the skies. The Earth is in darkness – mortals lie dying as we speak, and the power of Mycenae is broken. The world is dark, and we two brought about the darkness. I did not desire it, any more than you. So why is it all that remains?"
"I came back, nevertheless," said Zeus, stony-faced.
"That is your nature, and mine too, though you might not guess it. To give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and to seek for no reward, except that of knowing you have satisfied yourself. I am fading, so there is now an opening gap you must fill. Money ceases to be important in times of existential crisis."
Argurion pondered for a moment over his own words. Then he went on: "This is only a temporary victory, you know. Nothing to do with you. You must just fill the gap. Times of crisis need individuals like you, but peace

brings prosperity, which is where my kind triumph if they are not controlled…"
"I've got nothing against prosperity," said Zeus. "Only an idiot would."
"Absolutely," the other agreed. "Its benefits are clear, among them the freedom to be creative, whether in arts or science. Poetry and profit are inextricably linked. But let the people see that wealth generation is, as an activity, of very little worth in comparison to what it makes possible. This is where Olympus erred. But their mistake only calls for a readjustment of values."
"And yet," said Zeus, with a flicker of understanding, "prosperity is the only time when art may truly flourish, and the art of living be truly understood. Unless the balance swings too far…"
Argurion nodded. "In this way I've been conquered not by you as an individual, but as a personification yourself, by an alteration in society or circumstances, a shift of belief; not in my ability, but in the way I'm perceived. Before, I had enormous dominion over people's minds, and I filled their every thought and desire – from them I derived my nature and my strength. But now they've seen me as another of the monsters you were always fighting in the Heroic Age, for their perception of what is important has changed, and the structures of the Economic Age have crumbled in a blaze of glory and a breeze of divine peril. Times like this need a hero. And heroes breed poems.
"For though the Heroic Age is passed, we are re-entering a period of strife and heroism, of struggle and noble failure, which will be replaced one day, perhaps, by the struggle to conform and get a good job, but not yet. Wealth and happiness hold little place for individual heroics, for the great or gallant, the genii and

the monsters. No place for heaven or hell, no titanic struggle against insurmountable odds, no place for poetry, song and story of human deeds. And where there is no place for these, we have to pray there is room for humanity. When the world sees my power once again, Ploutokratia shall return. For you and I have not yet learned to live together. Is it a choice between a hard life, ever mindful of death, or a subjection of your individuality in wealth and the deception of the economists and the marketers? Hard and noble – very often only hard – or easy, fun and happy? I know what I'd choose. *How can man die better than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods?* I'll tell you how – in bed and in peace. Why go to the bother of being gallant?"

"But that's why poetry exists," said Zeus. "Poetry, music and art. Philosophy. Even the ability to speak and think, to be a human rather than a producer or consumer. To remind people of what's really important; to let them see that, while they are comfortable and happy, there once was something else besides – a spark, perhaps, that they too have hidden within them."

"Yes," said Argurion. "What makes goodness and wholeness, a sense of 'ολος, is not triumph or defeat of the one by the other, but an interplay between our opposites. Thus far we have been only two weights oscillating on a set of scales, as we cannot be in ascendancy together. We haven't yet found the balance. But think of what you know of the future… I have not seen a perfect age. Perhaps it will never come. Yet here and there, where people are willing to think morally from the comfort of their riches, there are signs. I only hope they can remember to make money work for them, not the other way around. And to keep in mind that life

is finite, people fragile, and wealth not as important as they might think."

"Argurion, do you know why there was no mention of what has happened to us in the prophecies of the future?"

"Because I am not of your time, and have no place in the span of your history," he answered. "Neither does Ploutokratia. She and I shall vacillate with you. The wheel shall come round in the end. Perhaps in the future, in the days of my prime, you will appear unbidden from the past, even as I have arisen in this time, to reclaim what was once yours, yours and the ancient gods'."

"But I do not think I can come back even now. I am powerless, and too much has been changed or lost…They have seen what I really am."

"Yet neither men nor gods have seen you in your hour of weakness. They will only remember you as you are now – the conquering hero, returning from oblivion to cast down his enemies and restore what has vanished. A hero, Zeus, and a god. Maybe you will know, or think you know, that you are not. But in the end, what the others think is more important. You know as well as I do that you'll go on to be Olympian Zeus and Capitoline Jove, into a history that makes no mention of what we have lived through."

"So this is the counterpoint," said Zeus. "Where the scales are balanced. After you've gone, am I supposed to rebuild, to go back to the endless cycle of construction and destruction?"

Argurion shrugged again. "You must do as you feel is right," he said. "Each time it collapses, hopefully we can come a little closer to what you can see but struggle to explain. Everything we make has within it the germ

of decay, as do all created things. The state that replaced you destroyed itself through trying to destroy you and the threat you represented. Could we have survived had we not sought to terminate you? Why should we have sought to annihilate you but for the dangers you posed? One cannot help suspecting it might have been easier to find a compromise that suited both parties. No one, not even I, has understood that symbiosis would produce something greater and more human than any blind adherence to one mode of political or economic thought. Thus money and art, the beautiful and the functional, the royal and the democratic, can subsist side by side. For they are all different elements, all different faces of the whole we cannot fully grasp, as there will always be sides of the dice we cannot see, no matter how swiftly we rotate them."

"Most of the other gods will not understand," said Zeus. "But I had come close before. With the appearance of a king, I worked harder and more thanklessly than any of them, to give them freedom, more like a bureaucrat than even Hera could imagine. Yet I can see it getting worse, especially among the mortals. There seems very little hope, whatever we may try to achieve. For the hypocrisy of the rulers and the deception of the ruled are the prices of stability…. Perhaps it is not a bad thing after all that in the end, the rulers shall be chosen from a type of people already too corrupt to be harmed by the evils of their office."

