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THE TARN OF ETERNITY

(Previous title, "When the Water Lilies Bloom")

by Frank Tymon

The Garden of Persephone

Dry and sere it lies. Where once beauty bloomed, weeds and briars grow, as grow untrimmed bushes once flowering plants.

They flower not.

Paths meander through the drear landscape. In earlier time lovingly attended, now lie they under gray dust and blowing brown leaves. All paths, in good time, led to the garden gate, its posterns now long whitened by blowing wind and sand.

Dry ditches, ground cracked, dust and sand stretch from the broken gate. The gate, the fence - fallen, twisted, even as the garden.

By day the sun burns harshly the once green grass. By night the chill of winter coats each plant with killing frost. Gusting winds tear and rip where once soft zephyrs blew.

In bygone days bloomed here red roses, and pink carnations. The lilacs' fragrance, the soft beauty of the violets, the brilliant yellow of the sunflower graced long ago this garden.

The bees hummed contentedly, and butterflies floated from flower to flower. Gentle rains caressed the brilliant blossoms, the verdant leaves. Dewdrops glistened on green leaf at morningtide.

Of evening, sang the nightingales. By day, birdsong and happy bird chatter filled the air. In vibrant colors warblers and finches courted here, and yellow canaries darted from tree to tree. Flying jewels, the hummingbirds, decorated the flower gardens.

Always blue skies above, and soft caress of the warm sun. At times, white clouds drifted softly, released the gentle rain. The flowers opened wide, washed their bright faces in the crystal drops. The falling moisture fed the myriad streams, and cooled the noontime air.

Rivulets flowed with delicate tinkling sound amidst the flowers. In the clear waters darted fish of brilliant hue, red and gold. Here grew the waterflowers along the bank, and watercress.

A pond there was, cool water where swam the ducks and wild geese. From time to time awkward goslings there swam, and oftentimes the graceful swan.

Growing there, also, the pure white beauty of the waterlilies. Their beauty hid a message of foreboding. A message, by the Gods' grace, that Persephone could not read.

Here dwelt peace and tranquillity, rest from toil, relief from care.

Here walked, with gentle grace of fawn, Persephone in happier days. The beauty of the flowers faded in comparison to her beauty. Bright eyed, smooth skinned, lips the color and softness of the rose petals she added beauty to the already beautiful. The happy chatter of the birds was lost in the happy laughter of this child. Here she tended her flowers with loving care, dreamed the dreams of youth - and blissfully knew nought of the trials to come.

Bird music filled the air, each performer more talented than the other. Nature painted the garden with hues beyond man's ken. Persephone danced in joy beneath the warm sun, sang with the birds.

Ceres watched with happy smile, her daughter.

Yet felt the chill of premonition.

Such was the Garden of Persephone.

And that, long since.

The Garden of Pluto

Darkness!

Not the gentle poetic darkness of a summer evening, softly hiding the courting rites of youth, bringing peace and rest to a tired world. Nor the friendly shadow one finds in the depth of quiet forest, sheltered from the noonday sun.

The darkness of Hades has nought in common with these.

Clasp your hands before your eyes, pressing close against your lids. Open wide your eyes and try to see. Feel the absolute darkness pressing in upon you!

This the darkness of Hades. A darkness that presses on your very eyes. And more! A darkness that envelopes mind and soul! An unending and solid darkness, not of this world.

This is the darkness of Hades! This is the darkness of the damned!

In Pluto's garden, earth's flowers do not grow. Yet grow there plants.

Strange, distorted semblances of earthly growth, they twist and writhe. They search for a non-existent sun, thirst for never falling water. The roses thorns have, yet have they not the blossoms.

Yet is there beauty.

The mystic asphodel here grows. With blossoms seen, now unseen, hues rainbow inspired. Waxlike and translucent they grow in abundance in this, the abode of the dead. They bloom in the deep night of Hades, their aroma rousing hopeless hope, and forlorn memories. The fragrance clashes with the evil ambiance of eternal misery. Trampled 'neath the hooves of Pluto's chargers, yet they ever rise again. Their strange beauty carpets the pastures of Hades. Their gentle perfume permeates the fields and streams of hell.

In Persephone's garden do gentle streams trickle.

Not so in Hades.

Here flows the Styx, the River of Hate, nine times round the infernal region, dark waters flooded with ancient mysteries. The Acheron, the Mother of Sorrows, carrying in its stream the woes of all mankind, merges with the darker waters of the Cocytus, land of the doomed wanderer. Here even the waves and ripples cry out, and none but Charon dare the fearsome tide.

Phlegethon flows here. Cooling water, water to assuage one's thirst, to cool one's brow?

No!

Fire! Liquid fire! With consistency of molten lava the glowing red stream burns all within its path.

And here also Lethe. The one good gift in all of Hades. A draught from the stream cleanses the mind of all remembrances. The evil acts, regretted, are no more. The rare acts of kindness, bright gems in memory, fade. What was, what might have been, washed away by this one blessed draught. Even, 'tis said, gentle Lethian dews bring blessed forgetfulness, release from love lost, sin committed.

The mighty rivers flow, and in the depth of Hades merge into a thunderous stream. Dense dark fog rises from that surface, more black than gray, then fades to rise again. Here, midst meadows of asphodels, the monstrous stream surges and pounds in a huge moat, guardian to the great castle.

A moat deep and broad, home of fabled creatures, forbidding and dark. From its surface exudes pestilential odors, and a drop of malignant liquid from its depths, extracted from time to time, spreads all repugnant ills upon the world. The misery of cholera, the evil plague, unnamed and unknown diseases are its behest to mankind.

That castle, the centerpiece of the Garden of Pluto, rises high and majestic upon the far shore beyond the turbulent moat. Its design, a strange and fascinating beauty, both attracts and repels. Turrets rise - and yet they waver in one's vision, fade, and rise again. From windows shine light of fire within, replaced at times by grotesque shadows on the panes.

The walls of purest white as though purity dwelt therein. A drawbridge, extending well above the angry waters below. Huge chains, cold and foreboding, wait patiently to lift its massive weight. A door, broad and tall, dark, blocks rather than welcomes the visitor. Above that door gargoyles of weird design look down. Living, or hewn from stone, they cast a spell of evil on all who pass this portal.

Within the guests of Pluto enjoy the viands from the far reaches of earth. Wines to challenge even the nectar of Olympus. Their bouquet ethereal and light, they entice and capture. Food both delicate and strong. Strong meaty tastes, and gentle taste of dainty herbs. Spices, strange and delicate fruits. Music and song and dance, with cymbals, and stringed instruments, and drums. With singers whose beauty rivals the beauty of their song. And dancers nimble as wild goat, smooth and gracious as swan. All these and more - for Pluto has on call the most brilliant of entertainers.

Poets read their masterpieces, novelists theirs. Artists display their paintings, statues. Musicians play with infinite skill. Nothing is lacking, for all are on call in this kingdom. Every art is represented here. Brilliance is not rare. Nor is beauty.

Conversation is gay and never ending. Humor of all sorts is heard. Skits are performed to thunderous applause. Joy and good cheer abound. Laughter fills the halls again and again.

The dances are spirited, with happy couples moving in perfect timing with the music of world famous bands.

Pluto looks on the festivities, notes when interest fades, introduces new diversions, keeps the activity ever moving, ever exciting.

Yet with his best efforts, at times, the sound of revelry fades. From out the walls, from beyond the moat, the moans and lamentations, screams of never-ending pain, weeping. Misery lies without. And all the charades within the castle walls cannot disguise that this is, indeed, the abode of the damned. Always, like a blanket of gloom, reality envelopes that great castle.

And finally, in the early morning hours, the guests are spirited back to their earthly abodes. The musicians put away their instruments, the entertainers retreat to their dressing rooms, the great hall is cleaned, and all who have catered the festivities return once more to their fated punishment.

Only Pluto remains, seated, dour and melancholy, on the great throne.

No bright and lilting music, no gay conversation, no happy laughter masks the lamentations from without.

The party is over!

This is the Garden of Pluto.

The Garden of Persephone, unattended, lies in waste.

The Garden of Pluto endures, tended by slaves who dream of emancipation - and labor eternally.

The Garden of Pluto endures - today, tomorrow, forever!

1. Beginning

"Demo, Listen!" Petulant anger was in her voice.

"He's chasing the chickens again! You really must do something about that dog. Hurry, now, before he catches one." His mother's usually calm mien had disappeared. She had raised a fine flock of chickens and was proud of every one. To her chagrin, Rough had acquired a taste for chickens.

"Rough, leave them be! Come here!"

The dog at first wagged its tail, then let it droop between its legs as it noted the tone of voice. Slowly it approached, its head hung low, expectant of punishment.

"Rough, I am the greatest hunter in the village. No, I am the greatest hunter in the whole of Greece. None but I can draw this bow. None but I can hit the mark, time after time. None can shoot an arrow for such a distance!"

His mother smiled. Only 17, yet with the assurance of youth, he boasted of his skill. Well might he do so. For years his bow and arrows had fed them well. Today he would foray in search of deer.

"And you! All you can hunt is chickens! Well, you are growing. Soon I'll take you with me on the hunt. And we'll hunt deer, and bear, and . . . Well, anyway, not chickens. You hear me, pup?" Demo rubbed its head with both hands, patted the animal.

Rough licked his palm, followed him into the house, tail wagging.

"Lucky for you, dog, that you didn't catch that rooster. He'd of flogged you good with his beak and spurs. Now, Demo, you watch him. I wont have my chickens killed by the likes of that mutt." Demo's mother growled in fake anger while surreptitiously feeding Rough some scraps.

A beautiful dog, with long light brown fur covering his body, except for a breast of pure white, his looks belied his name. A handsome head, intelligent eyes, and an attitude of careful interest placated his master and mistress.

Rough lay down quietly, gazing from one to the other.

"Yes, you are a skilled hunter. I will make ready to cook venison, for you never return empty-handed. You wont return empty handed, right?" She smiled.

She stood, stepped to his side, and hugged him for a moment. Her face mirrored pride as she felt his strong arms around her.

He had been a sickly child. But the Gods had been kind. With the help of a skilled nursemaid, with good food and work and play, he had recovered. Now a young man, tall and stalwart, tanned by the sun he displayed none of the weaknesses of yore. She was pleased.

His brown eyes, dark hair, and handsome visage were no less pleasant to her. Soon he would be looking for a mate from the village maidens. In her mind she had already made a selection. She glanced at him, smiled.

Her thoughts pursued for a moment that theme. I must invite Theresa to dine with us. Yes, they would make a handsome pair.

His face reddened at her compliment, and he laughed in pleasure.

"You shall not be disappointed, Mother."

"No, nor would I ever be. Ah, were your Father Celeus still living. How proud he would be!"

She filled his pouch with provender for the hunt. Cheese, and fruit, and warm bread she had baked that day. The smell of the warm bread and the sweet spread that coated it, the oranges, made all look eagerly to the meal ahead.

As she tended his meal, frying venison, he took more warm bread from the table, shared it with Rough, and grinned as his mother turned to catch them.

"Demophoon! Shame! Without even asking! Do you like it? Is it good?"

"Mother, your bread is better than another's cake. Isn't it Rough?"

Rough barked with mention of his name.

Watching him with both amusement and pride as he stalked into the bordering forest, his mother Metaneira noted the approaching storm cloud. She frowned.

With all his strength and courage he was still but a boy. Hopefully he will find a dry cave to shelter in. The rains will be heavy, the winds strong.

Even in the best of weather she felt concern when he went on his sojourns. Too many hunters had gone out, not to return. The Gods of the Forest did not take kindly to wanderers. And they protected their own.

A chill ran along her back, and she shivered.

"Rough, I shall be glad when you can go with him. He may well need your aid one day."

She did not realize how prophetic were her words.

Leaving their home he strode rapidly through the open forest of oak trees. Soon the land began to rise. He climbed the high mountains, their peaks glistening in the sun. The oak trees gradually thinned, and pines began to take their place. And at the higher reaches even the pines gave way to scrubbrush and weeds. Sunlight was beginning to disappear as he climbed, and he noted the dark thunderclouds, forming in the north. There shall be weather by nightfall, he thought.

"The deer will sense it. They will be searching for shelter. And I know the grove where they will congregate, waiting for the storm to pass." He voiced the words even as they came to mind.

It was a habit formed of living a lonely life. Since he had none to talk to on his frequent excursions, he talked softly to himself.

At times he argued with himself - now supporting a position; now, opposing it. Such mental contests amused him, sharpened his wits, or so he led himself to believe.

"They will drift down to the little valley on yonder hillside. I can be there by set of sun, or perhaps travel under moonlight, and our larder will be well-stocked tomorrow."

Today he didn't argue with himself. It was a good plan. He began the climb to the mountain valley.

Few paths led into the mountains. Torturous and narrow they quickly petered out into animal trails or ended abruptly without cause. Man left the mountains to Gods of the forest. Only the bravest hunters dared their heights.

It did not concern him. This was his world, and he climbed steadily, finding passage where others might turn back.

The lower reaches of the foothills were rolling and the climb was gradual. Here grew giant trees, broadleaved under the summer sun, bare in the cold of winter. Nevertheless, here game was rare, as man dwelled nigh.

As he passed the foothills the terrain became increasingly rougher. From time to time a vertical wall of stone blocked his way, and he detoured on twisting paths among boulders as tall as himself.

Sometimes, when no path existed for his progress, he carefully and slowly climbed the rugged precipice.

"Ah, " he smiled, "would I could fly." He gazed upward, noted dangerous routes, continued his climb. Panting from his efforts he progressed ever upward, soon reaching levels where only the evergreens grew. And as he went upward still, even these grew more rarely, and more diminutive in form. A few, twisted and gnarled, hung tenaciously to the near barren earth, their forms bowed in submission to the power of the wind.

As he leaped from boulder to boulder one twisted beneath his foot. The motion of the stone threw him to the side of the trail, to the outer edge of the pathway. Loose dirt and gravels rattled downward, bounced from jutting ledges, disappearing into the fog that hid the rock-strewn surface at the cliff's base.

With the agility of youth he caught his balance, danced to a more solid footing. For a moment he sat down, grinned at the incident as he gazed over the edge of the precipice that might have welcomed him. He picked up a pebble, tossed it over the rim, watched and listened as it careened downward from ledge to ledge. He shook his head.

"Could have been me."

He grinned, tossed another pebble. It rattled down the surfaced, bounced outward.

"No, no way, not me."

He leaned back for a moment, relaxed in the warming rays of the sun, filtered at times by the gathering clouds.

He rubbed his ankle, winced at the pain. "Well, not broken. I think I'll cut a staff. Too bad. May slow me."

Even as he fashioned the staff his thoughts wandered. He thought the deep, deep thoughts of youth. The concerns for tomorrow. His search for a goal beyond the hunting and fishing of his daily life. His companions had gone diverse ways. Some were now merchants, others farmers, a few followed the sea. Some very few had disappeared into the wilds, destined to join outlaw bands. Perhaps he should become, as his Father, a farmer.

To plow the fields, plant, and watch the harvest grow. Marry and raise a family.

"Mother would like that. She would favor Theresa. And I do like her. "

He put his weight on the staff, walked back and forth. The ankle was swollen, ached, but he would manage.

His thoughts once more returned to the future. Married, a home of his own? It was not unappealing. Ah, but he could not forsake the mountains, give up the hunt! Anyway, there was time enough.

"There is tomorrow, and many tomorrows to come. Time enough."

High above a flock of wild geese flew, their path southward toward the sea. Clouds, winddriven, chased them across the darkening sky. In the distance lightning flashed between dark cumulus clouds. Quickly the rumble of thunder followed. He felt the cool breeze ruffling his hair, heard its whisper in his ear. Another burst of thunder. "Close, very close." he murmured. "Best I be moving on. Still, the wind is shifting. Perhaps it will pass by."

Above the whisper of windrustled leaves he heard a different noise, the soft pad of footsteps approaching. He frowned. By the sound he knew them to be human, and likely two people. But who would be traveling here at this time, with the impending storm?

Rising, Demo slipped silently into the bordering underbrush, moved to the meager shelter of a gnarled pine. He lay flat at its base, obscured by its trunk from any curious eyes that might gaze from the pathway.

Tales passed by word of mouth of robber bands, brigands who made their home in the forests. Furtive, deadly, they survived by waylaying unwary travelers. Perhaps exaggerated tales, but few honest men dared the high mountains!

He waited, eyes wide, controlling breathe and movement.

"I tell you, I saw the boy. He was young, scampered up the slopes like a mountain goat. And he carried a pouch. There could be gold. At least he should have food, and our larder is nearly empty."

The speaker and his comrade came into sight at the mouth of a dark ravine.

"Maybe a kid out on a hunt. Or maybe a trick. He could be here looking for us, with a band ready to follow. They were peaceful enough in the village when we took only a few coins and needed food. It's when you killed that tradesman all changed. Now they are afraid, and they are hunting desperately for us."

"True. Anyway, it was dispatch him or be taken prisoner. And I say we do the same with this one. I say we find this lad, open his gullet, take his pouch and toss him off yonder crag. This is our territory, and we want no trespassers!" He grinned, pleased at the thought.

The speaker was medium height, burly, and his face wore an angry scowl. His companion was taller. The shorter man was plainly the leader, and the tall one listened more than talked.

"He had a bow."

"We come up behind him, end it quickly. His bow is of no consequence."

"Say, look here. Something's happened here. Look at the stones, and the footprints."

They knelt where Demo had nearly taken a fall, examined the disturbed stones, and the surrounding ground.

"You're right, someone has been here. And it looks like they've decided to stay - down there." The tall man pointed over the brink of the escarpment toward the valley floor.

"The path ends here, and that's a fact. Well, if he went over at this point he's a goner. Too bad. Wonder what he had in that pouch?"

They glanced cautiously out over the edge of the precipice. The short man suddenly gave the tall one a half shove.

"You idiot! What if I'd slipped. I'll rap you on that thick skull if you do a fool thing like that again!"

The shorter one grinned. "Ah, it was just in fun. I'd not send you over."

"No, not unless you were for taking all the coins for yourself. Just keep your distance. Maybe you saw nothing at all, just wanted to get me out here where it'd be easy. No, Rooster, I trust you not at all."

The burly man pulled a dagger from his belt, still grinning. "You think too much, friend Peter. Nevertheless, I like it! It is an excellent idea!"

The blade darted out! Missed!

The Peter stepped back quickly, slipped, fell sideward, slid toward the cliff!

He grabbed the ankle of his companion. The Rooster kicked his face! Blood spurted from a broken nose, covered the sandled foot! Rooster pulled and jerked, trying to free his leg, but Peter held on doggedly.

"Damn you." Peter spat at his attacker. He grabbed a rock, rose to his knees, still grasping Rooster's ankle. His opponent pulled away, his eyes on the rock. Red blood flowed from Peter's torn skin and swollen nose. Peter lashed out desperately with the rock, crashing it against his companion's knee.

"Damn you, you've broken my leg!" Rooster cursed, slashed at Peter's rock hand as both slid toward the waiting cliff.

Dropping the rock Peter, too, drew a knife, slashed at Rooster's leg.

A boulder interrupted their slide. They both struggled to their feet.

"I'll see you in hell," Rooster thrust once more with his weapon.

The blade sliced through flesh, hit bone. Peter, wounded in the left side, gasped, staggered backward.

With a grimace his burly assailant suddenly rushed forward, slashing wildly.

Peter, leaping sideward, felt the stones rolling beneath his feet.

Ground gave way, and he screamed. At the same moment he grabbed the Rooster's arm, yanked him forward.

For a moment they staggered on the edge of the precipice.

It ended quickly!

Even as they fought the ground quivered beneath their feet! Then, with a low rumbling, the ledge on which they fought began to slide. White-faced they dropped their weapons, scrambled to reach a firm foothold.

It was to no avail!

Their frightened screams mingled with the growing roar of the falling boulders, lasted only seconds. Demo lay still, unable to rise. The screams had ceased. Now nothing else was heard save the rattle of falling stones. Dust rose from the cliffs edge, quickly blew away by a vagrant breeze.

Demo lay still. It had happened so quickly!

They had stood on the trail, talking, friends it seemed. And in moments they had turned on one another, fought! And now - they were gone.

Dead!

He shuddered.

"Ah, how my heart is beating!" He stood up. "Dead, and in but a few heartbeats of time!" He leaned on his staff, took a deep breath. "And that's what they would have done to me!"

He moved gingerly from his retreat.

He listened carefully.

"There are no more of them . . . ?" He glanced fearfully toward the ravine from which they had emerged.

There was only silence.

Slowly Demo edged up to the brink of the precipice, slowly peered downward.

Nothing could be seen save a few scattered boulders and a few dark patches lying ominously quiet.

He turned now downward, turned his back on the lonely desolation of the higher peaks. His thoughts remained with the scene that had just occurred.

Long he had heard of brigands and outlaws in the high mountains. In appearance these had looked no different than his neighbors in the valley. Yet they had destroyed each other in acts of senseless violence.

"May the Gods keep me! What strange mad creatures we humans are!" he whispered to himself. He paused, leaned against the bole of a tree. He felt nauseated, weak. They were not old, certainly younger than his Mother. And now, snuffed out, gone. He sat down, his back against the tree.

It could have just as easily been me. He took a deep breath. It was me they wanted. And they would have killed me just as quickly. A shiver ran through his body.

"Is life so very cheap?" He looked at his hands, held them in front of his face. "It can end so quickly. "

He had never thought about it. Never given death even a second thought. But now it would not leave his mind. A quick slash with a knife, a blow to the head, a fell from a crag. And it is over.

The only death he had ever know was that of his Father. And he had been quite young. It had been lonesome without him, sad. But he had not understood how very final it was. He had always thought, in a childish way, that his Father would return. Perhaps, strangely, even 'til now.

He hadn't thought of his Father for a long while. He knew not why, but tears welled from his eyes. For a few moments he sat beneath the tree, sobbing. Now I begin to understand. How strange, after all these years. And yet he had always missed his Father. But he had never cried before. He shook his

head.

His Mother had cried. He remembered, at night, listening to her sobs. He had walked to her bed, hugged her, and she kissed him. But he had not really understood. Now he did. How very strange. How insensitive we are, unknowingly.

Biting his lip he rose, glanced back toward the escarpment. With an effort he brought his thoughts once more to the hunt. Did the deer ever think of death? Was the buck fearful, constantly watchful for the hunter? How very strange the world!

He began his descent, wide-eyed and watchful. There could be others around any tree, any boulder!

His concern was not warranted, for he met neither brigands nor wild beast. The mountain slopes were silent. As though the men had never existed, had never disturbed the peace and calm of the placid heights.

The valley he sought lay far below, tree encompassed. The downward path would be easier. Even now he walked mid patches of green grass and verdant bushes. Wild flowers bloomed, occasional berry bushes provided sustenance, and he ate, then stopped.

Here he was eating, enjoying the mountains bounty! And they! Lying dead, who had but moments before lived and breathed as did he. How short the distance between survival and abundance. He thought again of the scene he had watched.

The thought continued to shock him. His thoughts were more often on material things, on stalking the deer, catching the fish from the streams. He shook his head, driving away dismal thoughts as he lengthened his stride toward the distant valley.

"Well, I must be careful. Mother was right. There are brigands about. My, that ankle does ache. But I promised Mother venison." He leaned on the staff to lessen the pain.

The high mountains beckoned with promise of game. Above the domain of man the deer browsed. At times threatened by wolf or the mountain lions, they flourished still. To the hunter who dared these slopes a day without success was rare.

The storm clouds were nearing rapidly. The air preceding their arrival was beginning to cool. The odor of rain wafted ahead of the storm. And the odor of ozone, accompanying the frequent lightning flashes. Drifting downward from the peaks, dark thunderclouds forewarned of imminent danger. Long rumbles of thunder followed the frequent flash of lightning. And the wind blew continuously, a mournful sound at times steady, but more frequently gusting in sudden fury. The trees swayed wildly under the ministrations of Aeolus.

The deer, driven by the storm, drifted more rapidly toward the valley for shelter. They were small, at times indistinguishable because of the distance. Still could he make out, or so imagined, antlered bucks among them. The best of these would fall to his arrow. In spite of the weather he would indeed be there by sundown. It would be a good hunt. In his mind he could smell the cooking venison.

Ceres watched her world with happy smiles. Soft rains nurtured the crops, and harvests would be bountiful. Bees from flower to flower flew, humming as they went their industrious way. Grain grew tall, and every tree limb bent low, weighted with its fruit. Grapes were bounteous, green grapes and blue, others purple and red.

Ceres watched with jealous heart. Every seed to her was sacred. If but one failed to put forth its plant she fretted. If several slept lazily under the fertile soil her lips tightened in concern. A limb that bore no fruit, a plant that failed to flower - all drew from her the like concern.

Yet she was happy, for though man must toil to reap, his rewards were plentiful. The grapes, swollen purple, ready to burst with sweetness, soon would go to press. Bacchus would receive his devotees, frolicking, carousing, and celebrating joyful times. For the people were thankful for the wealth of food their land produced, and gave thanks through their celebrations.

Ceres watched her daughter playing amidst the flowers of their garden. Winsome and gay and ever active she darted among the plants, now chasing a colored butterfly; now dancing with a flirting breeze.

Soon her education must begin. The ways of the wind, of the storm gods, and of Earth herself must she learn. The many plants, their names and their fruit, were to be learned. When and where to sow, how deep the seed to plant. Harvesting, and storing the harvest, were skills she must have. Preparing the foods to satisfy the taste and body - so many wonderful and exciting secrets of the world!

But, for now, let her play. Her curiosity would teach her much. Observant, Persephone noted each subtle change in plant and in the land. Inquisitive, she asked of Ceres question after question, probing to find how and why and what of each event, each object.

Ceres watched with pride her lovely child.

And wondered at the dark sense of foreboding that would not leave her mind.

Brooding, his eyes half closed, Pluto sat on his sumptuous throne. Ornate with jewels - diamonds and rubies, sapphires and amethyst, green jade and blue turquoise - it held the treasures of the world. Decorated with filigree of silver and gold, it dominated the room. Or would have, were it not for its occupant.

Zeus and Poseidon, his brothers, were heroic figures before man and Gods. Strong, handsome, powerful - they were admired, worshipped.

Not so, Pluto.

Face and form hideous to behold he ruled the nether world. Not admiration, nor worship were his. Rather, fear!

His appearance aroused it. He stood huge over the poor supplicants who pleaded for release from this, the eternal prison. A skin of leathery hue, plated in metallic scales that gleamed in light of candle. Misshapen form, twisted, broken. A face of ghastly white, lined with deep marks that twisted with his thoughts, pitted with pock marks. He projected fear and evil. His kingdom reinforced it. The tales and rumors that spread among men, and even on high Olympus, did little to dissipate that fear.

Only his eyes, often hidden by lowered lids, belied his appearance. For they reflected the pity and compassion in his soul.

At his invitation the great castle filled with revelers. Yet, in their presence or alone, Pluto had no feeling of belonging. His was a lonely world, a world apart.

Companionship, friendship, understanding - these were denied him.

And, also, love.

Pluto brooded.

2. The White Owl

Demo suddenly heard thrashing, mixed with the distress call of a bird. Rounding a bend in the mountain trail he quickly stopped. Before him was a scene of impending tragedy.

An owl, beautiful, with white feathers, struggled. Enmeshed in a clever trap it was unable to break free. A cunning net had extended above the narrow ravine, and the bird had triggered an ingenious mechanism that released the net. Its wings threshed uselessly as it tumbled on the rocky ground.

And creeping ever closer, a fox. Its eyes gleamed in anticipation. Saliva dripped from its open mouth. The sun's rays reflected from the glistening fangs. Brown and white matted fur clung tightly to its body. Gaunt and hungry, its every muscle tensed, it waited eagerly for the right moment to strike.

It crouched to spring, inched closer to its prey.

"No you don't." Demo whispered the words. Laying aside the staff, smoothly, with hardly a thought, Demo drew an arrow from its pouch. Notching it to the string he drew the bow.

Even as he did so the fox sprang, jaws open wide.

With a whistle the arrow flew through the air!

The fox, startled, twisted to avoid the danger.

Too late!

The arrow struck him at the peak of his leap. It struck high on his haunch, cut deep into the upper leg. The arrow's force knocked the animal sideward, and he fell short of his victim.

Even as the fox fell the world burst asunder in a thunderclap of sound. The force of a sudden wind drove Demo to his knee, almost stunned.

He froze in that position, starred in consternation at the scene in front of him.

Where the fox had fallen an imp stands, looking at him in anger. It's hand pulls dagger from sheath. The long twisted blade is raised threateningly. Demo takes another arrow from the quiver.

A louder blast of thunder feels the air and the imp looks up in fear. With another glance of hate he dashes away into the bushes.

But Demo's eyes are focused on another, and the imp is not now the center of Demo's attention. The cynosure of his gaze is the beautiful white owl. For the beautiful white owl is now more beautiful still.

Standing free from the trap is the princess of the forest nymphs. She has shed the white feathers of the owl and stands before him in innocent beauty. She smiles as his face reddens, then steps behind some obscuring bushes.

"What, what is it . . . !" he stammered.

Dazed, Demo backed away. "This is unreal. It can not be happening. Imps, and Goddesses - these are but stories. Where am I? This is not the world I know. Who am I that I meet with imps and Goddesses. Enough that this day I have seen death. " He mouthed the words, but no sound came.

He closed his eyes, opened them.

She did not go away.

"You have saved me from the minions of Pluto, the God of Hades. And for that you shall be rewarded. I shall take you as my husband, and you shall live with me forever. We will dwell among the Gods, and you shall ever be my protector."

The lilting beauty of her voice entranced him. It caressed him as the gentle notes of a favorite song. Bewitched, he ignored the content of her words, merely listened to tone of her voice..

"Come with me. I am Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. We must tell Zeus. There will be great rejoicing on Olympus. Zeus feared I should never find a suitable husband! Yet, here you are!"

She reached out for his hand. They never touched, for then, twice in this one day, a mysterious force intervened. Looking upward he saw great dark clouds boiling. From their depth a streak of lightning sundered the ground between him and Athena. Dust and rubble filled the air, and the ground shook beneath his feet.

A mighty voice, deep and vibrant, rumbled from the heavens.

"Mortal, dare you even think to consort with the Gods!"

For a moment he heard no other sound. He looked up in awe at the darkened sky. The silence enwrapped him as a shroud. Even the wind whispered not.

"On your way! Back to your valley!"

Lightless, the sky seemed only a black blanket drawn over his head. The winds once more gusted, tearing angrily at trees and bushes. The thunder rumbled ominously in preparation for another lightning strike.

"Marry for yourself a simple galleymaid. Do not anger the mighty Zeus! Husband to Athena? Bah!"

He shrank back in dismay, wide-eyed.

Though he was silent, Athena bravely replied. "He has saved me from your evil brother, Pluto. He has risked his life for mine. He shall be rewarded. Oh mighty Zeus, if you love me, grant this to me."

Rumblings reverberated from the walls of the mountain canyon. Finally they give way to silence. Then, with brief lightning flashes from cloud to cloud, there is a response.

"Very well, my dear. Perhaps it shall be as you desire. He's a brave young man. Striking down a minion of Pluto alone does not, of itself, make him deserving. Nevertheless, he may indeed join us on

Olympus."

The voice stopped, the clouds darkened even more. The mountain, in the midst of day, is black as midnight.

By the sound alone he knows that Athena again reaches her hand to him. And again a bolt from the sky separates the two.

"No! First he must prove himself worthy." The voice once more thunders. "To win the hand of a Goddess is not an easy chore. But, if you prove yourself, it shall be as you desire. First, though, . . ." - and now the voice grew soft and warm with an assumed kindness.

"Yes, first you must perform some minor chores. A few little tasks, perhaps. Yes, that's it! A dozen or so little tasks. Piddling things, actually. Hmmm, let me give some thought to this."

The skies were beginning to lighten. The voice of Zeus had softened indeed, as had his mood. The clouds were rapidly dissipating. Blue patches of sky emerged. The dark clouds dissipated, and small white clouds drifted gently above.

"Go home! Prepare yourself! And when I call be quick to begin your sojourn. - Eh, yes, I think minor little chores."

It almost sounds like Zeus is humming happily to himself.

The wind whipped the leaves along the pathway, the clouds tore asunder. And, even as he glanced back to earth, Athena, too, had departed.

Nothing remained to reflect the tragedy that might have been. Nothing remained to reflect the beauty and wonder of Athena. Yet

On the ground, fluttering in the now gentle breeze, a single memento - a pure white feather. He picked it up gently, reverently.

What to do?

What to do? "This is madness. I am dreaming. Death and imps! Goddesses and Gods. What has happened today? Can it be real!" He looked around at the forest, at the sky. All was calm, normal. Except for one thing.

In his hand he held a white feather.

Reluctantly he continued his hunt. There must be food for his mother and himself. In spite of himself, because of the day's events, his thoughts strayed.

He blushed again as he thought of the beautiful Goddess. "Can I return to my hut, live as a simple hunter, having seen her?"

"No! As Zeus has spoken, I shall return and await his command. After all, how difficult can be a few little chores?"

He thought he saw the imp dancing through the bushes, chortling in glee.

Suddenly he tossed away the white feather. Even as it floated down the side of the mountain he took up his weapons, returned to the hunt.

"How foolish can I be," he muttered to himself. "Even if it were real. I to wed a Goddess! It cannot be!"

Shadows were lengthening, soon night would fall. Nights on the high mountain are cold and forlorn. Already the sun, hidden by the storm clouds, neared the horizon. The sky, an angry red, peaked through rents in the dark clouds. Large drops of rain pelted him, cold with the hint of hail.

Yet, swiftly, the body of the storm had swept by. The remaining clouds drifted high above, each in its solitary domain. The wind still gusted from time to time, momentarily, then faded.

Tree leaves fluttered as the evening breeze began its soft caress. In the eastern sky a single star began to shine. One of the heaven's wanderers, not unlike himself on the earth below.

He halted. In the copse ahead a creature moved. Sensing his presence it froze in position. A tawny hide, revealed momentarily between the leaves, brought a gleam to Demo's eye.

A buck!

Demo notched his arrow, waited silently.

The antlered head extended above the bushes. The moist nostrils sniffed the air. Then the buck bounded across the trail.

The arrow flew, and without glancing at the prey he unstrung his bow.

As he moved toward the copse a falling leaf drifted down, dressed in the yellow-brown of the coming season. His eyes followed it, then he glanced toward the copse. In astonishment, he noted that the buck was no where to be seen. Quickly he rushed forward. Nothing! No buck, and no sign of life!

"Not possible, not possible that I have missed! Now, where is the deer," Demo wondered aloud.

The light glinted on an object. He saw, lying on the forest floor, that object. An object that caused him to freeze in place. A beautiful white feather. And beneath it on the ground, his arrow. Athena will not be rejected!

Uncertainly he stared from side to side, hesitated. Finally he picked up the feather, pressed it to his heart.

"It is the will of the Gods!"

He returned the arrow to its pouch, rushed through the darkening forest to the mountain hut far below.

"I must prepare myself. I must be ready to perform the tasks of Zeus!"

Olympus is a world far removed from this, our earthly abode. Its laws are not as our laws, its inhabitants not as those of earth. Here dwelt, from time to time, the twelve major Gods. Here ruled Zeus, the ThunderGod.

It is said the Gods, all powerful, do what they will, act as they wish, and answer to none.

Not true!

Moirā, to whose edicts even mighty Zeus must acquiesce, had long before Olympus' birth assigned duties. Assigned those duties that ever were to weigh upon the celestial house. Duties that seemed, to those who bore them, merely whims of their own devising.

Zeus, forever to nudge the earth, to keep that sphere spinning in its little space. Poseidon, ever to keep the busy waters flowing, mixing, changing. Pluto, to warden the whole of Hades, dealing out evenhandedly to each of the ferryman's charges that portion of eternal punishment that each had earned.

And each lesser God, also duties had.

Of the Gods only Zeus sensed that strange and ever-present being, realized that responsibilities had been assigned. He knew not Fate by name, but knew full well the chores ever to be done. At times he chafed under their weight, yet always returned to his given work. Where others might have rebelled Zeus pondered, understood, and acquiesced. And as these duties were laid on him, he laid also duties on man. Pride, a strange duty indeed. Yet each must be proud of himself, of his selfworth. And work he imposed, for pride comes from work well done. The duty to love, and to seek love were there. The duty to be gentle, and to be harsh - and the wisdom to choose the time for each.

Yes, Zeus tempered duties imposed, with wisdom for their performance.

When Zeus had looked on Demo he had been troubled. This earthling would, of course, fail in one or all the tasks to be imposed.

And still, within, he felt the might of Moirā and knew misgivings.

What must lie ahead, not given even for Zeus to foresee? The plans of man and Gods go astray when Fate's dictates are ignored.

"Theresa, I'm so glad you came by. Perhaps you can stay for evening meal. Demo should return by nightfall. He's out chasing deer. I'm sure we'll have venison. Ah, your hair! What have you done to it! It's so different, and yet so nice. Come in. Rough!"

She shouted at the dog, who growled low at the visitor, then approached stiff-legged to sniff at her legs. Satisfied he wagged his tail, deigned to graciously accept the pats the visitor bestowed.

"My, look how you have grown! Let me see, you're 15 now. Do you know, I was married at 15. Such a silly girl. I knew nothing. But he was so attentive, so kind. I fell madly in love. Are you in love, Theresa? Every young girl should fall in love! It is a wonderful, sad, happy experience! Do sit down."

"I haven't seen Demo in ages. Is he well? What does he do?"
Theresa paused for a moment, adding "Has he a girl friend?"

Metaneira smiled.

"I'm glad you came. Here, let me get some sweetmeats and drinks. I don't have company often. Girl friend? No, I think not. He's too wild! What girl would want him! He fishes and hunts and disappears into the forest for days at a time. Ah, the poor girl who gets him for a husband!"

Theresa sat demurely on the proffered chair. Rough lay down beside her, comfortable that she was no threat to him, or to the family he protected.

"Oh, I think he is a fine boy. How old is he now? He seems so big and strong. And he's handsome. He looks much like his mother."

Metaneira accepted with pleasure the compliments for her son.
After all, she herself was sure they were true.

"No, he is his Father's image. His Father was very handsome.
Very handsome." She was silent for a moment, remembering.

"So long ago! Theresa, do you like Demo? I think it would be well for him to find a good woman, to settle down." She looked searchingly into the girl's eyes.

Theresa blushed, looked down, then looked at her.

"I've always liked him. Still, at times he is so young and childish. He seldom glances at me, or even at any of the girls. The other boys chase us madly. I could have my choice, you know!" Her voice suggested that she expected doubt.

"You stay for supper, dear. My, I like the way you are dressed.
Come here, there are a few changes needed. Trust me."

She examined the girl carefully. "Turn around, my dear, slowly. Hmmmm, can we tighten it ever so slightly here?" She adjusted the girl's waistband.

"And it is so warm. Why not leave this just a bit more open to the air - that much. No, a little more yet." She loosed Theresa's bodice slightly, then a bit more, suggesting rather than exposing the smooth rise of her breasts.

Theresa, red-faced, looked searchingly at her, then giggled.

"We're terrible, aren't we. It isn't our fault, since a young man is so insensitive. Sometimes you must be very forward to wake them up. Besides, I know he likes you. He's just very shy, and he truly knows nothing about real life. My, my, I shouldn't be talking like this. After all, I am his mother. Don't you feel like a conspirator?"

They laughed together.

Demo entered the yard, face flushed. Rough barked joyously, jumped up and down in excitement. He rushed to his master, leaped up, to receive a happy hug.

"Mother, I must tell you what happened. I . . . ?" He paused as both his Mother and Theresa came

through the door.

"Oh, hello, Theresa. Eh, Mother, I'll hang the venison."

He cut and hung up the meat while the women worked and talked in the kitchen. Once done he washed up, sat at the oaken table.

"Theresa is staying for supper. She helped me cook. Isn't that a lovely dress. Turn around for him Theresa. Isn't she pretty and slender. My, Theresa, some boy will be carrying you off before we know it!"

Theresa twirled, blushing but smiling. Demo blinked, swallowed. She was a very pretty girl. Yet he could not help but think of the vision he had seen this day, and compare the two.

The aroma of cooking meat reminded him of how long since he had eaten. The meal of venison and vegetables, with sweetbread his mother cooked, all washed down with wine he finished swiftly. "How hungry I was, and how good it is! Mother, you are such a good cook!"

"I don't know where you can put so much food. Poor woman who catches you. She'll spend all her time in the kitchen. Well, if she looks like Theresa, she may spend some time in the bedroom."

Theresa blushed, glanced under lowered eyes at Demo.

"Demo, walk her home, will you. The moon is bright tonight, but I've heard there are brigands about. Besides, I'm sure you could find no lovelier company."

They walked slowly beneath the moonlight. Theresa stumbled and he caught her arm. She leaned close against him, took his hand. "Thank you. I might have fallen."

"It's all right," he responded gruffly, moving away. Nevertheless, he left his hand in hers.

"Demo, the moon is so beautiful tonight. Almost bright as day. I love the moonlight. My, you are so tall. And such strong arms!" she placed her hand around his upper arm, squeezed.

"It's a good moon for hunting. Fortunately, our larder is full, at least for now."

"Then you should have more free time. Will you come and see me. At times it is lonely. I need a true friend, one I can turn to in time of trouble. A friend like you."

For a moment Demo was silent. He wanted to put his arm around her, hold her close, and tell her that she had a friend. He didn't understand his feelings. He felt the need to hold her in his arms. She seemed so fragile, so small and weak and helpless. He thought of a young doe, first learning to stand. He was confused. His thoughts wandered, today's events were on his mind, and he hesitated.

