

The background image is a vertical rectangle showing a dramatic scene. The sky is filled with horizontal bands of color, ranging from deep purple and magenta at the top to bright yellow and orange near the horizon. The sea below is dark and turbulent, with white-capped waves. On the left side, a small, dark silhouette of a person is visible on a small boat or platform, reaching out towards the horizon. The overall mood is one of hope, struggle, or a call to action.

THE RESCUE CIRCLE

BY CANDY RAY

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By Candy Ray

This story was channelled by Candy Ray from the chaos muse Ino

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Chapter One

Ryan was obsessed with joining a rescue circle. He had been studying tirelessly and doing preparatory work and now he was fully qualified; they would have to accept him. The necromancy book before him on the desk had been helpful, but he was planning an extreme ritual of his own devising in which he would bury himself alive in an underground cave and make sure that he would either pass the test or die. He would come through the ordeal triumphant to become a psychopomp, a guide of the dead, while still alive on Earth.

The day arrived, and he was ready: clad in a diving suit for reaching the submerged cave which would likely be fully flooded in about five weeks' time, and with the rest of his gear in a carrying case that he could strap behind the shoulders of the diving suit.

He had perfected his own method for going into a trance, a combination of counting, breathing techniques and meditation on the void. Once he was deep into the trance he would leave his body in suspended animation on the floor of the cave, having set up psychic defences to prevent anyone interfering with it. He would travel to the realm of the dead and go straight to a group of psychopomps who could cross both the great divide between Earth and the astral plane, and the divide between the higher astral plane (Heaven) and the lower astral plane (Hell). He would show them that he could do the same and was qualified to join them. When they had accepted him, and he had been acting as a guide to the newly deceased for a short while, he would return to his body and wake up, and after that he would be a guide every night during his sleep. He had it all planned.

Ryan stood on the shore, looking thoughtfully at the dim water with its salty lines of thin foam. In his mind, he could see Marianne: her hazel eyes and aquiline cheeks, the way she picked nervously at the handle of handbags she carried. After this grand ritual, when he had been accepted into a rescue circle, next on the agenda would be to find Marianne. However great a traveller he might become in the world of the dead, there was no reason why he shouldn't have his chosen companion beside him in life.

He launched himself into the water. Jumping off felt like a turning point, his entry into a new phase of life. Through the visor he could see a blurred image of the roof of the cave beneath him.

The tunnels twisted like the labyrinth itself, so that it wasn't clear how the submerged cave could be dry inside during this part of late summer- yet it invariably was. He swam down diagonally and wriggled through the main tunnel, pushing himself along by the walls on either side. Then he was in the cave.

It looked like something out of a ‘Tomb Raider’ game, with a great shelf ledge jutting out from a stone wall. The walls rose up, pitted, and yet in between the pits they were all washed smooth by the water that flooded the cave with such regularity.

Ryan found a recessed area wide enough to lie down in, so that his head would be next to the great shelf and his feet pointing into the middle of the cave. He took off his diving gear, stacked it carefully to one side and tried out the position. Perfect! He might as well be sunbathing on his favourite beach in the coastal resort nearest to his hometown – the one nicknamed ‘The Blistering Walls’ because it was a suntrap with sides like a cliff.

A few moments ago, before he dived, he had been tense like steel rope wrapped round and round in a bale, ready for his ritual, yet now he felt suddenly in danger of falling asleep.

With an effort, he sat up and cast a defensive circle, pointing with the single black stick that was the only tool he had allowed himself. It had come from the sea, a piece of driftwood that he had honed by carving it with his penknife. He drew several designs around the circle and wrote various sacred names in the sand.

The rest would be done purely by the force of his mind, and now he lay down again and began the breathing techniques. After those would come recitations that he had carefully prepared, featuring the name of Anubis, and then meditation to take himself more and more deeply into trance.

He fidgeted slightly, something he usually no longer did, and a picture came into his mind of the cave flooding earlier than it was supposed to. Like an unpredictable inundation of the Nile, like the unexpected freeze which killed the explorer Robert Scott, the flood tide in his imagination rushed upon him intent on drowning him and thwarting his intentions.

He reminded himself of the plan. As soon as possible he would become awakened as a psychopomp, before the weather had time to change, and then from this vantage point he would view the environment in which his body lay and keep an eye on any changes that might occur. He would time the point of his waking in accordance with this information.

With a rush of determination, Ryan returned to the breathing exercises and then on to the rest of the prepared ritual. He felt the trance about to take hold of him.