"This is why we need art and science," said Argurion. "This is why we must remember those things that bring no profit, which are without price, but whose value is unimaginable. The company of friends, sunlight, water and warmth, the breath of air moving over the green world; the sounds of music and the thoughts of the dead

captured forever by the magic of words or paint or marble. The useless things, that have no price because they are priceless. But these things can only come about when mortals have the wealth to do more than struggle to stay alive. It seems tragic that, once they do, so few of them care any longer for such things as these. *Sing, o Muse, of the wrath of Achilles, of his vengeance, deep and deadly…*"

"Those will be Homer's words," said Zeus. "Just before I struck you, you quoted Virgil's *Aeneid.* How can you bring yourself to say them? All you've done in Olympus had been geared to the destruction of the beautiful."

"Only because the scales were tipped unfairly," Argurion reminded him. "In a time of extremes, I could do no other. No, I shouldn't delight in the words of Homer. My mother never could. But I am not she, and perhaps I am thinking of an age where Homer and I shall walk together in a garden I've bought and each draw strength from the other. I am no daemon, Zeus, no more than you. Only another god looking for his part."

"I had thought we were diametric opposites."

"So we are. But few things are closer than the two sides of the same coin. A particularly apt image, if I may say so."

After a pause, he spoke again. "We're the mugs in this game, Zeus, you know that? Why do we try to do anything, if all we do seems mistaken?"

"Because we can," said Zeus. "Unfortunately, it would be wrong not to. I can't tell you how sick I am of an eternity spent doing things that I feel I ought to. That was one of the reasons I was beginning to enjoy behaving like a mortal. One of them."

"There are always bloody demands being made on us by too many bloody people, by the story, by *duty.*"

Argurion spat out the word like a maggoty piece of fruit. “Bugger duty is what I feel like saying.”
“Me too.”

They remained for a while in a silence of camaraderie, the unity of a mischievous fellow feeling of defiance. Then Argurion sighed.
“I’m weakening,” he said. Zeus realised he could see indistinct shapes of what lay behind the other god, showing dimly through his fading body. “Their belief in my importance is waning. Your side of the balance is rising. But before I go, I have a last plea, that my mother Ploutokratia would eliminate me for making. Zeus, I beg you to remember, however much bitterness or anger you may feel, that there is very little great evil in the world. What we have seen here is the accumulation of the little evils we all possess; a conglomeration of greed and self-interest, and blinkered desire. These may not get as much press coverage as the gods and the monsters, but they form the background hum of our unhappiness, and they dictate its tune.
“And I have learned, from my time here, that against all odds, people have an irrepressible tendency not to commit great evil. Though it is not a good world, and we cannot pretend it is, despite all this, what amazes me is not the world’s evil, nor its decrepitude, corruption, misconception and monstrosity; but that it retains so much goodness.”
“I’m sorry it has to end like this,” said Zeus. “Perhaps we could…”
The other waved a hand. “Not yet. Maybe never. We have to obey the scales. But it’ll be nice to see you again next time. I have enjoyed our meeting.”
“You go with my good wishes,”

“I shall leave now, Zeus. You have to face Ploutokratia.”

“On my own?” asked Zeus. “Like this? What am I supposed to do? She’ll squash me.”

Argurion smiled. “You won’t be quite on your own,” he said. “It’ll be very easy so long as you remember what I’ve told you. Keep in mind that she was only so strong because they loved me so much. You just need to be sure the People want you more than they want me…for a time. Then you’ll be lauded as the saviour of Olympus and will lead Greece into a greater age. But you haven’t won. Neither have I, nor has Ploutokratia. None of us can, in the cycle, remember. So, till next time, goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” said Zeus. “I’ll remember what you’ve said.”

They shook hands. Argurion hobbled unsteadily towards the Olympic gate, stark and brightly lit against the hollow indigo of the sky. Just before he reached it, he turned back to wave, with a wry smile twisted across his face. “An appropriate way to go, I feel,” he said. He sighed, and shook his head. “It does get me down sometimes. Symmetry, parallelism. And Symbolism. He likes Symbolism.”

He was outlined for a second, standing small and forlorn in the vast frame of the gateway. Zeus waved for the last time. Argurion raised his hand in an answering farewell. And jumped.

After he had gone there was a silence so complete that he half-wished for it to be perpetual. To break it seemed an act of sacrilege. Wearily, Zeus raised his eyes to the city. He had abandoned any attempt to understand what was going on. Henceforth, if there was such a thing any longer, he resolved only to act, and to

trust that his mind and body were capable enough in his absence.

Below the Court, in the Square, there moved the bedraggled and battle-worn crowd of the People. Dull fires coughed in the gloom of the city, and dotted among the wreckage of crushed palaces, trampled gardens and temples laid open to the sky, shifted vague forms, bound and harnessed, huge and indistinct. Four figures, bright against the blackness, flamed like fireflies darting between them. No more than a dozen Giants had been released from Tartarus and they, fearful to face alone, had in the end proved unequal to the combined strength of the People and the Olympians. The citizens of Olympus were crowding together now, drifting as a flowing tide to the Square, to look up at Zeus, silhouetted against the captive sun and moon, motionless and, in their eyes, triumphant. Light glinted from their upturned eyes, but he had no words for them, only a consciousness that it was, in some way, over.

Until he let his eye stray westwards, he had convinced himself this was so. Yet as he did, he saw what those below him could not, saw the consequence of Argurion's fall as his mother hastened to atone for his weakness from where she lurked on the margins of the city. As he watched, laconic and strangely uninterested, it advanced on towards the citadel of the gods. Already the West Side was crumbling and dissolving in the face of its numbing, swirling void.