"Theresa, we have always been friends since we were small. When you needed help, I have been there. It will always be so. I guess I have always cared for you, little sister."

They reached the door of her home, and her father stood outside watching their approach. "Good evening, Demo. I see you have brought her home. The pathways are safe tonight, it seems. Girl, your mother would like to talk to you."

"Goodnight, Demo. Please come tomorrow night."

As she went inside Demo heard her mother's voice. "Girl, you are out very late. My, your face is so bright and radiant. You don't have a fever I hope. Oh, my, what have you done to your dress. Turn around here. Well, you really shouldn't. Well, I guess I did the same when I was your age. You grow up so fast, so fast!"

"Demo, how goes the hunting?"

"Hunting has gone well. Our larder is full. Now I must prepare the house for the winter season. The winds are picking up, and we'll be getting more rain shortly. Our roof needs some repair."

"Well, I still need more meat, but there is time enough. Walk with me a moment, boy."

"You and Theresa have known each other a long time. I've watched you grow from childhood to manhood. And she'll be taking a husband before many more seasons pass. What of you, boy? Have you plans to marry?"

"Sir, my plans now are mostly to care for my Mother. I . . . , well, I suppose I shall marry in time."

"The flowers bloom, and then they fade. Don't delay too long in living your own life. I believe your mother would be pleased to see you wed. Like Theresa said, why don't you stop by the house tomorrow night. The wife is an excellent cook, and you look like you could use a pound or two. I have some wine we shall enjoy together. I'd like your opinion of it."

On the way home Demo thought of the day's events. Somehow, he thought, I have this strange feeling. As though the beaters were driving me into a trap.

"Strange. Yesterday I was child, without concerns." He spoke aloud, thoughtfully, to himself. "Today I feel so very different. I have seen death. I have seen Athena. And even Zeus has revealed himself to me. It is as though, overnight, I have grown up."

And yet he felt too much the child. Everything was happening too quickly.

"I need time, I need a lot of time."

Demo shook his head. Rough came running toward him, and he laughed, skipped along the path, then ran home with the dog barking, chasing excitedly at his heels.

The rumble of wheels, the pounding of hoofs, filled the night air. Through the darkness dashed without concern four great stallions, pulling the dark chariot.

At the reins was Pluto!

Thunder rumbled through the sky, blended with the thunder of chariot and team. The only light was that from occasional lightning. It revealed the grim visage of the driver.

On whatever mission Pluto rode this night, plainly it bore heavy on his mind.

Persephone sat in the garden swing, watched the night sky, the gentle stars. A storm brewed, but like all storms, skirted her garden. In the distance she saw the dark clouds, illumined by the lightning's flash.

And on the far mountain road, momentarily revealed by that lightning flash, a chariot pulled with madcap speed by four huge stallions.

She frowned, then laughed away her concern. A nighthawk flew by, identified by its nasal peent. A soft warm breeze rustled the leaves of the lilac bush. The sweet fragrance of the lilacs filled the air.

Persephone swung gently, hummed quietly to herself. Looking up she saw a shooting star, a brilliant traveler among the stars, quickly fading.

She laughed happily at its beauty. Then thought more somberly of what it might portend.

3. Waiting

He waited impatiently. The days were growing shorter, the rains were more prevalent. Even now, outside the hut, he heard the drops beating with ever increasing fury. The pelting on the roof, the whistling of the wind, and the increasing cold all presaged an early and severe winter.

His mother was preparing the evening meal. Luckily, on his way home he had chanced on two bucks, and the first fell to his ready arrow. And that two weeks afore!

The aroma of the roasting venison permeated the little hut. His mother hummed quietly to herself as she stirred vegetables, skillfully added the exact measure of spices, sprinkled on tangy herbs. Yet his thoughts wandered. Dwelling on recent activities, his thoughts were not on food.

Had Zeus forgotten?

He gazed into the burning logs, listened to the crackling as he stirred the ashes. The brilliant sparks rose and disappeared.

Demo strode from the fire to the doorway, stared at the mist and rain. The weather kept him from the hunt. The encounter with the Goddess Athena occupied his mind. He had confused and uncertain thoughts over all that had happened. Was it but a dream?

Now the winds began to moan through the trees. Autumn has already touched the high mountains. He glanced out at the moist leaves, all bright in gold and crimson hues, soon to darken. Then they will fall. The mountains shall be barren.

He examined the pack his mother had prepared. It contained several days' food, for he had no idea how long he would be on his quest. He picked up his pouch, examined each arrow in turn. Sharpened and re-sharpened! They wait to fly straight and true to his prey. The smell of the cooking venison again caught his attention.

"Eat well, my son. When you are called you will have little time for food." His mother smiled. Yet her smile is a little wan, for she fears for his welfare.

"You know, Theresa is a lovely girl. She was by when you were on your last hunt. I think she likes you."

He ignored her comments. He has no thought for Theresa.

"She's a very pretty girl. A little younger than you, but not so much. Her parents look with favor on you, too."

She glanced at him, judging the impact of her words. Disappointed, she returned to preparing the meal.

After eating he tested the strength of his great bow. Made of the finest wood, it drove arrow after arrow deep into the oak at the edge of the forest.

Braving the rain he went to the tree to regain his arrows. All but one were retrieved. Demo frowned, for the tree gripped the last arrow stubbornly.

Rough sat on his haunches, a quizzical look on his face as he watched his master tugging at the arrow. Suddenly Rough growled. He rushed toward the tree, barking.

Demo pulled even harder, glancing up into the tree as he did so. There, seated on the lowest limb, sneered the fox-imp. It smiled in delight at his efforts to free the arrow.

"Listen, mortal. My master Pluto sends you greetings. You are a great hunter." The imp stopped with a frown.

"I show the proof of it on my hide," he grumbled morosely.

"Never mind. My master says you shall also be a rich hunter. Give up your thoughts of the Goddess Athena. You shall have riches beyond measure."

The arrow suddenly came free in Demo's hands, and he tumbled backwards, rolled over and over on the muddy ground.

Rough quickly bounded to his side, whining. When his master rose the whine changed to a contented growl, and he turned once more to contemplating the creature in the tree. Plainly it looked more appetizing than a chicken.

The fox-imp's smile now changed to derisive guffaws. "And you would perform the twelve tasks of Zeus! If you but attempt to begin that sojourn I shall be with you. I, and my companions, shall haunt your trail until you fall in misery and failure." The voice is angry and threatening.

"But," and now his voice is affable, "if you accept the offer of Pluto - if you renounce this vain adventure - you shall receive all the pleasures of this earth. Gold and jewels will be yours. Wine of the finest vintage! Women of the most delicate and beautiful nature! All you desire - and an eternity in which to enjoy it. That my master offers you. As a token that you accept, only break the arrow in your hand."

He shook his head. Should he break the arrow. All the riches of the world! Slowly he grasped the arrows shaft, bent it in his strong grasp.

And if he follows the path laid out by Zeus? By the tricky and devious Zeus! Zeus who has never made easy the lot of the adventurer!

And Athena. He recalls her beauty, the sweetness of her voice. She wanted him as her husband - and as her protector!

Suddenly Demo drew back his arm, threw the arrow at the fox-imp.

The latter dodged quickly in surprise, and the arrow barely scratched his skin.

"Oh, you are a beauty, you are. Ah, how that stings. Master Pluto has great things in store for you, young hunter. Great things! And how I shall enjoy serving them to you!"

He leaped from the tree, turning to his fox form before touching the ground. For a moment he sat, scratching at the wound with his hind leg. Rough rushed forward, growling, teeth bared. The fox glanced quickly over his shoulder at the dog, then dashed into the forest.

Demo stood silently in the mist and rain.

Can this really be happening? I have heard of such things, but only in stories. I was sure they were only to frighten children. And yet . . . and yet it is happening to me. Why to me? I don't understand. I wish

"Demo, my goodness! You'll catch a terrible cold. Come inside. Oh, you look so pale. Here, dry your head. And wrap up warm." She hugged him to her, tousled his hair. "My, children never grow up. Quick now."

Zeus was slowly entering comments in his diary, muttering under his breath.

"The thoughts he had in his mind when he beheld the Goddess! Dear, dear - unconscionable!" He stopped, noting Hera standing by his side.

"Yes, Dear Husband. I'm sure you would not countenance any unchaste thoughts on the part of this bumpkin."

He ignored the sarcasm in her voice.

"And was he, this youth, perchance handsome?"

"Handsome," he growled. "No, no! You would find him singularly unattractive, I assure you."

'Ummm! Singularly unattractive. Well!'

"Now, be about your business. I must call Athena, the Goddess of memory. I vaguely recall some chores of historical note. Some very interesting little minor chores. Oh, yes!"

For a moment Hera stood still, frowned. Fortunately for Zeus she was quickly distracted by her maids, who gathered around to whisper of the exciting events of the day. They left the room, chattering and laughing.

Zeus smiled as he contemplated those interesting little minor chores. "Athena, in spite of her foolish infatuation, will provide me with the information I need. Eh, reluctantly, I suppose. My, the difficulties one meets in governing the universe!"

He hummed softly. "What is that called! Catchy little tune. Hera, dear, I'm hungry. My ambrosia, please."

Hera, at the door, glanced backed at him in surprise. "Ambrosia, please? Did I hear 'please'?" She walked across the room to his side, placed her palm on his forehead, shaking her head as she did so. "Strange, no fever. Please? My, how un-Zeus-like!"

In happier times did Persephone with the water nymphs play. By the seashore they gathered. They brought from the ocean's depth strange flowers, colorful stones, and jewels seized from sailing ships by angry sea.

Persephone carried with her flowers from her garden, a garland on her head. With her she brought fruits, and all manner of good and beautiful plants that grew within the garden.

In their play they fashioned garlands, gave them beauty by wearing them. The dolphins swam near and laughed and sported to see the beauty of land and sea at play.

One other watched them too. From a distance and with brooding eyes. Often, as they frolicked on that white and sandy shore, he sat in the gloom of the forest in his golden chariot, his four black steeds pawing at the leaf-covered ground.

Their beauty he coveted.

And above all he desired Persephone!

4. The First Quest

He lay in bed, awake. It was morning, but morning dark and gloomy. He could hardly see the doorway. The rain fell steadily, the wind gusting, falling, then gusting once again. The air was damp, cold, and clothes and bedclothes were soaked with moisture from the humidity. He shivered, curled up tightly against the cold.

Still, Rough tugged at the blankets as day broke, eager for his master's company. Reluctantly Demo shooed the dog away, tucked the covers more closely around himself.

"Well, mother, I shall sleep in this morning. Even Zeus is hardly up and about on a day like this."

It was the wrong thing to say.

The rain suddenly increased, the wind grew stronger, and the door flew open. Rough began barking excitedly, moved cautiously toward the open door. As the rain blew in he retreated nearer his master. Demo rose quickly to shut the door, but not before a dark object blew in, fell upon the floor. Quickly Rough seized it between his teeth, shook it from side to side.

"Hey, easy there." Demo approached the dog cautiously. In his mouth Rough held a thin leather sheet. And burned on its surface were some words. Slowly Demo deciphered them.

"The race is to the swift. Sometimes. Be at the Temple of Mars at sundown. The white feather must . . ."

He could not make out the rest. The heavy rain had soaked the material, and the remaining words were smudged beyond recognition.

Zeus! It could have come from no other!

"Mother, I must go quickly. Why the temple of Mars? There is no way to reach it by sundown. Still, I must try."

She looked at the falling rain, thought to detain him. Finally she sighed, quickly put more and fresher food in his pouch. "Perhaps you should take the white feather. And do be careful. I had a bad dream last night. I shall not repeat to you, but beware of that which you cannot see."

She hugged him.

In spite of the rain he smiled. The first task was begun.

The race is to the swift. Sometimes.

What strange words these.

And to reach the temple of Mars by sundown! Beyond the ability of any mortal.

Still, perhaps, if he could float on the swift waters of the churning river it might be possible. The falling rain had turned the gentle stream into thunderous torrents. And even as he looked a huge tree floated down the stream, twisting and rolling.

There seemed no other option. Quickly he located two fallen logs, pried them slowly to the waters edge. There he knotted vines around them, forming a single platform. Finally, with a deep breath, he forced them off the bank into the stream.

Almost too late he waded out. The cold mud sucked at his feet, the angry water stormed at his thighs. He leaped atop the nearest log, slipped, fell across the logs awkwardly. He was on his way to the temple of Mars!

What chance of success he had was quickly spoiled.

When he clambered onto the raft his pouch had opened. A sudden gust of wind picked up the white feather, wafted it quickly beyond his reach. In seconds it landed on the raging waters, quickly disappeared from sight.

Rough bounded along the shore, barking furiously. He badly wanted to board the raft, yet feared to dare the sullen waters. Finally, as the raft moved to the stream's center the dog stopped, whined, its tail between its legs. The dog shivered as though in fear, then slowly turned to wend its way home.

Demo watched with regret as the Rough quickly disappeared in the midst of the heavy rain shower. "Perhaps I should have taken you with me. No, you must stay home, protect Mother."

Demo smiled. With a sigh he braced himself on the logs as the tumultuous stream tossed the frail craft from side to side. What a wonderful start he was making to perform the required tasks of Zeus!

The white feather, lost to the wind and the rain! And his chances of reaching the temple before nightfall almost non-existent!

The watery trip, miraculously, was almost uneventful. Almost.

As the raft rounded a bend in the river the water narrowed, flowed ever faster. And on the shore, obscured by the driving rain and gathering fog, stood a creature of unearthly mien. It neither moved nor spoke.

Demo had faced the bear that claimed the mountain ridges as their own. The snarling night cats that dominated the forests had stood before him. Of them all, none had aroused in him such fear as now he felt.

For from this creature radiated a menace more fearsome than he had ever known, an overwhelming evil emanation.

Demo gasped, eyes wide. "What is it! What manner of beast are you . . . ?"

Almost immediately the creature disappeared in the swirling mist.

It was gone! Though it disappeared from view he felt a premonition. A premonition that he would see it again. He knew not why, but knew it would be with him. A constant, unseen companion. The chill that enveloped him now was not caused by the cold, soaking rain.

Whether sundown was near, or had long past, he could not tell. The dark, drear day had no sun, only the continuous rain. Finally, there, on the cliff above, stood the temple, barely visible.

He paddled with his hands, attempting to bring his raft to the far shore. The water swirled, waves built up before the wind, and currents formed and disappeared throughout the stream. His paddling was almost to no avail. The makeshift raft swirled, rocked, meandered randomly at the mercy of the river. By the time the craft reached the shore he had drifted well beyond the temple.

Clawing his way up the muddy bank he found a narrow trail and began the climb. His ankle, which he had thought healed, began a slow steady ache. Rock-strewn, and now covered with silt and muck and murky water, the trail formed a slippery maze up the mountainside. Rivulets gouged ever-deepening gullies across the path. At times the entire path was but a stream, with swift water washing away small plants and stones.

Midway in his climb he entered a wide clearing. A doe, in attempting to flee from his approach, had slipped and its leg hung useless as it stood, shivering in fear.

A ray of light appeared briefly from a sun very low on the horizon. Time was running out. With a frown he avoided the doe, continued his climb.

He could not help himself. He looked back, and its brown limpid eyes, full of pain and fear, held him. Finally, with a growl, he returned. He approached the beast carefully. Though it tried to evade him, it was to no avail. Finally it stood motionless, shivering.

"I have no time, little one. I must be quick. This splint will hold, hopefully, until you heal." He bound the doe's leg with wooden splints in place. With a growl he started once more up the mountain. He noticed the doe following behind, timidly maintaining its distance.

"Go away. The sun has certainly set. Ah, if you had only been a full grown buck. My arrow would have quickly found its mark. And I would already be at the temple!"

When he reached the temple it was indeed dark. The building rose massively before him. Built over the years, at times of wood, at times of stone, it had grown from a small shrine to its current size. Cautiously he entered through the huge doorway. The wooden doors were open, as though he were

expected. There was no sound. The temple was empty!

Plainly, Zeus had already departed!.

Demo sat down in the middle of the floor, his head bowed. Finally he noted a white feather lying in an open space near the temple's center. He picked it up, stroked it softly with his hand. How like the one lost in the storm!

Dropping it, aloud he whispered, "Good-bye, Athena. It was not to be."

The clatter of hooves on the floor caught his attention. The doe stood by the door, pawing the stones. "Well, you have cost me dearly, little one. Go on your way, there are hunters who would not reject you."

A rumbling voice filled the temple. "The race is to the swift. Sometimes."

The voice emanated from the doe!

Quickly he stood up. Zeus! It must be Zeus!

"Merely a little test, my boy. One must be sensitive to suffering. Your bleeding heart has caused you to fail this simple task, bringing the white feather to the temple. Nevertheless, I'll certainly remember you kindly for the aid you provided me. Well, boy, go on home now. It was nice knowing you."

His head bowed he walked across the temple, passed the doe on his way to the downward path.

"Wait!" The voice was an angry growl. "What is this! How did it get here?"

Zeus stood in the middle of the temple, in his godly form now. In his hand he held the feather Demo had previously taken from the floor, only to toss aside.

"I know not sire. For the feather I carried was stolen away by the wind. This was here when I entered the temple."

"Ah, good, good. Then it couldn't be the feather. Good day, my boy. Give my regards to your mother - and to any other kinfolk you should meet. Lovely day, lovely." Zeus smiled happily as the rain dripped upon him from a rent in the temple roof.

With drooping head Demo once more turned to go. A sudden disturbance caught his attention. Once more he halted.

A beautiful owl floated on wide spread white wings through the temple entrance.

"Zeus, Aeolus carried here the white feather. Even as you required, it was delivered. Nought was said that the boy must himself carry it."

"Athena, you shall have many children." He paused for a moment. "And all of them shall be lawyers," Zeus growled. "Very well, technically the task was done. Come back, my boy. Let us celebrate your success. Here, have a sip of my most valued nectar."

Zeus tipped the flask, burped, wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Here you are. Take a deep draught."

Demo smiled happily, looked at the rosy fluid for a moment, and raising the flask to his lips, closed his eyes.

He drank eagerly. Oddly, the liquid had little taste. Not noticeably different from the taste of water. Almost like rainwater, really.

"Demo, you must fix that leak. The rain is all over your face. How can you lie there!"

He opened his eyes wide. Indeed he was lying on his own bed. And the only nectar was the drops of rain leaking through the roof. With a start he sat up. It was only a dream!

Rough lay at the foot of his bed, eyes closed.

Lying beside the dog, half hidden by his form, something caught Demo's eye. Something familiar!

Two white feathers!

5. The Gorgon's Head

"An object of extreme rarity. Actually, only one exists - all others, destroyed. A shame, really. Could have sent out a few as gifts. Love to give one to my dear brother Pluto. Well, well, it can't be helped. Only one left." Zeus spoke sadly, noting the effect on Demo.

"And you want me to fetch this precious object for you?" Demo queried.

"Eh, that's the general idea. Now, there are some difficulties. I mean, after all, if it were too simple I would have dispatched Hera."

Suddenly his eyes widened. "Oh, oh, I didn't see you, my dear. Just joshing with the boy! Kidding around, you know!"

Hera glared. Fortunately for Zeus she was distracted, seeing Cupid practicing archery in the flowery garden. "Hmmp! Men!" she murmured as she went into the garden.

"The object - well, I must confess, it is not an object. It is . . .," He lowered his voice, glancing toward the garden. "It is a young lady whose beauty would adorn Olympus. I would have you invite her to the Olympian Spring Ball. Not a bad task, eh."

Zeus nudged him with his elbow while keeping an eagle eye on the garden. "Just let her know that the Gods look kindly upon her, and that she will be the guest of honor. She can't possibly refuse. Oh, by the way, her name is Medusa. Lovely girl, Medusa."

Now, what is the hitch? Zeus talks so kindly. Yet he is a wily one. An invitation to a beautiful girl to attend a spring festival? Why me? Would not an Olympian messenger, Mercury perhaps, have served better. After all, I have no credentials.

So his thoughts rambled as he proceeded northward.

And I know not where she dwells, nor do I know her appearance.

A bleak stretch of land lay ahead. Empty, barren, dotted with boulders it stretched well into the distance. At his pace it would require a fourth of a day to traverse. He moved across the open space cautiously, checking behind, to either side. He liked not being in the open, exposed to eyes he could not see.

Surrounded by forest, the open area exposed him to the view of foes who might wait among the trees. And in a strange land any might be a foe. Wild animals certainly wandered here. And outlaw bands who prey on lonesome travelers. He looked around more carefully. Bushes and shrubs formed a narrow border, beyond which giant evergreens loomed. In unknown territory, he felt the weight of unfriendly gaze following his progress.

On reaching the other side of the open meadow he glanced back, and his own eyes widened.

He shuddered.

It had entered the open stretch, crouched near the wooded edge. Now it dropped to the ground. Huge, misshapen, a travesty of a man, it lay quietly, motionless on the ground. Though distant, he knew it well.

The unseen companion!

Demo notched an arrow to his bow, felt the cool breeze on his fevered face. He drew the bow to its limit, shook his head.

Too far! The arrow would not carry.

He waited, but the creature lay quiet.

"What want you?" he shouted. "Why do you follow me?"

Silence.

Finally, with a shrug, he turned, started once more on his way. After a few steps he halted, looked back again.

It has disappeared! The broad expanse held now only boulders, small shrubs. Lifeless, bare, no hint of motion, other than from vagrant breeze.

Was it but a dream, an aberration in vision?

No! It was real. The bushes at the edge of the clearing were moving, disturbed by the passage of . . . He knew not what. He knew, though it had slipped into the brushes, it would return to his trail. Whatever it be, their destinies were intertwined.

But days ago I knew only my Mother, Theresa and her family well. And a few others but only to a small extent. Suddenly I walk and talk with Gods, and Goddesses - yes, and with imps. And I am followed by something, by a being unlike any other. What does it all portend? The thoughts repeated themselves as he view the clearing.

A foreboding crossed his mind.

One of us shall not survive the tasks of Zeus!

Ever northward he trekked. He did not know why, only that his feet were guided by Zeus. His quest was to the far north.

Game were plentiful, and he ate well. At times he partook of venison, at times of fish from the streams. Rarely, he ate not.

After one repast he knelt by a quiet brook, washing his face and hands.

In the water he saw a visage not his own!

He turned quickly, rose to his feet.

The unseen companion had faded into the undergrowth.

"Come out and face me, coward! Do not skulk and hide, recreant!"

Perhaps a tree branch moved, perhaps a footfall was heard.

Then, nothing.

His eyes widened, as he thought to himself, I must be on my guard. Whatever it is, it becomes bolder with each passing day.

He followed a stream, a path along its edge. The path widened as he climbed upward, and at times footprints could be discerned. A dwelling must lie not far ahead.

At evening he arrived in a small village at the foot of tall, snowpeaked mountains. He found an inn. Walls made from logs, with cracks filled with dried mud, and a rock fireplace as one wall, it formed one huge room. Animal furs, fur of deer, of bear, hung across from one wall to the other, sectioned off little bays where the traveler could rest in limited privacy. Through signs and much nodding and handwaving Demo bartered trinkets for such a room. The nights were growing cold, and this brief respite was welcome.

Suddenly a man standing by the door turned toward him, growled in mixed language at him. Strangely, Demo understood.

"Is he with you? What is he, and why does he loiter in the shadows?"

They crowded through the open doorway, gazing southward to the ravine he had so recently traversed. They stared fearfully toward the shadows at the mountain's base.

A creature, perhaps a man, stood huge in the shadows. It neither approached nor yet retreated. Even so, from it a threatening aura seemed to radiate.

The watchers moved nervously, whispered low one to another.

"No, not with me," he responded

"Begone! We want not you, nor his kind. Return him his treasures. "

The inn keeper reluctantly parted with the baubles he had received. Two were missing. Demo started to argue, realized it would be to no avail. Reluctantly he left the shelter.

"I know that creature! He has visited our village before. He brings pestilence, death. Begone, the two of you, quickly!"

They gathered outside the structure. One reached down to pick up a stone, then several others. Demo loosed his bow and they quickly shuffled inside, cursing and threatening.

Demo continued north. He didn't look back. He knew well that he was not alone.

His queries about Medusa led him now to one domain, now to another. Time after time, each lead ended without location of the fabled damsel. Until, at last, in a village on the slope of the mountains, he received guidance that seemed to hold worth.

The sun had set, and evening stars were beginning to make appearance. To the north the little bear could be seen. The air had the feel of coming frost. The great hunter moved across the cold winter sky, followed by his faithful hounds.

"Feel the air, young man! Is there not a storm brewing? A blizzard? Medusa has been deserted by her lover. Her countenance is hard. The chill winds will blow, the lakes freeze over, and living things shall freeze and die. For her heart has grown cold."

The old crone rubbed her hands together for warmth, continued.

"Until she takes again a suitor, the world will suffer from her rejection. Even now, there, beneath the little bear, she waits in her icy cave."

The night wind began to blow and the chill crept through his clothing. "Beneath the little bear, then, will I find her?"

"She is there. And she is dangerous. If you value your life, end this quest. She strikes out in her anger, uncaring for any. If you go on, beware the great white bear. He guards her by day, and by night." The old woman turned away, hobbled awkwardly to her frigid mountain hut.

She stood in the doorway, looked at him intently. "Your companion, why does he lurk in the shadows? He has nothing to fear from me."

He did not reply. He knew not himself the reason for the evil presence.

Game became increasingly scarce.

He was lucky when a rabbit crossed his path. And even these were few in number, lean in build. Scrub brush served to cook those few he killed.

The winds wailed, the snow peppered down, then settled in huge white flakes. At times the storm stilled and he traveled on in a world where day was night, night day. Across the skies strange colored images danced, twisting and turning. Here seemed a world deserted by Zeus, left to the ministrations of lesser Gods.

The world was enveloped in a blanket of white. At times he sank into its depths. At other times, frozen, it supported him as well as solid ground. And still the snow fell, wind-driven.

With cessation of the wind he could hear, though from a far distance, the crunch of footsteps on the frozen snow. Hidden in the fog or by the falling flakes, the unseen companion was ever with him, ever following.

Even when the snow ceased the air held a strange opaque whiteness, as though the world were immersed in milk. At such times even his hand before his face was not visible. He dared not travel on, knowing he would circle helplessly in the blinding whiteness.

Slowly the white out lifted. The barren snow covered wasteland stretched endlessly.

He pressed on. There was little choice.

At times the storm died, the skies cleared. Crystalline bright the stars shone down. Still the hunter, now directly overhead and to his south, marched across the wintry sky. The pole star gleamed softly, a

constant beacon.

But the storm quickly returned.

And then they met!

Invisible in the snow bank it lurked, marked his presence, waited to attack!

The great white bear moved quietly, without a warning growl. It charged down upon him, its huge jaws wide. Its clawed paws reached out to seize him.

Quickly he strung his bow, notched an arrow!

As he drew the cord, the snow settled beneath his foot. He felt himself slipping.

He fell, rolled downhill!

Demos slid halfway across a frozen pond. Thick, fat flakes of white touched his face. They melted in cold trickles as he lay half-conscious.

Suddenly the ice gave way beneath him!

Even as he sank he saw, blurred upon the shore, two monsters in mortal combat.

The great white bear!

And another. One he knew too well.

The bitter cold of the icy waters enveloped him. Through he forced his arms and legs to move, to try once more to rise to the surface, it was to no avail. The freezing cold quickly changed to numbness, then oblivion.

Warmth! He felt warmth!

Not since he had left home had he felt such wonderful, gentle, soothing warmth.

He slowly opened his eyes, then closed them in disbelief. The girl ministering to him outshone even Athena in beauty. Slender, yet with the smooth curves of a mature woman, she held his gaze. Her face, though pale, mirrored beauty found only in one's dreams. Her lips, soft and pouting, were warm and red. Her face expressed concern, and her eyes expressed compassion.

Her hands lightly massaged his body, and wherever they touched a glow of warmth spread through him. He recalled the icy cold of the lake, and his eyes widened.

"How am I here? Who are you? How did I escape the icy depths?"

Placing a finger to her lips, she smiled, exposing the whitest of teeth. "Shhh. Rest. I will explain it all, in good time."

Even as she spoke he closed his eyes, fell into fitful sleep in which he dreamed he was in her arms; then, dreamed he was carried in the arms of another, more hideous being.

He awoke with a start as the ravaged lips of the loathsome monster touched his own. Sitting up he saw no one. Finally, in the far corner of the room, he saw her. She rose slowly, from the fireplace dipped warm soup from an iron kettle.

Bringing the bowl with her she sat on the edge of his cot, slowly fed him the warm broth.

"He brought you here. Your friend. He brought you in from the blizzard, frozen and cold, and left you with me. In spite of cold and storm, he would not stay. He retreated into the blinding storm as though escaping an enemy camp." She shook her head in puzzlement.

"First, though, these words he said I should say to you." She thought for a moment.

"The time is not now. You have your destiny to fulfill. By the tarn shall all be resolved. Strange words, these. Do you understand his meaning?"

"No, I understand only that a great white beast attacked me. I fell, rolled into the frigid waters of the lake. I saw them, doing battle on the lake shore. After that I remember the cold, then nothing."

"He killed the great white bear. No mortal could achieve that victory. You have a mighty friend and protector."

"No friend of mine. He has followed me, always near, ever fearsome. I know not his purpose, but in some strange way our fates are intertwined. Would I understood it better."

"Why sojourn you in these far reaches. Did none warn you of the dangers?"

"I journey at the behest of Zeus. I seek Medusa, to invite her to the great Olympian Ball, where she will reign as queen. Do you know of her, know where I might find her?"

"Zeus! The Great Olympian Ball! I am Medusa. It is strange that you have you not heard my story. Do you not know the danger you face, merely being here with me?"

"I know nought of danger. I see but a damsel of excellent beauty, and need fear only for my heart."

She smiled at his words, then her face took on a look of sadness.

"I am condemned. I pass from wild happiness and joy to deepest misery and sorrow. And those who look on me in my happy times love me, and those who look on me in time of my distress grow cold and fearful, and are no more. No one warned you! Ah, Zeus, how can you be so unkind!" She sobbed.

"Look upon my face, for I am in a gentler mood. Beware, if you hear me lament, or see an angry trickle from my eye, look not upon me, but go your way swiftly." She placed the empty bowl on the table.

"Do you see these glistening white walls? They were formed at a time when I felt the miseries of the world upon me. The glaciers, the icebergs, the frozen wastes - all these I formed. At times, when I bask in the warmth of love, they fade, they melt. Again alone, once deserted, I form them anew." She smiled at him, touched his hand.

"I thought, perhaps, Zeus had sent you to me. Yet while you lay abed in your sleep, in your dreams, I find you love another. It is well, for my warmth shall not last. Come, let me show you my chamber of horrors. A chamber of horrors of my own doing."

She conducted him out into the cold. All around statues stood in various guises. All men. Warriors. Hunters. So detailed, so well sculpted, they seemed to lack only breath to move and walk.

"These I have loved, and in my anger destroyed. They stand there, a constant reminder of my uncontrollable nature. Even now, as I look at them, my heart moans. Begone, Demo, quickly, for a bottomless sorrow engulfs my heart. Quickly! And do not look upon my face, if you value your life!"

He started to turn toward her, but she grabbed his shoulder and turned him away. Even as she did the touch of her hands sent a chill through his body.

The warmth was gone!

"Tell Zeus Medusa shall attend the ball. Fare the well, young man. Now, flee for your life."

The calm air was stirring, and pellets of frozen snow that had been peppering the icy landscape were now blown wildly about. The wind mounted in howling fury, and soon the blizzard was upon him. He rushed southward, not daring to look back.

It was no longer the unseen companion alone he feared.

"You're back!", Zeus roared in evident surprise. "Well, yes, you're back. Been expecting you. Eh, nothing unusual about Medusa, I take it. I mean, nothing strange and, eh, stultifying?"

"A beautiful lady, sire. She welcomes your invitation, and shall attend the ball."

"The ball, yes. She will attend the ball! Zounds! What to do? Well, it may serve my purpose. I shall invite some special friends. Oh yes, very special friends! My charming brother Pluto. Serve him right. And a few other who have done me dirt. The ball is in the third month. And Medusa is in such a mood that month! Yes, I must invite some very special friends."

Zeus rubbed his hands together and smiled cherubically.

"Oh, Demo, of course you are invited."

What dreams do children dream?

Persephone sat quietly on a wooden bridge. Her legs dangled down, her tiny white feet broke the surface of the stream. The crystalline waters of the rivulet bathed them softly. A hummingbird darted near the water's surface, a brilliant winged jewel. At times it whirred motionless above the water. Then angry at the reflected beauty below, dived heedlessly, only to rise again as the rapid beat of its wings distorted the liquid mirror.

Persephone smiled, watched with amused attention.

Another hummingbird approached, and soon the two flew away, the first in angry pursuit. A tiny warrior protecting his domain.

Persephone closed her eyes, leaned back to bask in the warmth of the sun. The music of the stream, the softness of the breeze, the quiet solitude of her garden lulled her into a light slumber.

And as she slept, she dreamed.

Games of tag, of skipping ropes, of dolls ran through her mind. Friends she had known, kitty cats, and puppy dogs. Climbing the tall oak tree and seeing the big, wide world from its great height. Swinging on the swing beneath the tree. The taste of blackberries, of cherries, of fresh peaches.

The dreams of childhood.

Her mother, holding her, hugging her. Her mother's smile.

Colored stones, and crystals, and flowers. Beautiful dresses, and grown-up parties yet to come.

A far-off day and the arrival of a handsome prince, a marriage, living and playing together as children.

Children of her own, and she would mother them as her mother had done for her. Cookies, and pies, and cream covered berries.

Dolls for her girls, and swords for her brave boys. She would sew for them, and of a night tuck them into bed. She would tell them strange stories of magic worlds, and real.

Ah, the happy world, the beautiful world.

What dreams do children dream?

"Grim!"

"Inexorable!"

"Pitiless!"

"Passionless!"

"Without feeling!"

"Devil!"

"These have I been called!"

Pluto sat in his chariot on the mountainside, the mounting storm surrounding him. Gusting wind screamed, and pelting rain drove from the skies. The fury of the storm matched the fury in his voice.

"Without feeling! Then why burns this loneliness within me! Why thirst I for the companionship denied me! Was it by choice this form is mine!"

A sob was in his voice.

Gloomily he bowed his head, shook it. Reluctantly he took the reins, returned once more to the nether regions where he held sway.

Yes, even the devil weeps.

6. Escape from Tartarus

"Young man, I'm becoming increasingly dependent on you. You have carried yourself well indeed.

Athena may well have chosen a worthy mate." Zeus' smile was effusive, his manner friendly and brisk.

"I've just gotten word from the CIA (Clever Information Activities) that something is astir in Tartarus. I do hope you recall your history."

"Tartarus? Well, sire, I recall vaguely that the Titans dwell therein. And that it lies far beneath even the depths of Hades."

"Astounding? The boy has genius! Ah, you must have cheated in school. I'll bet you studied! Sneaky way to pass a course. Regardless, right you are. But there is more." Zeus paced back and forth silently, looking down, a slight frown on his face.

"The CIA tells me that Megalith, a veritable giant among giants, has assumed power. . . . However, first, let me mention a bit more geography."

Zeus sat at his desk, punched a few keys on his computer, and displayed a map labeled Tartarus. "Computer, display the boundaries."

The computer hummed and whirred for a moment, then displayed the same map, but with boundaries highlighted.

Zeus smiled in delight. "Pac-man it isn't, but it's still a great toy." He frowned momentarily. "Beats me at chess. I have plans for that programmer. Long vacation with my brother Pluto."

"Computer, give us an image of Megalith, hear?"

The computer once more hummed and whirred. A few words appeared on the screen. Zeus read them, grunted. "All right, all right! I'll do it your way! Computer, display Megalith."

The computer did some more of the h & w routine, displayed a muscular warrior, standing quietly, a bemused expression on his face.

"Looks peaceful enough, doesn't he. Ah, beware! That quiet face belies the turmoil within. He, young man, is plotting the escape from Tartarus! The escape that must be thwarted!"

Zeus stared for a moment at the computer screen. He sighed.

"You know, of course, that these - the Titans - are our forebears. I would we could live in peace with them, but it is to no avail. Out of the goodness of my heart I granted them asylum in Tartarus. Yet they are not appreciative. They want to escape. What a strange term! Who would escape from Paradise!"

The computer displayed a pair of arms, waving desperately.

"Yes, yes, what is it. Oh, I mean, Computer, Speak."

"Oh Great and Mighty One, Master of the Universe, Benefactor of all mankind, . . .," the computer began in a subservient voice.

"Computer, cease. I know all that. Get to the point. Computer, Speak."

"News of Tartarus, Master. Megalith has secretly had installed an express elevator from the basement right up to the earth's surface. He is even now contracting with the SkyHigh Elevator company to extend it to the top of Olympus. Fortunately SkyHigh is asking an exorbitant price. They have a monopoly on the elevator trade, so they are likely to eventually obtain the asking price. For now, however, Megalith is examining other alternatives. He was visiting the local Ultralight assembly plant. And it is said his agents have contacted the Rocketeers Club. No additional data at this time, Sire."

"And now, back to our commercial. Oh Great and Mighty one, Master of the Universe . . ." Zeus turned off the computer.

"He has already made his first move! An elevator indeed! And an extension to the peaks of Olympus! Zounds!"

"My boy, my plans have changed. This may require more than the skills of an earthling. I shall don human form, and I shall accompany you. The might of Megalith must be met! Ah, I like the sound of that! Permit me to repeat, The might of Megalith must be met!" He let the words roll sonorously from his lips, a slight smile on his face.

"Once considered the theater, you know. Actually, this God thing is much more fun - sometimes."

Two figures moved cautiously to the bank of the river Styx. Dark and smoothflowing the river arose from pale mists in the distance, and faded once more into mists as pale.

The sojourners moved slowly along the river's edge. One, a white-bearded elder, shuffled along supported by wooden rod. The other, younger and vigorous, darted ahead, returned, then darted ahead again.

"I think I shall tie a string to your leg, as though you were a June bug. Just calm down. There is no danger."

"For you, perhaps not. Still, I know he is here. I can feel his presence. In every sojourn he has been with me."

"Ah, the unseen companion! Yes, I too note an irksome presence. Nevertheless, nothing shall come of it this day. Trust me."

Demo glanced at the old man, Zeus. For it was indeed these two, long removed from the heights of Olympus. "Trust you . . . ? I knew this used chariot salesman once . . . Well, never mind." He noted the look of concentration on Zeus' visage. "No real correspondence. I was just thinking out loud."

Zeus regarded the river Styx with distaste.

"Most foul stream, this. I was in a vile mood when I loosed it from the bowels of the earth. Unpleasant odor, too. Fetid, in fact. Perhaps Pluto is right, a little landscaping and environmental cleanup are needed. I'll make a note . . ."

"Beware, my lad, that you drink not of these waters. Though you be of the most placid nature, but a sip from this stream and you shall rant against the world. Here has the essence of hate been distilled, and it flows forever at the edge of Hades.

They were interrupted by the yapping of a dog, or perhaps a pack of dogs. The yapping quickly changed to deep-throated growls. "Ah hah! Cerberus! My puppy! Must have grown a bit by now. How glad he will be to see me once more" Zeus was exuberant.

His face was that of an eager child. Plainly a wave of nostalgia flooded his mind, and a wistful smile flitted across his face. "To return to the innocence of childhood. How wonderful it would be . . . Here, boy! Come here!"

Demo shrank back!

The dog bounded toward them from a hidden cave. It rushed to Zeus, licked his hand with one of its heads, while a second head growled ominously at Demo. The third head maintained a continuous vigil.

"Pet him, he's quite gentle." Zeus smiled. "Good doggy, good doggy."

"Remember when I gave him to you, Zeus."

Startled, Demo and Zeus looked up. Their gaze encompassed the towering height of Megalith.

"Yes, I remember." Zeus smiled delightedly. "He was just a little bundle of fur. barely a handful, yet so warm, so loving. He came to me, climbed upon my lap and quickly fell asleep. A most wonderful present he was."

"Well," Zeus voice changed, and he ceased petting Cerberus. "So it is true. You have left Tartarus. You know, of course, that I can't permit it. I've already contacted the SkyHigh Elevator Company, and they'll be removing the elevator by the end of the month."

Megalith ignored the comment. "Your Mother Rhea sends you greeting, as does your Father Cronus. They want you to know they grow weary of the depths of Tartarus. They would breathe the air of earth, drink the nectar of Olympus. Lift your decree of banishment, Zeus. What manner of child are you, to so treat your aged parents! Remember you not, your happy childhood?"

For a moment Zeus stood silent, head bowed.

"You weave your words with delicate care, Megalith. I know it is not for my parents you seek these things. You, who were born in Tartarus, would have these worlds as your own. You would have the Gods of Olympus give obeisance, the children of man serve you."

Megalith reached down, patted the third head of Cerberus. The dog snapped at his hand, and he withdrew it quickly, scowled.

"You recall, Zeus, when you allowed me to visit Olympus, when I gave you the pup Cerberus?"

"I recall well. I was yet a child in many ways. Now, I have matured, Megalith. Gifts do not buy my favor."

"And do you recall I left with you, also, the jug of the best wine of Tantalus?"

"Good wine it was! A most amazing brew! To what purpose is your question?"

"You drank of the jug, and it brought you dreams of Hera, and of others. And even now those dreams return to tease your mind. The wines of Tantalus will return, time after time. Nor can you avoid them. Sleep now, Zeus, in a drunken stupor as the wine works its magic."

Megalith smiled.

Indeed Zeus stretched out on the greensward, Cerberus whining as he lay down beside him. A smile touched Zeus' lips.