Ibi was lying in the dust, with his legs blown off by a bomb. His homeland was Iraq, and the year was 2009. The unimaginable pain had been replaced now by numbness, and through his shock a fear began to penetrate of ending up like two of his relatives, unable to walk and being wheeled around in a cart.

The numbness began to spread higher up his body, accompanied by growing darkness. The nearest medical facility was a long way away. He was going to die.

“God is great,” said Ibi.

An angel approached, in the traditional form of a young, curly-haired boy with wings; he leaned down towards Ibi with a concerned expression and said, “take my hand. You’ll be all right.”

Over to one side Ibi could see more angels, and some of them were placing an arm around other stricken soldiers and helping them up. He frowned- those soldiers were from the opposing army that he had been fighting against.

Could these angels be imposters? “Leave them! They are enemies of God!” he cried. “God is great.”

The angel ignored his words and began gently pulling him to his feet. “I have your mother Halijah here. She is waiting for you, with your brother and grandmother.”

Ibi didn’t understand why the angel wasn’t supporting the cause, but all he would speak about was Ibi’s family. They were all like that in rescue circles: no politics, just compassion, and uniting the victims of the war with their loved ones. There were human beings in these circles as well as angels, some dead and some living, and at times even dogs would join them. The term ‘rescue circle’ is associated with Spiritualism, but is not confined to that religion.

Elsewhere, at another point in time and space, one of Odysseus’ soldiers Antreus was lying fallen on the battlefield. He was bleeding profusely from multiple injuries all over his body, mostly made by one determined warrior’s spear. He too could see darkness encroaching, and now enveloping him. “Is it worth losing my life over the immoral Queen Helen?” he asked himself. “I was going to be married and live on the slope by the vineyards with my wife. We would have had many children. Isn’t it better to build than to destroy?”

Although Antreus couldn’t move his head, his vision turned to see some figures approaching. The ancient Greek version of a rescue circle was a jolly affair: three or four garlanded junior gods who all looked only slightly more solemn than Dionysius, accompanied by some human beings carrying green branches.

One of the godlings leaned forward to take Antreus’ hand. “Come on, I’m taking you to the Elysian Fields.”

“But I’m only an ordinary soldier,” he murmured. “Commoners like me have to go to Hades. ‘Twittering sadly away from the sun’, as the wise men say.”

“Never mind that Hades nonsense- come on. Your grandparents are in a pleasant cottage awaiting your arrival.”

Antreus got up slowly, a flood of confused thoughts flying around in his mind. It sounded as if the afterlife was more pleasant than he had been led to believe. But he had still missed out on a fulfilling life on Earth, and the sorrow

at this prodded him sharply, making him want to have another try at a later date.....

.....which he had done, and now he was Ibi, once again robbed of his future. There may have been other more successful lifetimes in between those two, but he couldn't remember.

Chapter Two

Ryan wasn't floating; he was standing on firm ground. But could you call this ground? It was like a tube or a chute. It was lined in a grey substance, and for a moment he wondered if he had got into a pipe in some vast plumbing system. He soon saw that it could never be used to carry water or even gas because it wasn't fully solid; the sides were a whirling vortex with pulses of colour, of mysterious sound and even of unknown scents.

"Am I alone?" he asked silently. No-one was in view and yet he sensed presences in the tunnel. "Is Anubis here?" he asked aloud.

"You calling one of the bosses? He won't be coming yet; it isn't enough of a crisis, and won't become one either, if we do our job properly."

Ryan peered at the person who had materialized in front of him. He was a winged angel with golden curly hair and a long white robe, just like the angels in religious pictures.

So it had worked! He was in the realm of the dead.

Suddenly there was a flash near the roof of the tunnel, orange and purple, and the whole thing began to spin like a psychedelic kaleidoscope, throwing Ryan into the air and pulling him along with the current. Along the sides of the tunnel the images kept changing, especially towards the far end. It looked like the film '2001' which Ryan's mother had shown him on a DVD when he was twelve, growing up in Lincolnshire in England.

The whirling current had separated him from the angel, leaving him to ponder why it had such a conventional appearance and wishing that it or at least someone would help him as he flailed like a weak swimmer in a flood tide.

Eventually a scene stabilized at the end of the tunnel. As soon as Ryan looked at it the word 'pastoral' came into his mind. Surely that would mean something like a shepherd playing pan pipes? Yes, there was- as Ryan drew closer he could see that it was Pan himself playing pan pipes, lying with his back against a tree trunk in a meadow bordered by banks of flowers. Near him sat a girl with a face like a fairy, framed by brown hair in ringlets.