Compared with the benign vacuum that lay beyond the realms of Chaos, this was an obliterating oblivion too horrific to name; as stark as the difference between solitude and loneliness, between fasting and starvation, between death and the unknown regions we inhabit before our birth. Sucking at reality, it left behind it no

space, no time, no dimension, only emptiness. The oncoming wall of annihilation, consuming shop and street, park and amusement arcade, was the essence of homogenisation, the force that the gods had unwittingly unleashed into the world in the name of liberty; the freedom that gives a chosen few the power to deprive the masses of theirs.

Through his veil of detachment and disinterest Zeus felt insistent presences behind him. Slowly he revolved, to behold Aphrodite, Hermes and Athene, blinding and warlike, but lined with terror and white, whiter than sea foam in her fear. "It is Ploutokratia," she whispered. "Zeus, do something." As she spoke, a line of temples in the path of the coagulating, steaming maelstrom bubbled and disappeared, sucked into the greyness, burgeoning the towering wall now looming a thousand feet above the city, inexorable and hollow, yet filled with the nothingness of all it had consumed. Before it, a tidal wave of panic roared – the People, now washing in droves against the feet of Zeus' palace. Their voices rose to him, imploring, desperate, tinny and identical, merging dreadfully into one indistinguishable blur.

"What d'you want me to do?" he snapped irritably. "Go and ask it to stop? I'd rather leave now and let you all get on with it, to be honest."

He snatched the remaining thunderbolt from the stricken Heracles. Sentimentally, he struck a symbolic attitude, half aware of the glad shouts from below, at which, he noted, the cloud paused momentarily in its advance, then with a sigh of resignation he threw what was very probably his last thunderbolt. The air burnt and crackled along its path as it streaked towards the billowing darkness.

With a sucking sound, the lancelet of lightning softened and expanded as it neared the point of impact, finally sinking in a spongy coil into the swirling grey mist, which edged a little closer.

"You see?" said Zeus. "No point at all. We should all bugger off right now, while there's still time to save our skins."

Then he was aware only of a hand, a vast hand that dragged him backwards out of sight of the People; of a huge shadow shaking him this way and that, of a beard thrust into his face, of being pinned to the floor by an elephantine weight as Heracles roared at him, called him names no king or god had heard before, shook him again and again with the hopeless, impotent fury of a child with its father. He was aware only of the other's eyes, of the thunder of his voice, the words he could not countenance but comprehended nevertheless – a swansong for what had been, for the day-to-day, for the little things that had been forgotten in the affairs of the great and good. Heracles, above all the gods, knew the meaning of duty, for he had discharged his, and more than his, all the days of his life.

Heracles dragged Zeus to his feet. Images passed unsteadily through his spinning head – visions of blue and pale cloud, wine and sunlight, dappled shade and honey-cakes, the shadow of a girl's smile, a procession of faces; those he had once known, a tall and bedraggled man, an oar slung over his shoulder. A stream of words, a myriad voices, echoed in his memory, admonishing him, advising, preaching, ordering, opining; words that had altered the way he thought. And the mists began to clear from his mind. All that sustained the cloud of their approaching doom, he saw, was an ideology, a pattern of mind that could only be fought on its own terms.

Ideals are thoughts, he realised, and thought may be changed by words. He might be powerless, but he still had a voice.

Zeus drew himself up at the very edge of the pediment. Not two hundred yards distant, the formlessness of Ploutokratia boiled and rolled forwards. He gazed down at the crowd; saw their indistinctness divide and separate into faces he knew – Enipeus, Silenus, Kithairon; here and there a satyr he had met in Megara, a wood-nymph glimpsed in Arcadia. "People of Olympus," he called. "We have no time left. All I can do to save you, I shall. Yet I cannot accomplish anything without you. "

At this, Ploutokratia shook with a low, triumphant tremor of thunder. Its pace accelerated.

"People of Olympus, you have little cause to trust your rulers, or those who wield hidden powers in your city," cried Zeus. "But I come to you now not as I once was, but as a supplicant. All I ask is that you put your trust in me, and in me alone. I have conquered Argurion, as I conquered Typhon and the Titans long ago. You yourselves have brought low the Giants. Together we may conquer Ploutokratia, if you do as I ask."

A murmur of assent trickled up from the crowd, moving in an uneasy swell, shifting like a lid held precariously over a cauldron of boiling water, ready at any moment to burst free under pressure of the panic below.

"This is your election, People of Olympus," Zeus cried again. He drew a shaking hand over his sweating forehead. Fight her with her own weapons. "I ask you to vote for me. I don't have any corporate connections. I have no contractual obligations to fulfil or favours to

repay. Big business will hate me, because I'll stop them treating you like scum. I shall give Olympus back to you, and free you from the yoke your own minds have cast over you."

Driven into his brain like a bar of lead, he felt words, dull and featureless.

THAT IS NOT FAIR.

Yes it is, thought Zeus. You can be democratic without being fair. I can be both.

He opened his eyes. Athene had perceived what he was attempting and with the other gods she was whipping up support, canvassing in the swiftest election campaign in history. Within seconds it became clear Zeus would receive an overwhelming majority vote.

Athene stood up, far below him, and cast something into the air. It rose through the wreaths of applause, glowing on upturned faces, buffeted by cheers and cries of acclamation, spinning slowly in a dazzle of ethereal, transparent light. The Olympic Crown settled gently upon his grimy head, clinging about his temples where it had hung before. "People of Olympus," he said, "I herald the dawn of a New Age for our city! The dawn of a free city, ready to face the future at the head of the Universal Pantheon! Do I have your votes?"

And this time the response was overwhelming. No prompting from any other quarter was needed, as with tumultuous applause, the People of Olympus voted for their new President.

Into the mind of Zeus struck a thought now without words, or even emotions, beating him to his knees, as the teetering, bubbling horror soared directly above the Court, hissing gently, its susurrations rising, towering, howling into a crescendo like the tortures of the earth.