"I have long planned my return. The wine of Tantalus was but the first step. Now, while he sleeps, I shall roam once more this earth, partake of its pleasures, prepare it for our coming. And you, earthling, shall be my emissary. We are well met!"

"I serve Zeus, no other."

"Well said. See this pebble. Watch carefully, then mind your tongue."

Megalith lifted a huge boulder in his right hand, looked at Demo with a smile, lifted it high above the head of the sleeping Zeus.

Quickly Demo notched an arrow.

Megalith laughed. "Dream on, Zeus, for the dream shall soon end. As for you, blunt your arrows if you will. In a moment I shall feed you to Cerberus."

The dog growled at mention of his name.

From the River Styx a form arose.

"Hold, Megalith!"

With a start Megalith gazed at the dark and menacing figure.

"You seduced my brother with your gifts, Megalith. I laughed, for your wiles were of no value against me. You find the fields of Tartarus confining. Lay down the stone then, and come with me. For I have prepared a place for you in Hades."

A chill encompassed Demo.

He dared not look at the speaker. This one projected all the aura of another he knew. Another who traveled with him, unseen, on sojourn after sojourn.

The unseen companion!

Though shaken Megalith was not deterred from his intent.

"You have no power over me. And you have no reason to love Zeus, who banned you also to an inferior kingdom. Join me. We shall rule the earth, and even Olympus." Megalith smiled.

"True, I cannot harm you. I have no love for Zeus, as you say. Yet you have erred. For there is one who loves Zeus beyond all measure, and before that stone shall fall he shall tear your heart from that giant body."

Megalith's eyes widened.

Indeed such a one even now waited, ever alert, ever faithful.

Beside Zeus, awake and watchful, Cerberus stood. Baleful eyes, from each of his heads, glared at this creature who dared threaten his sleeping master.

With a deep growl he crouched.

Megalith stepped backward, in desperation launched the great stone downward.

It did not strike the helpless target. It's path was deflected.

The stone struck not the hapless head of Zeus. For another bravely placed himself in harm's way.

The stone struck the third head of Cerberus, crushing and tearing. The dog moaned low, stood still over its helpless master, then lunged forward.

The battle was long. The deep growls of Cerberus mixed with the angry snarls of Megalith. The ground rocked under their fury, and blood and sweat mingled in an ugly stream.

They rolled on the ground, tearing and ripping each his enemy. The hills reverberated with the sound of their blows.

Megalith broke loose, rushed to the mountainside, seized a boulder even huger than before.

He turned to meet the onslaught of the dying beast, brought the stone down. Another head was crushed, and Cerberus staggered back.

Megalith once more picked up a massive rock. Quickly now he stepped around the dying dog, stood again over Zeus.

Demo launched his arrow. It fell, blunted, from the rough hide of the Titan. Megalith looked at the boy, smiled a scornful smile. He raised the stone high above his head.

Before the stone could fall Cerberus struck. Wounded and bleeding, still he launched his body at the Titan, knocked him from his feet. His fangs closed on the throat of Megalith.

Megalith seized the dog's neck in both hands, his powerful fingers cutting off the breath of life. The dog shuddered, yet released not its death grip on the Titan's throat.

In moments it was over.

The Titan lay dead!

And Cerberus.

No. Yet he moved.

Slowly, painfully he inched his tortured body to the side of the sleeping Zeus. He licked his master's hand, his tail wagging.

Closing his eyes he slept, to wake no more.

The silence was broken only by the call of a raven, flying high above. Even Styx flowed quietly, as though in dread. The stream reddened where the blood of giant, and of beast, mixed with its dark waters.

Demo knelt by the sleeping Zeus, touched him hesitantly with extended hand. "Sire, wake. The task is done."

Even as he spoke Zeus pulled himself erect, stroked the long white beard he favored for his earthly form. He blinked, looked at the motionless Megalith. With a sudden sob he held Cerberus to him.

"'Tis well I sent you not out alone. I fear he would have done you in neatly. That wine! I should have known! A devilish concoction, well brewed to twist the mind of even the Gods. And say you another interfered on my behalf, your unseen companion? Strange indeed." He shook his head. "If that one be whom I think there is little love lost between us."

"Have you ever owned a puppy, my boy. Wonderful! There is no creature so loving, so caring of his master. Cerberus, Cerberus, that you should die saving me." A tear trickled from his eye.

"Yes, child, for such loyalty even the Gods may weep."

For a moment Zeus sat quietly, Cerberus in his arms. A tear trickled from Demo's eye as he thought of Rough, and the many times the dog had protected him.

"I shall bury him at the base of yonder mountain. It shall serve as his headstone. Let all who look

upon its majesty remember who sleeps at its foot." Zeus sighed.

"Well, well, it is over. And you, my boy. Well done. Well done. This sojourn I shall long remember. And though you are, shall we say, jumpy and at times overly eager I did indeed enjoy your company. So I may . . .

"Ah, listen, even now your Mother calls you. Is it fresh-cooked venison I smell? Yes, yes indeed. Excellent cook, your Mother. The berry pie that disappeared while cooling in the window . . . slightly tart, but oh so tasty, very tasty!"

Ceres walked sad of mien upon the earth.

Time past, the mighty Pluto had rode roughshod across the land. Had seized her daughter Persephone, carried her away to his damned kingdom.

Long since had she accepted her daughter's fate. Yet she remained forever disconsolate. At times she wept. No smile touched her lips. And in her mind a plan developed.

The wiles of women have oft changed the course of man's world. Even the Olympians would feel that power.

Carefully she gave thought to devices that would serve, to those who might champion her cause. Finally, in desperation, she turned to that power of powers.

White-faced, in dread, she prayed to Moira to unravel the evil that had been done.

Her humble cottage was quiet, still. The silence was such as she had never known. Even her breath was unheard.

In the silence she received her answer. Not in words, nor in thoughts, but in a strange vision.

She stood on a high peak, surrounded by rolling fog. In that fog she heard her daughter calling, but she could not tell from whence came the call.

She answered, yet knew her voice to be unheard.

Faintly, another voice sounded through the fog. The voice of a young man. "My lady, you are in pain. Can I help you?"

The vision faded, and she was once more in her little hut. She sat by her kitchen table, laid down her head, and cried.

There would be an end to the cursed imprisonment of her child!
There was yet a champion who would stand against the fiend from Hades. In time the one who had wrought this grievous crime would suffer!

In her mind she saw darkly a deep cold tarn, its face hidden by fog and mist. She knew.

There, by the tarn, the tragedy would end.

7. The Curse of Cronus

"My dear, it is but reasonable. It is the curse of Cronus, that even the Gods shall age." He sighed.

"I have, in my infinite wisdom, ameliorated that curse to a degree. The aging process is slowed, and eons are only days. Still, aging continues. No, basically, it is not practical to completely counter the process. I've certainly given it careful thought. Do you think I enjoy it. Just look at me!"

Zeus frowned, paused in deep thought. Using his cane he limped slowly to his throne.

"You really shouldn't be so upset. Look at what it's doing to me? Zeus - with a cane? Ridiculous!"

"But, sire, would you but look at me! How can I stand the humiliation. Just look at me!" Venus stamped her foot in exasperation.

"Yes, my dear, I am looking. Oh, yes! Eh, to be honest, I can't even see a single wrinkle. Just a moment, let me put on my eyeballs." He adjusted his bifocals carefully on his nose.

"My dear, you look delectable. Wrinkles! Bah!"

"You jest. I saw it only this morning. Right here, on my forehead. Do examine me more closely."

Zeus pursued his examination with great gusto, until the entrance of Hera distracted him. Gruffly he growled, "Well, if a wrinkle is there, it is a beautiful one. Let me see? Ah, I have it. I shall send for expert advise. Rest assured, I'll solve the problem."

Hera watched suspiciously, finally spoke as Venus departed.

"What's that young snip want. You were certainly giving her a thorough perusal. Which, I might add, you were relishing mightily."

"The duties I must perform. They weigh on me heavily indeed, my dear. Venus has detected a wrinkle. Sad, but the curse of Cronus, you know."

With a suddenness that Demo had come to abhor he found himself once more before the might of Zeus.

Arrow notched, bow drawn, he had the game on the dinner plate - and then, whoosh, the forest, the buck, everything - disappeared. And now he stood before Zeus, his arrow still ready for its flight.

Zeus ducked precipitously behind his throne.

"Now, boy, now, now! Didn't mean to startle you. Eh, just release the arrow - No! I mean, just return your arrow to its quiver. There will be other bucks, I assure you."

Demo turned red, quickly returned the arrow to its pouch.

"My apologies, Sire. You called me at an awkward moment. No offense was intended."

"Delighted, really delighted, to have you here once more. I look back upon our last little adventure together with fond remembrance. Fond remembrance? I like that combination. I'll have to use it again sometime."

Demo waited quietly. Zeus rarely spent time in empty conversation. Though it might seem like prattle, somewhere hidden was meaning - and danger.

"Have I talked with you of Cronus? No, I think not. Well, Cronus bore a grudge against us - myself, the other Gods. Some, they say, get mad, others get even. Not Cronus - oh, no! Cronus get mad? Never! Cronus get even? Perish the thought!"

Zeus stalked back and forth before the throne. His face was turning red in exasperation, and sweat trickled from his brow.

Already the dark clouds were beginning to form above Olympus.

"Now you stop that!" Hera exclaimed. "And quit rambling! Do tell the poor boy of Cronus' monstrous gift to the Gods! And do get on with it!"

"Hmmm, yes, my dear. Where was I?" He wiped his brow.

"Cronus was furious. F . U . R . I . O . U . S!"

"The boy knows how to spell. Be a bit more concise, Zeus. You know, we have this garden party shortly. Quickly now!" Hera was petulant.

"Of course the boy knows how to spell. Eh, don't you, my lad?"

"Oh, yes, Sire! My mother taught me well. She says . . . "

"Another time, boy. Another time." Zeus brushed off his comments.

"He was furious. He had no intent to get even. No way! Even would never do. It was his wish to lay upon us troubles ten times greater than those he received. Even? Ha!"

"And so he did. The Curse of Cronus! Has a nice ring to it, don't you think. I remember well the ceremony. In deep sonorous tones he enunciated those very words - The Curse of Cronus - and then repeated it three times. Melodramatic type, he was. I could almost hear the deep swelling boom of a gong as he ended each pronouncement." He paused, seemed to be thinking.

"I've tried awfully hard, you know, to emulate that voice. Very impressive, really. Can't quiet hack it,

though. Had something to do with his bearing, too." He stopped, looked at Hera and Demo, and blushed.

"Lift the curse, that's what I want from you. Now, be off and take care of it. I have a garden party to officiate, you know." He glanced placatingly at Hera. "Do be quick about it, for Venus is terribly peeved. Although I didn't see a single wrinkle. Lovely skin, lovely, . . ." He paused, noted Hera's angry glare. "Reminds me - to a lesser degree, of course - of Hera's beautifully smooth neck and shoulders."

Hera deigned to be placated. She smiled gracefully as she accepted his compliment. Yet, she had a knowing look in her eyes, and the boy noted how she shook her head.

Demo started to ask more questions, when he found himself, drawn bow in hand, once more in his hunting pose. He sighed, released the arrow.

Fresh venison, a new mission, and Cronus!

He cleaned the game carefully, working from habit without thinking. His mind was far away. The Curse of Cronus - I must lift the Curse of Cronus!

"Oh, yes, of course I know of Cronus," his mother appeared peeved. "I may be a country girl, but I want you to know, I am well read. Cronus was, of course, Zeus' old man. My, how they quarreled! Some thought Zeus would be banned. And well he might have been, if he hadn't moved first."

She sighed, added a touch of herbs to the soup. "Mmmmm," she commented. "It is tasty indeed. Not the ambrosia I'm sure Zeus serves, but quite tasty. Here, give me your bowl."

"There was a curse, mother?"

"Yes, that there was. Zeus drove them out - his father, Cronus; his mother, Rhea; all of the Titans. He stood by the wayside, lightning bolt ever ready." She paused, her eyes seeing a prior time, a time when the Gods were seen by man.

She filled the bowl with the warm soup, placed it before him. "Now try some of that. Cronus indeed. This will take the years off. And a slice of my bread."

She smiled as he began to eat, watched in pleasure as he attacked the food with the zeal of hungry youth.

"Cronus stumbled, and Zeus raised his arm to cast the thunderbolt. And then Cronus stood straight and tall and majestic. He repeated, three times I think, with his arms extended upward, 'The Curse of Cronus'. Doesn't it have such a melodramatic sound to it? Especially if you pause between the words." She once more intoned, "The Curse of Cronus", pausing dramatically between the individual words.

"And the curse, mother, what was it?"

"That the Gods, for whom 'til now time did not exist, would now - like other beings - age. Zeus laughed. Still, there are rumors, and I understand he laughs no more." She lowered her voice. "I'm told that, even now, he walks with a cane. Have you seen it? Can this be true?"

Demo ignored the questions. "Mother, how would I find Cronus?"

"My child, you do not find Cronus. He finds you. It is inevitable. It is from his touch that we pass from child to man or woman, from youth to middle age, from middle age to an elder estate. It is a process you would not desire to compress. No, search not for Cronus. He is not well met!"

Demo pondered her words, the story she had told. Fable, or fact? At one time he would have thought the former. Now he was completely unsure. His simple world had turned strange.

Demo began his trip, knowing not the way, knowing not the guise of him whom he sought. The fates were kind, and he found aid along the way.

"Earthling, attend me!"

The voice was soft, yet commanding.

He breathed deeply as he gazed upon her. The beauty of Athena, of Medusa, he had thought, could not be surpassed. He was wrong.

The diaphanous gown accentuated, rather than hid, the exquisite form of the maiden who addressed

him. The face was beautiful not only in its own right, but in its every response to her thoughts. Now with a slight blush, now calm and serene, now smiling and happy - always with an innocence that beguiled and attracted.

"I am Venus. It is for my sake that Zeus has dispatched you on this dreadful sojourn. And dreadful must it be for you, for when Cronus looks upon you the bonds of time will lock you in their embrace. Yet there is no other way." She sobbed.

"Take this. When you tend Cronus, tell him from whence it came. Then ask him, must the beautiful blond hair of Venus turn gray. Once he loved me, a grandchild who was his pride. Perhaps he still remembers. Give to him this mirror, for in it he shall see my visage. And as I age, so shall indeed the image on which he gazes. It is his curse. Let him reap its reward."

She expected no reply, and was gone so swiftly none was possible.

He glanced at the mirror from the side of his eye. He blinked. Truly, it was not his own image, but hers. He carefully placed the mirror in his pouch. Perhaps, after all, Cronus would relent.

One might think that, to reach Tartarus, the path would be first through Hades. And having passed through that monstrous domain Tartarus would lie ahead.

Indeed, Tartarus lies far below even the inferior regions of Hades. Solitary, neighborless - there is no common border, no entry or exit. Tartarus stands alone. None may enter. None may leave. To those who live therein its bounds are endless. To those who dwell without it is but a speck, lacking depth, lacking width, lacking height.

Demo searched. He found not Tartarus. He found not Cronus. And so he slept. And as he slept, Cronus found him!

Each night he lay down to rest, tired from his travels. Each morning he awoke, unrested, the weight of passing years pressing down upon him. Yet, the sun had made its own journey, and it was but the start of a new day. He felt in his bones aches he had never known. The muscles that served well afore now weakened, gave way under exertion.

The dreams began. A white bearded patriarch, severe of mien, stood nightly at the foot of his bed, gestured over his prone body.

And with that gesture he felt his very bones grow tired. The smooth skin of youth wrinkled, and his sharp eyes dimmed and lost their luster.

"Return to Zeus. Tell him that the Curse of Cronus shall never be lifted. Give up this quest, for on it you shall age each day as though it were a year. Only the kindness of Cronus prevents you from withering and dying before the dawn." The deep sonorous voice ceased, the vision faded.

He touched his cheek, his forehead. Indeed wrinkles formed and furrows! Beneath his chin a dewlap hung. His eyes grew tired, and his voice weak. Nightmare, or visitation from Cronus?

By day his travels became ever more onerous. The pain of arthritis attacked his joints, his breath was short, and at times he wandered over his earlier trail unknowingly.

Demo noted, looking in the mirror of a calm pond, his thinning hair, now turning gray. Dark pockets formed under each eye, and his eyes were themselves bloodshot.

Perhaps, he thought, it is time to return home, there to rest. Perhaps, there to lie down to an eternal rest.

Each night Cronus came. Each day Demo was left with a body weakened and tired from the visit of Cronus.

His appearance had become so wretched that he avoided the quiet ponds, that he see not his image. In desperation he called on Zeus, then sighed. Even Zeus, mightiest of the Gods, labored under the Curse of Cronus.

On a certain day, in a certain glade he walked, knowing not where to turn. His thirst grew, and he noted water trickling down the hillside ahead. At the base of the hill a small spring formed a placid pool, and he leaned forward to drink of its water.

"Not me! Let it not be me!"

The gaunt, ancient creature reflected in the still waters screamed out the words.

He would turn away, and yet he could not. Fascinated he noted the wrinkled face, the gnarled hands, the tired eyes.

My youth, to have fled so quickly! The Curse of Cronus indeed!

Night shadows were fast enveloping the land. He cut soft limbs and foliage to make his bed. It mattered not. All beds to him were hard. Emptying his pouch he nearly dropped the mirror of Venus.

He caught it before it struck the ground. I need no more bad luck, the thought crossed his mind.

The image of Venus brought tears to his eyes. The beauty reflected in the mirror but days before had disappeared. Now was seen but an old crone, straggly hair, wrinkled face, bent back. Still the eyes tore at his soul.

The sad eyes that held remembrance of beauty beyond that of all beings. They seemed to say, "If I could but forget what once I was. Then I could more readily bear this plight."

He shuddered, held the mirror in his hand as he stretched out on his forest bower. Sleep would come soon. And with sleep, Cronus!

And so it was. Cronus stood silent at the foot of his sylvan bed. He held an object in his hand, gazed at it in deep thought.

The mirror of Venus!

He had taken it from the bed where Demo lay. Slowly Cronus lowered the mirrored, glanced at the boy. Demo stirred, looked with tired eyes at his visitor.

"I know this one from long ago. I see, yet I know not the face, nor the name. Is this your mother, boy?"

"No, sire, this is the face of another, the face of one you once loved. The face of one you have condemned to misery. This is the face of your granddaughter, Venus, disfigured by the Curse of Cronus."

Cronus' eyes widened, and he glanced once more at the mirror. "I shall take this with me. Sleep, boy, this night I give you rest."

Head bowed, he turned and walked away, fading into the night.

Demo slept.

He woke late, the sun high in the sky. Even then might he have slept, except for the sound of the sparrows.

They hopped excitedly around an object gleaming on the forest floor. He rose, walked to it, and they took wing in fright.

The mirror of Venus. Cronus had dropped it there before he left. Strange. He had been so moved by the aged image therein. Demo shook his head, picked up the mirror.

In shock, he almost let it fall.

The beauty of Venus, radiant and young, once more graced its surface.

Eyes wide he glanced at the hand holding the mirror. The gnarled fingers, wrinkled and old, were no more. The strong hands of youth now held the mirror.

Quickly he rushed to the spring, examined his countenance.

Cronus had relented.

He heard a distant rumble of thunder, glanced anxiously to the sky.

A voice, strong and yet soft, reached his ears.

"Well done, my son." He knew the sojourn had ended.

And then he heard the words again. "Well done, my son." and felt a hand shaking him.

"Yes, well done. The firewood you were to gather, where is it? Do you know the sun is near its zenith, and you still lie abed."

"Yes, mother, I shall fetch it quickly."

He shook his head. Only a dream? He looked at his hand, the hand of youth. As he sat on the edge of his bed his foot brushed an object.

Absentmindedly he reached down, picked it up.

He found himself gazing on the beauty of Venus, a smile on her face. The lips seemed to move, and expressed in a voice all softness the gratitude shining in her eyes.

He smiled. No!

No! Not a dream.

As a child I nourished him. His body I made strong, agile; his mind, quick. Strength I gave him, and the will to bear pain without flinching. Almost, eternal life. But that was not to be.

Ceres was thinking to herself.

The voice I heard while praying - It is, I am sure, his voice. The time is coming when this tragedy shall end. In some manner, unknown to me, Fate will bring the paths together.

Ah, yet how powerful is the enemy! Zeus himself alone is more powerful.

No, not true. Moira has mapped the path of each, be they God or man. And Fate has given me a vision.

I knew not then to what purpose the boy's skills would be needed. How quickly time has passed, and the wrong done my daughter is yet to be avenged!

His shall be the duty.

I grow old, my limbs puny.

He is young, strong. My enemy shall be his enemy.

And for that enemy his name shall be Nemesis!

8. The Minotaur

"Being a well-educated earthling," Zeus began, a slight touch of sarcasm in his voice, "You are undoubtedly familiar with the legends of the Minotaur?"

"I have been told the legend by my mother, sire."

"Ah, a wise woman. And proud, I am sure, to have such a stalwart, handsome offspring."

"At times she has expressed doubts. However, it is but a motherly quirk, or so I believe."

"Fine, fine." Zeus seemed weary of the conversation, and yawned loudly.

"Pardon me, my son. It isn't that you aren't a brilliant conversationalist. I could listen to your childish prattle - eh - to your exploits for hours on end. Shameful, I have so little time for such pleasures. I must attend to my chores, you know. Have to give the globe another kick before long, keep it spinning." He paused long enough to sip at his nectar.

"Poor year, this. Lousy flavor. Must force myself to drink it, I suppose." He took a large draught from the flask, smacked his lips.

"Well, the annual circus is scheduled for later this spring. I've decided that we shall have some unusual creatures to entertain the Gods. They grow listless and tired with dull repetitive acts. Dragons, unicorns - you know, all old hat. So I thought I'd surprise them this time. A jolly old minotaur may well

jolt them a little. Yes it should." He mused aloud.

"Bring one back. Oh, don't hurt it, please. Want it in good shape. And find out what it eats, will you? Hate to have it starve on us. I suppose we could feed it nectar and mead. Might not drink the nectar. This year's nectar is really poor. Not fit for a minotaur." He took another draught, licked his lips, then took an additional one.

"Where . . . ?" Demo started to ask, only to find himself sitting on the ground in his front yard, addressing the air.

"Yes, dear?" his mother queried.

"Nothing. Mother, do you recall telling me of the minotaur?"

"Why, isn't that strange. They had a special on TV just last night on the very subject. The nasty creature has wandered away from the maze. No one knows to where. Frightful creature. I certainly hope it doesn't come near here. I'd give it such a whack."

She brandished her broom in the air, brought it down within inches of Demo's foot.

He scrambled backward.

"No one knows where it is?"

"No, sonny. But you stay away from the woods for a while. It may well be wandering out there. It could be very hungry. And no one knows what it eats. It really has a nasty temper, or so they say. I wonder why it has a nasty temper?"

Drat! Wandered off from the maze. Poor security, I'd say. Where would I wander if I were a minotaur? He sat in quiet thought.

Food, of course, it must find food. No keepers to feed it now. And water, certainly. The body of a bull, the upper torso of a man. Boy, I bet it has a strange diet!

I could go over and look at the maze. Might be a clue or two there. And I better talk to the keepers. They should have a handle on its feeding habits.

And if I find it? What then? How does one capture a minotaur? Or keep oneself from being devoured by it? Ahh, and I was so happy as a simple hunter!

"Mother, I'm off again tomorrow."

"Oh, I wish Zeus would quit sending you on these silly errands. And you should forget about that Athena. I hear she has a vicious temper. Now Theresa, she is such a lovely girl. And so docile. You'd make such a handsome couple," she finished wistfully.

"Yes, mother. Do tell dear Theresa hello for me."

Morning came early. He rose grumpily, washed his face in the wash basin, and carried it out the door to throw away the water.

He paused to look up at the stars, still brilliant in a dark sky. Orion was low in the sky, and seemed to be pointing toward the ocean's shore.

Perhaps it is an omen, he thought. I shall trek to the ocean. After all, the minotaur may have plans to leave our land for one more to his - it's - liking.

Demo tossed the water out into the darkness, heard it splash, then a sudden sputtering and words not fit for ears of a young man.

"Watch what you are about. If Pluto weren't so concerned I'd just quit this foolishness." The fox imp was leaping up and down, shaking itself to shed the water. "This is the second bath I've had this year. Enough is enough! Going to catch a minotaur, eh? At this rate I'm going to catch a cold!" He sneezed loudly.

"You'll be lucky to catch a mouse!"

Suddenly the imp was silent. He frowned, turned cautiously.

With a deep growl Rough pounced.

The imp squealed, rolled sideways, and dashed madly to the closest tree. Clambering up the oak, the imp glared down at Rough in anger. "I shall certainly sic Cerberus on you! What a thrashing you will get! Call off your dog, boy. Quickly, now, or I will send him where he would not go."

The threat seemed real. "Come here, Rough. You'd not care for the taste of carrion."

"Carrion? Carrion, is it! The seasons pass, my boy. And you near your destiny. I merely hope to be there when you meet that destined fate. Yes, indeed! Then there'll be no talk of carrion!"

He looked carefully at Rough, who stood tense and ready at Demo's side. When the imp thought the time propitious he leaped from the tree limb, danced a jig beneath the branches. All the while watching Rough carefully. Demo held the dog tightly. Finally the imp rushed angrily into the orchard, growling in a high-pitched voice while glancing anxiously over its shoulder for the approach of Rough. "Minotaur, indeed! Wait 'til I get on the phone to Pluto!"

"Mother, I'm off to Minos. I want to see where the minotaur lived."

"Well, for goodness sake, don't go inside. People just keep popping in, and Theseus is the only one to pop out again. Must be awfully crowded in there. If you pass by your Aunt Matilda's place, tell her I'll see her next week."

He picked up his bike, kicked the tires, and started pedaling. The phrase 'Minos or bust' came to mind, he didn't know why. Probably some historical significance, he thought.

Naturally he had a flat before reaching midway on his trip. "And no gas station within miles," he muttered aloud.

Never trusted these contraptions anyway. I guess I shouldn't complain. It did save me a few hours. I'll drop it off at Aunt Matilda's, and pick it up later.

"Oh, Demo, how tall you have grown. My, my! And so handsome. I must introduce you to my neighbor's daughter. You'd make such a perfect couple!" Aunt Matilda was plainly glad to see him.

"I really can't eat another bite. You are such a good cook, Aunt Matilda. Oh, mother said she'll be over next week. I think she wants to borrow a pattern from you. She's always sewing. Wished she'd learn to darn. Look at the holes in these socks!"

It took some time to extricate himself from the enthusiastic welcome of his Aunt. Eventually he left the bike in the garage next to the chariot, bade her a fond farewell, and hurried on his way. He'd be lucky to reach the maze by nightfall.

But he did. He crossed over the bridge, followed the winding path over the ridge. And there it was.

The maze, from the outside at least, was rather impressive. Huge massive walls of at least a man and a half in height. And they seemed to extend indefinitely, eventually disappearing into a wooded ravine. The keepers sat at the gate, talking together, and glancing nervously around.

"I hear the minotaur has escaped?" Demo questioned.

"That it has. We were distracted. This lady was going by and she . . ." He seemed to think better of his comment. "Anyway, we were distracted. It snuck out, quiet like. Amazing, for a bull. More like a tiger, stealthy quiet. It's sad, really. Never trust a minotaur. They'll turn on you. And to think how many years I've watched and guarded the creature. And my father before me, and his before him. Minotaurs lack dependability. I'll take a cat every time, myself. Don't eat nearly as much. Nice pets. Catch mice, too. Of course, for all I know, so do minotaurs. Nah, they couldn't be that spry!"

"How many stand guard here?"

"There are twelve of us. But what's to guard! He's gone, all right. Didn't touch his food last night. Of

course, I really don't blame him. The ladies of the Minotaur Monitor Group required that we feed him half hay, half fish or poultry. I think he stuck at the hay. So he is half bull. Of course, that's not the eating half. Anyway, the ladies had their way - and now look how it's all turned out. Of course, I slipped him a glass of wine at times, and he was appreciative of that, I want you to know."

"I'd like to go inside, glance around if I may."

"Oh, no! Zeus forbid! The going in is easy - it's the coming out that comes hard. None who went in have come out in my time. Nor in my father's time. Before that, there are those who claim Theseus went in, killed the minotaur, and came out. Well, I'll have you know, if he went in it wasn't far in - and he snuck out in a hurry. Cause the minotaur is alive and well, and wandering around I don't know where on this damp night. I surely hope he doesn't catch a cold. No, no, sir! You don't want to go in there."

"Well, I thought about the coming out again. If you'll kindly hold the end of this rope I'll take the other end in with me. And when I'm ready to come out I'll just follow the rope right back to here. No way I can get lost if you'll just hold on to the trusty rope."

After some discussion the guards admitted Demo to the entranceway. The chief guard held the rope end in his own hands, and Demo proceeded to follow the maze. Every so often he pulled on the rope. The tension in the line gave him a feeling of confidence.

But circumstances outside the maze did not bode well for his escapade.

"Ah, good evening again, ladies. Oh, you dropped your handkerchief, miss. Let me get it for you." The chief guard politely stepped forward to help the damsel in distress, in the process laying down the rope.

Unfortunately, at that moment Demo tugged at the rope, to insure his path to safety continued in place.

Tensionless, the rope lay loose on the smooth floor!

He frowned. Perhaps, he thought, I've left too much slack in it. This time he pulled harder. The rope moved easily, coiled at his feet. Demo's face whitened.

The chief guard turned in time to see the end of the rope snaking into the maze. He rushed forward to grab it, reached the entranceway in time to see it disappear down one of the many openings that seemed to appear and then vanish before his startled eyes.

He placed his hand on the entranceway, took a tentative step inside, then quickly withdrew his foot.

"Ah, what a nice young lad he was! I wonder where he can be. I do hope he starts back quickly, before the rope's end has completely slipped within. Oh, well, time for supper. Do hope the wife included a sip of wine. Relaxes one."

Demo looked dazedly at the rope coiled at his feet. The entire length was there, even the grappling hook that the chief guard had held so firmly in hand.

He sat down, stared at the walls that now seemed to press upon him ever closer. Finally he stood up, used the rope to measure their separation. After a while he measured it again. No, just imagination. They hadn't moved. The narrow corridors maintained a constant width, half a man's height.

All the same the appearance that the corridor became more and more narrow stayed with him. Is there truly no escape from the maze? How many had gone before, never to return. Did they die here? Or does it lead to another land, another world? Well, I shall not remain here. And I will escape this maze. But how? How?

He bowed his head, eventually fell into a disturbed sleep. He dreamed of searching for Athena, hidden in the middle of an impossible maze.

At times he dreamt he had found her, held her in his arms, as she whispered in his ear. Love words? Or something else. What was she saying?

Demo woke, glanced around.

Day was breaking and the sky above was brightening. Nevertheless, something was wrong. This wasn't his home! This was - ah, the maze. Slowly he stood up.

Athena. She had been trying to tell him something. Something very important. She had whispered so low the words were unclear. He shook his head, started to wander off in search of the entranceway.

Then he stopped.

It was something about the rope. She whispered something about the rope. I better take it with me.

The guards huddled around the fire, talking dispiritedly.

I suppose they'll transfer us back to headquarters. Can't stand that place! Too many brass. Too much spick and polish."

"You may not be so lucky. Remember, the minotaur escaped. They just might cut off our heads!"

"It wasn't our fault! How could we know it was coming out? Cut off our heads? Do you really think so?"

"Hello. Would you share me a bite of bread?"

Startled, they quickly looked around.

The chief guard stood up in amazement as Demo leaped to his side. "Are you real, sir. This is an experience. I've known none who successfully navigated that maze. Tell me sir, how were you able to do what none has done before you?"

Demo took the proffered loaf, tore off a section, and began to eat.

The guards eagerly awaited his response.

"Athena. She whispered it to me in my sleep. I almost missed it. Mother always told me, wash your ears. She's right, you know. I nearly didn't hear it."

"Ah, sir, and what were the words you nearly didn't hear?"

"Take the rope," is what she said. "An excellent recommendation, excellent."

They sat back in disappointment, glanced at one another and at him.

"Now why does she want me to take the rope. That's what I asked myself. And it came to mind that, with the rope and grapple I could cross the walls, rather than following each corridor. That way, if one corridor seemed to be getting me nowhere, I could quickly climb over to the next one." He paused to twist off another piece of bread.

The chief guard picked up the paltry remains and slowly ate the crumbs.

"Nevertheless, after swapping corridors for a while I found little evidence that I was making progress. And then another thought hit me. Brilliant thought, really. And not Athena's, but my own. I think." He paused, ruminating.

"Yes, I do believe it was my own."

The guards looked at each other in exasperation. Demo munched their bread, then picked up the chief guard's wine bottle. The latter half-heartedly attempted to retain it, but finally gave it to Demo.

"Save me a draught, if you'd be so kind," he growled rather sarcastically.

"Anyway, I started to climb to the next corridor. Just when I got to the top of the wall it struck me. Why fool with those twisting corridors. I'll merely jump from wall to wall and go in a straight line until I reach the outer wall. So I noted my shadow's direction from the rising sun, and headed south to the wall whereat I entered last night. It didn't take long at all, and here I am, and this wine is quite tasty. I fear I haven't saved you a full draught."

"From wall to wall he went. He didn't solve the maze at all, he jumped over it. I don't think that's really fair. Oh, well, certainly effective," the chief guard grumbled. "Yes, you are right, you saved me less than a draught."

He shook the empty bottle above his upturned lips, to no avail.

"I don't suppose you have any idea where he might have gone?"

"The minotaur? Well, the old boy has put on a little weight over the past century. I'd wager he moved mostly downhill, toward the sea. Much easier path to stroll, I'm thinking."

Demo nodded. As reasonable an assumption as any other. Off to the sea, then.

Demo heard the pounding waves long before reaching the shore. As he broke out of the undergrowth onto the rock-strewn beach his eyes widened.

The huge waves seemed almost upon him, then broke, ending in a gentle flow lapping at his feet. The sea was not the gentle blue of calmer days, but a deep and angry green. The skies were dark on the far horizon where a powerful storm built and drove the pounding waves. White froth leaped high into the sky where water met solid boulders. And on one such boulder a creature sat. A creature that blended well with the nature's fury.

The unseen companion, barely discernible through mist and froth.

He closed his eyes, breathed deeply.

When he looked again the massive boulder was bare.

Still, something moved. Beyond, on the beach, something stood.

He rubbed his eyes, lurched forward, the unstable stones twisting under his steps.

It had not moved, waited silently.

The minotaur!

"You don't have a bale of hay on you, by any chance? Or even a steak? I've been eating this sea weed for days now. Not that it's bad. Learned to enjoy it while in the Orient, years ago. Great taste, yet enough is enough, really. By the way, I suppose I do look rather strange. They tell me I'm a minotaur, whatever that is. It does have some advantages, with four legs and all." He reached down and picked up a handful of brown kelp, gnawed at it judiciously.

"Has a flavor all its own. Quiet different from dried seaweed I use to enjoy in Japan. Actually, I learned to enjoy it with sesame seed and soy sauce. You wouldn't have either of those in your pouch, I suppose. No, well, I didn't expect it. Should never travel without them, though. Local supermarkets seem to run out so quickly. Would you care to join me in a swim?"

Demo glanced out to the raging sea. The waves, which he had thought to be huge before, now had doubled in height. Even the boulders seemed to rock under the force of the surge of water.

"No, I think I'll stay here and play in the sand. I'm just not in the mood for a swim today. The water does look lovely, though. Why don't you indulge yourself?"

"No, no! Never swim alone! And old safety rule I picked up somewhere. By the way, are you here vacationing?"

"Actually, I was looking for you."

The minotaur suddenly tensed, became alert.

"You aren't planning to take me back to that silly maze now, are you? I'd walk around that place once each day, and its windings back and forth made me seasick. I should never have bought that place.

"Ahh, a real salesman! The Realtor was so very enthusiastic. A month after I bought it he came to the door to ask how I liked the property. I invited him inside, and haven't seen him since. I guess the place did have a few good points at that. Personally, though, I prefer view property. And I'll certainly not go back! No indeed! Of course, they did feed me. But hay? Do I look like I would enjoy the taste of hay?" He stared defiantly at the boy.

"Oh, no! I definitely have no intent of taking you back there."

"I'm glad to hear that. You see, I've been a captive behind those walls so long! I want to see the world. I'm looking to join a carnival and travel from place to place. After all, I'd be major attraction, don't you think?"

Demo listened in disbelief, and in sudden glee. "A carnival! Not a carnival. What you want to do is join a circus. Now that is the life. A three ring circus. The big top! Definitely, a circus!"

"I have no delusions of grandeur. Don't you think that might be presumptuous on my part. A little carnival would be sufficient."

"I have a . . . an acquaintance. I do believe we can have you as the chief attraction in the center ring. In fact, I'm sure of it. You would perform before the crown heads of Europe . . . I mean, before Zeus and all the Gods on Olympus. Believe me, this . . . acquaintance would be more than pleased to have you."

"Wonderful, wonderful! When can we start?"

"Right now. And if you'll let me ride on your back I think we can make it in record time."

The gatekeeper was notably reluctant to allow their entrance. Fortunately Hera was near and heard the argument. "Of course he can come in. It isn't every day we have such handsome company. And Zeus is looking forward to your return. He always is." She said the last in a sardonic tone.

It puzzled Demo at times, how the words said one thing, but the tone implied something quite different.

Hera announced them. "Zeus, your ringmaster and his chief attraction have arrived."

Zeus, who was staring at his cups, looked up.

"Poor year for nectar. And now you're back. What else can go wrong!"

The division had seemed fair and equitable. Zeus to receive the Heavens, Poseidon the oceans, and himself the nether world. Oh, they differed a bit in the dimensions, but when the dimensions were so large what mattered it?

Pluto sat on his throne, reminiscing.

We were all young bucks in those days, before Cronus and Rhea were driven out. Actually, as parents go, they hadn't been too bad. Old fashioned, believed in discipline - they just wouldn't give in to the whims of their children. It finally reached the point that something had to be done.

Zeus got the word first.

The three of them were to be turned over as wards to the court!

Incorrigible!, Yes, that was the word they used!

Themis had been looking forward eagerly to the day. I should never have dipped her pigtails in the ink. She resents that to this very day. And how was I to know she would be the Goddess of Justice and Law!

Yes, she was more than willing to take control of their lives!

Zeus laid out their counterplan, suggested the details of the partition. He and Poseidon merely acquiesced. Zeus had always been the smooth one.

They woke Cronus and Rhea in the dark of night, Zeus with that mighty thunderbolt, the one Vulcan had fashioned at Cronus' direction. A thunderbolt so powerful even the Titans such as Cronus and Rhea could not stand against it.

Reluctantly Cronus and Rhea agreed to leave. Of course, they pleaded with the children. He and Poseidon had felt remorse, had almost backed down, allowed them to remain.

Zeus was adamant. He would provide the Titans a world of their own, but to that world they must depart. And so depart they did, off to Tartarus.

The exodus went smoothly, except for that little incident of the Curse of Cronus. At first he thought it was merely a bad joke. Ah, a few gray hairs and aching joints had long since convinced him. It was no joke!

Well, well, time had passed. And now here he sat on the throne of his realm. With a queen yet!

So he had stolen her away! It hadn't really been done with evil intent. And he had made an honest

woman of her, proper marriage ceremony and all.

He'd never forget her mother. Angry? Whew, was she ever angry! Nothing she could do, however. Zeus himself conducted the ceremony. Couldn't be more official than that.

Food was delicious. Persephone hadn't eaten much. Of course, every young girl is excited by her marriage, wouldn't expect her to eat very heartily.

Joyful occasion, over all.

Except for two incidents.

Zeus had promised Persephone as a wedding present to give her one wish. How would anyone guess that she would wish for six months each year with her mother! Dreadful mistake, that wedding present. Zeus was a bit muddled, plainly, when he let himself be cajoled into such a promise.

The other incident hadn't been quite that bad.

Ceres came forward to give him her blessing.

She wiped the tears from her eyes, looked straight at him, and intoned slowly - "One born of man shall aid her, and when you follow him it will be to a foreordained destiny."

That was all. She smiled, turned away, and left the wedding party.

He had brooded long over her words.

Zeus knew not of their content, or refused to divulge his knowledge.

She was his bride, this his kingdom, and the only earthlings were those poor souls whose lively habits had condemned them to his control.

Pluto, Ruler of Hades, to fear nothing.

Death could not claim him!

Even Zeus entered not into Pluto's domain!

So why this premonition, this uncertainty!

9. The Dragon's Breath

"My Boy, My Boy! Ah, I am indeed so proud of you! Such daring! Such courage! And such wisdom! Well, I am all but shamed to send you on the ridiculous chore I now have in mind."

Zeus rubbed his hands together, clapped them, and otherwise exhibited an excess of glee.

"Yes, after surviving such adventures as that of the Minotaur, the next task will be rather childish. Ah, well, even routine chores must be done. I have the same problem, you know."

"Indeed, every day, day in and day out, I must spin the earth around. I actually missed a day! Gave everyone quite a scare. Ho! I made up for it. Spun it twice as fast the next day. I say, that was jolly."

"Of course, the wife gave me whatfor. Oh, I deserved it. You know, if you don't give it that spin each day, it starts to wobble. I wonder if I didn't spin it for . . .?"

He looked around for his wife. "Of course, I would never consider doing that. Eh, well, the next chore . . ."

"Dentistry! I hate the thought of it! My dentist tells me I need to have some teeth replaced. Ridiculous! Five teeth, to be exact."

"Of course, I couldn't possibly use ordinary repairs. Gold teeth, now. I do like the sheen of gold. But, no, that won't do. Very picky, these dentists. At times I've thought of driving them out of Olympus, right down to another kingdom! Let 'em visit Pluto for a while. My brother's very sociable."