Ryan readied himself for a conversation with spirits. He had the protocols there ready in his mind, from his experiences in the Lodge. They had done it all at various times: mediumship, Solomonic evocations, necromantic rites. There was a subtle difference as he was at present in spirit form himself; however, he was sure the same principles would apply, and he had been all ready to test them out with the angel he had encountered initially, before the unpredictable currents had swept the two of them apart.

The girl half-turned and saw him, then continued to turn till she was looking him straight in the eye.

"Are you coming out of the time tunnel now?" she asked.

Ryan put out a foot eagerly, longing for solid ground, and then it suddenly occurred to him that this could be a trick and he would never see his own country and people again.

The girl watched him critically as he froze, as if waiting for an explanation for his immobility.

"I don't want to jump out yet- not experienced enough with these tunnels," he said slowly, although he was thinking that he was really under no obligation to explain to her at all.

Pan lowered his pipes and spoke in a rich, golden voice.

"Your inexperience is understandable- you are alive, I see, and mixing with the dead. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"If you don't mind, Lord Pan, I'll keep my reasons to myself." Ryan hoped he didn't sound rude, and also hoped it wasn't ridiculous, because Pan would know anyway.

"You'll find that you're here for a reason," Pan said, sounding a little solemn but winking at him at the same time. "I see you want to learn step by step, and that's fine. And you're right about staying in the tunnel. That's best: you don't want to step out of it onto Mount Olympus when what you're looking for is nitty gritty Earth problems to address."

The girl had been watching him intently all this time, and now she leaned towards him and said, "my name is Carmella. I'm a muse of poetry- there are more than nine of us, many of us for each of the arts. Remember me when you go back to your own time, for they will still be reading the poem."

Ryan's interest was caught, and although he was in the act of stepping back from the edge he asked, "which poem?"

"Homer's. He responded today for the first time. Now he will write."

"Iliad or Odyssey?"

Carmella shook her head. "No names- not for a long time yet. Step down and you can be part of it."

"I dare not be trapped here, Carmella. I have set myself a test, and if I fail it, I die."

Ryan turned then and began to run back along the shifting tunnel, trying to keep his footing.

Whirls of colour buffeted him: they were like gas clouds, purple, turquoise and fuchsia pink. He was almost walking upside down now and it felt as if his feet were crunching on candyfloss and going straight through it. He cried out, his voice flat and muffled. "Is anyone here?"

No reply.

"What is this tunnel? Who else can see it?"

Silence still, and then at last he could see the other end of the tunnel. He could make out a narrow, dusty street which ended at a mosque with a tall minaret. Men in middle eastern garments were hurrying along the street towards the mosque. Strange- it appeared to be Earth, unlike the other end, which was an

astral location, the mythological Mount Olympus. But then a giant figure rose in silhouette, his profile like the rocky crags. It was quickly evident that this was a demon. Ryan had evoked demons, both alone and with the others from his Lodge, so he was able to keep his nerve.

The demon spoke. "I have been called and I am here. I, Iblis! Where is he who called me?"

It was then that Ryan was struck with an inspiration. He suddenly knew what had happened, and he replied without thinking how he knew. "Not I, but the victim I have come to help. HE called you. I came to save him, but we have been separated."

The shadow threw back its head and laughed. "No wonder. His rage has made this tunnel, and you are simply lost in it. Can your sympathy make anything as impressive as this tunnel? And you have yet to find out his name or see his face."

"I'm a beginner," Ryan said simply. "My first mission. Have patience."

"Learn, then- and you will hate what you see." On the minaret, a voice began the call to prayer, and Iblis sank down and vanished.

Ryan stood up straight in the tunnel. He had become a being of purpose, his feet no longer snagged in the woolly substance that faded in and out and dissolved around the tubular walls. "You who I have come to help, let me find you!" he shouted.

His will felt invincible, and yet when he moved it was not in the direction of the troubled person at all. Instead he went to the upper corner of a room where six very ordinary looking men and women sat in a circle on cushioned chairs, their eyes closed in deep meditation. In the other upper corner, hovering by the ceiling, was a guide in full Native American dress, his face framed by long, brown feathers.

"Have you come to join the rescue circle?" he demanded.

Ryan tried to orient himself, but standing in mid-air was unfamiliar to him and he swayed from side to side. "I was trying to do the mission on my own," he said slowly. "But I haven't found the victim yet. I do need help, but I would prefer to know the people in the circle before I join it."