Far away, or possibly quite nearby if one believes the Fates are ever-present, Lacathis bent over the Scroll with her sightless, penetrating eyes. “Oh,” she said with disappointment. “How very boring. I do wish he’d make his mind up, you know. Always chopping and changing.”

She splashed some pale liquid labelled “Restorer” onto a thick, heavy and blackened thread that meandered for some considerable distance over the Tapestry. Within seconds, it glowed once more a deep rich gold in the darkness. And was drawn by Clotho’s hands into the edge of the weave. Atropos clicked her tongue in annoyance. She had been looking forward to cutting it.

And the blindness was stripped from Zeus’ eyes. All the numbing darkness that had enfolded him for so long was torn away in a moment, and like a man rising up through deep water, unaware of sight and sound and smell until his head breaks the surface, he saw with new eyes, as he sensed his forgotten godhead flow back into his veins, as he had hoped it would when he drained the Office. The ichor burned within him, and he flamed like a god upon the pinnacle of his palace; looked up, and saw their doom.

Howling with the twisted scream of metal torn in the hands of Cyclopes, Ploutokratia raged over them. Thinned and dissipated, it is true, but blowing like a foul miasma down towards every crevice that afforded a refuge. At the last moment, there blazed over the Square and the prone forms therein the blinding light cast by Zeus, as with an earth-shaking bellow of thunder he soared in defiance into the midst of the parting cloud. He tore the Olympic crown from his head. Throbbing within it darted the captured might of the Olympic kings, precious, unimaginable and awful in its majesty.

As he rose through the choking fumes that writhed into his lungs, sought to burrow into his ears like creeping worms and devour his mind within, or to wriggle into his belly and inflame it with desire, he grasped desperately at the air, seeking a thunderbolt, and failed. Only the Crown remained, cold and heavy in his hand.

Choking, blinded, reeling in the gloom, he broke it across his knee. His hand flamed and withered as its potency streamed forth, uncontrollable and volcanic. With a last instinctive twist of his wrist he cast it into Ploutokratia's heart. And then his world exploded in sheets of blinding white fire.

Olympus shook with a detonation louder than the wrath of Etna, and with it the darkness was blown apart, borne scattered and torn on the winds to the farthest corners of the world; rent apart, yet not destroyed. But the air moved over the city of the gods, free and unrestricted. Not untouched by the evil, nor were the gods themselves. But they now had eyes only for the burning shape that alighted on the pediment of his temple.

With a movement of his hand, there burst upon the balustrade two teams of horses, silver and gold, fanned with flames yellow and white, liquid fire breathing in their tossing manes and tails. Zeus strode over to Helios and Selene, and their bonds burst apart at his coming. In an instant their teams were harnessed to their chariots, and at a word from Zeus, the chains of the Sun and Moon themselves were loosened. Together, Sun and Moon rose into the brightening day.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Charon later maintained he had not been at all surprised at his salvation from the sanitized hell his immortality had become in his post as Principal Receptionist for the Underworld. He considered that after his many hundred years of service in the House of Hades it was only proper that a god should have heard his cry from the depths.

It began with a gurgling rush as a million gallons of brackish, filthy slime cascaded from the empty air into the sparkling Styx. The keepers of the bridge had no time to wonder at this, however, since a torrent of black cloud hurtled down upon the incandescent gates of Hades and their bridge blew up in an explosion of which any military planner would have been justly proud. Its very stones were atomised, leaving Charon and his toothy companions to fall into the bubbling vileness of the river. Triumphant, Charon crawled up the nether bank. His clothes, hissing and melting, clung desperately to his body in the manner he considered proper for well-mannered garments. Hidden in the reeds huddled a warped and peeling punt, already half-filled with water, black and steaming. Stealthily he pushed it into the river and poled across to the other side.

*

Apollo's gibbering into his mouthpiece had driven his relations into a state of nervous mania approximating very closely to that state of nervous mania into which it was their habit to be driven whenever forced into each other's company for more than a few minutes. Poseidon had constructed a small catapult with various pens and rubber bands, with which

he fired admonitory salvos of tablet clips over the intervening glass wall, an action that had no effect on Apollo but did much to soothe Poseidon, and, he reflected, also meant that he was too busy with the collection of ammunition to answer his clients' calls. Most of the other Olympians had sunk in to a state of eyeless, listless boredom, including Prometheus, who slumped groggily over his fresh meat stall, though it hardly deserved that epithet any more. Until, that is, the lights fizzed, the lines went dead, and simultaneously every pot plant in the room exploded. The door vanished in an implosion of white light, which sizzled softly as Zeus strode over the pool of molten metal.

"Hades," he coughed, waving away coils of smoke, "sort this place out, will you? If I see one more Titan on community service I'm going to do something violent."

Newly alert Olympians peered at him through a forest of windblown fumes. "Hasn't changed at all, has he?" came Hades' dry voice. "Still hammering on about violence and coercion. Where will it end, I ask, where will it end?"

"I always told you he was a poor choice for the job," said Poseidon firmly. He discharged a clip in Apollo's direction. "Youthful. Immature. Flighty. Now if you consider the other candidates in the field..."

"I can't believe you're *still* sore about it," said Artemis in disbelief. "It was over by the Paelolithic. You're so anally retentive I'm surprised you can go to the lavatory."

"He doesn't," said Hades with gloom. "Just lets rip wherever he happens to be. Just go to the brink of Ocean and take a deep sniff of what he calls bracing sea air."

"It's like smelling salts," said Poseidon indignantly.

"Yes, laden with ammonia."
"*Just* like smelling salts," Poseidon insisted. "And I don't know what you mean about lavatories…"
"That," said Hades pointedly, "is quite clear from the state of the Ocean. Neat ammonia is one if the many smells I find preferable…"
"*Blubble*" said Apollo.