"And that, in a nutshell, is the chore."

"To drive out the dentists?", Demo asked in confusion.

"Sorry, sorry. To continue, then." Zeus frowned. "You know, you've really shown a great deal of brilliance. I'm surprised I have to explain things in such detail. Never mind. Now listen carefully."

He paused, sipped slowly from his flask the divine nectar of the Gods. He frowned, and a large black cloud formed above him. In a moment rain drops began to pellet them.

Hastily he looked up. "Ah, go away! Go away! Go bother Pluto!"

The cloud drifted rapidly away, darting from side to side in uncertainty. Zeus reached up, produced a towel, and wiped his visage.

"They've changed the flavor again. Can't leave well enough alone. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That's what I always say. It's not like the good old days. They knew how to prepare nectar then. I mean real nectar, with a kick."

He took another sip. "Well, well, one must make do."

"Cadmus. He killed this serpent, see. Knocked out its teeth, sowed them like seed, and raised an . . . Oh, it doesn't matter!"

"The important thing is, five teeth remain. For all his prowess, he didn't knock them out. My dentist says I must have those. No substitutes. No plastic. The real McCoy. Dentists!"

"Anyway, they're right in your own back yard. T'other side of the mountain from your home, actually. Easy day's trip. Just get a gunny sack, go over and pick 'em up, and bring 'em back. Your task, then - should you choose to accept it - is - get those teeth."

Demo frowned. Somehow it seemed he had heard those words before.

Zeus smiled kindly, reached out and patted Demo's head.

"I do apologize. It's such a silly task! But necessary. So be on your way."

Demo stood up, knowing he had been dismissed. The sudden landing when dismissed from Olympus back to earthly surroundings is best met standing and with flexed muscles.

As he departed he heard Zeus murmur, "Actually, this nectar does have a certain bouquet, a body, an essence of its own."

He couldn't quite make out the last few words. "Hmmm, did I tell the boy that the serpent isn't dead after all? Minor detail."

"Mother, do you know aught of Cadmus?"

"Cadmus. Oh, yes, he lived down the valley a ways. Strange fellow. Went around killing dragons and such. In fact, that was his downfall. Poor soul. Why do you ask?"

"Was he a dentist?"

"Oh, heavens no! Sorry, Zeus, no disrespect intended. Ah, you're thinking of the dragon's teeth. Did I ever tell you about that. It goes to show the ridiculous way some of the neighbors behave. Let me see." She paused, a slight frown on her face.

"If you cross the mountain at lowpass and descend to where the river forks, you'll see it."

Demo waited, but plainly she wanted him to ask.

"Yes, mother, what is it I will see?"

"The field, the very field where Cadmus sowed the dragon's teeth. It grew him a dreadful crop, it did."

"Warriors! They sprang up from the ground! Fully armed, ready for battle. Big, burly, rascals all. And he didn't even have to water or fertilize. I wonder how big they might have been if he had used fertilizer?"

"Vicious tempers, though. Hardly spoke a civil word to him or each other before they were hard at it, fighting like children. He just stood and watched openmouthed. Couldn't believe adults would behave so abominably. Did I pronounce that right?"

"Yes, mother, I think you did."

"Thank you. I really need to review my English - eh, Greek. One does forget, you know."

"Cadmus, mother, and the dragon's teeth?"

"They went bonkers, killed each other off, except for half a dozen. They looked around, and one said 'Hey, you could get hurt out here.' and they walked off the field over to Cadmus. He put them to work building some kind of city, Planned to live there, I think. Anyway, he got one of the God's peeved. Wasn't too smart, Cadmus."

"Really, mother. What happened?"

"Turned him and his wife into serpents. Kind of poetic justice I suppose. He comes slithering around this way every so often. I don't mind, cause he kills the mice. It is a little disconcerting when he starts talking about the good old days, though. And I have to be extra careful I don't step on him. He always was the one to be underfoot."

Demo bartered with the village smithy for some metal tongs and a hammer, stowed them in his pouch, and headed for lowpass. A beautiful day, with bright sun and cooling breeze.

"Five teeth. Zeus is right, this is a silly task."

At lowpass he gazed out over the wide valley. The river flowed roughly through its center, and the fork in the river was less than half a day's travel away. With a satisfied grunt he began the descent.

At first the trail ran steeply down. He half walked, half slid. But eventually the incline became less intense, and he made good progress. The path widened as it reached the green meadow. From there it led with little deviation directly to the dragon's woods.

In due time he reached the field. It was immediately recognizable.

Rusted armor and scattered bones brought tears to his eyes. So many brave men had died, and for nothing!

Here and there a small helmet rose only partway above the ground. "Ah, bad seed, I suppose. Never ripened."

Then he heard it.

The sound came from the forest adjoining the field. A moan, almost ghostly in quality.

"Do the spirits of these dead warriors dwell in yonder copses?" he whispered to himself. Slowly he approached the forest edge.

It rushed from among the trees, fire breathing from its mouth. Its huge body threshed from side to side, knocking giant trees to the ground.

As it saw him it stopped, moaned again. "I see you have some tongs there. Are you perchance a dentist. I've got this terrible toothache." It had hardly finished speaking when it moaned once more.

"No, I'm not a dentist. But, see here, maybe there is something I can do. Do you know where I'll find a dead dragon. Killed by Cadmus, if I rightly recall?"

"I am he, eh, it. Didn't kill me. Terrible dentist. Never, never go to Cadmus for treatment. No anesthetic at all! just yanked 'em out." The creature shuddered.

"The worst part is, he left five. He left the five I really had wanted him to work on. Never, never, trust a dentist. Oh, boy, do they ache."

Five, well that must be the five. Demo thought carefully.

"Well, hang in there. I think we can get you some help. Come along now."

When they arrived at Olympus Zeus was out back.

"Just go through the gate right there," Hera smiled. "I'm sure he'll be glad to see you. Shouldn't your pet be on a leash, though? Keep him out of the flowers. And don't let him chase my cat. She'll claw him good if he does."

She reached down and scratched her pet behind the ears. The saber-toothed tiger purred softly,

arched its back. With a supercilious look it examined the dragon as though it were an oversize mouse. Eventually it followed Hera out the door, merely stopping once to glance disdainfully back.

Zeus was busy, feeding fuel to a small still. He opened a valve at the base, filled his flask with the sparkling liquid.

"This is it. Just the right flavor. Just the right consistency. Just the right strength." He slowly sipped, threw his head back and took a larger swallow.

At that moment Demo and his companion entered the garden, and the dragon groaned.

Zeus took the cup from his lips, stared wide-eyed at the dragon, then looked at his drink. He closed his eyes, shook his head, then looked at the dragon once more.

"Boy, do you notice something unusual behind you. I do believe this nectar has muddled my senses."

"Oh, no sir. Nothing unusual. I've completed my task."

"Nothing unusual." He said the words sadly, emptied his flask on the ground. "I was afraid you were going to say that." He shook his head.

He looked once more at the dragon and frowned. "I'll drink no more of that stuff."

"The teeth, boy, the gunny sack full of teeth. Where are they?"

"Right here, sir." Demo pointed to the dragon.

Zeus blinked, then smiled.

"Aaah! Yes! I understand. Well, now, that's all right. I had some doubts there for a moment. Thank you, my boy." He refilled his flagon.

"Yes, I see. Well, take them, then. The teeth, that is. Fight him. Hit him a nasty blow and take the teeth. Get on with it."

"Oh, no sir. He's more than willing to part with them. They hurt dreadfully, he tells me. I told him your dentist would willingly remove them."

"Yes, of course." Somehow Zeus sounded disappointed.

Odd, he sounded disappointed at the completion of each task.

"Well," Zeus growled at the dragon. "Don't just stand there. The phone's over yonder. Make an appointment and get them pulled. I do hope the dentist isn't all booked up."

The palace had all the jewels, all the objects of art, all the trappings a person could desire. But for a country girl raised in a small hut it lacked a prime requisite.

It flat wasn't homey.

Such was Persephone's evaluation.

Even that could have, over time, been corrected.

A second problem concerned her even more.

Her husband.

He wasn't presentable.

His looks were atrocious, his bearing boorish, and he could only be described as uncouth.

He had one slight redeeming grace.

In his own strange way, he loved her.

That fact, more than anything else, made her unhappy.

If he were but toying with her she could willingly have despised, yes, even hated him!

His love was real.

He showed it in his every attempt to be kind, in his watchful manner. If she seemed to only hunger, he sent for food. If she were only tired, he prepared her bed. If she showed sorrow he tried to bring joy.

How miserable to be married to a monster with a kind heart!

Her feelings vacillated.

At times she hated him for having abducted her, for keeping her from her mother and the flowery garden where she had played.

At times she pitied him for the suffering he bore uncomplainingly.

Only she knew the sadness in his soul as each new sinner moved into his kingdom. Their pain he suffered too. Yet he was chained forever to his duty, to be the Master of the Nether Regions.

In spite of her feelings she thought of different ploys, plotted, to escape from this dark world.

In time that escape would occur.

As would regrets.

10. Heaven's Essence

On Olympus, in spite of all the stories and legends, idyllic conditions do prevail. Zeus and Hera live in peaceful bonds of matrimony. Mercury zooms off here and yon, now here, now yon. Zephyrs blow gently. Paradise indeed.

But, occasionally, matters go astray. The essence of heaven is flavored with a drop from misery's vial. And, oh, what despondency, what black moods, and what strange and tragic escapades a drop may launch!

Demo found himself at the center of one such escapade. He quickly wished himself elsewhere. To no avail.

"We're going on a very short vacation, Hera and I. It's been eons, literally, eons! So I just want you to take care of the place while were gone. Keep an eye on things. Check the house plants, make sure they are watered. Feed Cerberus's pup. That's really about it. I suppose I ought not do it, but I'll give you credit for a full - eh, for half a task." Zeus smiled happily.

"You told me," Hera paused, and angry look in her eye.

"You are right dear, you are absolutely right. A full task, my boy. Out of the goodness of my heart." Zeus glanced petulantly toward Hera. Fortunately she was examining her garb in the mirror.

"Oh, one minor detail. You'll be baby-sitting Cupid during our absence. Venus left him here to keep us company. He's a wonderful little chap. I'm sure you'll get along splendidly."

Was there a smirk on Zeus' face, a touch of facetiousness in his voice?

"Boy, why are you sitting on the throne of Zeus?"

Demo turned, startled.

"Eh, you see, I'm in charge. Zeus is on vacation, and I'm filling in for him."

"Indeed! A likely story. Let's see your credentials!"

For a moment Demo hesitated. Then he stood erect, shoulders back, as kingly as he knew how to stand.

"Who are you to question the credentials of an appointee of the mighty Zeus. See, here in my hands he has left his thunderbolt, symbol of his power. And in a moment I shall become angry and cast it at you. Begone! And when you are allowed to return, do so with a better grace, or I shall send you trapping, off to visit . . . well, off to visit his brother Pluto. Now, off with you, and quickly!"

Demo took the thunderbolt in his right hand, raised it high, and made as furious a face as a 17 year old might make.

Apparently it was sufficient. The lackey backed quickly out of immediate range, bowing low and rushing madly from the room as he reached the entranceway.

Demo smiled.

Well, he thought, I could have done worse. A little more practice is all I need. This Zeus surrogate role could be quite pleasant.

It wouldn't be.

The clouds were difficult. In fact, he couldn't master them at all.

With Zeus, merely to think an angry thought generated them. They clustered, dark and ominous, above his head. Streaks of lightning jumped from cloud to cloud.

Demo tried, but he could not really develop a seriously angry thought. At one time he did almost generate a mild fog, thinking about the fox-imp. With it's antic in mind, his better nature overcame him, and he broke into laughter. Poor fox-imp. It had been so concerned when Rough growled.

For two days were Zeus and Hera to vacation, and two trials were imposed on Demo, one on each of those long days.

The first day Demo sat in the garden, relaxing, watching the green grass grow. It was chore that pleased him, requiring little physical or mental exertion. There are those who prefer to sit and watch green grass wither. Not Demo. He really had no mean bone in his body. At least, if he so had he to date hadn't located it. Actually, he hadn't searched very thoroughly.

Nevertheless and regardless, here he sat, watching the green grass grow. Occasionally he broke out his micrometer, measured a blade or two. "I believe they are shirking. Hasn't changed a single millimeter!"

Would that it could have lasted.

"Sire," Janus bowed. "There are two who would have your counsel."

Demo nodded. "Oh, very well. Send them in. Oh, and bring me my nectar."

The two who entered were unknown to him. One, the smaller, limped. The taller, however, walked as unsteadily as did the small one, and his red nose and blinking eyes suggested a state of inebriation.

Demo frowned.

"Well, what would you have of me. Get on with it!"

"Sire, this picture, this picture so well crafted, is claimed by Bacchus. By Bacchus, who can not draw a straight line, nor walk one. He claims to have painted it, with all its intricacies and beauty. He lies. I, and I alone, painted this picture. I would take it with me to my island of Lemnos."

"Poppycock! Preposterous! This limping lout knows that Zeus is absent. He wishes to take advantage of your innocence. He is a worker in metal, merely an artisan. His soul is burned by the smithy's fire. Art! He knows nothing of art! This picture is of my own design, and it contains my very soul. An artist, you know, puts himself into his every product. Look! Here is beauty, wonder, brilliance - would a smithy even aspire to such qualities as reflected here!"

"Ho, yon wimpy wine sop would not know one end of the brush from the other. More like he would paint the picture in wines of many colors, not with the pigments you see on this my parchment.

The picture, limned on parchment stretched on a wooden frame, depicted a forest scene. Near at hand the trunks of large trees, and seen between them, in the distance, an open meadow. There danced woodnymphs.

Demo examined the picture carefully, then turned it face away from the purported owners.

"Tell me," he looked at Bacchus, "what is portrayed, and how so portrayed?"

He listened quietly to the exposition of the sylvan scene, the merry dance of the nymphs, the greens and browns and tone colors that formed the hues.

"And you," turning to Vulcan, "describe to me this picture."

Vulcan closed his eyes and was silent. Then he spoke slowly, almost as in a trance. "This is the

picture of a maiden, her golden hair lighted by a single beam filtered through the forest foliage. All else is only background, merely there that she might display her beauty. It is but a vision, unreal, of what might be. Yes, it is only the picture of a maiden."

"Could each of you supply me with a picture similar in nature that I might compare?"

Neither could respond to his request.

"Well, without more evidence I find that I cannot judge for one or the other. Let me give further thought to the matter. Eh, come back in 2 days. Zeus will be here, he'll resolve the problem quickly."

"My Lord, we are both to leave this edifice this very day. Zeus has so decreed. He was unhappy with our problem, and requested that we bring it to your attention."

Demo frowned. To my attention!

"It's time for my ambrosia. Return when the sun begins its descent. I'll give you an answer then."

He mused. He thought. He worried. He ate.

Delicious, this ambrosia. Not equivalent to his Mother's cooking. But certainly good enough for Zeus.

He carved the food carefully, munching on each savory bite. And as he carved a thought came to mind.

Okay, I've a solution. With my knife I shall rend the picture from top to bottom and each may keep his half."

He took picture, laid it on the table before him, face up, pulled out his hunting knife.

Bacchus rose, looked at the picture, then shrugged. "Very well, Sire. It will serve me just as well. It is but an ornament to decorate my wall."

Vulcan looked at Bacchus, at the picture, and then at Demo.

"No, I would have my picture. Still, let it remain whole. Though Bacchus may own it, it shall ever be mine. Better it decorate his wall in its entirety than suffer the sacrilege of dissection."

"Upon further thought, Master Vulcan, I consider the picture to be yours. You speak true, it is the picture of a maiden. All else is there only for her. And you would lose your masterpiece rather than see it destroyed. Take it."

"As for you, Master Bacchus, I find you to be deceitful in this matter. I would have you accompany Master Vulcan. For six months you will serve him. And he, in that six months, shall teach you the rudiments of his art. Now, begone, for Cerberus' pup grows hungry."

Was I right? Demo questioned himself. Perhaps, after all, Bacchus did paint the scene. What would Zeus have done?

Ah, Zeus would have done much the same. And, being Zeus, he'd be right by definition. So, of course, as Zeus' surrogate I too am right by definition.

Demo smiled. This God stuff wasn't too bad at that.

So he thought!

Children are lovable. As babies they, sweet and cuddly, invite one's kind adoration. As toddlers, though underfoot, they laugh and chatter, bring brightness into our dull lives. Older, they play, are now defiant, now dependent, as they seek to find their place in the world.

Then, there was Cupid. Not quite the child. Yet not an adult. Ever with the prankish nature of youth. Armed, nevertheless, with a bow. Armed with arrows of the most pernicious kind. Sly, at times. Open and outgoing at others, he shared the faults - and the virtues - of his mother, Venus.

The second day started off nicely. Demo gave the world a little extra twirl, and it hummed along smoothly. He did note a slight wobble, and gave it a slight extra spin to compensate.

He checked the progress of the sun, the positions of the stars, and kept a weather eye on earth and underworld.

No problems surfaced.

He was being lulled into an unwary mood.

The attack began!

It was ruthless! They came at him in droves, never giving him time to think. His face whitened, reddened, turned blue.

Demo tried to think of the terms Zeus might use under such circumstances. They didn't come.

Zeus' old flames - angry, petulant, pleading, demanding!

Demo was caught off guard.

They informed him that they had an audience. Zeus plainly had forgotten to pass on the information to him. They waited impatiently for the promised audience.

Zeus had promised faithfully, to each and every one, a place by his side on the throne. Had promised the decision on this very day. At these words Demo hair stood on end.

What kind of fit would Hera throw at even such a suggestion. The heavens would split asunder from her anger! This problem had to be resolved, and quickly, before the return of Zeus and Hera!

Nereids and naiads, they came. Sea nymphs and mountain nymphs. Beauties from far off forgotten corners of the world, and others from nearby. All with one thought in mind - to claim that promised gift from Zeus!

"Ah, Ladies, charming Ladies - I must retire to my chambers and give this matter careful thought. Return when the sun has reached its zenith." Demo smiled, bowed, and escaped quickly before their anger could be vented on him.

It would certainly be simpler if - well, dalliance on such a scale! It had never entered his mind. Zeus?

Anyway, whether real or imagined, these angry young ladies were convinced. What could be done?

Enter Cupid. Helpful child, he considered the dilemma faced by Demo. In his childish way he quickly arrived at a solution. A solution of great moment to Demo.

Cupid's arrows flew!

Unfailingly they struck the heart of each victim! Unfailingly they elicited a well-known result!

Love and ardor possessed each target. Love and ardor, no longer for Zeus. Rather, for Demo!

Cupid's arrows flew! And flew!

The approach of noon weighed heavy on Demo. How best to extricate Zeus from an untenable situation came not to mind. What to do? A really deplorable situation, with very little room for maneuvering. My, what would Hera say!

Aha! An idea came to mind. A contest, to chose one from the mob! Cut the problem down to size. What kind of contest?

Of course!

These, the most beautiful of women - what else? A beauty contest!

A problem still remained. Who dare judge such a contest? Certainly not Demo! He shivered at the thought. The anger of the losers might well be vented on him. No, someone better qualified must decide. It had to be someone impartial, and unassailable. Someone not subject to feminine wiles.

But who?

Oddly enough, Cupid entered the throne room at that very instant.

Demo smiled.

A child! Why, of course, a child! Who could be angry at the decision of a child? And certainly a child would hardly be swayed as might an adult.

"Cupid, my lad, I have a chore for you."

Cupid listened carefully, nodded in understanding, and agreed to participate in this new game. He would indeed judge the beauty contest.

"Janus, bring on the ladies, if you please."

The meeting did not go as planned.

The ladies entered. They sat around the room, stood, fidgeted. Each was unique, beautiful in an individual way. In look and action they differed. Yet they all did one thing in common.

They stared at Demo with undisguised desire, boldly caressing him with ardent gazes.

Demo felt the hair on his neck rise, and a shiver raced down his spine. With an effort he announced, "There is insufficient space in the throne room for all you fair ladies. So we propose to have a beauty contest, the winner to set beside Zeus and guide him in matters of the heart. Cupid has volunteered to be the judge."

They seemed little interested. Rather, they watched Demo's every move with strangely glistening eyes. At his direction they paraded across the throne room.

Cupid made notes, assigned points for various and sundry qualities, and finally arrived at a conclusion. He brought his notepad to Demo, stood quietly beside the throne, cherubic in appearance. That alone should have forewarned Demo.

It was a tie! All the contestants had attained identical scores!

Demo's eyes opened wide, and he quivered. This was unexpected! He hesitatingly announced the result, readied himself for the angry outburst he expected.

There were a few yawns. Some of the ladies engaged in quiet gossip. All continued to regard him with interest.

There was no outburst.

"Who cares." A comment came from the back of the room.

"Sit beside Zeus! I'd much rather keep company with a charming boy." The lady stared meaningfully at Demo.

"Hardly!" Another beauty stood up. "He is certainly mine!"

In moments the room was filled with rancorous voices, angry and loud. Turmoil followed, and the crowd quickly moved to the outer court, accompanied by pummeling and hair pulling.

Demo sat wide-eyed, glaring at Cupid.

The boy smiled. "Well, I must practice my archery."

He strolled away, humming softly.

Was that a smirk I noted, Demo thought. I'm sure not. After all, he is only a child.

I think I'll cut his bow string.

A maiden clothed in white gazed with tear-dimmed eye across an endless plane. Sulfurous fumes rose from boiling liquid ponds dotting that dread surface. Manlike creatures, yet men no more, staggered blindly from place to place. In their ceaseless walk they fell hapless into the open pits and screaming in agony clambered out, only to resume their endless wandering.

With a sob the maiden turned to her companion. Hideous though the manlike creatures were, the visage of her comrade was more hideous still. A body twisted, scaly, not of this world, well-suited to this dark and gloomy clime, supported the grotesque head.

"Have you no pity? Is there nothing to be done for these, the suffering?"

A voice between whine and growl responded. "They chose, while on the earth, their own brand of eternity. I am but the keeper. Yet, for the kindness of your soul, shall their pain be eased for a brief moment. I shall give them sleep. I can do no more."

"And for me? I who would choose another world, I who have not yet passed through death's portal - what have you to offer me?"

"I offered you a goblet from the River Lethe. That would have soothed your tears, and washed away all memory of yesterday, and of all yesterdays. Sadly, you would not drink. Perhaps it is better." He spoke musingly, as though unsure.

"You know full well that you are to abide with me until once more the sun pass through one half his journey. Then may you return to your mother's lodging, to green grass and gardens, for a time. Were it within my power the confines of Hades would be such a garden, that here you might too find beauty. It cannot be!"

The creatures of the nether region lay quiet now, a short respite from their eternal pain. Tears welled from the eyes of Persephone. Where they fell bloomed sweet violets, even bloomed in Hades.

But too quickly they wilted and died.

11. The Sound of Regulus

"My dear boy, how are you? This weather! I must apologize. I've been despondent, down in the dumps. I'll try to cheer up, really I will. Tomorrow you shall have sunshine." And in fact Zeus did indeed sound cheerful.

"Your poor dear Mother! I know she washed today, and then to have that awful deluge! Well, well, I shall have to make amends. Ah, she does cook such delicious berry pie! Ummm! Ah, I have it! You will soon notice, on the hillside to the south - I'll arrange to have the most scrumptious berries grow. Tell her to pick from that patch. Ah, those pies!" He paused, leaned back on the throne, eyes closed. The smile reflected that even the memory of the pies was appealing.

"But I mustn't waste your time. My snake charmer, poor soul, has lost his snake. Not literally. It has just grown old (Cronus, you know) and can't hear his flute to well. So he needs a snake. And he won't settle for just any type of snake. No, he tells me the regulus is the only one that will do. Would you be so kind as to dash off to the Cush and pick up one for him. The northwest corner, I believe. No, sorry, that's the northeast corner. I think. Oh, never mind, you'll find it all right. It's called the Nubian Desert. And do hurry back. He'll be so very pleased. Yes, he will. And so will I." Zeus smiled benevolently, and Demo knew it was time to go.

It was.

With a final word, "What you don't hear can't hurt you," Zeus waved good-bye and Demo found himself partially immersed in a sand dune. Slowly, cautiously Demo worked his way out of the dune, slid down the side. Overhead the bright sun beamed down as the heat became ever more oppressive.

In the distance he heard a steady beating sound, drumlike yet metallic. It disturbed him. The dull monotonous beat, reminiscent of the clang of shields, spear butt struck, announcing doom and death song.

Demo shivered. It did not bode well. Where had Zeus placed him, and where would he find the regulus? And the last words from Zeus, what did they portend. "What you don't hear cannot harm you." Strange words indeed.

But he heard well, and what he heard was that steady beat, and suddenly the sound of footstep in the sand. He turned to greet in friendly manner the native of this strange land.

Striding toward him, tall and imperious, spear in hand, a dark yet ghostly white sinister figure!

"Are you of Cush, or are you from the Northland?" The voice was emotionless, but the spear point bore upon his chest, a handsbreath away.

"Neither. At least, I think neither. I am Demo, and I am here on a mission for Zeus. I know nothing of Cush, nor of the Northland. I am here to find the regulus, to take with me to Zeus. I mean you no harm, and implore your aid."

The stranger listened stoically to his plea. He silently marched in a wide circle around Demo, always at spear length. Seeing no weapons he sat down at the edge of the sand dune.

"Zeus? Is that the name of the pharaoh? Are you an emissary of this pharaoh, Zeus?"

"Of Zeus, yes. But he is no pharaoh. He is, well, he is Zeus. And I'm here to perform this little chore for him."

"Strange, you don't resemble us. Neither the Nuba nor the Mirikan. Nor the people of the Northland. Very well, I'll take you to Jebel Bakhal. There your fate will be decided." He rose slowly.

"Come, perhaps your blood shall stain the sands of Cush. Others shall decide. That way!" The tall stranger pointed with the spear, waited for Demo to move out. As Demo hesitated the spear point was thrust forward, stopped a finger's width from his skin.

Demo nodded, moved quickly in the indicated direction.

So this is Cush, he thought. And somewhere in Cush I'll find the Regulus. Or will it find me? Ah, the sun is blazing. Would I were swimming in the streams of home!

Heat, dreadful heat!

Heat, humidity, and air that pressed upon the chest - how shall I escape?

Here, prisoner of love though she were, she knew only suffering. She glanced at the creature by her side. Pluto gazed out upon his kingdom deep in thought.

The moans of unremitting misery rose from countless throats, at times drowned by the screams of horror, the imprecations against Pluto and all his minions. Persephone cowered at the sounds, pressed palms to her ears, to no avail.

Pluto sighed, rose slowly. Sad-eyed he gazed upon the woman child by his side. Why had he brought her here? Though his, she would never be his. Though loved, she would never love. What a fool, to have stolen her from Ceres! And yet, he would not exist without her.

God, ruler of the nether world. Then why the sadness, why the remorse?

Pluto sighed.

Dunes gave way to wasteland, sand strewn with stones. And this in time to regions where grew sparse vegetation, small trees. Soon copses of thorn trees rose. And beyond, shimmering as an illusion, dark hills faintly seen.

Though his companion strode seemingly without effort through sand and stone Demo grew ever more weary. And even as the sun neared the horizon and a light breeze tokened cooler air he paused, exhausted.

His companion eyed him suspiciously, once more walked in a wide circle around him. "Uhhh, sit. The river is beyond. We shall sleep here this night. And tomorrow we shall know your fate. Here."

He was offered dried food, a mixture of fruit and nut and meat. There was little taste, but at least sustenance. "I need water," he breathed.

"No. Tomorrow there shall be water. Here there is none. Sleep now. When the moon rises we shall move on. Over there." He motioned toward a slight rise between dark boulders and above one of the scattered termite hills.

Demo lay down, shivering in the air, rapidly cooling with the setting sun. The sandy earth, still warm from the sun's rays, was welcome. And he fell rapidly into a strange sleep broken by even stranger dreams.

A dream in which a giant with a spear stood over him, spear raised. And a bright glow enveloped the giant's head, gleaming white.

Suddenly he sat up.

It was no dream.

The point of the spear touched his stomach and he slid hastily away. His companion stood at his feet, and the full moon gleamed brightly behind his head. "Quickly, we will be in Jebel Barkal by daylight. Quickly."

"Ah, Regulus!" They looked, one to the other. "The Master of the Cobras! The Guardian of the Desert!"

These were the priests, the wise men. Each wore the mystic crown, the sun disk with the protecting uraei, the twin cobras, sacred to Amun. All of gold, even the band of the crown. Clothed in gowns of white, trimmed with gold. The chief priest held a golden rod, nearly equal in height to himself.

The pillars supporting the roof were gold, and at the peak of each pillar the ram's head, above which was the sun disk, and a single cobra seeming to view with disdain those before him.

"Tell us of this Zeus. What has he to do with Regulus? Why would Regulus deign to visit this one in his far off kingdom? What manner of Pharaoh is this Zeus?"

"Zeus? Zeus is the Father of the Universe. All that is, is, because Zeus so wills. You and I and Regulus and . . . and everything. We are but the product of Zeus' power."

Ezah raise his spear, a look of shock on his face.

"Wait, wait! Do you speak of Amun? Is this Zeus but a different face of Amun? There is no Zeus here. And all that you say, that is the work of Amun. We know not this Zeus."

"Yes, it may be. In my land the supreme being is called Zeus. In your land the name may well be Amun. And he has sent me."

They whispered, looked at him askance, whispered again.

"You are but a stripling. Ezah could dispose of you with one blow. He could pierce you with his spear, and you would be no more. What kind of emissary is this for a God to send our temple, this temple dedicated to Amun?"

"I, well, I have chores to perform. And this was laid on me as one of those chores. I have no special magic, no special skills - I am merely the chosen one."

"The Chosen One!"

They all stood, and the high priest, wide-eyed, bowed.

"Amun has sent you, then. And the will of Amun must be obeyed! Tomorrow you shall be led to the Nubian Desert, to the abode of Regulus. And there we will leave you. For none returns who enters the lair of Regulus."

Sleep was fitful, with dreams that began and ended with a strange serpent eyeing him malevolently. And a hiss that made his blood run cold. He woke often, fell once more to sleep. The moon shone, cold and bright. A slight breeze blew, at times gusting to drive grains of sand across his face, into his nostrils. At times he sensed a musty smell, strange and frightening. The odor of Regulus. He was sure of it, though he knew not why.

Morning came cold with the desert night. But quickly the sun warmed the land an air, and day creatures awoke. Ezah stood silently by his side. They ate, drank a tea sweet with the taste of a strange honey, and Ezah rose. "I brought you here, and I have been chosen to lead you to your destruction. North and East toward the sea. But long before we reach that sea you shall enter the Nubian Desert. There I turn back. And you, Amun willing, you shall meet Regulus. And may Amun protect you, for none other can!"

The earth changed from hard surface coated with sand to sand alone. With each step Demo sank ever deeper into the entrapping grains. As he struggled to keep up with Ezah the sweat dripped in a steady stream from his brow, into his eyes, at times blinding him. He could taste the salt, mingled with the desert dust. Each breath drew in dry dust, clogging his nostrils, coating his throat.

Suddenly Ezah raised his spear high, stopped short of a ridge.

"I have gone far beyond the borders, far beyond my realm. But I can go no farther. Yonder ridge marks the bounds of his lair. I know not how he looks, nor how he attacks his prey. I am told on the far side of the ridge lies but a graveyard, dotted with the remains of those who dared approach Regulus. I have but one weapon, this spear. Take it, and may it render you good service. Before you go pray to Amun, or to your Zeus. Now I must leave you."

Demo accepted the long spear and watched in dismal mood as Ezah turned and quickly disappeared in the direction from which they had come. Reluctantly Demo move toward the ridge, using the spear as a cane to aid his passage.

As he reached the peak his foot slipped. He fell forward in the sand. He rolled headlong over the ridge, and downward. Rolled into the lair of Regulus. Stopped finally. Buried in a dune of sand. Sand clogged his nostrils, forced its way between his lips, packed even his ears.

He tried to stand, to break out from the smothering blanket. He moved his arms and legs as though swimming. He was blind, knew neither up nor down. His heart pounded as he held his breath, for fear of breathing in only the deadly grains.

He felt the spear's shaft, held it tight, moved it from side to side. And suddenly through slitted eyes he noted light.

For a moment he lay still, then gradually worked his way upward, upward to the light.

Hours passed. Or days. He had no sense of time, only of desperation. And finally he emerged from the imprisoning grains.

He forced the grit from his mouth, his nostrils. Rubbing carefully he cleared his eyelids, blinked slowly to regain once more his sight. His heard a continuous roar and he looked around to find the source. Then he realized it came from within him. He could hear no external sound! Both ears were plugged with grit, with desert silt and sand!

He found that, ears plugged, his sense of balance was lacking. With each step he wobbled from side to side, both from lack of balance and from the loose particles beneath his feet.

He could see now, though dimly. His eyes burned and teared. If he only had water to wash his eyes.

And his mouth! Dry, filled with the taste of earth and silt and minute particles of rock. And the rising wind was driving even more grit into his face, into his lungs. He turned his back to the wind, gazed at the bleak landscape of Regulus' Lair.

For the most part there was nought to see but bare desert waste. And yet, dotted here and yon, remains of those who had gone before. A skull, whitened by the windblown grit. The rib cage, each bone in place, lying half buried at the base of a dune. And the horizon darkening as the wind's intensity mounted.

Though he could hear nothing the felt the driven grains striking even through his clothes. And dust devils rose from the desert floor, danced their dance, and faded in the distance. The sun was blotted out as the gusting wind lifted silt and sand and dust into the sky.

He lay down, desolate and knowing not which way to turn. But even as he lay on the desert floor the sand began to blanket him. With an effort he stood erect.

How could he find Regulus? Indeed, with the blowing wind, the shifting dunes, and the desert heat how could he do anything. Zeus, he though, I have failed you. I'll see home no more.

Amun the powerful ruled those desert wastes. Amun the merciless drove the sand across its surface. But Amun could relent. Perhaps the pleas of Mut, Goddess Mother, perhaps but a whim, yet the winds died and dark clouds gathered, poured briefly their life giving waters on the scene below.

The huge drops fell, pelting the desert floor, drenching Demo in the deluge of a rare thundershower. And bringing a new and different danger.

For the rain fell in torrents, and water rushed down gullies, down ravines, flushing sand and rocks before it. A wall of water loomed above Demo's head, coming ever closer. He clambered up the side of a dune, fell. He rolled down, but managed again and again to regain his footing. Finally he reached the top.

Standing there he gazed at the raging waters in disbelief. They ate at the dune as though a wild beast. Waves rose an bit away the sand beneath his feet. The dune shrank, began to merge with the surrounding water. The rain had ended, but the stream continued unabated.

And then, as suddenly as it had risen, the stream sank into the desert leaving but moist pools behind. Demo looked in disbelief at the sudden calm. Hurriedly he drank muddy water from a pool at the base of the dune. Even as he drank the thirsty soil soaked up the water. Small pools disappeared under his gaze, and larger ones shrank rapidly.

He knew the winds must have hummed, the torrents roared - and yet he had heard nothing, the silt and grit pounded into his ears. And he was sure that now there was silence - how much he wanted but to listen to that silence. He smiled at the idea, then frowned. How dare I smile at a time like this, he thought to himself.

Distracted by his thoughts he did not note the ripples on the largest pool. Ripples which emanated from movement beneath the surface. Movement that ever became more violent. Nor did he hear the hiss that bubbled up from the depths. Aroused by the torrential rains, the rushing waters, the blast of thunder, Regulus awakened.

"He's seldom gone this long. Demo is such an able hunter. I do believe if there were but one deer in the forest Demo would find it. We're never without venison, you know." She was proud of her son, of his prowess as a hunter.

"But this time the hunt has been long. And I dreamed of Moira last night." She shuddered. "May I never again have such a dream!"

"Moira? I don't know Moira."

"No, and be glad you don't! But enough of that. Come, you shall help me cook the last of our venison. I do hope Demo returns soon with his kill. He's always so proud, you know. Rough, leave those chickens alone!"

Hissing and writhing Regulus rose from the pool, slithered out on the sand. He gazed at Demo balefully. Demo neither saw nor heard. For him the world was silent.

But then he noticed something. A faint musty odor, and odor which he remembered from his dreams.

Demo quickly stood up, looked toward the pool of water. And saw Regulus rising, the brown drops shedding from his slick skin. Wide-eyed Demo held the spear level, pointed toward the strange apparition.

Regulus regarded the spear point with concern, hissed mightily. With consternation he observed Demo, hissed once more.

"Most unusual," he commented, "I must be losing my touch."

He slithered over the sand, undulating from side to side in his progress. He approached Demo, but kept a distance beyond the spearlength. With slow sinuous motion he glided around the boy.

"Hiss! Hissssss!" he breathed, watched nonplused at the lack of response. "You seem not to understand, my boy. Have I failed in some manner to properly enunciate the sound? Perhaps my lungs are waterlogged! Know you not that none survive who hear the hiss of Regulus? How dare you continue to stand there, impervious. Bad mannered, to say the least."

He grumbled, still continued his slow and torturous encirclement of his intended prey.

"You must be Regulus," Demo commented, in part to himself. "I would hope, though my ears are so confoundedly stopped up I can't hear you, that you can hear me. I'm sent by Zeus to invite you to come live on Mount Olympus. No nasty sand storms - and absolutely no floods! Look at you, dripping and with wet sand sticking to your every scale! You could slither comfortably through the smooth green grass, dance to the flute, and sip nectar in sun."

Though Demo was hardly a salesman he was suddenly aided by the elements. A dark cloud was forming above, accompanied by thunder, lightning, wind - and sudden rainfall.

Regulus wriggled from side to side, glissaded down one dune, up another. But there was no place to hide. Grumpily he returned to a spot before Demo, nodded his head in agreement. Whatever Olympus had to offer, it would be an improvement.

Hardly had the contract been made than Demo found himself once more in Zeus' presence, accompanied by the sinuous serpent.

"Well, well, I'm pleased. So this is the Nubian Demon. I beg your pardon, but it is the reputation you have earned. Regulus, isn't it? Of course. Ah, you shall like it here. Yes, indeed. But please stop that infernal hissing. You see, it really doesn't work up here. Just crawl into that basket over there. And please, pull the top over you. My, what a surprise you shall be to my charmer.

"As for you, Demo, once more well done. I'm amazed at your resourcefulness. But do keep in mind that my little black cloud was helpful. Good day, my boy."

With a sudden thump Demo found himself once more in his own front yard. The fall had ended so abruptly the sand-and-silt plugged ears were cleared, and he could hear once more.

"Demo, I told you to stay out of that tree. My, I hope you haven't broken anything. Well get up from there and come to eat. We have such wonderful company. Theresa is staying for supper."

Rough licked his cheek and grinned a dog grin.

Evening came early.

They ate their supper in a strangely quiet mode.

Afterward his mother looked at him for a moment, turned away, wiped a tear from her eye.

"Mother, are you ill? What is wrong!" Demo rose quickly, stepped to her side.

"Demo, I have a story to tell you. Sit down, don't interrupt me."

She sighed, paused as though uncertain how to continue.

"Today an old woman visited our home. A very old woman. Her name is Ceres. Perhaps you have heard the name."

He shook his head.

"An old woman, but a very good woman. One known to me since youth. At one time she served as your nursemaid. A good nursemaid! Would that I had known how good!"

She stood up, paced back and forth in a disturbed manner.

"You were a weak baby, with very little chance for life. I feared that you would not survive. I prayed to the Gods. And then she came to me, brought to us by your Father. He had met her in the forest, where she wept for her lost daughter. She nurtured you, raised you for me, put strength in your bones and muscles. Nearly, she gave you gifts no human dare dream of."

This time she sobbed, head bowed.

"But I, foolish woman, feared her ministrations, feared for you. I ask her to leave my house and I took you away, and action I shall ever regret."

"Nevertheless, I had promised, that should you survive, she might one day ask of you a service.

"This day she came, and so asked. I queried of her, what might that service be, yet she answered not. She said only this, that should you accomplish the chores of Zeus, one task more must you perform, and then the debt would be paid."

Demo smiled.

"Mother, if I complete the tasks laid on by Zeus, what matter a simple task laid on by an old woman. The promise has been made, the service shall be rendered. In due time she will, I'm sure, inform me of that which must be done. Do not be concerned."

His mother hugged him close.

During the night he heard her sobs.

He felt for the first time a gloom, a foreboding, that one insurmountable task lay ahead. He fell to sleep with difficulty, woke often. And he dreamed.

In the night he dreamed of rushing through the dark forest, pursued by he knew not what. Knowing that, before the long night's end, he must turn and face that dread pursuer.

12. Poseidon's Wrath

"A family reunion would be nice. I really don't get around as much as I used to. The job, you know. Duties. Responsibilities. You humans! You just don't understand how vexing it can be, being a God. Why, every day, day in and day out, I've got to have the sun rise. No big chore, but it's only one of many." Zeus shook his head.

"The moon, if I don't watch her, goes wandering off. Messes up the tides terribly. Disconcerting to young lovers, too!"

He looked, head cocked to the side, at Demo.

"So, what may I ask, do you want here at Olympus?"

For a moment Demo was nonplused.

"Sire, I gathered you had sent for me. I came not of my own volition. Perhaps some other has need of my services . . . ?"

"Somebody is playing games, and they are surely going to get themselves into a mess of trouble. Yes! A mess . . . of . . . trouble!" Zeus glanced around, a thoughtful expression on his face.

A titter sounded from the inner hallway.

Zeus glanced at Demo to see whether he had noted the sound.

Demo was silent. Best to leave all surmises alone. After all, he thought, who am I to criticize the dalliances of Zeus.

Zeus smiled.