"You can't even find the tunnel again by yourself, can you?" The guide said it kindly, not critically, yet Ryan was still agitated. He felt he was losing control, and he suddenly thought of Marianne. What would she think if she could see him here? And he had put off his quest to find her until he had completed this, as if it was less important.

The guide was speaking again. "Wait here. You will go to the same place and the same troubled soul, but this time as our representative." It was a statement, an order even, already out of Ryan's hands.

He heard in his mind the guide's thought, "don't be hurt by this," but the guide didn't say it. Instead he gestured to each of the people sitting on the chairs and told Ryan their names: Bryan and Cathy, Natasha, Margaret, Eddie and

Justine. “They are Canadian. We are in Toronto. They meet once a week, and rescue circle is every alternate week; the other weeks are healing or clairvoyance. They are Spiritualists, from the biggest church here.”

“All these religions,” Ryan said. “Ancient Greek, Islam, Spiritualism. I expected it, but not the feelings. Each religion has its own feeling. So strong! It washes over me, and then there’s another one, and I can’t keep my mind clear.”

“Great Spirit behind all of them,” said the guide, and then he smiled.

Chapter Three

Ibi found himself standing in a broad square with fountains, in front of a crystal pyramid. The door was guarded on one side by a crocodile and on the other side by a jackal. He had run away from the angel- that angel was an apostate. But his present plan was not very pious; he had been forced to become an apostate himself. Well, the situation justified it.

Ignoring the two fierce animals he ran through the open gate into the pyramid, and found himself in a giant library where a small group of people were browsing and pulling books from the shelves. In the centre on a small, raised area stood the librarian in long golden robes and with the head of an ibis.

"I am Thoth," he announced. "Do you seek answers in my records? Come and take some of your books and read your previous lives."

"I am seeking answers, but not in books. I know what my lives have been. Struck down before I had the chance to live, twice! No sons to follow me. I demand justice, to be sent back to one of those lives or both, to live my natural span." He spun round towards the people who were browsing and raised his arm, now holding a rifle which had materialized in his hand. "I'm taking these people hostage. No one moves until my demand is met."

Thoth began to walk casually towards him. "I'll just remove you from here..."

"No, you won't." It was Iblis, no longer just a shadow but now a large muscular man. "He has complained to me of unfairness. I uphold his complaint."

Thoth glanced around. "I will call others for reinforcement."

"I will call others too. There will be a lot of fighting in your little library- do you want that?"

Thoth backed away slightly. "It is true I don't want any disturbances here. We constantly try to calm the human beings down, to end the wars. In times past it worked but it no longer does; the regions where I was revered are right in the most war-torn part of the Earth and they do not respond to my efforts. But you"- he looked at Ibi, "are not properly adjusted to your death. You need to see a psychopomp. Anubis is the one linked with me. Anubis!" he called loudly.

Ibi raised the gun. "No-one else is to come here. Just grant my request, or I'll shoot these people."

The small group who were browsing the akashic library had been standing immobile since this drama began. Now they looked first puzzled, and then angry.

Thoth shook his head. "You can't kill them. They are already dead, like everyone here."

"It will hurt, though. I have learned this- I learn fast."

“And remember, I am supporting him,” added Iblis with a threatening look.

Suddenly the angel appeared who had escorted Ibi right at the beginning. He still looked like an angel from an illustrated Bible, with wings and a long pearly-white robe, and even a hint of a halo. The browsers all stared at him.

He went straight up to Ibi and seized him by the arm. “YOU CAN’T RUN AWAY! I alone know where to take you.” In Ibi’s other hand the gun went off, blasting one of the walls near the top.

Pandemonium ensued. Many angels and many of Iblis’ djinn rushed in and began fighting one another. Ibi shouted incoherently, waving the gun around but not firing again. The group of browsers fled. From a basement room beneath the library a horde of scarab beetles ran up the stairs and began to throw forth something which resembled sheets of white netting, although it passed through everything it touched; this carried the calming force designed to tone down warlike behaviour, which Thoth had alluded to.

Outside on the steps stood Anubis, jackal-headed and dressed in tight-fitting black trousers and tunic. “I am asking this- do I go in?” he remarked in a slightly humorous tone to the crocodile and jackal guarding the door, who did not reply.

The djinn appeared to be winning the fight, which prompted some hasty gestures and recitations of sacred words from the angels, and then they started to win.

Seeing this, Iblis became a shadow again, giant and towering above the entire library building. He yelled in a voice so loud that everyone heard it above the clamour. “The time tunnel that Ibi’s rage created has one end in ancient Greece and the other in modern Iraq. It would have faded by now, but it stays! It stays till he gets satisfaction.”