Zeus stared at them. At the flick of his finger, their cubicles disintegrated in coils of dust, whereupon they began to move towards the doorway, still arguing volubly and with renewed energy. "I suppose you want us to be grateful, now," complained Poseidon. "Well, all I can say is that you've certainly taken your bloody time about it. This blithering idiot Apollo was driving me nuts. If it wasn't for my trusty clip-catapult I'd have lost my sanity completely."
"I can't help feeling that happened some time ago," said Artemis. "And as I recall, there didn't seem to be very much of it to lose."

Hera approached Zeus last of all. Tall, regal and unbowed, she gazed coolly into his eyes, then nodded swiftly – once, only once – and moved on.
"It is all over," said Zeus. "Everything. I will say no more. Only go, each one of you, and help to rebuild what you helped to undo."

They streamed though the doorway, their quarrels, briefly suspended while he spoke, renewed with vigour. Across the wreckage of the room Zeus and Prometheus faced each other. "What did I do wrong, Prometheus?" asked Zeus, hollow-eyed. "What did I do to deserve such a family?"
Prometheus came forward and took his hand. "Welcome home, Zeus," he said. "I knew you would not fail. So

you have overcome the evils of Argurion and Plutokratia."

Zeus hesitated, struggled to find words, and then decided not to attempt an explanation. "Yes, I suppose I have," he said. "But wait – I'll tell you later." He moved to the door and called, "Hades?"

"Yes, old chap?" floated back the disembodied voice. They heard his invisible footfalls returning along the corridor.

"Hades, can I ask a favour of you? There are two people I must speak to, recently dead. I do not think they have crossed over the River yet." He held his breath for a second before he explained, heart accelerating inside him; for it was his hope that had driven him to the Underworld so swiftly, a hope he did not want dashed too soon.

Hades listened sympathetically. "Yes, that could be arranged," he said. "Just give me a few minutes to find out where they've been putting Arrivals, will you?"

"Thank you," said Zeus.

*

They met in the valley between life and death. There loomed a darkness as warm and comforting as the folds of a coverlet in winter, which wrapped itself around them, unquestioning, undemanding, accepting. Two shades stood before Zeus, one larger than a mortal man, the other slim and slight. They had not yet passed through the river Lethe – once on the other side, all their memories would be washed away, and even their names forgotten. But for the present they kept their mortal natures and memories of their lives and deaths.

And at first there seemed to be no words to frame their meeting, nor refuge to be found in human touch, for as he tried to clasp them they slipped as wraiths

between his fingers. Yet the silence, they sensed, and his very presence there, said more than any fumbling words could weave.

Zeus could not conceive how any words could console a human spirit that he had doomed to death, but even so, he spoke, fruitlessly, he thought, saying what he felt necessary even though his phrases might fall unheeded to the ground. And even though they did not speak in answer, in their eyes he saw, by his own light, what he had hoped to see.

"I come, in part, to offer you something," he said. "Even Zeus cannot raise the dead to life again, but I can give you something more than life. If you will, I shall make you immortal gods, that you may dwell with me, forever blessed, in Olympus, and escape from the Shades. A small reward, I know, for all you did and meant for me. My two most faithful friends on Earth, who stood beside me despite my fall, and whom on Earth I rewarded only with death. Now let me requite you as you deserve, and as best as I am able. Let me grant you what your kind has ever most desired."

Megaventris considered. "You mean we could become real gods?" he asked. "With proper functions?"

"Yes. Whatever you desire," said Zeus.

"I might become god of the immensely overweight," Megaventris reflected.

Melitta laughed. "What, and I the keeper of the overworked?"

"Now," admonished her father, "you can't say I ever overworked you. As you know, it is morally irresponsible to allow young people to be idle. Well, Zeus, I am very grateful – though I was becoming used to being dead – and I like the idea. What about you, Melitta?"

She turned to Zeus, and her dark eyes, those eyes he had not thought to see again, looked into his as she smiled. “Yes, I like it a lot,” she said. “Thank you, Zeus.”

He shook his head. “It was the least I could offer.”

“A wonderful idea,” she said. “Thank you – but no.”

Never had he considered that she would refuse, and unprepared for such a reply, he stared in flabbergasted silence down upon her. Without speaking, she tried to take his hand and draw him towards her, and made as if to kiss him gently. “You know I loved you, Zeus,” she whispered. “As well as a mortal can. But with all that is mortal, there must be an ending. Otherwise there is no meaning.”

“But Melitta,” he faltered, suddenly, helplessly mortal again, “I wanted to give you something to make up to you, to console you, and your father…”

“You gave me more while I was alive than you imagined.”

“Melitta, come to Olympus with me. There we can be on equal terms, both immortal…”

“Equal terms?” she interrupted. “No, Zeus. The only time when that was possible has passed, when you were as mortal as you could become. If you had spent that time with me as a god, it would have meant less. Because we need to believe we are immortal. We need to believe this – which your immortality would have ruined in the end. And Zeus, if I were immortal with you, we would lose what made it what it was, what I felt it was, even if I never said as much to you.”

“You mean that mortals long for eternity but must never attain it? Or find it poignant that they can’t?”

“Exactly. You did learn, didn’t you?”

“Melitta, I could not know what was going to happen in Mycenae. Or in Dekalia, Megaventris. You understand, don’t you? I came back for you, Melitta. I raised a monument over you on the mountain. I did what I could for you, with my bare hands, for then I was no more than mortal. And for the rest of time I shall honour the ground where you, and your father, lie. I did not forget you.”

“I know,” she told him. “I knew you would not. But it could not have lasted, whatever you think.”

“But I’m offering you the chance for it to last forever.”

“In Olympus? Under Hera’s nose? What sort of immortality would that be?” She held him as well as she could, her insubstantial arms resting about him like bands of cloud. “Zeus, remember what it was like when we first met. What we had…can never be recaptured, and you shouldn’t try. Only a mortal would understand.”