"Anyway, you are here, so let's get you started on another exciting excursion. By the way, you've really done remarkably well, and I am proud of you. Here, let me give you a slight token."

He thought a moment, smiled once more, and waved his hands nonchalantly in the air. The medal was large and shiny as Zeus slipped the supporting chain over Demo's head. Demo took the medal in his hands, read the legend thereon. Although the words were difficult to read in an inverted position he managed to decipher them.

"For Ungodly Support to the Gods."

Zeus kissed him on one cheek, then the other. "I'm never sure the order in which I'm supposed to do that. Never mind. If I got it wrong, we'll merely change the ritual."

He glanced rather anxiously toward the hallway.

"Young man, rather quickly now. I want you to drop in on Poseidon. Lovely fellow, you'll like him. Eh, don't ever discuss fishing with him. He has a dread of the subject. I was fishing one day and he nibbled at the bait, and . . . Anyway, a subject not to be discussed. Where was I . . . ?" Zeus glared at Demo as though the boy had stolen his train of thought.

"Take this bag with you, and give it into his hands, and his only. He'll know what to do. By the way, do you own a bathing suit?"

Zeus, Olympus, and all else seemed to be fading away. Demo seemed to hear, faintly, Zeus scolding. "Now, you know you aren't supposed to play with my powers. You just leave that young man alone, my dear. I'm such an ogre when I'm jealous."

He landed with a splash.

Zeus' aim was plainly off.

Almost always he had landed in his home, the forest. But this?

The middle of a stream, of course. He slipped under the water, propelled himself upward, glancing quickly around at the height of his watery leap. A shudder went through him.

No river, this!

Neither shores, nor the green forest, nor the high mountains of home!

Water, only water! Deep blue water, extending as far as eye could see. Blue . . . and salty. Surely he had landed in the ocean!

"Zeus, Oh, Zeus! I do think you may have erred . . . only slightly, of course. Zeus . . . ?"

"Who dares call on Zeus, when he swims in my domain? How come you here, earthling? Where is your ship? Do you not fear my watchdogs, the great sharks that guard my kingdom. And why call you on Zeus. Poseidon rules these waves!

"I . . . My name is Demo. I was merely doing an errand for Zeus. And, through some mischance, I landed in these waters. Perhaps you can direct me to the nearest shore?"

"Mischance, eh? Well, Zeus is putting on the years . . . Odd, but he may be losing his grip. Oughta spend more time at the seashore. Relaxing. Yes indeed." The voice seemed to emanate from a puff-fish, which floated rather nonchalantly at arms length away.

"The nearest shore. Of course. You earthlings. I would invite you down for a meal, but you lack the necessary organs to join me. Toward the setting sun. A small island. I'll race you!"

Demo looked to the west. Water, only water.

"Is it, well, very far?"

"No, no! Just a good swim away. Ah, forgive me. It could be a bit strenuous for you. I'll take care of it, though." The puff-fish whistled loudly, popped up above the water to peruse its surface.

"Here he comes."

Demo followed the puff-fish's gaze. He wished he hadn't!

The shark was approaching at alarming speed. Its fin split the water's smooth surface, drawing ever closer. Demo's eyes widened.

"Hey, that's a shark!"

"Yes, yes indeed! Actually, merely a minnow as sharks grow. Actually, he was the only one in the area, so I flagged him down. Oh, taxi, right this way."

The shark circled slowly, at times rising to the surface, its cold eyes regarding Demo with hungry interest.

"None of that, now! Just come over here and let him ride upon your back. Over to the island, and be quick about it. I don't care to wait. And I do so enjoy shark steaks."

The shark stopped dead, then slowly swam alongside Demo, who clambered aboard.

The trip was indeed swiftly completed. Though it ended swiftly, not swiftly enough. Not before the shark, perhaps to show its displeasure, several times dived deep.

Coughing and spewing saltwater, Demo suffered the torments with little grace. As they reached the shallows off the island he quickly dismounted, swam toward the waiting beach.

The shark swam with him, circling ahead and behind, and occasionally taking a playful nip at Demo's heels. Amazing how playful nips at one's heels improves one's swimming skills!

As he waded toward the shore a sudden wave roared in. Massive torrents of water tore over him, knocked him to his knees. When he groggily arose he saw before him, in all his oceanic splendor, a figure of majestic proportions.

"You are on an errand for Zeus, are you shipmate? And may I inquire to what port ye are bound? I may well give thee favorable winds and gentle seas, if it so please me."

"Sire, I seek the master of the deeps, Poseidon himself. I have this missive to convey to him."

"Well, now, you've laid your course well, and have made already landfall. Lower your sails, matey, for I be Poseidon, he whom you seek. Let me look upon this important missive. My, my, from Zeus himself!"

Demo proffered the missive, astonished at his good luck in so quickly completing his task.

Poseidon opened the package, pulled out a long roll of papyrus.

"Well, a letter from Zeus! I didn't know he could write!"

He read the Zeus' letter, looked contemplatively out to sea, then read it once more. "Have you read this missive, my good lad?"

"Oh, no, Sire. It would not do, you know!"

The calm look on Poseidon's face had disappeared. Anger seemed to be mounting, and his face grew first red, then purple as an angry sea.

"Then let me tell you what this is. This is a bill. And not an ordinary bill. Our good Zeus says, says he: 'Your past bills for the water I have supplied you have not been paid. Your rates are therefore doubled, and the present bill also includes a penalty for late payment and excess water usage. Return payment in full with the boy, or suffer the consequences.'"

"How dare he! To send such a bill to Poseidon! I rule the waves and all the water under them! Penalties! I am somewhat annoyed by your missive, shipmate. Have you heard the term, keelhaul? It's an old custom to keelhaul those who arouse the ire of Poseidon. And, in the absence of Zeus, mayhap we shall keelhaul his emissary."

Demo looked around. He saw no sign of emissary, none to serve for the aforementioned keelhauling.

Demo shivered.

"Eh, Sire, he seems not to have an emissary handy. Should I see such an emissary, I shall most certainly direct him to you, so that he may participate in the keelhauling. Anyway, now my mission is complete, and I must report back to Zeus."

"Oh, no! I wouldn't think of such a thing. Come aboard, come aboard! Ho the dinghy, we'll be going directly to the ship. Look lively, now!"

Demo followed Poseidon's gaze. Where the sea had been empty now floated a three master, its sails furled. And on the beach a dinghy, manned by a scurvy looking crew of ill-clothed sailors.

"Yes, indeed. I can see you are impressed by her lines. Only wait 'til you are on board. We shall have a sumptuous feast in your honor. Ah, you haven't eaten until you've partaken of the food from my galley. Come along!"

Demo examined, surreptitiously, the oarsmen. Though they rowed with vigor, their faces remained expressionless, their eyes empty. He felt as though he were looking on the spirits of drowned sailors, condemned to these chores for eternity.

"Quickly, now, laddie! Up the ladder. Hold her steady, boys. I wouldn't have the youngster get wet, not yet."

Somehow the last two words disturbed Demo. He wasn't exactly sure why.

"Keelhauling, I didn't explain it to you, did I. Well, it's a sport we indulge in at times. Gives the lads a chance to get in their exercise. The way it works is, we take a . . . eh, a volunteer. We tie his hands behind him, wrap a hawser around him, and toss off the bow. The boys pull the hawser from stem to stern, from starboard to larboard, all around the good ship back to the bow once more. Jolly good fun!"

Demo listened wide-eyed and speechless.

"I see you are impressed! And so you should be. I've a very good mind to let you volunteer. Give you a chance to show off your mettle. Yes, I just may give you the chance." Poseidon's voice held a tone of anger to match his angry face.

"And the sea is of like mind. Have you ever seen such waves! Keelhauling today would indeed be great sport!"

"Sire, I fear I would provide poor sport indeed. With hands free I swim like a rock. With them tied I fear I would never surface at all."

"Well, don't fret. That happens all the time. Ruins the fun, of course. Keep in mind, though, that we always give the volunteer a solemn burial at sea. A very impressive ceremony. You would truly appreciate it."

The prospect of participating in a keelhauling - in fact, of being the keelhaulee - grew less and less desirable as Poseidon explained the term.

"But, first, a good meal. We'll start with some bacon and eggs. Delicious bacon, and the eggs are cooked in the bacon grease. A delightful meal. And you probably thought we'd be dining on cockles and mussels and nought from the dry land. No, no! We feed our guests well. Yes, indeed!"

The rolling of the ship as the waves struck, the thought of the greasy bacon and greasy eggs - the very idea of eating - nauseated Demo.

With a sigh he stared out at the watery scene.

The sea, which had been so blue and calm early in the day, now frowned with graygreen surface and waves that reached, at times, the foot of the crow's nest. The wind blew with a sonorous tone, reminiscent of the dirges played at village funerals. And above all the sky looked down with a gray visage, pockmarked with black clouds.

From these, more and more frequently, lightning flashed to better display the scene.

Flying fish swam deep, and dolphins sported not. Gulls and terns were not to be seen.

And yet

And yet a bird flew. Battered by the wind, drenched by falling rain, its powerful wings brought it ever closer to the ship. A huge white bird

Demo eyes brightened. Could it be her? Here, in this dreadful storm!

Indeed it was.

She landed beside them, assumed the form of a goddess.

"Well, uncle, you sail rough seas this day. I've come to ask of you a favor, for I am in love and what Cupid cannot grant, the mighty Poseidon may well provide."

"Ah, little niece, delightful to have you on board. The boy and I were discussing some manly sport for later in the day. Perhaps you can stay. It should be amusing."

"Come, Uncle, let us go forward to where the bow leaps from the depths. I want to feel the force of the waves, the blast of the windy gusts. No fair weather sailor I. Boy, stay! We shall return."

With anxious mien Demo awaited their return. He was sure his own fate was being discussed. Could she control even the power of Poseidon? A shiver went through him, whether from the cold rain and wind or from his own fears, he knew not.

"My boy, forgive me. I knew not your qualities. Athena, my dearest niece, has told me of your exploits. My, you are much too shy and retiring. If I had done the deeds she attributes to you, I would blare them out for the world to hear. Come, join Athena and myself at a table set to honor you."

The attitude of Poseidon had changed indeed. And the smile of Athena erased all fear and doubt from Demo's mind. Even the sea now grew calm, and the winds died to mere gentle breezes. Demo thought,

'The wonder of a woman!'

"Before you return to Zeus - with a message I wish to dispatch - I would have you assist me with a problem. I'm sure it will take but a little of your time, and you shall certainly be rewarded well."

"Sire, I would willingly serve, but . . . "

"Good, good! Then it's settled. Have you, perchance, heard of Oceanus, and of my henchman Proteus!"

"Vaguely, I recall the names."

"Eh, you shall get to know them well. Perhaps you will know them better than you would care to. I think so. Well, enough for now. Let us enjoy the feast." Poseidon smiled.

They dined well. The wealth of the sea contributed to Poseidon's table. Yet were missing the flesh of the sea calves, a delicacy for which his table was famed. Amphitrite, Poseidon's wife, commented on the lapse.

"Proteus, long our herdsman for the sea calves, has left us to follow Oceanus. For Oceanus has returned, and attempts to reclaim these watery regions from the rightful authority of my beloved Poseidon. It is sad, for only strife can result, and the death of heroes."

Poseidon glanced at her, then addressed Demo.

"I had intended to delay this conversation until after our repast. However, since the subject is broached, let me appeal to you." He sat silently for a moment, a slight frown on his face.

"These domains were passed to me from Oceanus, in the early times when the Old Gods lost their powers. Even as Zeus was given the heavens, and Pluto the netherworld, so received I the raging waters, the ocean depths, and all creatures who take to the sea. And the Titans, who had long held power, were exiled to Tartarus."

His face grew grim.

"I have ruled well this maritime kingdom. The fisherman takes his catch, the traveler sojourns on peaceful seas, the water nymphs sing along the quiet streams. Yet Proteus, when still he served me, prognosticated of evil times. In words strange and cryptic he warned of a usurper who would wrest from me my very throne."

Amphitrite patted his hand, and for a moment he smiled.

"Athena has told me of your services to Zeus, of your courage and your deeds. I now am in dire stress, and would send you on a task. A task to thwart the avarice of Oceanus, and end this madness."

"My dolphin, my sea chariot, and my horses are at your disposal. I have little guidance to provide, little help to offer. You should know this. When Oceanus ruled these waves the seas were wild and no ship dared sail. Under my rule calm seas have greeted the sailor, and steady winds have filled his sail. I would keep it so."

"Tomorrow, at break of day, my chariot and steeds shall be at your disposal. My dolphin shall act as a guardian, to warn you in times of danger, and protect as best he can. As for the rest, it is left with you."

After the meal they went on deck. The seas were calm, sparkling with strange luminescent lights where played the flying fish. The moon rose, its light reflected from the water's surface. Demo and Athena stood quietly at the bow of the ship, enthralled even as we by the beauty and majesty of the sea.

Poseidon and Amphitrite watched the couple for a moment, then looked at each other with a smile. "I think she chooses well," Amphitrite voiced quietly.

Poseidon nodded.

Demo walked with his hand in that of Athena, bathed in her smile. Strange that Zeus did not interfere!

Premonitions occupied his mind, and even as he pressed the warmth of her against him he shivered. Waiting for him, he knew, was the unseen companion. And a destiny he could not fathom.

She sensed his mood, touched his cheek lightly with her hand. "Would I could remove this curse from

you. Understand that it is not given even to me to see the final scene. Yet my love will be with you. Ah, 'tis time. The moon is sinking into the sea, and I must be a-wing ere it fade from sight. Fare the well, my wanderer. Return safely to me."

He looked at the moon, now half hidden by the horizon. Turning he found her gone. The beat of wings above the ship, and the silhouette of an owl against the moon, marked her going.

Demo stood, disconsolate, listening to the quiet lap of the waves against the bow, the groan of taut hawsers, the gentle flap of furled sails in a light breeze. Tomorrow a different adventure - one from which he might not return. Well, morning comes swiftly. He sought his bunk, slept well, rocked by the gentle swells of the vast ocean.

The chariot rode smoothly and swiftly over the surface of the sea, pulled by a brace of stallions even a warrior might ride eagerly. Led by the dolphin they raced he knew not where. To search for Oceanus, whom he had never seen; to look for Proteus, who changed form at will - what strange adventure this. Perhaps, what hopeless adventure.

Yet they pressed on. The sun rose and lightened a glistening sea, deep blue mirroring the blue of the sky. And as far as sight could see, nothing. Only the endless surface, stretching from horizon to horizon.

Still on the dolphin sped, close followed by the steeds. Never had he ridden with such speed, never had he seen an ocean without end. Sun overhead, he felt the warmth of its rays, even though the cool ocean breeze gentled its beams and he felt only comfort.

They came upon the shore so quickly that he was surprised. The mighty stream rushed into the sea, a current that stretched even beyond the sight of land. They had approached from the side. Suddenly the dolphin leaped into the air, twisting sideward, and swam slowly in a circle. The team slowed, halted the chariot at land's edge.

What was he to find here? He recognized nothing. Beyond the mouth of the river the trees grew profusely, hiding the upper reaches from his view. The near shore was rock strewn, but marked with wide sandy stretches. Inland the land rose slowly, then reached a escarpment, a huge vertical stone wall.

He waded to the shore, looked for edible plants near the river's brink. Strange plants grew in scattered clumps, but nothing that he recognized. He sat down, gazed out to sea. On the far horizon white cumulus clouds were forming. Finally he picked some of the native plants, examined them carefully. Perhaps they had some food value. They might serve for greens, or even a salad. Reluctantly he munched on a leaf.

The taste was bland. Still, there seemed to be little else with which to satisfy his appetite. At least, it would fill his stomach.

He had eaten a handful, leaned back to rest, when he noted a shadow on the sand. Quickly he looked up.

He had felt no alarm. Surely this monstrous creature was not the unseen companion!

"I came swiftly, yet plainly not swiftly enough. I am sorry. You have eaten the herb, and the curse of Glaucus is even now working in your body.

"I pity you, young man. You have eaten of the herbs that brought me to the state you see. Soon you will feel a mild desire to enter the water. And if you resist it will grow ever stronger. At last you will respond, and when you do, your body will change as did mine. You too suffer the curse of Glaucus!

Demo stared at him in distaste. Yet, fearfully, he knew it was true. Even now he felt the urge to enter the beckoning sea. His mind saw visions of deep lagoons populated with swarms of fish, great manta rays, swimming amidst brilliantly colored coral reefs. His skin felt dry and sere. He must swim in the warm ocean, or he would surely die.

Quickly he rose to his feet. Glaucus looked down, did not move. Demo walked slowly to the beach, looked back at this, his weird visitor. Finally, closing his eyes, he stepped into the water.

He felt the change begin even as the soft waves touched his ankle. He rushed forward, threw himself headlong into the soft waves lapping the shore. He heard a roaring in his ears, his muscles ached, and for a moment his eyes were sightless.

It was done!

He did not ask. He looked at the scaly hands, the strangely webbed fingers and toes. The curse of Glaucus. The adventure was over. Athena was lost to him forever. Now he was but another denizen of the deep, a strange monster in the ocean's depths.

The dolphin swam near.

"You are one of us, now. I know not whether the process can be reversed. In any event, in this form I can take you to Proteus, if it is your will?"

"Proteus? What matters it now. He would set upon me, for I resemble nothing but a monster of the deep." Yet, reluctantly, Demo swam with the dolphin through boundless seas 'til night darkened the eastern sky.

"Down. We must go down. Here Proteus waits, prepares for the coming of Oceanus. He works busily, his eight great arms ever assembling the throne on which Oceanus would sit. Come with me to the depths."

With each moment they swam ever deeper. The blue-green waters of the surface darkened, took on a purplish tinge, grew ever more impenetrable by the eye. Yet, far below, a light gleamed dimly, or lights. And it was toward those lights they made their way.

At first the fish had swam and played, delighted with their company. Butterfly fish flitted by, seahorses danced in a vertical ballet, and in the distance the sharks circled, ever accompanied by the pilot fish.

With each fathom they penetrated the fish grew ever fewer, even as did the light. The warm surface waters were no more, replaced by chill drafts from far below. And colder still the waters as their passage continued.

The source of light became more evident as they drew nigh. Red and glowing lava, flowing in an endless stream, lit the massive peak from which it flowed. The stream near the volcano's mouth glowed brightly, and lava flow around the peak retained the glow until the heat was quenched by the frigid waters.

Water and steam and bubbles swirled ever upward above the melted stone, a seething cylinder of white illuminated by the light beneath. And there, on the edge of the molten magma, Proteus worked his work.

His giant squid-shaped body was limned by the magma's red light. He coiled his tentacles around huge boulders, tore them from their rest. These he sat in place, building a massive throne, the throne of Oceanus.

The task progressed. Nevertheless, even as he worked the Gods of fire struck out against the defilement of their melted artistry. A belch of white-hot lava erupted, brushed aside the mighty throne. In hasty retreat Proteus swam quickly, tentacles drawn in to escape the edge of the crimson river. He drove across the watery waste, propelled by the force of inky jet fluids.

His passage brought him to the very spot whereat they waited. His eyes looked upon them in neither curiosity nor fear. So long as Demo and his dolphin guide did not interfere with Proteus' movement they were ignored.

Demo watched the undersea volcano, the fiery eruption with its steaming seawater, molten stones. Still, it was not the grandeur of the scene that held his attention.

In the midst of the burning mass a dark object stood, arms folded, eyes focused in deadly hatred on Demo.

The unseen companion!

With a shudder Demo closed his eyes, opened them once more. The vision was gone. Only the angry red lava remained. He shook his head, turned once more to the job at hand.

"Proteus, I am sent by Poseidon to reason with you."

The tentacles suddenly coiled spasmodically. The creature moved cautiously away, halted, then approached once more.

"Poseidon knows full well why I have left his service. I served him well as herdsman, and in reward the Golden Isles were to be mine. They have gone to another, Glaucus, who is only a trespasser in these

watery depths."

"Glaucus, he who was transformed from human form to one such as I?"

"Indeed! He whom I would drive from these waters with all good will."

Demo was silent. Suddenly a spume of molten lava shot from the peak of the volcano. The explosive eruption drove them back, even as the red liquid followed a steamy path, lighting the depths around them. Only Proteus observed nature's fury with equanimity.

With a shudder Demo ignored the roiled waters. "Proteus, let me deal with Glaucus. Should I convince him to return to the land from whence he came, can you in your wisdom return him once more to human form?"

"Willingly, willingly. I tell you, though, I know his kind. He'll never give up the Golden Isles."

Turning to the dolphin Demo ignored the last remark. "Take me to the isle where I first assumed this form. There I knew Glaucus. Perhaps there he still remains."

Lying in the waves Demo gazed anxiously at the shore. There grew the horrid plants, the occasion of his unhappy condition. But nowhere was Glaucus to be seen. The waves gently washed upon the deserted beach, and terns and gulls flew low above them in search of food. High above white cumulus clouds floated in an azure sky. Even as he gazed one began to obscure the brilliant sun, casting a dark and cooling shadow on earth and sea.

The dolphin grew restless, swimming back and forth to release its pent-up energy. "Go, search these seas for one such as I. Tell him that a friend waits here. A friend who may well have a remedy for this curse from which we suffer."

The dolphin willingly began his search. No lover of indolence was he.

Diligent though he was, he searched to no avail. Glaucus was not to be found. Eventually, night day's end, the dolphin swam once more to Demo, confided to him his failure.

"Know you of Scylla? The six headed monster who takes her toll on those following their trade on the sea? Go where she waits her prey, and look there for Glaucus. For there was a time, before Circe in anger molded this hideous creature, that Scylla was a maiden fair. Yes, a maiden loved of Glaucus. Search for him near that abode, for he will not wander far from his true love."

Through the night Demo slept in the gentle tide, washed by warm waves. The phosphorescent sea stretched as far as eye might follow, dropping below a distant horizon. Flying fish played above its surface, and seahorses danced beneath. All was silent, save for the soft waves caressing the shore.

He dreamed.

Of Athena, of home, of what he had now become.

The roar of incoming waves awoke him. A sea fog covered the shoreline, and heavy waves were forming with the incoming tide. He dove into the oncoming wave, swam deep to calmer waters.

There played bigeyed butterfly fish, colored with a palette of white and black and orange. Silversides swam, and among the floating weeds wanderer crabs creep. Seahorses cavort, and at times the young were exploded in droves from the fathers pouch. Shoreward, where rocky outcrops lay, seasnails moved slowly, devouring the algae on their way.

He sensed, rather than saw, their approach.

They came swiftly. The Dolphin swimming in happy glee, Glaucus following at a more subdued pace. After explanations Glaucus willingly accompanied him to Proteus lair.

The pact was sealed. Glaucus would be returned to his prior form. Proteus was to return once more to Poseidon's service. "And myself?" Demo queried.

"It shall be as with Glaucus."

Proteus smiled, if one can say a squid smiles. At least, he grimaced.

"How, then, do we deal with Oceanus? You know of his rekindled ambition. What can be done to placate one such as he?"

They talked long, examining the problem each from his own perspective. "It is a problem without solution!" exclaimed Proteus. "He seems invincible. Yet even he must have some weakness, some hidden defect that might be his downfall." Demo spoke with little assurance.

"None. No, there is not niche in his armor. Any weakness in another is lacking in him. I should know. Weekly, before the Golden Isles fell to Glaucus, Oceanus and I played round after round of golf on those shores. I observed him, talked to him, learned of his history. He opened up to me. I tell you, no, Oceanus has no weaknesses."

"What, of all things, does Oceanus most enjoy?"

Proteus sat quietly, only the tips of his tentacles wriggling. "He enjoys thoroughly power. He likes, of course, a round of golf. And to talk. Little else."

"Ah, let us wend our way to Poseidon. There is much to be done."

Indeed there was. Day after day they worked with Poseidon, taught him skills foreign to his domain. With Proteus he visited the Golden Isles, the throne intended for Oceanus, and learned much along the way.

"Proteus, when comes Oceanus?"

"That I know not. But this I know, the waves shall not be still, nor the ocean calm, with his coming."

Demo woke with the leaping and bounding of the three-master. The ship moaned in the throes of an angry sea. The planks bent and gave, and sea water sloshed in the hold. Above, the wind tore at the furled sails. The hawsers, stretched taut, groaned under the torment. Seabirds landed on the deck, sought shelter from the storm.

"Is it now? Has he come?"

Proteus, now in human form, nodded. "It is surely Oceanus. I will address him. He will listen to me." Proteus spoke with little assurance, his eyes watching the ever wilder sea.

"Oceanus, 'tis I, your old friend, Proteus. We would meet with you, on the Golden Isles. Poseidon is amenable to concessions. He would negotiate with you. This day we sail for the Golden Isles."

The words seemed to have little effect. Then, gradually, the winds died, and the waves grew ever smaller. A light breeze rose, steady, blowing toward the Golden Isles.

Quickly the sails were unfurled. The ship rode smoothly and swiftly toward the distant shore. In the bilge sea water continued to slop, gradually was dumped over the side.

"A gift, Zeus, from Poseidon." Demo handed Zeus a golf club, handle of gold.

Zeus frowned. "And what of my missive?"

"Given to him, Sire. He acknowledges that his payment has, indeed, been delayed. But, another matter might interest you. A terrible battle ensued between Poseidon and Oceanus. The waters of the oceansea thundered upon ship and shore. Islands disappeared haplessly into the depths. Still they fought in ever more desperate anger.

They labored for a day, and only with nightfall did Poseidon finally dominate. 'Twas on the golf course of the Golden Isles, and as result of his win Poseidon retains mastery of the seas. Oceanus had the lead, then developed a nasty slice as they neared the 15th hole."

"Oh, yes, it really was a nasty slice. Ball flew right off the course."

"Golf, Poseidon, Oceanus? Who rules the watery domains as they while away their time at such diversions?"

"I, your majesty. Great fun. Some minor problems. Washed away the rock of Gibraltar, which

Poseidon kindly replaced. And, Sire, Poseidon invites you a golf match at your earliest convenience, where he would negotiate with you over the bill you submitted. I'd be more than pleased to run Olympus in your absence."

"Yes, I understand." Zeus weighed the club in his hands, took a hefty swing. "I'll surely join him. I doubt he knows that Proteus gave me lessons years ago. 'Twill be a most enjoyable game!"

He paused for a moment, eyes wide, as though watching a major catastrophe. "You . . . in my absence!" With a frown he walked toward the throne. "Where is my flagon of nectar. Good day, my lad!"

The river Lethe flows dark and deep in the nether kingdom. Strange stories of the power of those waters spread among mankind.

One story was true.

Who drinks of those waters remembers no more.

Lost loves, friends, family - their vision fades away.

Hate, enemies, wars, catastrophes - all are gone.

Happiness, joy, taste of rare wines, flavor of good foods - all fade.

Victories, defeats. Catastrophes, triumphs. Gone, all gone.

A blessing or a curse?

To each new dweller in Hades offers Pluto a goblet. In that goblet the limpid water of Lethe. The only kindness offered in the kingdom of the damned.

One bathed in those limpid waters, drank deep, and found no peace.

Pluto.

Master of the evil domain. Keeper of the Portals of Hell.
Cursed to minister to the punishment of the damned, forever.

And cursed yet more with a heart that bled for the poor fools whose actions had brought them to such sorry end.

The most damned of all souls in purgatory.

Pluto, master of that dread domain.

He had hoped with Persephone to escape in her arms the ever-present misery.

Her sorrow brought misery the more.

"I can give to others the waters of Lethe. Only to others. As for me, I must know all past evil deeds - and even more, must know the evil yet to come."

The waters of Lethe failed him.

13. The Anger of Zeus

"I will not have it! Dare he taunt the master of the universe! I will swat him like a fly! No! Too easy! He shall change places with Prometheus! No, no! Even that is too easy. Boy, where are you, come here! Now, right now! I have a chore for you. Yes, such a chore!"

The sudden call to Olympus was unexpected. Not that Zeus ever sent out invitations. Normally - if one could consider a summons from Zeus to be normal - he had few cues and hints before Zeus summoned him. This unceremonious summons came as a complete, and not overly appreciated, surprise.

He noted immediately Zeus' red face, and the tumultuous tower of black clouds above Olympus. This was going to be a real task!

"Atlas! A vulgar name! Do you know it? I'll tell you of Atlas! Condemned! Condemned to hold the world forever upon his shoulders! And he dares claim that I chose him for that task because I had not the strength and stamina to perform it! How dare he!"

Zeus paced back and forth, sputtering.

"He is to be punished. Right now, I have yet to decide the what that punishment shall be. You, my lad, shall decide. I want you to travel widely, to examine all the vilest, cruelest, most atrocious forms of torture. Select from these the very worst. That torture shall be imposed on the impudent lout."

"But, Sire, I . . . "

"Enough! Begone. And do not linger, or you may join him."

Never had he seen Zeus so angry. Once more he started to speak, but with a wave of his hand Zeus dismissed him.

He landed in the midst of a patch of briars, extricated himself slowly and carefully. "My, but he is peeved!"

Two mighty brothers served Zeus faithfully and well. Yet there came a falling out, and the anger of Zeus could not be appeased. One brother he chained to a mountain crag, and daily sent a great eagle to tear and rend his flesh.

One he placed in eternal servitude, to carry upon his shoulders the earth and heavens. And that was Atlas.

Torture, torment? More like Hades than Heaven! What a strange and obscene task was this!

"Mother, the Gods at times have been cruel to man. What manner of cruelty have they applied, what devices or creatures that give pain?"

"A strange question. But, yes, the Gods work in strange ways."

A sparkle lit her eye.

"There is a legend that once, in long ago times, there lived on earth only men. They grew proud and warlike, offended each the other and offended all the Gods. Zeus became very angry, and called unto him all the Gods. Long they parlayed, and angrily. And at long last they decided on a torture so inhuman, so merciless, so enduring that they hesitated to loose it upon even these undeserving earthlings. At last Zeus authorized the punishment."

She paused, stirred the pot in which vegetables were beginning to boil.

"And that was?"

A smile crossed her face.

"A present was delivered to man. One that he looked on with delight, and took to his heart. A present that has punished him ever since. It was an object of unending torture; still, a torture that poor weak man courted."

"A present, Mother?"

"Yes, he sent to man Pandora. Pandora, the first woman. And since that day man has found himself unable to live without her. She torments him, tantalizes him, arouses in him all emotions. Yet he turns again and again to her." She laughed.

"Just as Athena torments you, yet you turn to her again and again!"

"You tease me, Mother?"

"No, the legends say it's true. Woman was man's first punishment. Disguised as a gift! Well, well, perhaps your Athena will be more the gift, less the punishment!" She tousled his hair, hummed to herself, glanced in amusement over her shoulder at him, and laughed.

Demo smiled. Such pleasant punishment.

Yet, truly, how much pain. The wanting, the loneliness, the feeling of emptiness when she was not near - before he met her they did not exist. Now they were his constant companions.

A coin has two sides.

Gift and punishment indeed!

The more he thought, the more reasonable it seemed. The punishment for Atlas, the ultimate punishment, would be to find him a mate.

Of course, it was difficult. For one such as Atlas, who might qualify?

There were children's' stories, tales, even legends, of women such as these. But reality knew none such.

I have a task of great difficulty, he thought to himself. I'll get busy on it after lunch. "Mother, haven't we anything to eat?"

"Mother, tell me of women."

"Women! Why . . . , eh, what in the world do you want to know?
She blushed slightly, frowned.

"Well, you spoke of Pandora. I am sure there are other women in history. Tell me of them."

She blinked, then smiled. "Oh, of course. History is replete with stories of great women. Let me think."

"What is greatness? Hera, wife of Zeus, of course. Venus, Goddess of Love, certainly. The Amazons, who dominated men, perhaps. There are so many, and they vary in their greatness."

"Let me tell you true, Mother. I have a task laid on by Zeus, to punish the mighty Atlas. I would find for him a wife, a gift of happiness, of misery. Thus there would be punishment, but lightened by womanly touch. Where would I look for such a one?"

"Zeus! At times I am angry, even at the Gods. Atlas did faithfully support his master. Yet Zeus has rewarded him with an unending toil! A fit mate for Atlas? I can think of only one, and that one who would resist such wedded bliss."

"You know of one! Her name, Mother, and I will find her!"

"You are eager, but beware. She has been courted by many, won by none. Her name is Atalanta. Huntress, runner, wrestler - skilled in arts of man and of woman. Yes, you might well search for Atalanta."

He was committed. Find Atalanta, woo her for Atlas, arrange the nuptials - and convince Zeus that he had fulfilled his task.

Little details must be worked out. A plan of action developed. A purported weakness of Atalanta - a love for golden apples - might well be exploited. Vulcan agreed to fashion these in his shop, and with his usual skill fashioned them in exquisite form.

Demo looked at them and was so enticed that he had a mind to keep them. Wisdom prevailed, and merely placed them in his pouch.

He inquired widely of those who might know, searched widely for the land wherein she dwelt. In due time he was rewarded. And finally he reached the very village she called home.

The dwellings were scattered, separated by green meadows and forest. Each small domicile resembled in its own way the home where he lived with his Mother.

But he did not find her in one of these.

They met in the square of the little village. He was astonished. With her reputation for physical superiority he expected - well, it doesn't matter.

What he found was a beautiful woman, tall and slender. Not muscle-bound, she. Not the heavy wrestler. Nor the huge-biceped brute he had visualized.

They talked.

"Ah, young sojourner. What brings you to our land? Do you seek adventure, riches? You'll not find them here, I assure you. But, while you tarry, join with me in a race." She challenged him, as she did all newcomers to the village. Race with her, and if he but win she would acquiesce to his every demand.

Demo blinked. It was going to be so easy. Amazing! He had expected to cajole, beg, lie - even, terrible thought, to carry her off against her will.

The race began unpropitiously.

She darted ahead, turned with a smile - a sarcastic, mocking one.

"My, shall I help you? Perhaps your brogans are too heavy. Or is it those huge feet?"

Quickly he tossed one of the golden apples before her, slightly off to the side. The legends proved true.

She quickly deviated from the path, picked up the apple, continued on her way.

Happily, in those moments he gained. She was now only steps ahead!

Once more Demo tossed an apple. This time it went even more off the path. Nevertheless she ran after it, returned to the race.

She laughed.

"You think to distract me? I have but begun to run. But don't worry, I'll wait for you at the finish line."

And now they were abreast!

He tossed once more, the last of the apples.

His eyes widened. The fox imp rose from the roadside bushes, seized the apple, and disappeared again, chortling.

Atalanta would now be concerned only with the race! How could he possibly beat her! Ah, if only he had one more of the golden apples. Sadly he staggered on. There was no way he could beat her!

He had failed!

He reckoned not with Vulcan's skill!

Atalanta lost all thought of the race, ran madly after the fox imp. The imp, looking back, saw her quick approach and dropped the apple. It skipped sideways, dashed into the forest without a glance behind.

Atalanta seized the last apple, returned to the race to find herself bested. With good grace she bowed to the winner.

The nuptials were performed by a local priest. He wanted no pay, merely the reputation of having married the mighty Atlas to Atalanta.

As Atlas shifted the world on his shoulder Atalanta squeezed his brawny arm. The adoration on her face brought happiness to his eyes.

A perfect match, thought Demo.

"Give him a wife! I sent you to find the most horrible of tortures. How dare you suggest we reward his impiety by providing him with a wife! I've a mind to have you replace him for just a few hours, with the burden of the world on your shoulders!"

Zeus was, to put it kindly, miffed.

"But, Sire, think! If Atlas had such a wife as Hera . . . ?"

"Give him Hera? Well, you begin to interest me." Zeus looked around quickly. "Just jesting, my boy, of course. Now what have you in mind?"

"That he be wed to Atalanta."

"The huntress! Yes, yes indeed. Glad I thought of it. A delightful young lady. Enticing! Irresistible!" He paused, glanced around, spoke with lowered voice. "She will tire of him! At first, they will be attracted, of course. Of course, he will be so busy balancing the world, he'll have little time for her. Soon they'll quarrel and he'll feel miserable." Zeus smiled benevolently.

"Wonderful! My boy, your wisdom exceeds your years. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm inclined to permit your marriage to Athena. You, too, deserve such married bliss."

There seemed to be a slight snicker in his voice.

Demo ignored it. Finally, Zeus was beginning to mellow, to consider rewarding him for his services. What a kind and considerate God indeed!

Though she knew not where fate might lead, Ceres labored still to undo the evil marriage of Pluto to Persephone. In the heart of Pirithous she planted the seed of love, love for Persephone. There it grew and prospered.

The day came when Pirithous would tarry no longer. Whatever his fate might be, he would free his loved one from the grasp of the barbarous Pluto!

Theseus reasoned with his friend, but to no avail. Then, reluctantly, knowing full well the dangers, he joined him on that fated mission.

The entrance to the dark kingdom lies on the far shore of Oceanus. Nevertheless, there are secret ways, known to only the few. This knowledge Ceres had.

Dark caverns and dread marked their way. Creatures not of this world guarded narrow defiles, yet let them pass unharmed. Sulfurous fumes that might have brought them to a deadly sleep dissipated with their approach. Olden bridges, rotten and decayed, crossed deep caverns, yet none gave way with their weight. With each such success Theseus grew ever more alarmed.

"Friend, it is not as it should be! We are not opposed! Do you remember the ambush of the Sileni? I fear we are being led on."

Pirithous listened, nodded.

"Such is my thought. Turn back, old friend. I shall press on alone. For good or evil, my fate lies ahead, in the bowels of this infernal region. Fare thee well, now go your way. And say a prayer to Zeus for the success of my mission."

Theseus placed his hand on Pirithous' shoulder. "We have fought many a battle, you and I. The times you have saved my life, and I yours, are innumerable. If fate calls you yonder, then you shall not go alone."

Would that loyalty and friendship were portents of success.

It was not to be.

Even the drawbridge was in place, and the great wooden door to Pluto's castle, open. They entered warily.

Pluto grimaced in a friendly smile, if such it could be called.

"Welcome, for I have few such visitors. Come, join me. Sit on yonder bench, and let us discuss the purpose of your visit."

Woe unto those who sit upon the Chair of Forgetfulness!

Named rightly, even as the waters of Lethe, it cleanses the mind of all that went before!

And that the bench to which Pluto motioned them.

Pluto poured red wine into waiting glasses, rose to carry it to them. He nodded to the bench as he approached, reached the wine toward them.

Pirithous accepted the glass, moved to the bench. Theseus frowned. Something was wrong. But what?

Finally he too moved to the bench, joined his friend.

"We came to" Pirithous was silent, glanced at Theseus. Shaking his head, he repeated, "We came to" He could not continue.

Theseus sat quietly, empty-eyed.

Without a sound Pluto took the wine glasses from lax hands, called his minion to carry away the glasses and wine.

He sat, looked at his visitors, then turned away.

They waited now for the coming of Hercules.

And Ceres waited, too.

She waited for a champion.

A champion to challenge Pluto's power.

14. Lover's Quarrels

Cupid launched his arrows with careful aim at times, at times with casual disregard.

Today he launched no arrows.

His quiver was empty.

"Zeus, you've got to straighten out the postoffice. I ordered a gross nearly an eon ago. And still they haven't arrived! Look at me! What good am I without my arrows? What is Olympus coming to?"

"Now, now, have patience, Little One. Let me see. Ah, I have it. Just stand by. Oh, Demo. I need you. I have such a nice chore for you. Demo, get yourself up here!"

Demo grimaced. Just before supper, and what a meal his mother had prepared. Surely there'll be nothing but leftovers when I get back. Ah, unfortunately, Zeus was not one to wait.

"My lad, we have a major problem. A work stoppage! Our mail system is old, archaic, obsolete - besides which, I don't like it. Fix it!"

Peremptorily Zeus turned, walked through the nearest wall and disappeared from view.

Demo blinked. Such abruptness would be unpardonable in a lesser entity. At times one must bear with Zeus. He had his - eh, eccentricities.

"It's the rain! No, it's the snow! No, it's the dark of night!" The postmaster explained the reasons for such poor service. His subservients listened quietly, nodded in ready agreement with each of his explanations. Then they all sat back, put their feet on their respective desks, and talked incessantly about ways of solving the problem.

"Eh, shouldn't they be out delivering the mail, " Demo inquired?

"Well, yes, but we need to think about this big problem. The mail can wait."

Demo looked at the postmaster, shook his head, and started for home. He stopped. "Is there any mail for myself or my Mother? I'll take it with me."

"Oh, you couldn't do that! Only we are authorized to deliver the mail. It'll be along in . . . , oh, in a week or so."

Cupid's arrow are very effective. In fact, they never fail. Unfortunately, they do have a minor weakness. Their effect is not permanent. Thus Cupid must wander from place to place, zapping the same targets from time to time.

That isn't to bad, as Cupid is fast, his aim is accurate, and in an odd sort of way the victim enjoys the wound.

However, since he has previously inoculated his subjects, he must use the same concoction as previously. Otherwise the spell may work, but for an entirely different object of desire.

The problem with the mail was introducing another complication.

Cupid's spell was beginning to wear off for many a couple.

One such couple was Athena and Demo.

Not that they quarreled. Rather, as Athena phrased it, they discussed.

The discussion became loud, grew heated, and Athena paced angrily back and forth. "And I could have a God. But no! I choose a country bumpkin! An insensitive, heartless, country bumpkin."

Fire burned fiercely in her eyes as she glared at Demo.

"So he saved my life. Anyone could have done as well! Certainly that is no reason to condemn myself to live with him for an eternity. Look at him! Merely a mortal! And an immature, childish one at that!"

Demo blinked, swallowed.

He had never seen anyone so angry. Not even Theresa the time he spilled cold wine down her back. Well, maybe that time. Nevertheless, no other.

This was indeed a crisis! Plainly, the mail system must be rescued, and Cupid's arrows quickly delivered!