The tunnel materialized in the air, semi-transparent against the library ceiling with its gold carvings, and into it Ibi jumped and disappeared. Then in a flash everyone except Thoth had left the hall of records, and apart from the scurrying beetles everything was still. Outside, Anubis began to walk away across the desert.

Chapter Four

Ibi ran. But his feet kept going straight through the floor as if it was made of marshmallow, and he was surrounded by confusing bright colours. As he ran he was thinking, “what did I do? I have never been violent before, only as a soldier in the course of duty. Life is sacred, even when one is in despair. Will God ever forgive me?”

He frowned. Who was this coming towards him? He was longing to see that angel again, to be told he was forgiven. But instead it was the godling wearing a garland of leaves who had rescued him when he died as Antreus, all those centuries ago. The memory came back strongly to him as the being drew near.

“Hail, Antreus! Do you want me to petition Zeus for you to have your life back? I can try, but it will probably be no. He rarely makes exceptions.”

Ibi put his head in his hands. “Please give me time. I do not know. It may be my life in Iraq that I want back. It is more recent.... I know it better....let me think.” The godling put his hand on Ibi’s back in a comforting manner, and kept it there as Ibi sat down on the shifting floor of the tunnel.

“I am so fed up with the war,” Ibi confided. “War all the time- all my life. And in the west, sin everywhere. The fear that it will come to us, and our society will become full of sin. I could go to Greece, to a lovely island, forget it all. But it was the same thing in Greece when I was there, always war. Sent away to the Trojan war, away from my mother and my brothers and sisters. No lovers. The kings and military chiefs had their lovers, and I had to fight because of their love quarrels, but with no wife and children of my own. So unjust!” He fell silent, feeling that he was about to weep.

“If you had your life back it could all happen again. Your fate would not be changed.” There was sympathy in the godling’s voice.

Ibi stood up unsteadily. “I will walk a while, towards the other direction where my home in Iraq is, and I will make my decision, if I want to go back there or back to Greece. Thank you for this.” He began to walk slowly, his feet once again sinking into the mushy flooring.

Elsewhere, the Native American guide was preparing Ryan to return to the time tunnel. It hadn’t been too long that he’d had to wait in the upper corner of the room, but time was different in this astrally projected state, and two or three days had gone by. The sitters had finished their circle and gone home, and over the days that followed Ryan had got to know the couple who lived in the house, Bryan and Cathy, quite well as they moved around and talked and carried out their daily tasks. They were retired, and often went out in the afternoons. One of their daughters Samantha was coming to visit soon, and she usually joined the circle when she could but hadn’t been there the last time, when Ryan had arrived.

He felt that he knew as much about the family as if he was a casual friend. They hadn't acknowledged that he was there, because they were careful to close down their psychic sensitivity when they weren't actually sitting in the circle. Because of the seriousness and intensity of the work they did they needed to take a break from it in between sessions, and immerse themselves in their mundane daily lives.

The guide returned one day just after noon. Cathy and Bryan had made lunch and talked about their plans to visit a large household store after they had eaten. Now they were reading newspapers for a while before clearing the plates away. Ryan wasn't exactly bored; it felt different from being in someone's house physically and observing them, but he was starting to find it a strain to keep his mind on his belief that this was an important learning experience.

The guide raised a hand briefly in greeting, and said, "now is the time when I send you out, to the same person as before in the same time tunnel. Let me tell you something of the inner struggle he is facing."

Quickly he recounted the story of Ibi and his two deaths in battle, both times while he was still a youth with the whole of his life before him. He explained about the time tunnel and Ibi's wish to choose which of the two lifetimes to go back to, even though it was in fact impossible for him to do that and wouldn't be permitted when it came to it. Ryan's task would be to reconcile him to entering the afterlife instead.

The final part of this lecture was the most striking. "Imagine you have a ball of wool to find your way out of a maze, except that it isn't solid like wool, it's invisible and made of light. That connects you with us, and you can come back at any time. Imagine it there in your pocket."

Ryan pictured the ball of wool made of light.

"I am known by this circle as Joe," the guide continued. "When you want to come back, take hold of the strand of wool and call my name, and you will return here to me." He moved smoothly across the mid-air space between them and gave Ryan a firm push. Everything spun round and round in a spiral, and then Ryan was back in Ibi's tunnel.