“Only you can write tragedy,” said Zeus. “For an immortal there can be no final end. No complete destruction. So we are left with third rate comedy instead.”

“You want to give me everything, then?” she asked. “So that I should remain in the system – your system, in the end. But you see, here I can escape it. No part has been written for us in the Underworld. Perhaps we shall go to forgetfulness on the other side of Lethe, but not to oblivion. Here we can live outside the frameworks you have laid down. And in the end, Zeus, though I loved you - and nothing can change that, not even now – though I loved you, I would rather hang on to the only thing we possess that the immortals cannot know.”

Megaventris cleared his throat. “Sorry to overhear all that,” he said in an embarrassed voice. “It was a nice

idea, but I think my daughter's right. No messing with human nature! I'd better stay with her." He held out his hand. "So this is the last goodbye, I guess."

Zeus tried numbly to shake his hand. He could find no words, no pitiful sounds, nor fight his way through the inadequacies of language, to say what needed to be said but would never be expressed. And yet, he felt that the man, in some inexplicable way, understood; understood, as he knew Melitta did, Melitta who had seen what he had known was true but had not the courage to recognise. Their parting was silent, at first, for they found that they needed no words.

"Now go back to Heaven, Zeus," she said to him at last. "You have seen what it is like to be mortal – remember that as you rule. It may be useful. Go and find another girl – be happy with her."

"You were the last, Melitta. The last – and best."

She laughed, a strange sound in that dark place. "Farewell then, Zeus." Yet she could not restrain her tears; nor could the immortal god. "Farewell, Melitta," he said.

For the last time, their hands reached out; hands that strove to meet, but could not, that passed through each other every time they seemed to touch.

"Remember me," she said. "Think of me sometimes."

"Always," he promised. "I will never forget."

She smiled through her tears. "But I go to forgetfulness," she said.

She took her father's arm, and together the two shades walked slowly away, towards the banks of the river Lethe, and neither turned to look again at the god, standing royal and forlorn, shining in the darkness. He could have caught up with them in a moment, but

something made him stay, and watch, till they had vanished forever in the gloom.

*

Over the burnt and blasted hills the spirit of Demeter walked. Beside her skipped the goat-legged wraith of Pan, a trickle of music seeping from his pipe. And where their feet passed, where his notes fell, there twisted a faint memory of grass and gorse, a flourish of heather, indistinct blurs of flowers not to bloom for another year; and creeping over the trees stole a cloak of green. Silver-grey and deep over hunched olives, deep and black for the cypress, piercing hues for oak and almond, orange and magnolia. In the cornfields, now awash with earthy gold, the tasselled corn swayed and hissed, crackling, in the wind of their passing, and into the silence left in their wake stole the sweet, drowsy and hypnotic ring of the cicadas.

Athene and Hestia moved unseen over Greece. Under their touch, the peoples who had lived through the last days found what strength they needed to bear their losses. Into the shells of their cities, to the ghosts of their villages, they crept back – to rebuild, reform and to forget; till the Dorians came from the north. And seeing the labours of the silent gods, they offered prayer and sacrifice, which poured anew into the emptied Worship Works, now brimming once more with potency and promise.

Far from Olympus, off the pearly-smoothed shore of Corcyra, floated a pink inflatable bed. From the blue furnace of the sky the sunlight fell upon the water, shimmering like powdered glass, ever moving, rocking the reclining form of Poseidon in its slow and lazy swell. The distant coast of Albania was huddled in a haze – along its shoreline lay a ribbon of soft cloud, like

a frosted drift of morning breath. Poseidon sighed happily, and tickled the nubile sea-nymph, who shared his inflatable bed. From time to time, he stirred the sea with the trident he held in a lazy hand.

A shifting shape sped through the mountain woods. Now hound, now hart, now fleeting, white-clad maiden, it never paused in its ceaseless race; and where it trod, the trees, once scorched by flame and thunderbolt, murmured and rustled again in a shiver of leaves. Watched by a silent, weed entangled river god who stood waist-deep in the torrent of Enipeus, Artemis fled between the trees, across the ridges towards distant Kithairon, and vanished. Far away and above her, on the shoulders of Parnassus, her brother Apollo crouched moodily, surrounded by the Muses, each of whom had failed to please him and was weeping in consequence. He was attempting to console them in picking out a tune on his lyre to fit the words that had come into his head. But the first line had begun, "No woman," and he was experiencing great difficulty in finding a rhyme, no matter how much he wished for them to stop crying.

Hades had enlisted the services of Heracles and Dionysus in the Underworld, seeing as they were both old hands in the deep places of the world, and who, he reflected, had special gifts apt for the restoration of Hell, with which all concerned were happily engaged. In distant Etna, Hephaestus bent over his dry-roaring furnace, skin blazoned crimson in the light of his spilling fires, hammering sheets of livid steel into horrific shapes. Mighty Cyclopes, sweat pouring into their single eyes, drummed alongside him, though they beat the metal rather more gently around a particularly horrific shape, where one of their number had fallen into

the steel. They would saw him out once the new Gates of Hell had been completed.

Heracles, his colossal strength suitably employed, was directing and assisting a team of Titans in the demolition of the Reception lobby and the Personnel Departments, while Dionysus took great pleasure in getting everyone in the Underworld as drunk as he possibly could and was conscientiously directing a riot. A forest of vine leaves coiled eagerly over the wreckage, pulling falling concrete apart, and in its wake, into the cracks and fissures, crept the old familiar shadows, the comfortable dark of the House of Hades.

Prometheus was with Zeus when he climbed the Air Throne once more. He sat at the feet of Zeus as they surveyed Olympus and the turning Earth beneath. Zeus shuffled slightly. He found the Throne less comfortable than before.

The West Side had vanished, destroyed in the upheavals, whilst teams of demigods could be seen in the distance, under the instruction of mountains and rivers, landscape gardeners par excellence, in the rebuilding of their city.