Demo began his task by doing extended research. His first step was to read. History of the Post Office. Operation of a Post Office. Management books in general. Operations Research, Management Analysis, Industrial Engineering, Sex Life of the Sea Turtle - Oops! That book was misfiled, on the wrong shelf. Anyway, it was really dull reading.

He interviewed the customers of the Post Office. He interviewed those who delivered the mail. He interviewed the managers. The more they talked, the less he knew.

He attempted to examine the day-to-day operations. In spite of his credentials as Zeus' emissary, he found little cooperation.

Organization charts were missing. Long term plans were non-existent. Budgets were cursory documents. Balance sheets and Profit and Loss statements were fiction.

The warehouses bulged!

The mail was accumulating at a phenomenal rate. The mail was being delivered at a minuscule rate.

Fingerpointing was rampant!

Managers blamed workers. Workers blamed management. Zeus blamed Demo. The people blamed everyone.

And Cupid waited impatiently for his arrows!

What to do!

He discussed the situation with his Mother.

"Why, dear, there really seem to be two problems. Delivering the mail that has accumulated, and insuring that it doesn't accumulate in the future. Perhaps you could burn the backlog, and throw away all incoming mail for a while."

"Burn! Throw away! Mother, Zeus would be furious! Besides, what if I burned Cupid's arrows? Athena and I might never be united!"

Nevertheless, he thought about his Mother's words. And thought of a brilliant solution to the first problem.

"Sire, we need to implement a two step process. First, we deliver all the outstanding mail. Second, we streamline the existing system to insure we don't again arrive at our present situation again."

"Fine, I like that. Do it!" Zeus seemed very agreeable.

"Well, yes, Sire. By the way, I'll need the services of Mercury."

"Of Mercury! He's my private messenger! How dare you! How long will you need his services? Ridiculous! When can I have him back? And how do you propose to use him?"

"We'll loan him to the Post Office Department. He'll distribute the backlog quickly and easily, and then we have only the second problem to solve."

Zeus frowned, then finally agreed.

Mercury's transfer to the Postal Department was delayed. Not because he objected; rather, because of the normal bureaucratic delays. Eventually the paperwork was completed and the transfer made.

The results were astounding. Within a day half of the backlog was distributed. It seemed that the initial problem was well on its way to being solved.

Appearances are deceiving!

On the second day the mail distribution once more failed. And Cupid had not yet received his arrows!

Demo hurried to talk to the Postmaster.

"What has happened? Where is Mercury? The mail is once more piling up!"

"No problem. It'll all be delivered in time. As for Mercury, he was ruining the morale of our normal deliverers. I really couldn't tolerate that, so I placed him in another department. He is currently acting as our censor. Keeps his eye open for anything that might be controversial. Why, he just found a package of arrows! Never should have let them get into the system. Directed to a Mr. Cupid, on Zeus' staff. Might well have been an attempted assassination planned!"

"Arrow? Cupid?" Demo's eyes brightened. "Ah, where are they? What did you do with them?"

"Turned them over to security. Right now they are rounding up this Cupid character. It'll go hard with him, I assure you!"

The arrest of Cupid created a furor on Olympus. Zeus was nonplused. Hera, horrified! Venus, however, was the practical mother. "Zeus, you must go his bail. I know it is high. Still, I am sure there are some celestial bailbondsmen who'll cover it for a fraction of the total amount."

Reluctantly Zeus provided the gold.

The problem still remained. Find the arrows!

Demo rushed to Hades, where The Great Detective, better known as TGD, a detective of somewhat dubious character had established office. "Sir, you are famous for the divorce cases you have supported, for the furtive tracing of vanished criminals - indeed, for tracking down lost people and lost items. Your skills are badly needed in support of Zeus!"

TGD smiled. "I am pleased that Zeus has need of me. I would be better pleased if he were to allow me to relocate my office to Olympus. However, for a reasonable fee, I shall be glad to locate the arrows."

"The arrows? How did you know? Well, yes, the arrows must be found. The world is approaching a level of desperation never seen before."

"Great! Then my price shall be adjusted accordingly. Now, where were they last seen? In whose hands? What was the intended disposition by that person?"

"Come, boy, just the facts. Don't waste my time.

Though taken aback, Demo quickly supplied the information.

"We must act quickly! The game, to plagiarize, is afoot. Hand me my cape, my cap, and yonder cane.

Been at this too many years, you know. Eh, my pipe, also, if you please."

"But . . . , eh, where are we going?"

"Don't be dense, lad. Where else - we're going to collect those arrows. I don't charge by the hour, I charge by the case. So I don't care to waste time. Come along, now, Wat . . . - Beg your pardon, come along now, Demo."

Demo came along.

TGD had dealings with the postal system before. His interrogation of the Postmaster was cruel. Without hesitation he attacked when any sign of deviousness, confusion, or simple lack of clarity surfaced.

"My dear sir, you're talking pure balderdash! Come, come, to the point, man. Who was the last man known unequivocally to have had possession of those arrows? None of this 'It seems like,' or 'I think it was,' or any of that tomfoolishness. Who do you recall with certainty last had the arrows!"

TGD augured in on the key contact, step by step. With each new suspect he reiterated the above questions. His eyes were brightening. He plainly had a clue!

Demo listened and watched. He was impressed by TGD's step-by-step, inexorable closing in on the culprit.

Mercury recalled finding the package of arrows. In his job as censor he had decided to notify the Postmaster. The latter had called in the security department, and the arrows were transferred to them.

"To whom did you specifically deliver the arrows?" TGD queried.

"Why, to Janus, of course. As doorkeeper Janus is in full charge of security. Would I have delivered them to anyone else!"

TGD smiled. "Thank you, of course you delivered them to Janus. Eh, did you ask for a receipt?"

"Ask for a receipt! From Zeus' own doorkeeper! Never!"

"Ummm. Yes, I understand. Thank you, you have been most helpful."

"How long have you worked as doorkeeper, Mr. Janus?"

"Oh, for eons. Yes, for eons and eons! I've always been Zeus' doorkeeper, you know. He'd never have another. Very pleased with me, he is.

"Except that time I closed the door on his foot. Terrible episode, really. Never cared for those sandals, myself. Don't really offer much protection. Lost th' toenail on his big toe, he did! It grew back, of course! My, but he was in a dither. Said some dreadfully rude things to me. Even, would you believe it, threatened to replace me!" Janus feelings had been hurt, perhaps even more so than Zeus' big toe.

"Yes, I'm sure. Now about the arrows, Mercury gave them to you, did he not?"

"Of course he did. Dreadful conspiracy going on. Arrows are dangerous things indeed. I gave them to Ate for delivery to Zeus. Blessed if I know what she did with them. Be very careless, letting them lie around. Particularly after the release of that dreadful Cupid. Was he plotting an insurrection, do you think?"

TGD smile, turned to Demo. "We are closing in. Ate! Yes, I might have known. The very essence of mischief. Let us first discuss the matter with Zeus. We'll get no straight answers from Ate, of that I am sure!"

Zeus received them with poor grace.

The love that Hera held for him was growing ever thinner. He glared at Cupid with undisguised anger. "You should have had a backup supply. Ridiculous to run out of arrows. They really aren't that costly!"

TGD grilled Zeus with the same methodical approach he used for all. And even Zeus was impressed, and finally cooperated.

"Demo, I am sure you will succeed. Indeed, he is TGD. Must get him to find my wife's earrings. We'll work on that later."

"Yes, Ate did mention the arrows to me. Told her to get them to Cupid, right away. But he claims never to have received them!"

Of course, Ate, true to the reputation for mischievousness, had never delivered the arrows to Cupid. The noose was tightening. The culprit was now identified!

"Ate, did Mercury give you the arrows?"

"Oh, no. Janus gave them to me. Perfect arrows, well designed for their purpose. Plainly they belonged to Cupid. Talked to Zeus about it, and I delivered them to Cupid the very next day."

TGD was taken aback. In spite of Ate's reputation he recognized some semblance of truth in the words.

Cupid denied all. "Never received them from Ate. Never even saw Ate. Dastardly lie, that's all. Finger pointing! Would ruin my reputation! Ridiculous!"

Sitting quietly TGD listened, nodded. "Lovely place you have here. Would you show me the house?"

"Delighted," Cupid smiled. "I decorated it myself."

Demo found himself blushing at the many statues and pictures. They had plainly been developed with Cupid's tastes in mind.

TGD, however, had other things in mind.

"You've no mail slot in your front door."

"No, I'm a bit old fashioned. Mailbox is down by the road. Retains something of the old rural atmosphere, you know."

They wandered through the house, from one erotic treasure to another. Then they walked outside.

TGD admired the lawn, the trees, the white picket fence. He opened the gate, reached in the mailbox, and extracted a package. "Here, my boy. Your arrows."

Demo's eyes widened.

"Astounding, my dear TGD! But, how did you know? The mailbox? No mail is being delivered!"

"Elementary, friend Demo. Of course you knew no mail was being delivered. I know that. Cupid knows that. So Cupid doesn't bother to check his mail." TGD smiled.

"And Ate certainly knew that! And I know Ate!"

"Thank you, lad. Never has my kingdom been so peaceful!" Zeus was well pleased.

"Ah, sire, it is truly wonderful. Athena smiled at me! Oh, by the way, the earrings. TGD says not to worry. Hera is wearing them."

"Wearing them! No wonder she couldn't find them in her jewelry box! I really must pay more attention to my wife.

"Oh, as for the postal department! I abolished it. Mercury is now running the Celestial Parcel Service. Deliveries guaranteed to reach destination before being dispatched! How's that for a gimmick!"

Man weeps.

The beast of the fields ate of his flesh, and no where could he hide. By day the pterodactyls swooped from the skies to take their toll. By night the wolves, in vicious packs, invaded even man's caves and carried off their prey.

Man weeps.

The sound was low, smothered by the wind.

But one heard.

Prometheus.

He took a brand from the fires of Olympus, laid it at the mouth of the cave where man shivered in cold and fear. And the wolves grew wary, approached not. And man maintained as sacred the fire given to them by Prometheus. Priests and priestesses watched without cessation that the fire should be fed. Let the flames but flicker, and they stirred the ashes. Should the burning brands be too few they replenished them. And should the flames die they brought forth the bellows, blew life giving air on the coals below, and the fire burned bright. They never failed in their chores.

Except,

Once.

Then, the fire died!

"Lad, you must never tell a soul of this task. As Zeus, master of the universe, I make no mistakes. But, at an earlier time, I took an action that I have since regretted. Prometheus, the giver of fire, as you earthlings know him. I punished him severely. Even to this day he suffers."

Zeus seemed to be downcast. "Anyway, the fire he gave to man has burned out, flickered out, been blown out - whatever. Yet, after careful thought, I have decided that man should have fire. Prometheus must be freed to once again pass a lighted brand to mankind. I can't free him, as that would cast doubt on my infallibility. So, you do it. Off with you, now!"

There is a mountain, far removed from human haunts. There, time after time, a tragedy repeats itself. Prometheus, the giant benefactor to mankind, waits. Chains bind him to the mountain. He waits and watches, watches the sky.

High in the sky, barely visible, a black dot can be seen. Suddenly it falls, faster and faster, and as suddenly slows, wings widespread. An eagle. A giant bird, with fierce talons, merciless curved beak, strikes at the helpless captor.

Its talons rip, its beak slashes, and Prometheus gasps in pain. The eagle tears at skin and muscle, at bone, and finally tears from living flesh an organ. It flies away, the liver of its victim in its beak.

Day ends, night passes, and lo the body of Prometheus has healed. And now he waits again the coming of the eagle.

Demo began his hike to the Edge of the World, that region where juts the great mountain upward to the sky.

He carried with him dried venison. No bread had he. Mankind's fires were no more. Raw fruit and vegetables. Sun dried meat and fish.

At home his Mother sat before the stove, her frustration plain on her red face. Without fire she could not cook. Without fire the night became ever dark, and days were too short.

Prometheus must be freed!

"These boltcutters will handle any chains you'll run into, young man. Well tempered metal, endorsed by Vulcan when he started this franchise. His personal guarantee on every one sold. Money back, no questions asked, if you aren't satisfied. Now, what more could you ask?" The salesman was solicitous

and persistent.

Finally Demo nodded, paid the asking price, and added the boltcutter to his pouch of goodies.

He had chanced on the Vulcan Franchised Technology hardware store while passing through the village. Fortunately it carried the type of equipment he required.

"And keep in mind, with the extinguished fires, there'll be no more of these produced. It'll become a collector's item, worth much more than the original cost. You are getting a bargain!"

The sight of the giant, some scars still open and bleeding, brought tears to Demo's eyes. Quickly he climbed upward, reached the cliff to which Prometheus was pinned.

Demo looked at the chains, at his boltcutter.

It was too small!

He examined the pitons that maintained the chains in place. Hammered deep in the rock, they seemed mounted to last forever. Demo shook his head. What could be done?

At that moment he heard a strange sound, growing ever louder. Looking upward he saw an object. It fell from the sky, swifter and swifter still.

And then, wings spread, in eagle form it lashed at its assigned prey!

The mountains trembled at the thunderous scream of the tortured giant. He quivered, threw himself against the bonds that held him!

Agony on his face, he screamed once more!

Demo put hands over ears to escape the misery and pain that voice held. It did not suffice!

He looked, grief-stricken, at the bleeding, gaping wound. He gazed in wonder at the pain-filled face, the reddened eyes!

Prometheus eyes closed. Sweat poured from his brow. Slowly he slipped down, unconscious from the pain. Only the chains supported him.

"Zeus, that you could impose such horror! I cannot understand! But he shall be freed! I must act quickly!" Demo talked to himself as he worked.

Though his boltcutter was useless Demo was not ready to give up. He took hammer and metal chisels from his pack, began to work on the most worn of the links of chain.

Even as he worked he noted the change in Prometheus. The wound healed! By nightfall no sign remained, except the fearful scars, to show that the vicious attack had ever occurred!

Tomorrow, the eagle would return!

The boy worked throughout the night on the link. In early morning it gave, opened!

Prometheus pulled against the links, and one arm was free. With both hands he wrestled with the remaining chain on his left arm. In moments the piton was freed from the mountain wall! Quickly he wrestled with the leg irons, wrenched them from their place against the cliff.

Prometheus, his bonds broken, glanced wildly around. His eyes reflected fear, madness. He watched the skies, searching for something fearful and inescapable.

But no eagle flew.

Demo motioned downward, toward the path leading to the valley below. Quickly he led the way! "Follow me! Follow me! Quickly!"

Prometheus, walking awkwardly, using skills long lost to captivity.

They reached the valley, began the long journey to the sea.

Suddenly they felt a shadow encompass them. Demo frowned.

Prometheus had thrown himself on the ground, curled up like a child. He was sobbing.

Glancing toward the sky Demo realized why!

Now the eagle flew!

Closer and closer, its wings spread wide, it zoomed downward.
Its prey lay still, paralyzed by fear, waiting its strike.

Demo notched his arrow, loosed it against the huge bird.

The arrow struck home!

With an angry squawk the bird turned from its prey to its attacker. Demo fell as it swooped near, rolled over!

Too late!

It had his leg, was pulling him aloft!

Prometheus, an expression of fear on his face, yet reached out, seized the wing of his enemy. He pulled the eagle to the ground.

Demo was released, quickly rolled over. He watched, wide-eyed, as Prometheus unleashed his pent-up anger on his tormentor.

They fought long and hard, and feathers and blood mingled on the valley's floor! At long last the eagle stood atop the giant, its talons at his stomach!

Yet, even as it tore at the flesh of the giant, Prometheus seized its throat in powerful hands, cut off the breath of life.

In moments the eagle lay dead!

Demo looked at the face of the conqueror. He shuddered!

The eyes of Prometheus still held unreasoning fear. No semblance of reason was displayed in those haunted eyes! The long, ever-enduring torment had not destroyed his body.

It had destroyed his mind!

The hope that man might once more have fire was dashed!

Prometheus, for all his size and strength, was helpless.

"Come, there is nothing left to do here. I'll help you. To yonder stream."

Demo led him from the site, down to a green meadow where flowed a quiet brook. There he washed the giant's wounds, gave him wine to drink, watched him as he slept.

Like a child Prometheus followed Demo. At first ever watchful, his frightened eyes on the sky. With time he relaxed, only sporadically tensed, glanced anxiously upward.

He did not speak.

He did chores as directed. He searched for berries, edible plants, honey. He fetched water from a nearby spring.

Within the immediate area he worked diligently. He would not go beyond sight of Demo. When he reached a distance that seemed to great he would halt, bow his head, and return.

Broken, frightened, the hero was dead! Only the shell lived.

The wild beast became ever braver. Fire, that strange creature that turned night into day, no longer existed. Mankind huddled by night in their abodes, listening, frightened, at the night sounds.

The wolves became bolder. They hunted in larger and larger packs, killed sheep at will. Soon village dogs became their prey. And children who wandered alone into the night. Even men, traveling alone, were subject to the deadly raid of the wolf pack.

Prometheus and Demo came under attack. They slept in the open, under the stars. Demo woke to hear the call of the wolves as they assembled for the hunt. He grimaced, felt for his bow and arrows.

Prometheus slept. Childlike, he trusted to Demo for his protection.

The howls soon ceased. That silence, more than the wild calls, frightened Demo. He notched an arrow to his bow, sat with back against a huge oak. He watched the edges of the clearing, looking for sign of motion.

He wasn't to be disappointed.

They came in the false dawn, quietly creeping to the edge of the open space. Demo saw in the dim light their movement. He let fly an arrow, prepared another. The yelp of the injured wolf signaled the attack.

One more arrow flew and a wolf fell. The pack was upon him! He had not time to draw his bow again.

With an angry roar Prometheus awoke. His huge form towering high, he seized a fallen tree trunk, raised it above his head.

He met the oncoming horde with battering blows, growls more fierce than that of beast. Quickly, leaving fallen comrades behind, the wolves scattered.

Prometheus sat down, shivered as though cold.

"Why is there no fire? They would fear the fire."

Demo stared!

Under the fierce attack Prometheus had regained his will to live, to fight!

"The fire you gave man is extinguished. He failed to keep its flame burning, failed to protect it. He took it for granted, and none would be its keeper.

"There is no fire!"

Prometheus lay down the great log, breathed deeply.

"I took from Vulcan's furnace, from the hottest flames, the heart of fire. I gave it to man for his care and nurture, to protect him from the creatures of the wild. I gave it to him to protect him from the night, and those things that creep in the darkness. And now he has let it die? What fools are these mortals, to disdain a such a gift?"

"Man grows lazy and irresponsible. He thinks all things come to him with no effort on his part. He values little those gifts that he receives. At last he knows, now, what he has lost."

"In my own hand I carried the fiery coals. Look!"

He thrust out the palms of both hands, and Demo stared in the dawning light of morning at the charred and blackened skin.

"Vulcan will not so easily be fooled again! Yet," Prometheus mused, looking at Demo, "Perhaps it can be done."

Demo frowned. No more was Prometheus leaning on him to take the lead.

"You have access to Olympus. Zeus has given you the key, for you seem to be a favorite of his. And once on Olympus, you have access to Vulcan. You could prepare the way for me, distract Vulcan, and I could once more draw fire from that deadly furnace. Let us plan together."

They sat, discussed, argued, compromised.

It was decided. Demo would return to Olympus, persuade Zeus to call an audience with Vulcan. And in Vulcan's absence, once more would Prometheus carry fire to mankind.

The best laid schemes of man and firegiver go oft astray.

Zeus would have none of it! "I want no involvement on my part. Otherwise, do what you will."

They sat, discussed, argued, compromised.

Demo was amazed! That Zeus would condone such activity on Demo's part seemed unbelievable. Perhaps, as Prometheus implied, he was a favorite!

Regardless, Vulcan would be called to an audience. He would be detained long enough for Prometheus to wend his way to that great furnace wherein lie the eternal fires. And once more would Prometheus give to man the gift of fire.

Vulcan looked morosely at the raging fires in his furnace. Flames huge and red leaped, frolicked, and disappeared to be followed by others of blue and white. They cast gigantic shadows, grotesque and ever changing.

Usually he admired the display, relaxed as might others to the sound of music.

Tonight he did not relax.

Zeus desired his company.

Rarely did Zeus call upon him. Even more rarely was he invited into the presence of that most august God. It did not please him. Here, at his furnace shaping objects from hardest metal, he felt at home. Let others court the company and favors of Zeus.

Nevertheless, he would go. Perhaps there was a chore to be done, a mighty sword to fashion, a shield to form from molten metal. Or, more likely, some damaged tool to repair, welding broken parts to make a whole.

He stoked the fire, breathing the hot flames as though perfume. Wiping sweat from his moist brow he hurried to ready himself for his audience with Zeus.

Prometheus waited.

With Vulcan's departure he slipped into the celestial foundry, inched ever closer to the heart of that huge factory. The furnace glowed from the fire within.

Prometheus entrance was noted.

He knew not of the guard.

Vulcan had led a life of abuse, mistrust, and rejection. He himself trusted no one. Though crippled he remained agile and able, and used his skill with fire and metal to fabricate an object of strange shape and size.

The object was formed of the strongest metals. Its joints were cunningly hinged to allow motion. Its appearance was that of man - rather, that of giant. For it was huge. Huge and massive.

Silently it stood guard in the empty foundry. A dead, useless metal statue, a scarecrow for the vagrant birds that might pass by.

It had one more characteristic.

It lived!

Vulcan had withdrawn from the huge furnace a heart of fire, ensconced it in the body of his creation. That burning, beating heart gave it an existence of its own.

Prometheus' entrance was noted.

Noted by Vulcan's metal monster!

Prometheus stalked quickly to the fiery confines of Vulcan's furnace. Opening the door to its sizzling interior, he flinched back from the blast of flames and heat.

Quickly he picked up the long shovel, thrust it into the midst of the flames. Slowly he withdrew it, the very heart of scorching mass centered in the scoop.

Vulcan's creation struck!

The metal monster, moving silently, steadily, had positioned itself behind Prometheus. Even as he captured the heart of the furnace its arms enfolded him.

Prometheus dropped the shovel!

The white-hot mass of fire rolled onto the floor, began to melt the stones that supported it.

Prometheus threw himself backward, tipping over his attacker!

They rolled on the floor. The creature dug its iron talons into Prometheus stomach.

Prometheus screamed!

The memory of the eagle engulfed him!

Once again he was chained to the crag, the eagle coming ever closer.

Now it struck!

Its talons, tearing, ripping . . . !

He seized the metal arm, bending and ripping at the fingers!
One by one they gave way to his strength.

Even as the last finger gave way, the other arm now enwrapped his throat! His breathing grew ever more difficult. And Vulcan's monster wrestled him closer and closer to the deadly ball of scorching fire.

He felt the heat on his skin, burning and charring! Now his chest was barely inches from the fire! It touched his skin!

Abruptly he reached out, seized the burning mass in his huge hands!

He lifted the deadly cargo above his head!

Burning through skin and flesh, charring bone, it lit the hellish scene!

With an effort he loosed the deadly mass behind his back!

It fell on the head of Vulcan's creation.

The struggle was over!

A molten mass, the metal monster lay inanimate upon the floor!

With crippled hands Prometheus once more shoveled the burning heart of the furnace. Without a backward glance he rushed from the site of battle.

Arriving on earth he deposited his burden in the bowels of Mt. Vesuvius. There would it ever burn. And from that burning mass man once more distributed fire to hearth and kiln.

"My boy, you handled that quite well. Certainly left Vulcan's foundry in a mess, though. By the way, I sent Aesculapius over to care for Prometheus' hands. It will take time, but Aesculapius works wonders. Gad, his rates are high! Do you know how much he charges for house calls! Never mind, it's enough, I assure you!" Zeus grumbled to even think of the cost.

"Stay healthy." He growled morosely.

16. Wading in the River Styx

Odor of dying algae, of rotting plants, of stagnant waters - all drift above the long, dark stretches of the river Styx. No beauty here.

And in these waters lived creatures not of this world, but of Hades, round which the river flowed, and flows forever. Doomed through eternity to these putrid stream, they had yet one recompense.

Who dared wade the River Styx, he was their prey.

"My boy, take this package over to the guardshack just across the Styx. They are expecting it; by the

way, be sure to get a receipt. They hate to sign receipts. Still, it messes up our accounts if we don't have them. The boat is anchored right by the pier, and the oars are stowed beneath the seat."

Zeus started to turn away, then hesitated. "Oh, well! Boy, don't drag your hands in the water. And don't even think about taking a dip. You'd be dreadfully sorry!"

An extremely simple chore, this. Why all the fuss?

Each river has its peculiarities. The Nile, known for its annual flooding. The Lethe, notorious for the effect on those who drink its waters.

And then there is the river Styx.

It has a well-deserved reputation. The environmentalists have been picketing since time immemorial. They complain, legitimately, about the odor, the sludge, the inhabitants - all the little things that help make the Styx unique.

They picket Pluto.

Pluto suggests they picket Zeus, instead. To emphasize his point he releases Cerberus.

Hurriedly they scatter, not taking time to even look back.

They picket Zeus.

Zeus takes it all with gentle and tolerant attitude. His is a measured reaction. He assigns to each picket a little black cloud, from which rain continuously falls. Umbrellas are discouraged by random gusts of wind.

The pickets persist.

Zeus smiles.

The clouds grow larger, the winds gust more strongly.

The temperature begins to fall. The continuous rain ends, is replaced by snow showers. The winds now blow steadily from the cold north.

The pickets persist.

Zeus' smile broadens.

The clouds merge. The winds now reach blizzard force, and the snow changes from soft flakes to frozen pellets. The temperature drops, then drops again.

The pickets assemble, discuss, and rapidly disperse.

Zeus smirks, makes a snowball, which he then playfully tosses into the air. He then builds a snowman. He gives it a picket sign to carry.

Humming, Zeus returns to his throne.

There is no snow by the river Styx. Nor rain. Nor cooling breeze.

The air is stagnant, hot, thick with the odor of rotted plants, the breath of Hades' denizens.

Demo, with the back of his hand, wipes the sweat from his brow. Ah, how delightful it would be to splash even this putrid water on his forehead. Or even to swim in its cooling depths! What was it Zeus had said? Something about being dreadfully sorry?

He rows slowly, moving the oar against water with the consistency of mud. To lift the oar for the next stroke is nearly as difficult as to row.

Then he cannot lift it at all!

Frowning Demo yanked at the oar. It gave slightly, then slipped back into the dank water. With an effort he used the side of the boat as a point of leverage, once more brought up the oar.

Covered with slime, strange plant growth, it broke the surface of the water. But there is something

else, a red long and sinewy coil wrapped tightly around the oar. Grimacing, Demo tried to scrape the enwrapping red plant from its hold.

The red plant suddenly uncoiled, extended upward, and quickly enwrapped his forearm. Wide-eyed Demo attempted to pull free.

The hold on his arm tightened!

He was being pulled to the side of the boat!

Slowly the boat began to tip. He lost his footing, fell against the gunwale. The boat began to rock, and with each rock the putrid water of the river Styx splashed in.

As Demo pulled hard more and more of the red plant became exposed.

With a start Demo stared into enormous green eyes!

This was no plant!

Rather, a denizen of the weird waters! A denizen with an appetite for Demo!

A grin appeared on its face. Rather, a smirk. It licked its lips in anticipation.

With one arm held captive by the creature, Demo was unable to use his bow and arrows. Nevertheless, he was not completely helpless.

With his free hand he pulled an arrow from its pouch, stabbed at the entwining red tentacle. Surprised and in pain, the creature uncoiled its hold, slid back into the dark stream.

Demo sat down in the boat, sweat appearing on his forehead. For a moment he sat still. Then he noticed that the boat was drifting away from the shore.

With a start he once more manned his oars!

It was useless. The slow flowing waters of the Styx had now branched off. This was a different river entirely!

He recognized it! Fearfully his eyes opened wide!

The Meander! A river that went on forever. Purposeless, endless, going on forever!

He looked back.

No trace of the Styx was to be seen!

From the far shore he heard unearthly laughter!

An object he knew too well blended with the shadows there. The unseen companion!

Night fell, the air cooled. Birds flew low in pursuit of mosquito swarms. From the swampy shores growls and moans, strange shrieks and lonesome howls disturbed the darkness. The water lapped intermittently against the boat's side. Fish, or creatures adapted to the Meander, leaped above the water, splashed back to the surface. Nightbirds winged closed to the boat, dived toward Demo, then veered away.

Finally, lulled by the boat's rocking, he fell asleep.

The frigid night air woke him. The vast waste of the river was coated by a low-lying white fog. Above, a cold and desolate moon shone full on the quiet scene below. At times white fluffy clouds blocked its rays, then drifted on.

As morning approached a light breeze began to blow. The surface fog, like disturbed ghosts, scattered, drifted, faded away. False morning lit the sky, only to fade.

A red and angry sun rose on the horizon. Twisted, bent, huge trees brooded along the river bank. The sun's rays hardly penetrated into the depth of the forest. Birds flew high, dashing wildly away as a hawk fell into their midst. A large fish leaped from the waters' surface, splashed back and disappeared.

His empty stomach growled in anger over lack of breakfast. The thought of meat and eggs cooking on

his mother's fire would not leave his mind.

He searched his pouch, found only day old remnants of bread, which he quickly devoured. Still, visions of venison roasting, of warm loaves of bread from the oven - enough! He must quit this foolish dreaming, must find a way to return!

Listlessly the young man let his hand dip into the water. Only were he able to catch a fish, anything to provide sustenance.

With a start he felt an object brush against his fingers. Quickly he grasped it, pulled it to the surface. Perhaps a fish, careless of predators.

"No!"

He thrust it from him! The headless body of a man! Shuddering he watched it slip away. In his mind he recalled the story of one so killed, doomed to the endless wandering of the Meander.

The broad river seemed to wind endlessly, going nowhere. Along its low banks huge trees dipped their limbs in the muddy water. A turtle swam by near the shore, then dived below. In the tree limbs above birds sang their mating calls. Serenely the placid river flowed. A lifeless stretch of jungle bordered it.

But was it lifeless!

Something moved among the brush and tree trunks. At first he thought of the unseen companion. No, this was different.

He watched carefully.

Farther along, more movement! Something, or someone, was following his boat!

They stayed well back from the shore. Still, from time to time he saw again the movement, glimpsed once more a stern visage.

He tensed as the current moved him closer still to that shore and its unknown inhabitants.

The boat ground to a stop, its lower hull lodged on the shallow bottom.

Demo took a deep breath, using the oar tried to pry the boat from its anchorage.

A small stream flowed into the river within feet of his position.

The bushes along the stream were moving! The motion came ever closer!

He climbed into the water, attempted to free the boat again.

It was to no avail!

He turned to the shore. They stood silently, stoic, watching.

Waiting!

The Sileni!

A distant cousin of the centaurs, with much the same appearance. Their lower haunches were horselike, while torso and head were that of man. Their history was dim, their homeland unknown.

There was no escape! The boat was lodged tightly. He stood, waded slowly to the shore.

"We rarely see visitors from the outside." This Sileni stood tall above his companions. "And on the river Meander some come and go, never to be seen again. What seek you on this river?"

"Ill fate sent me to this stream. I merely wished to cross the river Styx, carrying a missive sent by Zeus. Strange forces diverted my passage, and I floated unwillingly here."

"Tarry with us a bit. To follow the Meander is useless. It never ends, never repeats a passage. An eternity is too short to follow all its windings. Perhaps we can aid you, help you return to the river Styx. Though it, too, is a river of ill repute."

The hospitality of the Sileni pleased him. They fed him well, gave him cot on which to sleep. During

his sleep they dragged the boat to shore.

"Your coming has been foretold. One waits now to talk with you, for there is much you do not know. Egeria, the last of the Caminae, would speak with you. There is the matter of the Tarn."

With a start Demo regarded the speaker. "Egeria! I do not understand. The Caminae are long gone, long departed!"

The conversation with Egeria confused him. She told him of things to come, but in words that were mystic and full of cryptic allusions. Yet she spoke of the tarn, where he must inevitably meet a foreordained fate.

"The tasks shall lie behind you, yet will there be another task. By your kindness to a stranger shall you be led to danger never faced by man. Though you be brave, follow the dictates of your heart. Heed my words. For this were you brought to me. It was foretold before your birth." The ancient woman stared at him through blinkless eyes.

Although he had listened he knew well that he did not understand. "Heed the dictates of your heart." What dictates of his heart? And if all had been foretold why should he not be informed of those inevitable results? He gazed at her, started to ask questions, then reconsidered.

"The Sileni shall return you to your craft. Lie down, in the bottom. Do not take oar in hand. When darkness descends you shall once more be on the river Styx. Your mission shall be quickly done. Tell Zeus that Egeria has opened your eyes."

It transpired as she explained. Zeus, when he delivered her message, bowed his head. "The Moira draws maps on sandy beaches, and man and Gods dare not deviate. My boy, believe that I wish you well. You understand, I cannot intervene in what will be."

Perhaps for the first time Demo felt real fear!

17. Lost in Time

Cronus hiccuped.

It doesn't happen often, and it rarely has much significance.

Only this time, it had significance. This time, Cronus was busy.

He was adding a slight touch of gray to Demo's hair.

Cronus, to those not knowing, has time as his domain. Even the gods respond to his wiles, and age even as you and I.

And Cronus was gently aging Demo.

Cronus hiccuped.

He had taken a liking to the boy since they had met on an earlier task imposed by Zeus on Demo. So Cronus had not acted in spite. It was only that Cronus is the master of time, and when he hiccuped he inadvertently sent Demo flying into a time far removed. Even this would hardly have been a problem, for Cronus could easily have returned him. But, as only one way exists for a project to go right, and many ways for it to go wrong, this project went wrong.

Cronus was distracted by his wife. He quickly followed her to adjust a timepiece that kept erratic time. "My dear, it really isn't the sundial that's at fault. It's the sun. It refuses to travel at a constant rate. I've talked to Zeus. Unfortunately, It's low on his priority list."

Then Cronus went off to his study, and his hobby of clock collecting. Demo was, for the moment, forgotten. In his study Cronus maintained clocks of every size, every design, every motif. Electronic clocks, grandfather clocks, wall clocks, floor clocks, round clocks, square clocks - even clocks that kept time. But no two displayed exactly the same time. For, you see, time isn't at all the same. Here it has one value, there another, and elsewhere still a third. But, most assuredly, one of the numerous clocks ticked the right time. Only Cronus knew which one.

"Which studio you with? They shooting here today?"

Demo looked quizzically at his interrogator. Since becoming Zeus' protg he found that languages were no problem. All the same, always there were references, words, and phrases of which he had no ken.

"I know not of studios, and the next shooting is at the great fair, a full moon away. There I shall surely prove champion of all of Greece, perhaps of all the civilized world."

"Ah-ha! Your advertising a coming film, right. The Great Fair. Well, I'll try to take it in. Your doing good, pal. I'll tell you, though, that costume really needs some work."

The stranger smiled and walked away.

Demo frowned.

No city of Greece was this. Grass grew not, and chariots dashed madly, teamless, down streets of solid rock. The people wore clothing of strange design, talked in a weird dialect, and gazed at him in benign amusement. The buildings were as none he had ever seen. They, too, were made of stone or even metal, and their height gave challenge to proud Olympus.

Suddenly he noted, passing high overhead, a dragon of strange construction, growling deeply as it passed. Passersby gave it no heed. Plainly the monster had already fed, was returning to its lair for rest.

A chariot smashed into the side of another, and high-pitched screams as of the wild geese filled the air. The chariots lined up, one behind the other, all emitting similar shrills.

Something here is akilter, he thought.

He noted men being disgorged by the shrilling chariots, shouting each to the other and making aggressive motions with closed fists.

Then arrived chariots with fires of red and blue flashing upon their heads, screaming like night creatures in tales he had been told.

These in turn disgorged men adorned in blue cloth, with shining metal decorations on their chests. These men in turned carried sticks, and screamed and shouted at those who had gone before.

In due time the horseless chariots moved away, the mass chasing in single file the leader. And endless sequence followed madly after the leading chariot. Was this a race, or a new form of war?

Along the pathway a bench attracted his attention, and he sat down, took dried venison from his poke. A young man, perhaps his own age, approached.

"Hey, got a dollar? I'd like to borrow a dollar for a while."

"What, pray, is a dollar?"

The youth stared at him for a moment. "All right, forget it! Whatcha eatin'? What's in th' poke?" He gestured toward Demo's pouch.

"Food, good food. Would you care for some tasty viands?"

"Vines? Did you say vines? That ain't vines you're eatin'. Looks like meat to me. You got any more?"

"Yes, try it. You'll find it quite tasty. My mother dried it under the sun, salted it herself."

The suppliant tasted the dried venison, looked at Demo in disbelief. "Hell, I'm going to the Salvation Army. You really eat this stuff!"

A large horseless chariot pulled up alongside him. A woman starred at him through some strange, clear material. She smiled, then laughed. He looked around to see what caused her laughter.

Nothing untoward met his sight. Ill-dressed heathens strolled aimlessly, it seemed, along the wide pathway. No, there was nothing amusing to be seen.

Frowning, he continued to eat his dried venison. Two men dismounted from the chariot, and it drove away, moaning in a disquieting manner.

Inside the passengers were looking at him through the viewing space in the rear.

Perhaps it is my garb. Here they dress strangely.

"Hare Krishna?"

One of the passengers who had descended addressed him.

"No, Demo."

"That's a new one. Is it Indian?"

"I don't think so. Greek."

"Greek? Well, new ones are popping up all over. Here, just to show you I'm open-minded, I'll donate a couple of bucks. Good luck."

The man walked off, murmuring, "Demo, and Greek! L A is the place, I'll tell you!"

He approached a large building. It had openings through which he could see, but could not enter. However, watching the strange people he noted an entrance that resembled a whirligig. My, he thought, how many years since I played with a whirligig. Anyway, as people went in and out, the door rotated.

Finally, he entered the building.

A boy stood in front of a silver recess, leaned down, and a gush of water rose, striking him on the mouth. Only then did Demo realize he was thirsty. When the boy moved Demo approached the recess, leaned down.

Demo frowned. Nothing had happened.

He leaned forward again. A man looked at him, "Hey, it ain't broke again, is it?" The man pressed the button and a stream of water struck Demo's face. He sputtered, then drank thirstily.

What part of Olympus is this, he thought. It resembles nothing I've seen before.

Nevertheless, it was becoming gradually familiar. He entered a little room that had the picture of a man on the door. After watching a few moments he found himself well versed on the facilities.

Fortunately, item after item followed a similar pattern. The important thing was to watch. The paper given to him earlier served as money. You used money to buy from machines and from individuals. Of course, how to get money was unclear.

Then he thought of the boy who had asked him for a dollar. Of course, just ask.

He tried it. At first he felt a little strange, for time after time the individuals he asked seemed a little embarrassed, finally provided either coins or paper. "Damn cults everywhere. All right, here, just leave me alone."

The young supplicant soon found his purse bursting with paper. It was a strange phenomenon. Ask for money, it is given to you. Give it to machines, to individuals, and they give you products. Not too unlike home, except for the first step.

Cronus frowned.

There is something I've overlooked, he thought to himself. Something important. Well, tomorrow I'll get around to it.

The thought struck him.

Demo! He had been aging Demo! Then, he had helped his wife with the sundial. Then . . . Oh, ho! The boy! What of the boy?

"Ah, I've lost him!" He spoke aloud. "I've let him slip off, and I didn't really note to where - rather, to when. Drat, it's inconvenient. I suppose he'll show up by and by, sometime. Yes. I wonder, what time?"

At that moment he heard his wife calling. Evening meal was ready. Thank goodness, I am famished, thought he.

It was a delicious meal.

Demo left the building, watched the chariots stopped in the broad streets, growls issuing from inside. At times other sounds issued from the vehicles. Loud and raucous, the sounds repeated and repeated, as though some musical instruments were being played out of tune. Accompanying these sounds were screams and yells of tortured innocents.

He could only assume that, in some manner, the chariots had malfunctioned.

Duane Golchick and Ralph Fulcere waited nervously outside the bank door. The customers were thinning out as three o'clock closing time neared. Finally the last of the stragglers left.

Duane and Ralph entered quickly.

"Say, I'm sorry, we were just closing." The guard smiled, motioned them toward the door.

"Just walk over to the counter with us. Put your hands behind your neck and hold 'em there." Duane spoke in a half snarl, held a revolver in his hand.

The guard noticed the nervous motion of the gunbarrel. "Okay, okay, don't be nervous. Whatever you say! Just take it easy! No one's causing any trouble."

"All right, listen up!" Ralph shouted. "This is a holdup! Any screams, any alarms, and we'll take you out. And we don't care who we shoot first, so you heroes just give it a try. Open it up, babe."

He indicated the gate leading behind the counters. The clerk nervously fumbled with the catch, finally opened the gate.

Duane and Ralph cleaned out the drawers, stuffing bills into a garbage bag. "On the floor, all of you. Hands straight out, legs spread, face down. Lift a head, move a muscle, and you're history!"

The left the building quietly. No one had moved. No one was moving now. They ran for the car, parked in a nearby alley.

A man in blue stopped Demo.

"Those arrows real?"

"Oh, yes, very real. Deadly, too. I've killed many a buck with them. Won a few tournaments, too."

"I thought so. You got a license to carry a deadly weapon? You ain't some kind of kook, here to kill off as many as you can, are you? Here, you better give me the bow."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that! It's been in the family for generations. My Father used it to kill the sea serpent. And his Father before him to kill fire dragons. I just couldn't part with it."

The policeman, for such he was, looked at Demo in astonishment.

"Oh, boy! One of those!"