He was right at the Greek end, almost stepping off the edge, and just like before he pulled back. But the woods and mountains looked so beautiful; the air was fresh and full of the scents of flowers and the sound of chirping cicadas. After spending several days on the ceiling of a living room it truly looked like a paradise waiting to be explored, and after all this was Mount Olympus, a higher astral world and the home of the gods in the myths of ancient Greece.

Carmella was there again as well, in the glade beyond the tunnel, although Pan was not. This time she wore a flowing lemon-coloured dress, and had her hair in plaited braids. Her skin had a warmer tone as if she had been sunbathing.

"I think Antreus came back to his Greek life," she said. "If you really want to help him you will have to step down and look for him here." She seemed to know everything about Ryan's mission without being told, even though she was

only a muse which Ryan had always believed to be quite a junior sprite in the hierarchy of Greek gods.

“Are you sure he came out here, Carmella?” he asked. “I should go back along the tunnel first and check.”

“I’m not completely sure. We muses aren’t infallible. But it’s most likely- he preferred it to his other life. Step down from the tunnel. I can see the skein of wool in your pocket- just like in our ‘Labyrinth’ legend. Clever! As soon as you have found Antreus you can use it to return to the tunnel, and from there to your own time. I could be your companion while you’re here.”

Seeing the way she was looking at him, Ryan quickly explained, “I don’t love you, Carmella. There is a girl in my own time who I love, Marianne.”

She kept her expression neutral, although he could see it was an effort for her to do so. “Where is Marianne? Have you brought her with you?”

“She went away. Had some stuff to sort out.”

He remembered Marianne’s pinched expression during that argument, when she had accused him of despising her New Age group. “You think I’m fluffy. Not intelligent enough for you. I want to go travelling on my own for a bit.”

There was no reason why he should be faithful to her on this mission- it was a trance after all, a dream. But he didn’t feel sexually aroused during trances the way some of the others in the lodge did. If you don’t feel any desire for the denizens of the places you visit, there’s no point in pretending that you do. To him this experience felt more like a divinely appointed mission, and he had to be true to himself. As he was thinking this, without realizing what he was doing he stepped out of the tunnel and onto the springy grass.

“Sounds like you would be more interested in the poetry,” Carmella commented tartly. “You will be able to see me, and everything that happens, but not to touch. Perhaps then you’ll be sorry you turned me down.”

It had not occurred to Ryan that a junior entity like Carmella would be able to move him around, yet immediately he rose above the ground and began travelling at speed through the woods and flower-covered hills. He whizzed along as if he was on a miniature hovercraft, and he had no power to stop his momentum and come to rest in any of the lovely locations he passed.

At last he reached an enclosed glade, with a portal in the air that overlooked part of the Earth. The place it overlooked was a meadow by a river, just outside the walls of a town. There he landed, and found himself behind what felt like a sheet of glass. He could watch both the Olympian glade and the area of Earth that was visible through the portal, but was unable to move in any direction. All he could do was press his face against the glass; he could see but not touch, just as Carmella had said.

Ryan couldn’t tell the historical period just from looking at the town, but he assumed it must be in the time that Antreus lived. It looked like a typical Greek town with white stone houses, a market, and on the outskirts livestock and fields of crops.

In the meadow that was nearest to his glass window, and therefore in the foreground, a bearded man was sitting on the riverbank holding a scroll of thick paper.

He was reciting verses to himself in a muttered voice, over and over as though to impress them on his memory. Sometimes, tentatively, he unrolled the scroll a little on the grass at his feet and wrote a few lines with a quill pen, and Ryan now saw a bowl of ink standing a little way away.

A figure appeared in the distance; someone walking from the town in the direction of the writer. It was another man also bearded and wearing red and white calf-length robes. The writer looked up and watched him approaching.

“Hail, Homer!” he exclaimed.

He must have been speaking in ancient Greek, but Ryan picked up the thoughts and it was as though he was hearing them in English.

Homer’s friend sat down next to him on the grass. “You look pretty grim today, Homer. Why so brooding?”

Homer gazed at the scroll he held, his brows knotted. “I am composing a poem about war. The gods compel me to this subject, and my own heart also. Further, the King of Athens has promised to pay well for a piece on the Trojan war. I am exploring deeply to convey the emotions of all: the heroes and gods, tricksters and politicians, even the cowards and the women. Sometimes as I explore the state of mind of these latter two, I almost find myself lamenting those terrible trials of war that have faced men in every generation. At these times the war seems like a tragedy for each man’s family, and I fear to become a coward myself.”