"I should like to see Heracles, Athene and Aphrodite," said Zeus, turning in his seat till he perceived them. "I haven't yet thanked them properly."

"I don't know whether this is a time for thanks," said Prometheus. "We did what we thought was right."

"For which I thank you," said Zeus. He paused. "One should always strive to do what one thinks is right."

"Not so much has been lost after all, Zeus," said Prometheus. Zeus winced, and did not answer. The older god went on, "Mycenaean civilisation had to fall, as Troy fell, to make way for the Dorians and the ages that are to be – the Archaic, the Classical, and

Hellenistic. And as for Olympus, soon everything will be the same again."
"Will it?"
"Time is a great healer."
Zeus looked sharply at his companion, and Prometheus found himself compelled to meet his gaze. "No," said Zeus. "Time was my father and a monster. He is no healer. Time is only a crust that forms over what is still raw and painful underneath. Do we want it to be the same again, Prometheus? Much was wrong before, and I should not have fallen were this not so. I know a little of what I must do. The People of Olympus have tasted freedom, and they gave me their votes and their trust. I must not betray that trust, nor yet that freedom. Remember that Ploutokratia was not destroyed. She was merely scattered and dispersed. And I cannot uncreate Hera's system of money or finances – you know as well as I do that no Immortal can undo another's work in this way. But I must ensure that we use the power of Argurion, wherever he has vanished, for the people's good, not to enslave them, and to allow them a say, however small, in how they are governed. And above all, I must leave them free to think and act as they see fit. I hope that at a fundamental level, Prometheus, if we are fairly liberal and fairly free, who their ruler is will make little difference to their lives, as long as he is sufficiently far away and his hands gentle on the reins. This is what I must remember. What I owe to them, perhaps."
"It's unusual for *you* to lecture me," smiled Prometheus.
"I have been lectured so often by so many people recently," remarked Zeus, "That I no longer know what is really right or true or even what I think myself. But I have an idea, possibly erroneous, which I shall do my

best to realise. And as it is secret, I shall not use it for political mileage or let it become some fatuous slogan on a banner."

He was quiet for a while, looking down upon the Earth. A brief smile curved his mouth. "Poor Hera," he said. "I now see that she was not wholly wrong. Indeed, in many ways she saw more clearly than I did. I am sorry that I made her fury cloud her judgement. She would still be a powerful friend, could I win her over."

"She is pretending that none of it happened."

"Very sensibly. And strangely enough, she seems very friendly towards me at present. She is working with Menelaos' successor in Sparta. She said something to me about it before she left. I didn't quite grasp it, but it was along the lines of *Oh, Athene has protected Athens and is going to build it up in the next age, how marvellous,* so *pleased for her myself, would be wonderful of it works, don't you think it would be a lovely idea if I did the same for Sparta, and I could direct the Spartans into an alliance with the Athenians, seeing as it's Athene's city, and they'll all be great friends in the Classical Age and won't it be lovely, Athene will be* so *grateful to me*...Anyhow, she seems happy enough down there. I'm sure she'll make a great success of whatever she does with Sparta.

"Yes," said Prometheus doubtfully. "I'm sure she will."

They watched a ribbon of green and sun-baked gold unrolling over the distant hills and plains of Greece. "So many structures and systems, so delicate and irreplaceable, only too easy to destroy forever," said Zeus. "Did I tell you that I'd repaired the Office?"

"No, you hadn't. That's good news."

"Yes, it was delighted. I've set it up with a less-inquisitive programme, with better back up systems.

And I've given it lots and lots of Random Temporal Access Memory as a present. If it weren't for its hard work, I'd have been in Tartarus long ago. It seems to be playing some kind of violent game with itself for the time being, but it'll have plenty to do soon, I'm sure. All the gods are working very hard at the moment, but it won't last. Nothing they do does."
"Quite."
"But nevertheless, we cannot rebuild exactly. Not all their new ideas were unworthy."
Prometheus shrugged. "As you see fit. I'm only an advisor. As long as we keep clear of the evils of a monetary society…"
"And from the virtues as well?" asked Zeus. "The old days are gone forever. Shouldn't we just let them pass?"
"Not entirely. You don't mean to say you've been converted, Zeus? To Argurion?"
Zeus shook his head. With the fall of hyacinthine locks upon his brows, there echoed a quiver of thunder in the clear sky. "Not converted," he laughed. "I find it difficult to describe. But I shall tell you some time, no doubt." He fell quiet, and then went on, "One thing I think I have seen is that to be really effective as a god, you *can't* let yourself believe that individual human beings matter. To do so would destroy your sanity, because so many pass before you that it's almost impossible to believe that the individuals themselves have any meaning or significance. You cannot care for them all."
"Do you really believe that?"
"I said effective," said Zeus, "not good. Apollo can objectify a human being, because he's a perfect god. But I hope that I can't, especially now. If that is the price to pay for perfection, then I would rather stay

tainted." He gave a sudden mischievous grin; the first real smile Prometheus had seen upon his face for longer than he could remember. It warmed the heart of the old god, and filled him with a sweet paternal feeling. He knew then, for the present at least, that his part had been played.

"Well, Zeus, I really must be off now," he said, rising to his feet. Zeus clasped his hand. "Thank you – for everything," he told him.

"Any time, any time," smiled Prometheus. "I delight in service – of all kinds. But I'm going back to what I was up to before all this started. Very interesting it was too, despite the horrible weather. In a little island, of the west coast of the Continent. I've got whole tribes of hairy gentlemen who have leanings towards blue body paint all very struck by the idea of sticking large stones into the ground and doing funny mathematical things with the stars and the sun. Most interesting, and great fun, I assure you. They show remarkable promise."

"I shall make a point of coming to visit," promised Zeus. "But goodbye for now."