He took out his communicator, called for reinforcements. "Were standing in front of the alley next to Martin's Bank. Seems like a loony. Anyway, so far he's not violent. Get some reinforcements over here, before he does go off his rocker. And tell Sue warm up my pizza. I'll be in about two hours from now. You let her know."

He had hardly signed off when he felt an object pressing against his neck. "Your in our way, Mr. Man. Now just pull out that gun and let it fall, real easy. Now, put your hands behind your head. Up against the wall. Spread 'em!" Ralph was relishing the situation.

"Get the gun and let's get out of here. You, get out of the way." Duane motioned to Demo, who stepped politely aside.

The two men entered the car, rev'd up the engine, pulled out into traffic.

"Stop them! Stop! Police!" The officer shouted.

Demo notched an arrow to his bow, drove it through the right rear tire of the vehicle. He then repeated the process with the left tire.

The car abruptly swerved, ran against the curb, jumped it.

Crashing into a store front, the engine died.

Almost at that instant the reinforcements arrived and hurried to the car.

"My God, it must be the kook with the bow. Look sticking out of those tire! See if anyone is hurt. I've got him in sight."

"Drop it, drop it now! I'll shoot!"

Demo glanced at the approaching form. This also was a blue clothed one. He turned to his companion. "Is he talking to you?"

"Hey, it's all right. He's okay. Get them gorillas in the car. Hurry, they're getting out!"

Everyone rushed madly toward the chariot. For a moment Demo watched, then turned with a shrug. An interesting, but kind of strange, sport.

"Hey, Guru, tell me what life signifies. You still chomping that dried junk?" The boy who had asked for a dollar was grinning at him.

"My name is Demo, not Guru. Yes, I rather enjoy dried venison."

"Look, Guru, no offense, eh? You got cover for the night? The Y has some pads open. They get taken in a hurry, so you better scat over there if you want one. Gonna rain before morning. Say, I'm Randy. Look, I can't pronounce that Demo bit, so you're Guru. Don't let it throw you."

"Cover? The Y? Ah, shelter from the rain? Yes, that would be well. You are kind. Where is this Y?"

"Hell, I'll baby sit you a while. Just follow along, sport."

They located an available pad, and Demo found himself in a dormitory filled with numerous unique individuals. The glances he received indicated that he won honors for uniqueness.

It is a law of nature that, for things to go right, there is only one viable path. For things to go wrong, the paths are infinite. Demo continued down one of the infinite paths.

Cronus had indeed attempted to make contact, return Demo to his own time and place. Cronus selected the right time without difficulty. Place, however? Well, place threw him a curve.

Demo had gone wandering off.

Cronus had rather limited power so far as space is concerned. Given sufficient time - of which he was the sole master - he could examine the reaches of space. And examining the reaches of space was his immediate goal.

He began the task methodically.

First, he returned himself to the time and space when he was occupied with aging Demo. Then he moved forward (time-wise) to that point in time when he was distracted. With care he then gave careful thought to the next incident.

Unfortunately, he found himself in the predicament many of us face from time to time.

He had a sudden mental lapse.

As the saying goes, the right words were on the tip of his tongue. Stubbornly, unfortunately, they clung there tenaciously. Grumbling, he vectored forward in time once more. I'll sleep on it, he decided. Tomorrow is soon enough.

Demo, if he were asked, would not have agreed.

Randy woke him early. He knew it was early because it was dark. Also, because he was sleepy. He was not by any stretch of the imagination an early bird. Au contraire!

They left the building hurriedly.

"Nice place and all," Randy noted. "Just keep in mind, some strange people stay here. I'd rather not meet them outside. 'Nough said?"

They walked along the pathway, which Randy called a sidewalk. Demo noted that he himself was rapidly developing an extended vocabulary of words, mainly from listening to Randy.

"Look, we got to scrounge some eatables, you know, food. Now there's a place over on 5th" He paused as Demo smiled, motioned toward his pouch.

"We can buy food. My pouch is full of paper, eh, money. Gifts! Dollars!"

Randy stared at him for a moment, put his hand in the pouch and pulled out a few bills. "All right, man! You are with it! Okay, let's hit this place across the way. I could use a good meal for a change."

The waitress smiled at them, looked at Demo's garb with curiosity. "Look, no offense, but you Joe's got cash? The boss is real mean about that!"

"Of course we got cash! Hey, show her, Guru!"

Demo pulled a handful of bills from his pouch, stuck them back in.

The waitress stuck out her lower lip, nodded. "Okay, here's the menu. What'll you have? The western omelette's not bad. Makes a good meal."

Randy ordered the omelette and coffee.

"I'll have the omelette and milk," Demo decided.

"Hey, Guru, where'd you get that rig? What's your thing, anyway? You're awful close mouthed."

"Randy, you ever hear of people traveling through time?"

"Oh, great! All right, forget it. Sorry I asked."

"No, really, I'm serious. I'm from Greece . . . from long time ago Greece. Don't ask me how I got here. I really don't know. And I don't know how to get back." Demo's disconsolate look almost convinced Randy.

"You are one good actor. I'm ready to break out a hanky. Look, I was out of line. You don't have to tell me anything. Hell, I've told you practically nothing about me, now have I?"

They finished their omelettes, and Randy was sipping his coffee when Demo glanced out the window.

"It's him! It's Cronus! I'm going back! Randy, thank you for your help. Here, take this money."

Demo pulled out handfuls of bills, laid them on the table in front of Randy.

"Cronus! Come off it!" Randy glanced out the window.

A tall figure, dressed as was Demo, stood on the sidewalk. His face was grim, and he was making some weird, ritualistic motions. Randy looked toward Demo.

Demo was fading. At the moment he seemed at some point between clear jello and fog, with fog gaining the upper hand.

Randy reached out to grab Demo. His hand passed through the image in front of him, touched nothing.

He stood up, threw his arms around his new found friend.

A chill ran through him.

The room was darkening. His vision blurred.

"Not me! Leave me here! I belong here! I"

The words faded.

He was now part of the fog. He could see nothing, hear nothing.

But he knew things were happening.

Strange things.

The waitress stood beside the table, eyes wide. "Boss, I don't feel too good today. I think I better take the rest of the day off."

"You can't do that! Cecilia is ill, Grace is on vacation! Anyway, what's the problem?"

"Two boys! They were sitting here. I brought them omelets. Now look! They're gone. They didn't pay me, I didn't see them leave, they left all this money. Something is really weird. I think it may be me."

"Nah! Here, let me check the washroom. Anyway, what if they slipped out. That'll pay for the meal and leave you one real fine tip."

In a moment he returned. "Ain't no one back there. Two of 'em, eh? Look, don't let it bug you. They probably are just having fun, playing a joke on you."

"Well, I don't like this kind of joke. All right, I'll stay. Say, I sure feel odd."

Randy looked around wildly.

The city was gone, the restaurant, the building even.

Around him were trees, a nearby brook, some birds singing. Demo was sitting on a log nearby.

"Man, what have you done to me? What is going on here. I don't like this. No sir, I don't like this at all!"

"Randy! Randy, what in the world are you doing here? Cronus must have brought you too. Oh, boy! What a mess."

"This" Randy hesitated.

"This th' place you were talking about. Look, I'm sorry. I thought you were putting me on! I wonder why'd he bring me here? How'm I gonna get back. Who is this Cronus? You tell him, I want to see him, and right now. He can't push me around this way!"

"Just calm down, and for goodness sake, don't talk like that! It's just an accident, just some kind of accident. I'm sure he'll send you back. Well, I'm kind of sure"

He wasn't.

Randy languished. Rural atmosphere and bucolic settings were great TV fare. Who wants to actually live such a life! No way!

Demo attempted to teach him hunting.

Randy proved that, with considerable effort and practice, he would never be a hunter. The trees chosen as targets survived unmarked. Arrows vanished into unlikely places.

Chariots in lieu of cars did not sell to well. First, Randy was scared of horses. Second, he couldn't tell his gee from his haw. Third, he wasn't interested.

However, one aspect of Demo's world did indeed interest Randy.

At the evening meal Theresa chanced by, was introduced, and Randy's eyes lit up. Rural atmosphere, bucolic settings - in the right company they could be tolerable.

He started by telling Theresa of all the wonders of the 20th century. She suggested he drink less wine.

He explained to her the pleasures of flying. She gently suggested he learn to drive a chariot.

He told her of the convenience of food dispensing machines. She explained to him how gardens could be grown.

They fascinated each other.

Cronus made known to Demo that he could now handle sending Randy back to his own time and place.

Demo explained this to Randy.

Randy looked at Theresa, who looked wide-eyed at Randy.

"No way! I'm here, and here I'll stay!"

Demo looked at them both, nonplused.

He reported the state of events to Cronus. Cronus consulted with Zeus.

"Ridiculous," Zeus growled. "Ship him out!"

"Absolutely not!" Hera cried. "It's very romantic. Let him stay."

Being a wise husband, Zeus recanted.

Should you have read of the mysterious disappearance of Randy Bocksteil, and wondered what happened, you now have the details.

Randy became a mediocre farmer. He learned the rudiments of hunting, of skinning and quartering deer.

He learned, alas, how to make the potent wine of the region.

When newcomers visit the village, and Randy has sampled his own wine, he explains to them the wonders of the 20th century.

They suggest he drink less wine.

It was said of Dionysius that, if he did not steal it, he would do without it.

It was said of Dionysius that, if he did not kill, he would call the day a waste.

And so it was.

Dionysius came with a band of pirates from a peninsula lying far to the west. He came at night, landing on the shores of Greece in the early dawn of day. He killed a soldier guarding that shore.

Dionysius killed without hatred, killed quickly. Some joyed in toying with their victims, inflicting pain. They wished to stretch out the victory. They reveled in the growing fear felt by their opponent. Watching in glee as their opponent realized his impending fate and became increasingly desperate, they delayed the inevitable. Then, when the game began to wear, they cruelly and slowly mutilated their prey. Eventually, tiring of the game, they dispatched the helpless victim.

Dionysius' pirate companions were of such nature. He despised them, traveled with them only for his own ends.

Once they had made shore, dispatched the guard, he left them to their own devices. He began a sojourn to the mountains. To the mountains where lived Demo.

Demo pursued the deer in the foothills. They had migrated down from the mountains during the night. He found their spoor beside a clear branch whose cold waters they had come to drink.

Demo followed the trail from the branch deeper into the green copses. The deer were cautious, kept moving. He pursued them as they drifted toward the distant seaside. At times the wind shifted, and they caught his scent. They scurried quickly into the deeper forest.

He moved carefully from tree trunk to tree trunk, keeping the obscuring bushes between himself and

the herd. Finally the distance was right, and he drew his bow.

Even as the arrow flew the deer began to bolt.

Too late for the buck he had chosen! It fell to the ground with a shudder as the arrow entered its heart. He moved forward quickly to bleed the carcass.

Only then did he see the cause for the deers' alarm!

Dionysius stepped from the shadow of a tree trunk, sword in hand.

"Good shooting. Don't reach for another arrow. I believe I shall take that buck. Be so kind as to carve it for me. And I would not try to use knife against sword. At least, not until the buck has been carved. Then you may try what you like. Lay down the bow!"

Reluctantly Demo unstrung his bow, placed it on the ground.

I deserve to lose that buck. To have failed to watch, listen carefully! He stalked angrily to the deer, began cleaning the meat.

While cutting he watched the robber with careful eyes. If the fellow dropped his guard! Forlorn hope. It did not happen. Then he noticed something new.

The birds on the shoreward side became suddenly noisy, then broke into flight. Their flight was followed only by silence.

Something, or someone, was approaching!

He went on with his task, while his eyes searched feverishly to see who approached.

She stepped into view at the edge of the small clearing. Smiling she approached.

"Demo, I was told you hunted here. Ah, what a fine buck! You never miss, do you?"

"Theresa, go home! Quickly!"

He stood erect, stepped between her and the swordsman.

The latter smiled, swished his sword through the air in melodramatic gesture. "Not so quickly, my lady. We haven't yet been properly introduced. Boy, where are your manners?"

Theresa shrank back, took a deep breath, turned toward the forest.

"You run, the boy dies!" Dionysius' voice was gruff, angry.

Slowly she turned back, eyes wide with fear as she glanced at Demo.

"Theresa, run! Now!"

She obeyed!

"Boy, you call for your own death!" Dionysius growled angrily.

Dashing into the forest, she ran with all possible speed toward the village. In the fields at the village's edge she saw her father with other farmers.

"Demo! He's in danger. A swordsman has him prisoner."

They gathered their tools, and her father his longbow. "Show us!" her father commanded, grim-faced.

They arrived in time to see Demo toss the buck's haunch at Dionysius. He fell back to ward it off, even as his sword was impaled by the meat.

Demo lunged forward, wrestled with Dionysius before the latter could free his sword. His own knife fell to ground.

Suddenly Dionysius released the sword, dove to the ground and seized the fallen knife.

He smiled as he stepped toward Demo.

Only then did he note the ring of farmers at the forest's edge.

And most of all he noted the longbow, drawn, in the hands of Theresa's father.

Dionysius, stopped, bowed. "Here, boy, you'll need this to finish cutting the meat."

He extended the knife, hilt first.

Demo took it, cautiously, backed off.

The farmers quickly tied their captive, led him back to the village. A messenger was dispatched, and soldiers came quickly. Dionysius sojourn had ended

18. The Fates

"Now, my boy," Zeus began with a friendly smile and a pat on the shoulder. "Now, you see, I have this problem. Nothing to tumble Olympus, of course. Still, a problem. And you are going to have the privilege of resolving it. It may well be your claim to fame. No, just joking! It's really minor." He glanced around, lowered his voice.

"My boy, it involves women. Now, I'm not a misogynist - eh, the dictionary is on that stand over there. In spite of being . . ." He halted, glanced carefully around once more. "In spite of being married to Hera, I do love and respect beautiful women."

"However, I am Zeus! I am master of the heavens, of earth - and if Pluto would fight fair, of even the nether world! And in spite of that these three - Women! - are flaunting their power as though I were impotent. Powerless!"

The clouds were forming one on top of another over Olympus. Suddenly Hera entered, and angry look on her face. "Not over my flower bed. You've already washed away two of them. Stop it! Right now!"

Zeus blinked. "Yes, of course, my dear. Merely explaining a few things to the boy here." He took a deep breath, let it out slowly while watching the clouds with anxious eye. They slowly began to dissipate. Zeus smiled a wan smile.

"Lovely woman. A little impetuous at times. Loves that garden."

"Let me see. We were talking about this little task. Well, what I'd really like for you to do is to bring me some items. It's kind of a game, really. Yes, a game. A scavenger hunt!"

"And you, my boy, you will undoubtedly be successful. Three items. Simple little items. Nothing controversial. No indeed. Wouldn't think of it."

"Have you ever been on a scavenger hunt?"

"No. No, sir. Never."

"Really great fun. I recall when I and this bevy of Naiads . . . Well, no need to trouble your mind over that . . ." Zeus was silent for a moment, a slight smile on his lips as he reminisced.

"On a scavenger hunt you go out and locate the items you have been told to bring back. And you bring them back, and you win. That simple. So be on your way, now. Don't slam the door."

"Yes, sir. I mean, no sir. The items, sir?"

"Oh, of course. A pair of scissors. I told you, nothing rare or controversial. Thread. Yes, plain, ordinary old thread. And a spinning wheel. A little large and awkward. But, I assure you, not too much so for a youth of strength and stamina. Three items. I think you'll enjoy this scavenger hunt. I really do."

"There are those - you'll find this unbelievable, but have faith - There are those who believe they have the power of life and death. Well, I'll have you know it lies in my hands. Do you doubt? Shall I demonstrate?" Zeus face was reddening, and clouds were once more forming above Olympus.

In fact, he noted them. "Ah, well, yes, have to watch that. Let's not become perturbed. Oh, Heavens no. My boy, enjoy your scavenger hunt." He waved grandly.

"Oh, let me help you a little. Three sisters, and I'll not tell you their names, have the very objects for which you search. Lovely ladies, and I'm sure they'll do all they can to bring your search to a quick end.

Very quick."

He found himself in the midst of a glade. And well it was, for rain was beginning to fall, and the trees protected him from the cold drops. Scissors, thread, and a spinning wheel. Why, he thought, I can get those from Mother.

Suddenly a shudder ran through him. He did not move. He knew. The unseen companion was there. Waiting, waiting - waiting for what? What event would trigger the inhuman hatred radiated by this strange creature. Always there. Never fully seen.

He rose slowly, glanced fearfully around the glade. "Come out, if you dare. I await your pleasure."

He thought he heard the rustle of leaves. Quickly he glanced upward. The leaves were indeed moving. This time they were stirred by a vagrant breeze. He shook his head.

He knew - though he knew not how - that the scissors, thread, and spinning wheel of his mother would not serve. These must come from the three sisters. The lovely ladies mentioned by Zeus. In the back of his mind he thought of stories he had heard. Perhaps, at some early age, he had heard of the three sisters. Sadly, he could not remember. Who are they, and where do they dwell?

Startled, he looked up. The leaves were again moving. This time, no breeze caused this disturbance.

A large bird, perhaps a white owl, flew rapidly through the forest and in its wake soft white down marked a trail. A trail he knew he must follow.

The skies darkened as he stalked deeper and deeper into the forest. In time the wooded vales grew even darker, and the sky no longer came to view. A thought formed in his mind, he knew not how. He knew for whom he searched.

The thought brought sweat to his brow. The Sisters of Night! How often had he heard the legends, the strange tales. How often had they spun the thread, how often cut it! It must be they. The Sisters of Night!

He was lost. The trail was no longer marked ahead, and behind was only darkness. Slowly he inched forward, hoping for a clue. A simple indication of which way to proceed.

He heard the sound and joy almost made him sing out. She has returned, he thought, glancing to his right. And then he froze. Indeed he had heard sound. And indeed was something there. Something huge and monstrous, too near to be imagination; too far to be clearly seen. The unseen companion! With him still!

He notched his arrow. It was too late. Even as he moved the rain fell heavy and he could make out, not even the trees before him. He waited. Only silence. No further sounds were heard. With a sigh he returned the arrow to its pouch.

A flash of lightning lit a rocky rise before him, and he noted the mouth of a huge cave. Slowly he inched up to the opening, slowly stared into its depth.

Though nothing met his eyes, yet there seemed a light, a small flickering light, somewhere in its deep within. Cautiously he moved forward.

"Welcome, Welcome, Young man! We've been waiting. What kept you so long? Hurry along now, The thread is growing short. Come along."

He blinked. She wasn't there a moment ago! Waiting for me? I don't understand!

"Madame, there is a mistake. You couldn't have been waiting for me. I don't know you. I had no intention of stopping here. I . . ."

She smiled. And though she were old and wrinkled, her eyes brightened like a happy child's. "Come along. You'll understand by and by. Come along."

She led him ever deeper into the cavern. The flickering light grew ever brighter, and seemed to flicker no more. Finally his companion motioned for him to stop. "Mustn't frighten them. 'Twould be terrible if they made a mistake. Terrible!"

"Clotho, he has arrived. Lachesis, welcome him. Come, my dear." She led him forward, and he bowed

to the ladies who looked up from their labor, glanced at him without emotion or even interest.

"Girls, girls, are we that old! Look at him. Isn't he a handsome one. Ah, how sad. To die so young!"

"Atropos, you were always one to talk too much. Here are your scissors. Now get on with it!"

Clotho was busy spinning a thread. Her spindle moved slowly at times, then rapidly. Lachesis, bent forward, examining the thread, comparing its length to an unseen measuring stick. "Right about there, sister dear. Oh, give him another inch. No harm done. He is a handsome young man."

Atropos looked at the scissors handed her, sighed. "I would it were otherwise, young man. But we are duty bound. Nothing can stay us from our labor."

Wide-eyed he stood as the scissors opened, approached the thread. "Wait! Zeus, Zeus, He wants you. You must cease immediately. He eagerly awaits your company."

"Zeus! Olympus! Parties! Dancing! He wants us. Child, you can't mean it. 'Twas he who banished us to this cold, dank cave. And now he wishes our return? Well, he's plainly drunk too much of that nectar. I knew it would eventually get to him. Clotho, have you a thread for Zeus?"

"Oh, never. Well, I admit, I tried. After all, it wasn't at all nice of him to send us here. Anyway, it kept unraveling."

"Lachesis, give the boy another foot or two. Oh, give him an extra yard. Boy, we'll get dressed as soon as we've put away our tools. Zeus wants to see us!"

"Eh, please, don't put away your tools. He is extremely interested in your skills. You must bring them along."

"Learned to appreciate us, has he? My, how many eons has it taken! Oh, very well."

He led the way and in due time they arrived at Olympus. "Wait at the gate, I'll announce your coming." He smiled at their activities.

Clotho was practicing her curtsies, Lachesis her bows. Atropos smiled a broad smile, then a more reserved one, then tried a calm yet quiet visage.

"Zeus, sir, I have them. I have them."

"Well done. Amazing. No! Not really. I always knew you had the right stuff. Of course, to scavenge the items I fear you had to terminate the owners. It is sad. Still, what can one do? Bring them in, bring them in. Scissors, thread, and spinning wheel! Wonderful, wonderful!"

"Oh, no sir. I didn't have to terminate them. In fact, they're here. Come in ladies, and receive your welcome."

Zeus opened his mouth, closed it. He looked at the three Sisters of Night. He looked at Demo.

"Yes, brought them with you. Yes, very thoughtful of you. Thank you, my boy, thank you. Don't call me, I'll call you."

With that Demo found himself in his own home, in his own room, rolling off his own bed with a thud.

Rough barked joyously, leaped upon him in frantic welcome.

"Ah, that Zeus! I really wish he'd not do it that way," he said aloud. "Mother, I'm hungry!"

19. The Stables

"I'm delighted, my boy, that your chores are almost completed. Delighted!" Zeus didn't look delighted. Rather, he seemed put out. Jolly voice and all, but that scowl!

"Now, this next task. Represents a logistic problem, really. Time consuming, rather than difficult. Your qualifications are such that you'll have little trouble, I'm sure." Zeus smiled, as though at some secret humorous thought.

"I'm into some real estate deals. Brought a few places down on earth. Boy, was I taken on this one. Oh, was I taken. Shysters and developers! I must visit Pluto one day and see if he has room for any more. They are overrunning his place, I'm afraid." For a moment Zeus fell silent. His thoughts were evidently on his brother's domain, and the shysters and developers dwelling therein. A bright smile lit his face.

"To the matter at hand. I brought this ranch. Excellent property, very reasonable price. Closed escrow and all that. Then I thought to look inside the stables. Gad!"

"Poor suffering creatures. Horses, excellent horses. Unfortunately, locked in those stables for eons. Eons and eons. Maybe longer. To summarize, the place was not entirely sanitary. Now be off with you and get it cleaned up." He guffawed rather loudly.

"Oh, here. This may help." Zeus handed Demo a broom, a mop, and a clothespin. "For the nose, you understand."

Demo arrived unceremoniously at the stable doors. He was greeted by the local population, consisting of many and varied forms of flies. Black flies, white flies, colorless flies - all eager to make his acquaintance.

Shooing them away he slowly opened the stable doors, quickly closed them.

Impossible! No mortal could possibly clean up this mess. Still hadn't a hero, long ago, faced a similar problem?

Yes, yes indeed. And he had solved it. Solved it by merely changing the course of a stream. Simple enough. Now where might he find a stream.

There was one, and at not too great a distance.

Well, it is only a creek. Nevertheless, it's all I have. So let's give it a try.

He worked diligently, opening a channel to the very door of the huge barn. As night drew near he began to dam the creek, forcing its waters to divert to his newly dug channel.

The youthful civil engineer smiled.

The water was beginning to flow. Quickly he hurried to the stable, dared the flies, and threw wide the doors at both ends of the edifice. Fortunately he wore the clothespin.

The water was moving ever closer. The chore was indeed a simple one.

He looked up, and frowned.

The sky had darkened, and even now huge raindrops began to fall. The mild creek was rising higher and higher. The dam, built to withstand that creek, was faced with an ever deepening, ever angrier river.

The water reached the top of the dam, flowed now heavily through the channel, washed at the very entrance to the stables.

Suddenly the dam began to move, at first slowly. A crack appeared in the middle. It widened.

Water began to seep through the crack.

Water began to pour through the crack.

The crack was gone!

The dam was gone!

Demo sat down, stared in disbelief.

In moments his hours of work destroyed! The rock, the mud, the good green sod - all gone.

And the stable, fly infested, standing as before.

Even as he looked a swarm of flies rose, moved in his direction.

Quickly he retreated.

This required rethinking! Not so simple a chore as he had thought!

Back to Olympus! I must talk to Zeus! No way!

He arrived at Olympus. Zeus was absent. "He is on a . . .," his gardener smiled, ". . . on a hunting trip." He winked.

Suddenly a loud screech disturbed their ears.

"Oh, dear!" The gardener wrung his hands. "That's Hera! The flowers are growing so poorly. I've spent hours tending them. But they will not grow in this kind of soil. I've told Zeus a thousand times. Olympus is just too pure!"

Hera entered.

"I will not have my flowers drooping, my bushes wilting! I may well have my gardener in that condition if he tends not to my garden!"

The gardener cringed.

"What are you doing here. Did not Zeus send you out on another of his ridiculous chores. Begone, then, for I am not fit company today!" She stomped back to her patio, giving one last angry look at the gardener.

Demo frowned. "Well, I wish I could help. Anyway, I'm not much of a gardener. I know we use fertilizer on our plants. Mostly we use . . ." He paused. A thought had entered his mind.

"Sir, perhaps this is your lucky day!"

"This boy, eh, the one who sold you the fertilizer for the vinyard and for Hera's garden," Zeus paused, a slight frown on his face. The clouds above Olympus darkened, and a low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. "This boy wasn't too smart, you say?"

"Oh, no! Smart? Ha!"

"At first he wanted ambrosia, wine, women - for fertilizer! Ridiculous! He talked! And talked. The more he talked the less he decided to charge. We waited quietly." The gardener smiled.

"His charges dropped?"

"His charges dropped!"

"Still we waited! Aha! Finally he agreed that it was all ours, if we would give him just one bottle of wine and agree to move everything within 3 days! Oh, he was a cute rascal! We just outwitted him. Yes, eventually, he came our way. Merely a matter of waiting." The gardener's smile broadened.

"Yes," Zeus mused. "A cute rascal, indeed!"

"So, this callow youth, this dunce from the barnyards, practically gave away his, eh, merchandise?"

"And did you, eh, move all this fertilizer? Within 3 days?"

"Oh, yes, sire. Indeed we did. We didn't want to give him the chance of changing his mind. I had to call on all the Gods - save yourself, Sire - to get the job done. Such dedication. Even Hera carried her share. Lovely wife, Sire, lovely!"

The gardener smiled. Zeus nodded somewhat glumly.

"And we gave him 5 bottles of wine to insure he gave no further thought to the fertilizer or the stables."

"What! What is this! Stables! Did you say Stables!" Zeus brow was dark, and the clouds above Olympus now roiled and flashes of lightning lit the dour sky.

"Why, yes, sire. It seems that, through negligence, the stables had not been cleaned in - well, in a long time. One might say they were a bit ripe."

"And the horses! Poor things! They were indeed in need of washing and curry-combing."

"But, to the matter at hand. Yes, stables they were. And full to the brim with excellent fertilizer. Oh, such gardens as we shall have this spring! I'm sure you will be well pleased."

Zeus sniffed the air. Zeus seemed to be not well pleased. He was muttering to himself.

"Callow youth? Stables? Fertilizer? I will have his head . . .!
Buying it from him with my own goods! Inconceivable!"

"Had all the Gods and Goddesses hard at work. That's something I've never accomplished. Ah, perhaps he might fit in well at Olympus!"

Dionysius sat quietly in the prow of the boat. The ferryman was silent, merely guided the craft on its way. The craft moved of its own volition.

"How come I here? Who are you? And what is this body of water on which we float?"

The ferryman stared at him in steely silence.

Dionysius glanced around, studied the ferryman, the boat, the dark liquid on which they floated.

"I was condemned, and the execution was for tomorrow. I had venison for supper - stupid cook burned it badly, gravy was tasteless. Then I slept. Someone roused me and we went to the execution chamber. They readied me for the blade. I remember cursing them soundly, one and all. I was bound and the executioner made ready. Did I faint? Did you rescue me, or was it another? What pay do you expect for this service? I am a poor man, so don't expect too much!"

Although the air was dark and gloomy Dionysius was beginning to feel cheerful.

"However it was done, I am thankful. And you shall all be rewarded. Before I stabbed the old priest I learned from him the location of the temple's treasure. I saw it with my own eyes. Jewels, money, golden goblets and silver. Yes, indeed, you shall be rewarded."

He smiled.

He sniffed the air.

"The sewers must lead into this stream, the smell of burning sulfur irritates my eyes. How much farther until we reach shore? There is a strangely unpleasant odor about this place. I like it not. Will you speak, or shall I toss you into this filthy stream!"

He rose, stepped toward the silent figure.

Suddenly he stopped.

The ferryman neither shrank from his approach, nor responded. His face was hidden by the hood he wore. Yet his eyes shone from beneath that hood.

The look from those eyes froze Dionysius in midstep.

"No! No! It is a bedtime story to frighten children. What are you telling me"

His gaze shifted from stream to boat, from boat to ferryman, from ferryman to stream.

"It is a fairy tale, nothing else. Take me to the shore!" His voice was once more threatening.

Suddenly he sat down, held his head between his two hands, sobbed quietly.

"It's true, isn't it? This river - Styx is its name. You are the ferryman. This gloom is not the dark of night. It's all true!"

Suddenly a thought came to mind.

"Then you are . . . You are Charon. And I must have - yes, here it is. Your toll. Take me then to the Elysian Fields. Quickly, take me away from this dreadful place."

He extended Charon's toll.

The figure made no move to accept.

Rather, a deep and melancholy voice responded. "Your stop is not the Elysian shore."

Dionysius gazed at the dark figure, at the coin. Reluctantly he let the coin fall, watched it disappear into the depths of the murky water.

He was silent.

What more was there to say!

20. The Demon's Lair

There are dark grottoes in the high mountains. And tarns, deep and cold, bottomless pits of murky water. And in some few favored spots, dark grottoes and murky tarns together.

Such was the site at which Demo stood.

Here dwelt one whom even Olympians fear. This was the Demon's Lair.

The village folk had long remembered legends. Hoary legends, whispered around campfires during winter storm. Used to frighten children to mind their manners. But only legends. Or so Demo had long believed.

Something - no one spoke a name - there was. Or something there had been. Something that preceded even the Titans, that ancient race from whom the Olympians were descended.

The Titans, so the tales went, had not conquered it. Rather, they had duped it, deceived it, and encaged it in bars not of this world. Bars that, until now, had held. Bars that, perchance, were weakening with the passage of eons.

Whispered conversations on earth, whispered conversations on the pristine streets of Olympus, told of an ominous presence. Not seen, nor heard - still dread of this unknown creature stalked the night as might stalk even the creature itself.

Idle chatter of fearful children? Old wives tales from the back woods? Or something else, something evil. Something so powerful that even the gates of Olympus stood not against it.

No one knew.

And that was why Demo stood at the gate to the demon's lair. Zeus would know what manner of creature was there imprisoned. Zeus would know what manner of prison held such a creature in throe.

Who better to send than Demo? If he succeeded, another task marked off. If he failed, one less concern as Athena chose another.

Demo gazed into the still water of the tarn, touched its surface with his hand. He gasped at the chilling cold that seized his entire arm.

Was this then the tarn of which he had been forewarned? Would here the strange tie between himself and the unseen companion be severed - or brought to its inevitable conclusion?

It seemed fitting!

No drearier spot had he seen. No gloomier grotto existed in these mountains. If doom hung over his head, it could not choose a place more suitable than this!

He resigned himself to the inevitable!

The sun slipped swiftly behind the western peaks, and cool night breezes stirred the leaves. Swallows swooped in the darkening sky, and night creatures called one to another as day ended.

Come morning and he would search further. For now, a fire, food, and a night's rest.

The flames reflected from the precipice's base, their warmth welcomed as cool night crept in. Beyond the fire light night sounds rose and fell, now near, now far.

He added wood to the fire, wrapped himself in his Eddie Bauer mummy bag. Ah, how pleasant to sleep after a long day's journey.

It was a sleep beleaguered by dreams. Dreams of he who dwelled in the deep tarn. In the dreams the creature came forth, looked down on the sleeping youth. Its eyes were cold, held deadly enmity.

Yet, it did not strike. Motionless it observed him, turned, and descended once more into the frigid waters.

Morning came early. Demo sat up, wide-eyed. From the tarn's brink to his resting place he saw footprints. A great weight had pressed them, even into the dryer ground. They turned back, led once more to the tarn.

Demo closed his eyes, breathed deeply. What manner of creature, and why had it turned away, doing him no harm? The footprints, though huge, seemed hardly those of some monstrous being capable of frightening even the Lords of Olympus.

Demo stirred the ashes to reveal hot cinders beneath, fed twigs and breathed gently on them to kindle a fire. As he placed larger branches on the flames he heard behind him the sound of measured footsteps.

With a start he turned.

The man looking down at him loomed tall and ominous. He showed no emotion. Rather, his face was calm, nor did his demeanor suggest threat. Slowly Demo rose, glanced toward his bow and quiver.

The man smiled.

"It would avail thee not. Rest easy. I mean you no harm. You, in turn, may be of aid to me. Why am I here, summoned from an age yet to be, a world far removed? Did you summon me? I think not. You are only a child! What can you tell me of this place, and of that one who stole from the cold waters in the dark of night?"

"Who are you? You were summoned? How so? From an age yet to be, a world far removed? I understand not your words. Still, if you were summoned I can think only that it was the work of Zeus. No, perhaps not. Athena may have brought you here to provide succor for me on this strange sojourn."

The tall man squatted before the fire, warmed his outstretched hands. "Strange names, these. Zeus? Athena? I know them not. And how might I, Beowulf, provide succor to one such as you, when I seem unable to even help myself. I sit here, lost, knowing neither north nor south, east nor west."

He spoke quietly, calmly. For all the strangeness of these proceedings, his face showed no fear, his eyes reflected only constant vigil.

"I can tell you why I am here. Zeus sent me to find what creature is imprisoned beneath these waters, and what manner of prison it be. It is plain, from your words; and from the prints upon the shore, it is imprisoned no more."

Beowulf responded musingly. "I walked 'neath moonlight across the moors, alone. The sound of wings, and huge white owl flew by. And then the moors were gone, moonlight faded, and I stand upon this forsaken shore of some strange pond. I feel overcoming me a dread that once before I felt, only once before. And that when I fought 'neath murky waters with the mother of Grendl. Is there no end? Have I come here once more to meet a fiend in mortal combat? And each more powerful than that which went before?"

Demo eyes lit up. "It was Athena. She knew of you, though you had never been. And if she has brought you here, it is with good cause. Grendl, and the mother of Grendl. Who, or what, are these of which you speak?"

"Fiends, creatures of night and corruption, that prey on good folk, weak and helpless. Alone I have met them, and that in their own lair, and brought upon them such destruction as they had sown. Monstrous though they were, yet did I feel not dread as I feel in this dark cove. What manner of creature dwells in yonder tarn. In my mind my thoughts are dark, and Wyrð himself peoples them."

"Wyrð? I know of Zeus, of Pluto, and of others of like ilk. I know not Wyrð."

For a moment Beowulf sat silent, eyes on the ground before him. "Wyrð is he who awaits us. Before all, he was. When all has faded and passed on, he will be. Though I fear him, I shall not bow to his power. Strangely, I believe he dwells here. I know not why."

Demo spoke now, glancing at the tarn in apprehension. "Legends have it that, before the Titans ruled,

another walked this world, held it in a grasp of iron. Then the Titans beguiled him in some strange manner, and with fetters formed of dreams entangled him. After that, that he might never again escape they locked him away in caverns far beneath Tartarus' depths."

He gazed at Beowulf, back at the tarn.

"It is said he once more walks the earth, and he is not a stranger even to the streets of Olympus. Nameless among us, perhaps Wyrð is the name he bears."

Beowulf took from its sheath his sword. Light reflected from its surface in strange patterns, and the sword's edge seemed alive and moving in the sun's rays.

"I grow old. Yet, it seems, there is one more toil, one battle more. Well, so be it. Every man dies. But it is given to some to live and die for a cause. For a cause that makes their having lived worthwhile. Boy, I will stand beside thee. Against this one none has ever prevailed. How will fare a boy, and an old man?"

He laughed. "Well, well, until I came none had prevailed against Grendl. Nor against Grendl's mother. Be of good cheer. We shall do what flesh and blood can do. And if that be not enough, then surely we shall die as men, sword in hand!"

The day passed swiftly, and shadows were lengthening. Demo built a fire, warmed the food his mother had hastily packed. Beowulf ate of dried meat he carried.

"Your friend, I think, will return once more this night. Sleep by your fire. I shall rest against the trunk of that oak, and when he comes I will greet him. If your Zeus be powerful, pray unto him, for this night one walks the earth as evil incarnate. And of us three, I fear none shall view a rising sun."

Beowulf rose, walked to the tall oak, sat at its base. He lay the naked sword across his lap, closed his eyes. Whatever dread he felt, it showed not in his demeanor or action. Though he slept Demo knew no sound or motion would escape his attention. It was the sleep of one ever alert, ready for the life and death struggle that might lie ahead.

A fog rose from the cold surface of the tarn, and driven by a light breeze, drifted onto the shore. Demo huddled close to the fire, eyes watching anxiously that fog-shrouded tarn, the mist-shrouded trees. His hand clutched his bow, and an arrow lay beside him, ready to be notched.

With sunset the grotto lost all semblance of light. Vague winds rustled tree limbs, calls of night birds sounded, and other sounds. Sounds that brought quick apprehension to his mind. And then they faded - then returned once more.

Suddenly Demo sat up!

He had fallen asleep. A noise, a movement? Something had surely wakened him.

The crescent moon had risen, and in its light the trees and bushes cast soft shadows.

Quickly he glanced toward the huge oak.

Beowulf was gone!

Slowly he turned his eyes toward the tarn.

It was there!

Moving toward him with deliberate stride, dark except where the moonlight reflected from its eyes.

Quickly he notched his arrow, drew the bow.

Nearer it came, and nearer. It seemed nearly upon him when he loosed his arrow. It struck the creature full in the chest, dropped harmlessly to the ground.

"Athena, farewell!"

The creature's claws touched his arm, cutting effortlessly through cloth and through flesh.

"Face me, worm of death. I've traveled through space and time to challenge you, and you return to your lair only through me."

The creature rose, loosed the boy. It turned to face Beowulf.

Throughout the forest the scream of anger sounded!

It charged the waiting swordsman.

Claws extended, fangs bared, it leaped with fury on its foe.

Quickly they were joined by sound of blows, the whistle of Beowulf's blade in air. With every motion the sword gleamed with a strange and changing light. Now a deep and glowing red. Then a green that seemed to flow its length, changing to sunlight yellow. And all besmeared with the blood of Wyrd!

Blood flowed, both red and green!

Beowulf fell before the onslaught, rose again.

Demo watched, transfixed. Even in the horror of nightmare was not seen such fearsome battle!

Wounded both and bleeding, and still the battle continued!

The moon dropped from view, and the gentle stars looked down on the frenzied struggle.

In despair Demo saw Beowulf fall, his sword dropping from his hand.

Demo lunged forward quickly, was struck down as quickly. He felt a bump rising on his head where the blow had landed. He crawled forward, fell, lay still. The creature turned once more to Beowulf, its blood-drenched claws extended.

From the tree tops the white object plummeted, opened wide its wings and flew into the face of the fiend. Startled, the monster fell, rolled over and quickly slipped into the frigid waters of the tarn.

Athena stood beside Demo. Their eyes looked in sorrow at the prostrate body of Beowulf.

Even as they moved forward to help him he sat up, his hand searching for and seizing the hilt of his sword. Without a word he stood, shook his head, staggered to the brink of the tarn.

Sword clutched in hand, a look of resignation on his face, he dove into the Demon's Lair!

For a brief moment the water was still, not even a breeze disturbing its surface.

Without warning it erupted!

A huge shape rended its surface, fell back with a scream of anger! The green blood blended with the dark water of the tarn.

For hours the battle continued. The once calm tarn was now an ocean of waves and froth, and thunder sound above it. From beneath those waters rumbles of anger rose. Sulfurous fumes lifted from its surface, killed the trees bordering the dark waters.

Then nought but silence!

Athena's voice was sad. "He will drive Wyrd once more into those bonds that have so long endured. For all his heroism, for all his strength, Beowulf cannot survive the conflict, and even I cannot save him." She gazed, sad-eyed, at the fateful tarn.

"Yet, he shall return at last in another time, another place. Indeed he will one day slay the Grendl, the Grendl's mother - archfiends of another era."

Her eyes were turned to the heavens, seemed to look beyond the visible.

"Beyond that, the day will come when the fire dragon itself shall fall to his sword. Only then shall Wyrd have him, as Wyrd must have us all."

"Come, Zeus waits."

"Wyrd. Yes, yes, the Worm of Death. But, even the Titans knew it only as a legend. Well, never mind. It is once more returned to its lair, once more imprisoned."

Zeus seemed to have other thoughts on his mind.

"How did you manage, my boy. No, no, I don't have time! Golf tournament this afternoon. Poseidon has won the last two. Still, the score is getting closer. Oh, would you care to caddy. No, I suppose you are a little tired. Good night, my son."

"Good night, my son."

Demo looked up at his mother, rolled over and pulled the blankets close. Such strange dreams.

His fingers gingerly rubbed the lump on his head.

Theresa entered the room timidly, eyes downcast.

"Is Demo home. I need to talk to him."

Metaneira's eyes held a question? "He's out back with Rough. Is something wrong?"