His friend shook his head. “Don’t think like that. There is nothing wrong with empathy in a poet- in fact it is essential. A poet must enter into the minds and feelings of all.”

“It repels me though, for it is the opposite of my heroes’ ideals: Achilles and Hector and Odysseus. They love to fight and trick their enemies, and so to win.”

“Life cannot be built on destruction. The poetry of war today, and tomorrow you can recite the poetry of love. It all has its place.”

“You’re a philosopher, Doroclese- unlike me. I’m just the man who has to get inside the philosopher’s head, and paint a picture of his thoughts for the King and the rest of the audience. This tale of the war will be long and will take much time to finish. This is what the gods are inspiring me to compose, and even to write it down this time, instead of reciting the tales aloud as we usually do.”

With an exclamatory cry, Doroclese leaned over the paper that hung down from Homer’s scroll. “Show me! I haven’t seen writing before.”

Meanwhile in the twentieth century in Somalia, Bryan was saying the exact same words as Homer. “War is a tragedy for each of these families.”

The rescue circle was assembled on a Somalian plain in their astral bodies, helping people who had been killed in the fighting there to make the transition to the next world. Astral helpers always go to war zones to help the victims; sometimes it is individuals who go while they are asleep, and other times organized groups belonging to various religions who travel to the war zone in a trance state.

“All I know is, there will never be a shortage of incidents for us to be sent to,” Cathy responded drily.

They paused beside a woman whose limbs appeared to have been both cut short and twisted into a knot, and were also all wound in with swathes of material that had once been her clothes. Her chest was broken too, and red. Sometimes when younger helpers joined them, they didn’t register the gore: they looked straight past and saw only pictures coming from the higher part of their mind. The angels saw, but chose not to look directly at it. Two angels were with them tonight and they floated a little way away, waiting.

There had obviously once been a few buildings standing, made from poles and stretched hide, but they had all been flattened and around the outside was parched ground and desert sand. Cathy was aware of other people trapped under the fallen buildings, all either dead or dying. But their spirits hadn’t yet risen out of their bodies.

“It won’t be hard to find their families,” said Justine. “Most of them are probably in the spirit world already and it’s the ones on Earth who are in the minority.” Another place that had been war-torn for years.

“We need more helpers,” Cathy said. “Those under the buildings will be terrified to be left alone. Joe, where’s that new guy you mentioned, Ryan?”

“I can’t reach him,” answered Joe. “He’s off on a special case which he asked for to prove himself, although he was not a member of our circle nor of any other. I admitted him officially and sent him to finish the mission yesterday, but he hasn’t been in contact.”

“Don’t put pressure on Joe,” remarked one of the angels, coming over. “we’ll get some more helpers; they’re on the way now.”

Chapter Five

Marianne sat in the cramped booth listening to the psychic who was giving her a reading. Usually she went to one of her friends, but something had attracted her to this one as she was walking past. When you're on the road everyone is unfamiliar; everything's a chance.

The psychic was a middle-aged lady with a bright bandana tied around her head- a smoker, Marianne noted with disapproval, with burnt out cigarette stubs on a plate at the back.

"What would you like to know?" she asked, fixing Marianne with piercing green eyes.

No unprompted readings to be had here, then, and those were the kind that Marianne preferred. She thought about mumbling an apology and leaving, but she was in here now and it would only cost a few pounds.

"What is my boyfriend Ryan doing?" she asked.

The psychic half-closed her eyes and then began to speak dreamily. "I see a siege in the hall of records. No-one is allowed to leave."

"Are the police there?" Marianne asked anxiously, hoping the psychic was wrong.

"No. You don't understand. Not a hall of records on the Earth- THE hall of records in the next world. The place where all our karma is recorded."

"Is he dead?"

She was quiet for a few moments. "No. He's only there temporarily- probably a quest of some kind. But you can't reach him there, honeybun, not unless you go on a quest there too."

"Are you sure he can't leave?" Marianne was still hoping it was all nonsense, but she didn't like the feeling it was giving her.

"No-one may go. There is a troubled soul keeping them prisoner. You will have to pray to God and the angels of light. Is there anything else you want to ask?"

"No- thank you," said Marianne and she quickly took out her purse and paid for the reading, then made her escape.

She suddenly felt disorganized. It was eleven-thirty in the morning, and the only food she had in her backpack was a cereal bar. She had no fixed plans how to get to the next town on her itinerary. Now Ryan could be in trouble, unless this psychic was completely off the mark.

That night, in a cheap youth hostel by a main road junction, Marianne prayed that Ryan would be safe, and asked to visit in a dream the place where the hostages were being held.