"Goodbye."

Zeus sank back in the Throne as the sparkle of Prometheus twinkled in the afternoon sky, shrank and vanished in the blue. He gave a deep, long and unutterably weary sigh. Tentatively he felt for the arms of the Air Throne, and teased the cloud cushion in his fingers. Yes, it did appear he was really where he seemed. So it was all, finally, over. Although there was much he did not wish to think about, much whose memory was painful, much that was left for him to do, he could at least rejoice in the knowledge that it was ended. He had arrived at the end of the road.

He realised, as he fought with his sadness, that no other living being held Melitta's memory as did he, that she had passed from all other minds beneath the sun, passed leaving no more trace than a cloud-shadow moving over a field. Not even Melitta herself would now recall that she had once lived and laughed and walked the Earth; and he must not let her wholly die. Some part of Melitta would escape Libitina, goddess of death, and while he lived and breathed, in some sense so would she.

Yet the nagging thought of the road began to trouble his mind. A tiny, niggling reminder of something he had said, had seen or done, and within seconds he was upright again, searching the world below him, focusing now on this pathway, now on that, on trackless wilds or folded mountains. Finally he found what he sought. A tiny, lone figure, plodding determinedly along a Macedonian pass. His hair and beard were tangled and grimy, his tunic torn, coated with filth, scarcely covering the impressive frame beneath. To Zeus' great surprise, the man still bore a long pole over his shoulder, shaped and flattened at one end. Music came faintly to Zeus' ears; he realised that the man was whistling a cheerful tune with irrepressible dolefulness, or a doleful tune with irrepressible cheerfulness. It was difficult to say which.

Zeus called to Hermes, who had been dozing all the while at the foot of the Air Throne, waiting orders. "Yes, sah!" he saluted. The newly clipped Winged Boots shook their pinions briskly at his heels.

"Stop saying that, will you?" Now, I want you to disguise yourself as a mortal-"

"Yes sir."

"- and go down to Earth and ask that man over there why he's carrying a winnowing fan on his shoulder."
Hermes looked. "Permission to speak, sir."
"I wish you'd drop this stupid military act," said Zeus. "But yes, speak."
"He's not."
"Not what?"
"Not carrying a winnowing fan on his shoulder," pointed out Hermes helpfully, with the manner of one correcting a minor, who is on the point of making a career-impairing mistake. "It's an oar."
"I don't care what it *is*," said Zeus irritably. "I want you to ask him why he's carrying a winnowing fan."
"But…"
"No, don't ask me to explain. Just do it, please. Ask your great-uncle Poseidon about it when you get back."

Hermes gave his grandfather a pitying glance, but rose as though humouring an elderly relative who used to be quite good fun, but does have funny turns occasionally. He patted Zeus on the arm. "All right, I'll do it," he said. "You just sit there and enjoy the sun. See if you can have a nap. I shall now go and ask that mortal, who is carrying an oar, why he is carrying a winnowing fan."
"Thank you," said Zeus. "It'll mean a lot to him."
"Yes, I'm sure it will," said Hermes.

After he had gone, Zeus leant back and closed his eyes. He exhaled slowly. Now, he told himself, it really was over.

It was while he rejoiced in this happy realisation that he became aware of a subtle and seductive scent stealing sylph-like through the summer warmth. At first he dismissed it as the workings of his imagination, but as the scent grew stronger and correspondingly more

seductive he was forced to open his eyes, to find Aphrodite sitting perched on the arm of the Throne. In voluminous waves of translucent, airy gossamer, crowned by her foaming wave of floating golden hair, she appeared once again ravishingly, irresistibly lovely.

"Hello Zeus," she smiled.

"Hello Aphrodite," he greeted her gingerly. He'd last seen her in action against the Giants just before their confinement to Tartarus, and, as he had remarked, hadn't yet thanked her sufficiently for her part in his restoration. He did so now.

She giggled, a beautiful, silver trill of laughter. "Oh, please don't mention it, darling," she admonished him, placing a playful hand briefly on his shoulder. "*Anything* for you, Zeus."

"Yes, I'm sure," he agreed uneasily. "Perhaps…I was thinking…I might have some work to do somewhere…I've left rather a lot undone, got pretty behind lately…"

Aphrodite laughed again. "Yes, that was what I wanted to talk to you about," she said, leaning down beside him. She lowered her voice. "Haven't we got some…unfinished business to see to, Zeus?"

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Later, much later, the hard glitter of the blue enamelled dome above softened and dimmed, and its glassy hues paled before the oncoming dark. Across the western sky spilled crimson from the blood-red waves lapping the shores of the Hesperides, and from behind the frowning cloud wall on the margins of the world, fanning across the dome, shot bars of brightness, golden lances streaming along the azure tunnels towards the night at their end, through a curving bastion of heaped

darkness, fired beneath to the colour of narcissus eyes, melting into the lemon-pale sky. On Earth, the trees trembled in the wind, and the scents of evening sprang into the air – soft musk, the whisper of pine and cypress, shot through with the distant echo of owls floating on silent wings, their soft calls filling the silence left by the fading of the cicadas.

A night like, yet unlike, every one that had darkened before it. It followed a pattern, it is true; but the quiver of the leaves, the light, metallic scent of dewfall on grass and stone, the shiver of the starlit air, would never return in quite the same form, never be glimpsed or tasted again. Perhaps a hundred thousand nights had gone before, a hundred thousand follow, and in their abundance blend under one brief word – but to forget those that had passed and be unaware of those to come was but the work of a single breath of that night's air, to realise the infinity that lay around one in the darkness, a sable beauty that one now saw was unique, never to come again. Yet at the time it might have been possible to believe this night would last forever, a night with all its faults and follies, all its wonders and loveliness. And to believe it would remain, until the stars were drowned in the lilac flood of another morning.

Το τελος
The End