"I . . . I like Demo. I really wouldn't hurt him for the world. I am sorry, I Please, I can't marry him. Metaneira, I am sorry. There is another. Oh, what can I say, what shall I do!"

"Theresa, don't cry. Perhaps all will work out for the best. But, yes, you should tell him. He is a brave lad. I'm sure he will take it like a man. Why don't you wipe your eyes, then go out back and talk to him. Be brave, girl!"

As Theresa went out the back door Metaneira looked up, shook her fist. "Athena, you are a conniver. Who have you sent to poor Theresa? I should have known. Oh, well, you may make a delightful daughter-in-law."

She shook her head, looked out the back door.

Theresa and Demo were standing quietly, his arms around her.

"It's all right, little sister. You see, I think it's always been this way. I've always felt toward you like a big brother. I don't think I could really have been anything else." Demo spoke quietly.

He liked Theresa, always had. Not as a lover. No, more as the little girl next door than as an attractive and mature young lady. Even now he could not see her other than as the little girl.

"Who is he, Theresa? Are you sure?"

"You know him. Randy. He is so strange and wonderful and I knew when we first met."

He smiled, placing his hand under her chin he lifted it up. "If he ever mistreats you, you let me know. And tell him big brother will beat him to a pulp if he isn't nice to you. Understand?"

She half sobbed, half laughed.

"Yes, big brother."

She hugged him, her arms around his neck, then kissed him on the lips, pressing against him. For a moment they stood thus.

"You know, big brother, I think I could have made you love me - another way. I'm very glad I didn't. I'll always need a big brother."

"I'll be here."

21. Dream Shadows

In sleep reality is dreams, dreams reality. And Demo knew not whether he slept, and all was but a dream. Or, whether, waking, his mind did dream of dreams.

It had started - as had all his recent adventures - with a summons from Zeus. And when Zeus spoke Demo felt that, perhaps, he had indulged in too much of Olympian nectar.

"Boy, the world is not what it seems. Look around you. What do you see?"

The question, of course, was purely rhetorical. Zeus went on with no hesitation.

"You see Olympus, of course. And, if you had my powers, you might look down and see earth. Or even let your gaze penetrate to the nether kingdom of my brother, Pluto. With a little more effort Tartarus comes in view. And that, think you, is the universe. Ah, and that is where you err."

Zeus was plainly morose. He had a problem that bothered him. And rather than attacking the problem head-on, he was talking his way around it.

"Ah, indeed, Sire! Just the other day I was telling my mother"

"Yes, yes, but what I mean is, there is also the unseen. The world in transition. It was, and now is not. Yet, in a strange sort of way, it is. Understand? (More rhetorical questions.) It will be, eventually; it hasn't become, yet. It's a world in . . . well, it's a world in transition. And during the transition, it isn't. Hmmm, very simple, actually. Must make a note of that, - A world in transition - should go over well at the club."

He reached above his head, unrolled a long papyrus, and jotted a few notes on the bottom. As he let go the papyrus rewound, disappearing when the last page was snugly wrapped. Zeus smiled, took a slight bow, and tossed his pen into the air. It, too, disappeared. But, not, unfortunately, before several drops of ink splattered the divine face. With a growl Zeus reached up and a white towel appeared. He started to wipe away the ink.

"Drop that! Not with my clean towel!"

Hera rushed into the room, seized the towel, handing Zeus instead a well-used one. With a sigh he wiped away the ink, dropped the towel into the waste disposer. The waste disposer growled, wagged its tail, and devoured the towel with a single gulp.

"Anyway, that's where you need to go. It's the one region outside of my domain. I just don't have any power there, because it really doesn't exist, you understand. Well, it exists, kind of, to be scientifically precise."

Zeus prided himself on his scientific knowledge.

"And, Sire, what is the purpose of my visit."

"That, my boy, is a good question. Let us see if we can fabricate a good answer." He paused, walked back and forth twice, did a hop and a skip and a slight curtsy.

"I don't know! You will have to define your mission yourself. You see, this transition world, this shadow land - that's it, that's what I wanted to say. Shadow land! It is that. That is where you are to go. And what are you to do? Improvise! Improvise, my lad!"

"Yes sir, but to what end?"

"That tomorrow may come."

"That tomorrow may come?"

"Great! You've got it! Farewell, and a safe journey!"

Transitions? Shadow land? So that tomorrow will come? Has Zeus reached his dotage! Demo would ask more, except that he found himself suddenly alone. Alone, but where? Surely this was not his own world.

The gray fog swirled, settled, then swirled again. Dimly objects could be seen. And movement. They were there, or so it seemed. Yet, what objects? And what moved?

Silence accompanied the fog. Or, perhaps, preceded it. Regardless, the only sound was his own breathing.

A light was approaching. Small, at first almost non-existent, it loomed larger, though no brighter. A silhouette, vague and distorted, carried the lantern. At times both disappeared as the fog thickened.

The approach stopped. Plainly they sensed his presence. The lantern was held higher, and he could catch glimpses of a woman's face. There was anxiety in her eyes, even fear, as she gazed at him.

"Sir, whence cometh thou? Thee be not of our world. Flee to thy home, for he walks the moors this night!"

"I . . . I am sent by Zeus. You say one walks this night? Who walks the moors this night? And why should I fear?"

"None is safe alone in the dark. If you have not where to go then come with me. Quickly, quickly!"

He followed her down dark alleys, twisting streets. The earth was wet, and muddy water flowed in rivulets crisscrossing their way. Varied smells, of vegetables, of cooked meats, and of decay, tinted the air. At times lights were visible through small barred windows along their way.

The fog became ever more intense. She held his hand that he not go astray. Her hand was small and cold. He enwrapped it in his own to give it warmth. She smiled at his concern.

They passed a pond where floated debris, bodies of dogs and cats, and perhaps objects of more unsavory character. As they reached the far edge of the pond she turned to the right, slipped and shuffled down a mucky side street.

She slid the door open and motioned him to remove his footwear. When they stepped inside she took a soiled towel from its rack, wiped his feet and her own.

The room was small. A straw mat covered the floor, and cheap cotton tapestry decorated the walls. A small barred window looked out from the back wall. A mat unrolled on the floor beneath the window served for sleeping.

She closed the door, dropped a strong wooden bar in place to block it from opening. "He will not enter. Still may the Powers help whomever he meets on these dark streets. You are fortunate I took you in. Others might have taken you for a changeling, and left you to your own devices. Many a young maid has lost her life by mating with handsome changelings!"

"You are most kind. No, no changeling I. My name is Demo, and I am here on a mission. When it is done I must once more depart."

She seemed little interested in his mission, regarded his face and figure with marked curiosity.

"Thy clothes are not as ours. Thy skin is dark from rays of sun, and here there is no sun. And thee speaketh strangely, with words and accent unknown in this land." She stopped, a bemused look on her face.

"What call you this land and its people? What is your name?"

She smiled at his questions.

"This is the world of Brume, and we are named Brumians. As for me, you may call me Mist. It is only a title, not my name. Our names we hold sacred, and to give them to others invites dire consequences. Yes, to Mist I shall answer."

"Well, I suppose I should likewise be as reticent. Anyway, my name is . . ."

Quickly she put her hand to his lips. "Speak it not again! You are a stranger, a sojourner in a strange land, and its customs are not of your world. You need not believe in our customs, but do not needlessly court danger. I shall name you."

She walked around him, a smile touching her lips. "Thou art tall, youthful, strong. Thou travellest from far lands to our world. I name thee Wanderer."

She opened the back window and the white vapors of fog crept in. Sliding a small door to the side she removed a pot and some utensils. Toward the center of the room she removed a block of floormat, revealing a pit in which firewood lay.

Soon the room was warmed, and the aroma of a thick soup tantalized his nostrils. Gladly did he eat, little noticing that only spoonfuls remained for her. "Ah, you cook like my own mother! What meat is this?"

"Do not concern yourself. It is nourishing, and harmless to you. It is the night season, and you may share my pad. Though you may think me forward, ask nought of me, for I am pledged. Only my company can I grant thee."

He slept. The fire died, the fog shrouded the room.

Of early morning he woke to find her fast asleep beside him. He reached out to tuck the blanket around her shoulders.

His eyes widened. Taking a deep breath he drew back his hand in consternation and sudden dread.

The shoulder was without substance. His hand felt cold and clammy air, nought else, passed through to touch the mat beneath.

She woke, looked at him with sad and pensive eyes. "Doth thee understand. Thou are not as we. We are but shadows, and thou art real. Waking, we can have semblance of reality. Sleeping, it fades. But touch me once more, for now I am."

Reluctantly he reached out for the hand she extended. Though cold, it was solid now as his own.

The sadness on her face disturbed him. Quietly he squeezed her hand, smiled. "There is much I don't understand. You have been kind to me. Still, I have a mission, and it must be done. I . . . "

The rattling of the door interrupted him. It started suddenly, grew in intensity. Mist moved to the far corner, dread on her face.

Demo frowned, took up his bow and notched an arrow. Slowly he drew the bow, waited.

The door held. In moments the rattling ceased. From without they heard a growl, followed then only by silence.

"Stay. Don't go out. He walks the street this night." Mist held his arm, eyes wide.

"Who is he? Why should I fear?"

"He is like you. He also comes from elsewhere. Yet, he is not like you. For you are kind. He destroys all he meets. And he is real, not shadow. When he came our world stopped. No longer do we move from the unreal to the real. We linger here in this shadow world, with no yesterday and no tomorrow."

He looked at her, startled. "No tomorrow? Strange! He said something very much like that - that tomorrow may come. Strange!"

"I cannot stay here, for I have my job to do. When I leave, close and bolt the door quickly. I pray we shall meet again. Time passes, and now I must do that for which I came. Peace!"

Then he opened the door, swiftly stepped out into the fog. He glanced up and down the alley, as far as he could see. Only fog.

A sound behind him caught his attention.

Turning swiftly, he found Mist closing the door, stepping to his side. "You shall not go alone!"

Arguments came to his mind. He was silent, for he realized she would not listen. "Stay close behind me. I search for him, the one from elsewhere. I know not why, but I feel that my mission is with him."

"You need not search. He will surely find us."

Demo moved down the street, ever watchful. Silence held sway, and the fog clung to them like wet cloth. At times lights could be seen, rapidly disappearing as the drear dawn came. Dawn brought little change. The fog still enmeshed a silent world, a world seemingly populated by Mist and himself.

The chill he felt came not from the fog. A coldness along his spine, a prickling on the back of his neck, forewarned him. Something there was, something evil and fearsome, close at hand!

"No!" Mist cried as she ran forward toward an object barely visible. Demo reached out to stop her. His hand touched only cold fog, and she was gone.

He followed her quickly, then stopped. The scream of utter terror rose, ceased quickly. All was silent. For a moment he closed his eyes. He knew full well he would see her no more.

Mist. A strange name. And yet a kind and gentle person. Now gone. To fight the unseen companion to protect himself had been his goal. No longer. Anger enveloped him. Mist was dead. The Demon must die!

Demo gazed from side to side, trying to penetrate the white barrier before his eyes. To no avail. Then, glancing down, he noted footprints. Footprints not made by man!

Slowly, his eyes on the ground ahead of him, he followed the trail. Where Mist had trodden he could not tell. She left no trace of her passage.

Looming huge in the fog and early morning gloom, ahead an object stood in his path. This was the creature she feared. The one that surely had destroyed her!

It was coming slowly closer. Plainly it recognized his presence. Smoothly he strung his bow, notched an arrow.

Demo waited quietly.

A shudder enveloped his body, and his eyes widened.

He knew this one. An aura emitted from it, one that was not new to him.

Surely, this was the unseen companion!

Without hesitation he released his arrow.

The laughter that came from out the fog held little humor. "Your puny weapons are merely playthings. I would end you now, if it were not that the fates have written, and it is by the tarn you shall meet your destiny. If you survive this world, or non-world! I leave you now, earthling. Find your way back to Olympus and Zeus. If you can!"

The unearthly laughter sounded once more, then faded, as did the figure half displayed in the swirling fog.

In his ears was but silence, and his eyes saw only the swirling fog.

'That tomorrow may come.' The words repeated themselves in his brain. What had Zeus intended? Was the unseen companion the evil influence dominating this strange world? Or were there other, still hidden, culprits. "Zeus, you have indeed given me a strange chore. I know not where to turn! If only I could lift this fog!"

He wandered through the streets. Glancing at a pond in passing he recognized it. He knew that he had merely retraced his steps, neared Mist's dwelling. With a sigh he found the door, entered.

He sat quietly on the mat, fell asleep.

Dreams, interrupted by moments of awareness, disturbed his rest. Dreams of Mist, of the unseen companion, finally of Athena. She spoke strange words to him, words couched in riddles. "Prometheus knew the answer. As did your unseen companion. Quickly, before the fire die."

He woke, sweat streaming from his body. From the center of the room a wisp of smoke rose from the dying fire. 'Before the fire die?' Strange words. 'Prometheus knew, the unseen companion knew?' What did they know?

Wide-eyed, he looked at the fading fire. Suddenly he reached down, pulled a fiery brand from center, and tossed it at the wall. In moments the building was burning.

He rushed out of the building. The conflagration spread rapidly, and the once empty, fog-shrouded streets were filled with dim forms rushing helter-skelter to and fro.

Even as the flames spread the fog began to dissipate. An early morning sun could be seen shining on the horizon. Where strange shadows had moved along the streets now people were to be seen. Smiles replaced looks of dreary misery. Indeed Prometheus had known!

Still, there remained much to do. 'That tomorrow may come?' What action must be taken 'that tomorrow may come'? The fog was indeed gone. Only a burned out city remained. No tomorrow, this!

What else had Athena whispered to him while he slept. Something very important. Nothing came to mind. He moved westward, drawn by an unknown force. The answer was to be found beyond the western horizon. If there were an answer.

The mountains loomed large to the west. He began that westward trek, barely reached the foothills before the sun began to sink behind the jagged peaks. Looking for a place to sleep safely, he noted an opening, the mouth of a cave.

He entered cautiously.

"There is no cause for fear. Welcome. I've awaited your coming."

An old man spoke the words softly, calmly. His countenance belied the words.

Clad in the armor of a warrior, with face stern, marked by steel and fire, the old man projected a sense of authority.

Demo stepped forward slowly.

"Sire, I know you not. Yet you have awaited me?"

"One who has traveled far with you forecast your arrival. In due time you shall know him. Much will be revealed - by the tarn. But that another day, another world."

The unseen companion! He had been here, spoken to this one. What strange fate forever brought their paths together? And what was the secret of the tarn?

Demo shook his head.

"I rule this domain, ignored by the Gods, unknownst to mankind. This is the field of atonement. All pass through here. Some quickly. Some remain long. For a moment you have lifted the mists. Nevertheless, they shall return. I have halted all transitions until your coming. The souls who depart your world and pass through here would press on. And so shall they, in due time."

"What would you have of me, Sire?"

The warrior stood, pulled from its sheath a sword. "Vulcan did temper this sword with blood. And each who leaves your world must first feel this edge. It has proven strong and sharp. Still, time and usage take their toil, and it is now it is only a blunt instrument, useless for its purpose."

"Sire, I am no swordsmith."

The warrior held the blade in hand, extended the handle toward Demo. "Take it. Return it to Zeus. Tell him one whose name remains forever unspoken would have the broken sword of Cadmus. Let Vulcan fashion it and put thereon an edge that will not fail. 'Til you return, Clothos shall spin no more, nor Lachesis measure, nor Atropos wield her shears. And none shall pass through these portals to tomorrow."

The warrior held the blade high, brought it down flat against his knee, and the metal snapped. He handed the broken weapon to Demo. "The gate is there."

He pointed to the darker recesses of the cave. "Quickly, now, to Olympus. I wait impatiently."

Zeus listened in quiet amazement, the broken sword in his hand. In anger he tossed it down and it faded into oblivion. "You shall meet with it by the tarn, in good time. It is not given to me to know of this shadow land. Of its existence only am I informed. The Ancient Ones - they knew! Strangely, they told me nothing! Must even the Gods pass through those portals? I know not. Here, take it. The sword of Cadmus. It, too, was broken. Well, Vulcan has applied his skills. This edge shall never dull."

The warrior examined the sword with critical eye. "The craftsmanship of Vulcan leaves little to be desired. I see the break in the blade. It matters not. There is no weakness now. You have done well."

His visage reflected an expression that might be construed as a smile. "My broken sword lies by the tarn. It may well be of service, at the appointed time. Now, on your way. For I must return to my dreadful chore."

Zeus was morose. "It is a drear vision you bring to me. Still, let us live for today. If it were hidden from the Gods, then it concerns them not. Return to your own, my boy. The flowers bloom, soft winds blow, and spring creeps upon the land. And, I assure you, there will be no fog!"

22. The Escape

It is said that none enter, that none leave, the confines of Hades except they be conveyed by the ferryman. Yet, in time past, ancient time, one entered unattended that eternal prison. He entered in

search of his own true love, and pleaded with his songs. So sweetly sung were they that Pluto, that stern master of the nether regions, granted safe passage to him, and to the one he loved. For Pluto, most hideous of living beings, yet within his monstrous form knew the pangs of love.

Yet did another depart those infernal regions with no aid from that dark ferryman.

This is the tale of that departure, of what transpired before. And here lie the tangled threads, and the first strange steps on the dark path to the Tarn of Eternity.

Legends relate the sad story of the kidnapping of Persephone, the story of the evil Pluto. And the legends tell true. But they ignore the role of Venus, and of Cupid. And they are not guiltless.

Persephone did dwell in the Vale of Enna, gathered there the wildwood flowers.

Pluto, master of Hades, dwelt alone in his nether kingdom.

Powerful, emotionless, dedicated only to his duty, this ruler of the dead traveled from time to time, his coach pulled by giant black steeds. And one such a trip Venus espied him. Angry because she had no power to move him she turned to Cupid.

"This one knows not of love, lives in serenity. I would he suffer the pangs of unrequited love. Loose your sharpest arrow. Let him suffer as suffer those mortals ferried through the portals of his empire."

Cupid grinned impudently. Ever pleased to show his skill he notched arrow to cord. True and straight it flew.

Pluto felt a yearning he did not understand. Disturbed, he flogged his steeds, flew tempestuously he knew not where, seeking he knew not what.

Wild, the horses flew. And in their flight they entered the Vale of Enna, paused to drink from the pond therein.

Carrying wildflowers in her arms, with laughter and song did Persephone approach the chariot, tossed in childlike simplicity flowers to the occupant. "Come, play with me. I have no playmate. I need a friend."

She looked on his loathsome form with neither fear nor disfavor. To her he was merely a welcome playmate, though not of human form. She asked nothing of him, only that he share this little while.

He gazed upon her, and in his heart Cupid's poisoned arrow worked its magic.

The innocent beauty of that face, the warm and happy spirit shining through those clear eyes, brought to him feelings he had never known. He thought to hold her close, to stroke that soft hair, to caress with gentle touch her smooth skin.

And within him, too, aroused the desires of a man. For though her face was that of youth, her body was of sculptured beauty that Venus might envy.

When Pluto beheld her all thoughts save one departed his mind. This was to be his bride!

He tarried there, danced in parody of handsome prince, sang in voice marred and croaking. She mocked him not; rather, smiled.

Of flowers garlands she made, given to him in innocent pride. She sang sweet songs of light and sunshine, of crystal stars and mellow moon, of flowers that did not die, with blossoms that forever bloom.

He told her sad tales of a dark and lonesome realm, of those for whom hope was no more, and of a keeper who sat in solitude in mastery of that realm. A keeper who, more than all dwellers therein, was prisoner of that realm.

From her eye, soft flowed a tear. From her hand, a gentle touch. He thought not to ask for more.

They parted, though never long. Always his mighty steeds drove through time and space, returning once more to that quiet retreat. The love he felt for the innocent child grew ever stronger. Still, he approached her, not in courtship, but as a friend.

"Your arrow has flown true. It lacked the needed potency. He loves her as does a brother. Once more loose your bow, and into his heart drive desire, passion. And I shall open wide her eyes, that she may see him as the monstrous form he is. He joys in her presence, feels not the pain of unrequited love. As he has ignored me, she shall reject him!"

Venus caused once more Cupid's arrow to fly. An arrow not tinged with sweet love, rather poisoned with selfish lust. And even as the arrow flew she closed the eyes of Persephone, let her dream of handsome prince. Handsome prince, of looks far removed from those of this dread companion.

Pluto lurched back in alarm as desire mixed with tender thoughts, new and uncontrollable needs surfaced.

Persephone opened wide her eyes, saw him now in a new light. No handsome prince he, no proper comrade. With a scream she rose from beside him, rushed blindly toward the garden gate.

He seized her, dragged her to that golden chariot. Madly he lay whip on flesh, driving the mighty steeds as never had they been driven. Thus he carried her to his own domain.

She resisted not, for his was the greater strength. As his chariot reached the gates of the garden she sighed. In arms she held her kitten, a white small ball of fur. As they passed through the gate she set it free. "May the Gods grant you freedom and happiness, for mine is no more."

Pluto heard her words with deep remorse. Nevertheless, the spell cast of Venus overpowered the germ of kindness in his heart. And yet, though he desired her, his love was more powerful. "Only when the Gods have granted you to me in marriage shall you be mine."

In due time it came about. Still, Persephone was granted one wedding wish. Quickly, before it could be withdrawn, she prayed to be returned to her mother for half of each year. And so it was.

In time she accepted her exile with good grace. Yet, because Cupid had never used his arrows on her heart, she felt no love for her captor. At times, perhaps, pity.

Time as earthlings know it does not exist for denizens of the nether world. Those suffering suffer not by day or night, but by eternity. The Curse of Cronus, lifted from the Gods, still left its mark upon these sufferers, and age beyond age they carried.

And even Persephone, though shielded by the Gods, felt the power of Cronus, saw wrinkles gently forming. Invisible to Pluto, who saw only through the eyes of love, this aging process.

One innocent pleasure Persephone had.

The dread ferryman in his duties came ever to the kingdom's portals. And there he heard the happenings on earth, and fables of happenings in Heaven.

These tales he passed on to Persephone, for she longed to know of the world she had left behind.

And one day he brought to her a tale that left her heart cold.

Ceres, her mother, was nearing the end of her days. She prayed daily to the Gods that she might see, before her departure, her beloved daughter.

The bargain had been made. Six long months must Persephone dwell within the nether realm. The Gods would not relent.

Still, Persephone would see her mother. She pleaded with the ferryman. To no avail. He listened not to her pleas. He carried only passengers from the portal to deep within. None carried he to the portal.

She wandered though Hades with sad mien, searching for a path to the other side. She found none.

While in her search, she met the shades of the departed. On one such meeting she heard the name, Orpheus.

Suddenly her eyes widened. Orpheus! The only living man to enter Hades without the attendant ferryman!

Slowly, from tormented souls, from the ferryman, even from Pluto himself, she gathered details of

that entry. How he came, singing his songs, and melted even the heart of Pluto.

Ah, how did he enter? What secret way, unknown to any other, had led him into this Stygian realm?

The heights of Taenarus! Earthly legends told of a path, a path of unknown origin. Through terrain unlike any known to man it twisted its uncertain way. Boulders coughed from deep within the earth's core blocked its passage. Edged stones marred its surface. And the path winds into a cave, whose very mouth is enshrouded in darkness.

From its mouth sulfurous fumes rise, and dark clouds of noxious gases besmirch the sky. Bones of man and beast lie scattered midst pools of murky water.

It is thought that this fissure penetrates the very bowels of earth. Even into the domain of Pluto, the fearsome kingdom of Hades.

Through this portal creatures of the afterworld are unleashed on earth's dwellers. Ghosts of those long gone, strange beings never dreamed of by human kind, spirits weird, and other creatures lacking even a name.

Orpheus must have entered through this portal. Through the cave of Orpheus may I escape to my world!

Thus thought Persephone. And she planned her escape. Each day she wandered through the dark domain, mapping its drear geography in her mind.

She waited.

In due time Pluto was called to an accounting at Olympus. In his absence she began the ascent, up through the dark and evil passages. Ever upward with uncertain step and only hope to guide.

Guardians did cross her path, challenged her passage. But when informed that she was queen, and in Pluto's absence master of that dread domain, none dared stay her way.

She reached the portal, followed the rough and strenuous path leading downward from the heights of Taenarus. Always she gazed fearfully behind.

He would come!

23. The Extra Task

"Well done!," Zeus roared. "Every task completed!"

He paused. "Hmmm! I've lost count. Every task . . . Well, I'm sure you won't mind just one more to, eh, help me out."

"Yes, yes, every task, that is, except one, a minor one I overlooked."

Chagrined he listened as Zeus stated the Final task.

"Perhaps you have noticed, in your sojourns, that you have had a companion. An unseen watcher. A sneaky follower. A sly, disreputable creature! Destroy it! That is your final task. Now, begone!"

Imperiously he waved his hand, and as it fell he faded slowly into oblivion. Why was he smiling so happily?

It happened so quickly that Demo had not time to complain, not even time to think. He stood on the mountain path once more, alone.

Or, perhaps, not alone. The wind gusted, leaves rustling along the pathway. Above the tree tops bowed in obeisance to the intermittent breeze. The smell of rain was in the air. And a sulfurous smell. One he had noted to often before.

He sensed, rather than saw, the unseen companion. In anger he raised his bow, but could not decide where to dispatch the arrow. With a shrug he lowered it, returned the arrow to its pouch.

"In due time I will succeed. I must!" he breathed.

He felt tired. He had labored mightily through the twelve tasks. Rest was delayed for their

completion. And now a further task lay on him.

For a moment he leaned against the trunk of a tall pine, his eyes closed. His arms ached, his back and neck, and he felt the need to lie down, to rest.

But he dare not! Somewhere, waiting, his nemesis. And when and how he might strike he knew not.

He trudged disconsolately along the mountain path. In the distance the howl of a wolf broke the silence. The quivering wail was answered quickly from neighboring hills. The pack was assembling for some nightly raid. A dust devil traveled a crooked path on the trail ahead, ended with leaves falling on the floor. A deer stopped at the edge of the trail, sniffed at the air, then retreated.

Demo moved cautiously forward, each step a chore. Strong though he was his energy seemed to be waning. Startled, he remained motionless. This is not right, he thought. I have gone days without rest, and still felt stronger than today. Am I ill, have I eaten something that has weakened me.

He felt a vertigo, nearly stumbled. He shuffled forward, each foot scuffing along the pathway.

As Demo proceeded he noted a shadow on his path. The sitting sun limned the figure of a young girl sitting on a log by the path, rubbing her ankle. Plainly she was suffering, and with the approaching night, in dire circumstances. Exhausted though he was, he could not ignore her plight.

"My lady, you are in pain. Can I help you?" he inquired.

"No! No. Begone, handsome youth! I carry with me dangers you cannot understand. Even to talk to me invites disaster. Go quickly on your way!"

Her voice was taut with emotion, with fear. Her breath came in quick pants, and her face was distraught. She bowed her head in hopeless resignation.

He started to turn, noted the tears in her eyes, and so remained.

"Here, I have medication for your ankle. It will ease the pain."

He rubbed the ointment on the red swollen skin, and her eyes widened as the pain began to recede.

"Oh, sir, I am fleeing from a most horrifying creature. There are no words that can describe it. Should it find you with me, it will destroy you. Please, go on your way. You have been very kind, now leave quickly. Let me climb down the mountain alone."

For a moment he hesitated, took a step away from her and down the mountain. If I stay to help her it will endanger my chances of completing the final task. I must go on now!

His thoughts said leave. His heart said stay. The sad face of the hapless maiden held his eyes. He could not walk away.

"I too have known fear and loneliness. I cannot leave you thus. I will help you, no matter what pursues. And should it overtake us, I shall leave my mark on it." He touches his arrows for reassurance.

They slowly descend the mountain, and she leans heavily on him as she hobbles along the rock-strewn path. At times winding steeply, narrow. Then leveling and wide. When they reached a precipice overlooking the site of a beautiful, dark pond they paused.

A gnarled pine grew on the crag, leaning outward. In time the wind and rain would loosen its roots and would plunge off the overhang. For now a swallow nested safely within its branches.

Demo looked down at the tarn so far below. For a moment he closed his eyes, drew a deep breath. This is the place. The wait is over. He sighed.

There are ponds where birds sing in happy summer frolic. Where nests are built in bordering bushes, and eggs laid. Ponds where the fish leap, and frogs sing their merry songs of night. Here lightning bugs brighten the surface, court the light of reflected stars. Here the waters are clear and cool. The farmer stores milk here to keep it cold. Children play along its banks with happy laughter. By summer day they swim in its depths. Here by night lovers sit 'neath honey moon and whisper soft words of adoration.

And there are ponds of rougher nature where the fisherman plies his trade. Ponds where flowering plants hide snakes that glide upon the waters and feed on the creatures swimming below. Where turtles wait for unsuspecting geese or ducks and drag them to their death in waters deep. Here young men come to gig frogs, to seine for bait for tomorrow's fishing, to joke and carouse and wrestle man to

man.

There, too, are tarns hidden in dark recesses and grottoes. Tarns deep and still where legends grow and strange stories are whispered. Here in the eventide one sees the will of the wisp. At times the call of the loon breaks the evening air. Stories better left untold are found here. Of strange sights in the dark of night. Of spirits of those gone. Of evil incarnate, and hate incessant.

Such a one was the tarn that lay below. Tales were told of blood mingling with the murky waters. Tales of bands of evil note frequenting its shores. Tales of bodies weighted with stone, resting forever on the bottom.

The escarpment extended outward from the mountain, formed a lookout overlooking the dark waters. The escarpment, of solid rock, attracted those despondent, invited them to end their woes with a plunge into the waiting waters. Too many responded to that fatal invitation.

"Here is the land of my mother, Ceres. I am Persephone, her only daughter. And I have been away so long." She sobbed.

Ceres. He knew the name. Where had he heard it? Ah, his Mother. A nursemaid, long ago, and a weak and sickly child. Was this then the needed task, to protect her daughter from a ruthless enemy? How strange the fates! Every move seemed programmed, every action preplanned long ago. And the results? Were they too preprogrammed? Our lives it seems are in the stars, and we neither control nor understand our fate. There was now no question in his mind. This is the Tarn of Eternity! It is here all shall be resolved!

"Finally, now I am getting closer to home. I shall see her once more before she dies. The trip has been long. Soon it is over."

He felt the sadness in her words. And felt something else, something more foreboding.

A hint of a strange odor, a scent that he knew too well. The unseen companion was close, very close!

Even as she spoke a dark form emerged from the heavy bushes beside the path.

Unthinkingly he knew. This was the unseen companion!

Demo's mother slept fitfully throughout the night. Dreams, rather, nightmares, repeatedly aroused her. She saw, again and again, her son. And something else.

Something huge and grotesque, evil and deadly. Something with an unreasoning hatred for her son.

She arose before sunrise, sat on the edge of her bed in deep thought, spoke aloud to herself. "I could try to go to him. Sadly, I am old, weak. I would be but a further burden.

Rough sat at her feet, licked her hand. She reached down absently, patted his head. Her eyes widened.

"Rough, go to him. What I cannot do, you can. Protect him with your life. Quickly now! Find your master! Go!"

The dog whined as she opened the door, looked up at her. Then turning, with a low growl, Rough loped quickly toward the high mountains.

Whatever danger threatened Demo, he would share. Whatever enemy imperiled his master, he too would face.

She sighed, whispered, "Perhaps, perhaps . . ."

Misshapen head, twisted body, covered with hide plated with metallic scales, it stood tall above them.

But he is not the only one to recognize the creature.

Beside him Persephone starts, cries out. "No, let me be free of you!"

A gasping chortle issued from the swollen lips of the creature.
"Ah, princess, it is fit we meet here by the Tarn of Eternity.

Only its waters can still the fires of Hell. And even they cannot still my love for you."

The words, meant to express deep feelings, were grotesque when voiced in a broken, harsh whine by the monstrosity. And yet Demo noted, the eyes held a devotion that was real.

"Pluto, go back to your world. Leave me to live in peace with my mother. I will never return to Hades. Better a short life on earth than eternity in Hades."

"Persephone, I will never release you. My love for you is without an end. You will be mine forever."

This travesty on words of love, voiced by a creature totally devoid of humanity, brought tears to the eyes of the young maiden.

The final task! Destroy the unseen companion! Pluto! Brother of Zeus! More powerful than any save Zeus himself!

A tear came to Demo's eye. No mortal could accomplish this task! Yet, though he die in the struggle, he was committed. Athena, remember me, for I have loved you!

He was no longer tired. He drew strength from the imminent danger.

He took a deep breath, drew an arrow from its pouch, notched it to the string.

"You jest! What power is in your weapons?" once more Pluto speaks.

"I have followed you far, and your arrows have not found their mark. Do you not know, that nothing you can do will destroy me. I am immortal. I dwell in Hades, Master of that infernal region. Only the waters of the Tarn of Eternity can quench those flames."

He laughed, loud and harshly, without humor.

"Now stand up, tall and brave." he sneered, "I tire of this childish game, and you are about to die."

As Pluto lifted his huge fist Demo drew the bowstring. A threshing from the side of the pathway, distracted him.

He paused.

Before either he or Pluto could move another interfered.

From the brush a deep growl was heard, and in a moment Rough stood in the path of the threatening fiend. He crouched, eyes blazing.

And sprang!

Caught in mid air by a blow from the monstrous figure, Rough fell, rolled over, lay quiet. Demo released his arrow!

It struck, then fell blunted from Pluto's thick hide.

"I struck the animal only a light blow. I too had Cerberus, and of all creatures only he loved me. The dog shall live. But not you, earthling."

Pluto once more turned toward Demo, his deadly intention evident.

"No, Pluto, no more! I can stand no more of you, no more of your evil ways."

Persephone rushes by Demo, dodges by Pluto.

Frozen, Demo stands motionless. Still, there is one who acts. With a desperate lunge Pluto tries to stop the maiden.

Too late!

She flings herself from the edge of the cliff!

Down she falls, down, finally to plummet into the cold depths of the Tarn of Eternity.

Pluto turns, dives into those murky waters. Plummets downward to rescue her from their frigid embrace!

As the waves touch him he screams.

The waters roil and tear at him as though the tarn were a living creature, a beast of prey. Blood stains the roiled surface.

Demo rushes down the tortured pathway, his lungs and throat burning. A stone turns and he falls, slipping over the edge of the escarpment. The roiling waters of the Tarn of Eternity licks hungrily at the boulders below. They crash against the shore, waiting for their next prey.

Slowly, painfully, he regains the path, continues his precipitous journey. Finally arriving at the rock strewn shore, he throws himself down as the air rushes through his burning throat.

There is no sign of life on the Tarn. The water, never still, moves in chaotic pattern. Swirls and streams, whirlpools and rapids, never still.

Then it rises from the deepest, coldest depths. Pluto!

Pluto swims slowly, uncertainly, moving toward the shore where Demo now sits. Demo rises, defiant. A broken sword from some ancient war, lay on the ground, and he seizes it in desperation.

And then he remembers. The broken sword of the warrior! Unsullied by its mishap, the broken blade still shines. Holding the weapon in his hand he waits on the shore, watches the tumultuous waters of the tarn.

Even in his torture, Pluto swims in desperate search for Persephone. But the dark green waters hide their prey.

And then he sees her!

Quickly, thrashing his way to the drowning girl, Pluto dives beneath the murky depths. He lifts her from the water's deadly embrace. Cradled in Pluto's arms, her face white above the dark surface, she seems more dead than living. Thrashing the deadly waves Pluto brings her to the shore.

Demo raises the broken sword high, waiting!

Pluto stalks onto the shore carrying her like a doll, gently, in his huge arms. Turning to Demo, Pluto growls in the angry voice he could not renounce, "Save her." He lays her softly on the ground, lays her gently on the sandy beach.

Throwing aside the sword Demo falls to his knees beside the child.

Demo turns her on her stomach, ministers to her. And finally he is rewarded by the slightest movement, a sign of life. Soon she begins to cough, to breathe.

Pluto stands quietly, watching. What on another creature might have been a smile touches his lips. On his cheek a trickle of liquid. Water from the Tarn of Eternity?

"She lives." He utters, half question, half statement.

"Yes, she lives."

There was no question now. The tears were real.

For a moment Pluto turns away, then turns once more to look at her. "I grant you your life, earthling. Care for her. Help her, human. For this I spare your life. Quickly, now, for as I forecast, the Tarn of Eternity is quenching the fires of hell, and quenching the very life from me. Yet I pass on willingly, that she may live."

He pauses, looks out toward the center of the Tarn.

"These waters, as foretold, have destroyed me."

Though Demo had paid attention only to Persephone, he had still noted the horrible oozing of Pluto's blood from a thousand wounds.

"It is over. I go to my fate. Tell her this. With her departure, what hope in Hades dwelt no longer lingers. And tell her, that in my own way, I loved and love her still."

He turns.

With a dignity born of valor he wades into the dark waters, marches stolidly into the ravenous waters

that swirl and froth and tear at his body. Their waves lap ever higher until, silently, he disappears beneath the surface, into their clouded depths.

And, though he were a denizen of Hell, one could but think,
'True love deserves better.'

Quickly Demo turned to the maiden. In those few moment her breathing once more has ceased. Loosing her bodice he turns her over, lets the dank water seep from her lips.

Almost he gives up hope. And then she once more stirs, moans.

She moves, half sat, wide-eyed. Gently he holds her hand.

She looks wildly around.

"Where is he? Is he gone?"

He told her of Pluto's last words, of how Pluto died - evil, misshapen, cast out from the heavens. Of how he knowingly cast himself into the deadly waters of the Tarn of Eternity for her sake.

Hated by all. Destroyed, though, not by any of these, not by the power of his enemies. Destroyed by the one small touch of goodness left in him, the ability to love.

Bemused she looked at the now placid surface of the tarn.

Pensively she gazed at the quiet, dark waters. And though she is silent he noted the quiet tears upon her cheeks. Then she rose slowly, walked to the water's edge, and reached out to a green weed growing there.

"Mother, grant me beauty." She whispered the words.

And as she touched the plant a white flower bloomed, fell into her outstretched hand.

"As you have died for love, oh Pluto, I pity you. And though you will be remembered for the evil of your ways, and as master of the infernal regions, one consolation you shall have."

She tossed the flower with its large white petals out on the now still waters.

"When the water lilies bloom, you shall be remembered, not for your vices, but for your one saving grace.

"You will be remembered for this, that you gave up eternity to save the one you loved." She paused, a sob in her voice.

"Rest well, Oh Prince of Darkness."

A tear trickled down her cheek, and her voice was tremulous.

Even as she spoke the face of the pond rippled, and the white beauty of the water lilies spread. Quickly they carpeted the waters along the shore. Gently rocking with the ebb and flow of the ripples they spread their beauty ever farther.

She sat by the quiet waters, stared vacant-eyed toward its farther shore. Turning, she glanced at Demo.

"I remember, when I was a little girl, a poem. It was of a brave warrior, and the woman he loved."

She spoke the stanzas, not to him; softly to herself. Her voice, partially choked by emotion, blended with the soft wind and the rippling waves of the tarn.

"For love of maiden fair,

"He walks untrodden ways,

"And fights with dragons in the air,

"And evil ogres he slays.

"For love of maiden fair,
"He sailed on unknown seas,
"And dared the demon in his lair.
" 'Mongst haunted, ghostly trees.

"For love of maiden fair,
"He lay him down to die,
"And asked a token only there,
"A teardrop from her eye.

"For love of gallant youth,
"More than a tear she gave,
"She would not live with constant ruth -
"Slept by him in his grave."

"There will be no poem for him!"

As she spoke a break occurred in her voice, and a sadness.
Perhaps she had not loved Pluto, but surely she had pitied him.

"He was ugly, hated, feared. I, who knew him best, held him in awe. And yet, for all his faults, he was gentle. Though master of that dark domain, he wept for those within. Though he had power, he had not the power to set them free.

"He loved me. A strange love, perhaps. When I returned for that brief moment to my mother, he wept. And when I returned to him once more, his face was radiant.

"Did I love him?"

She was silent. Yet, tears flowed from her eyes.

"Love? What is Love?"

She walked restlessly by the tarn, breathed deeply.

"Mother, I would rest. Take me home." She sobbed.

Demo listened silently, head bowed. Though a tragedy had now ended, still there was tragedy. How strange indeed this life, where evil destroyed did not bring happiness. Where maiden rescued did not bring joy. Where task performed did not bring triumph.

He picked up the broken sword, gazed at it musingly. With a half smile he shook his head, tossed it aside.

Finally he turned to comfort her, but she was gone. Where she had stood a rose bush grew. Its single blossom, one deep red rose, hung low in sorrow. A vagrant wave gently kissed its soft petals.

With a sigh Demo turned to climb again the mountain. Above its peaks a lone white cloud drifted. Sun's rays lit the tree tops.

The final task was done.

"Rough, you've come back . . . , alone! Oh, and you're hurt."
She dropped to her knees beside the dog, felt of his legs, ribs.
"At least there aren't any bones broken."

She stood up, thinking.

"You wouldn't have deserted him if he were in danger. I'm sure of that. So he sent you home. I only wish I knew that he is safe. Well, come, boy, I have some food for you."

She patted the dog, took him inside. After feeding him she stood in the open door.

A tear formed in her eye, and she wiped it away.

"Athena, if you truly love him, protect him."

24. Finale

The flutter of wings broke the silence, and she was there beside him. Athena! She reached out her hand, and he held it. This time neither Zeus nor Pluto intervened. In moments they were flying upward, ever upward, to far off Olympus.

He glanced back to the tarn below. The water lilies had covered its surface. The waves lapped gently at the sandy shore, washed tenderly the wild rose.

A few red petals fell softly into the quiet waters, mingled with the white waterlilies floating there.

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