Five minutes after falling asleep she found herself in the library room within the crystal pyramid, with its many bookshelves and the carpeted floor that

muffles all footsteps, and the tapestry wall-hangings. She looked all around her, but it was silent and empty. "Ryan?" her voice was a whisper. Had all of them been destroyed?

Thoth padded across towards her, unhurried. "Marianne."

She whirled.

"That psychic made a mistake. The siege only lasted a few minutes, and no-one was harmed. Ryan wasn't even in the room; only in a tunnel that touched it."

"Oh- Thoth." Recognizing him from some pathworking exercises her group had done, she inclined her head reverently. "Please tell me-where is Ryan now?" she asked timidly.

"You cannot follow him on this quest. You should go to Maat and study her ways- it is a good path for women."

Marianne contemplated this. She didn't like to say that she disagreed with separate paths for men and women. She tried to think of other implications of a path of Maat, and the only effect was to make her realize she was in a dream. "Will I remember this dream?" she asked, and looked wonderingly around the library, taking in the colours and figures on the tapestries and the texture of the wool. Then she moved- away from the library and into dreams of a parkland with water birds, forgetting that it was a dream.

In the meantime, Ryan was trying to listen to the philosophical debate between Homer and his friend, but it quickly became difficult to hear because of the noise Carmella and her party made as they took over the nearby grove of trees. The party consisted of many fauns, nymphs and muses and they seemed determined to convert the place into a temporary playground with wide flower-covered swings suspended from the trees, and bouncing shapes encrusted with jewels that reminded Ryan of beach balls. A small herd of horses came galloping around the corner, and they began jumping onto them, riding and shouting, as well as playing with the beach balls and on the swings.

After a bit, Carmella strode to the fore and smirked as two fauns threw a garland around her shoulders. "It's today, friends," she announced. "I will appear to Homer now. Wish me luck!"

They all cheered and waved as she passed through the portal and approached Homer's seat by the river.

A few minutes later Dorocles got up and took his leave, and began to walk in the direction of the town. When he was out of sight, Carmella placed herself directly in front of Homer, and Homer's transfixed face showed that he was seeing a vision.

"Hail, Homer!" She exclaimed. "I am the muse who has been telling you to write this time, instead of memorizing verses. First write out a draft of your epic poem, and then correct it, composing the perfected final version. That is what all poets will be doing in the future, and you have enough paper in the scroll. The King of Athens has been more than generous."

“Beautiful muse- you honour me,” Homer replied.

“Wait a moment- I will help you some more.” She rose into the air and flew rapidly away.

When she returned shortly afterwards she had a new and charming person with her- a little feminine sprite in a delicate lace shift like a nightgown, with pale blue eyes and long light brown hair. She resembled a human European woman.

“This is my serving-maid, Lyric.” Carmella waved her hand- disdainfully, Ryan thought. “She will write the first draft with you. In this world where all are mortal, your works will live forever, Homer- and Lyric’s works with them.”

“Won’t you be dictating some stanzas yourself?” he asked, leaning nearer to Carmella. He obviously fancied her more than the fragile-looking Lyric, who stood waiting placidly with her small fingers curled around her own quill pen.

Carmella looked straight at Ryan, triumphantly, as he leaned against the invisible glass barrier unable to move anything but his eyes. “Let it be as I have said- for now.” Again, she flew away.

Homer sighed, and with a look that implied getting down to business he took up the scroll of paper.

As Lyric and Homer worked, Ryan thought of the cave where he had left his physical body. If he remained trapped here for long enough the cave would flood; he would fail the test he had set himself, and drown. He couldn’t move his hand to touch Joe’s string in his pocket. Yet if it was made of light couldn’t he touch it with his mind? He reached out in thought towards the string, but nothing happened, and he was still trapped.

The next day it was cloudy over the patch of Earth that could be seen through the portal, with periodic rainstorms. Homer didn’t come down to the river to write; however, Ryan knew that he was writing indoors because Carmella made a remark about it to her companions. They continued to lounge about and play games in the grove adjacent to where he was standing. He tried to face towards them and tried to catch Carmella’s eye, but both proved impossible to do.

Time flowed differently here, just as it had done when he had been hovering above Cathy and Bryan’s living room, and it wasn’t oppressive to stand in one place all day the way it would have been on Earth. He could even have enjoyed watching the antics of Carmella and the other characters and learning more about them; first-hand experience was much more interesting than reading tales of Greek mythology. But it was spoilt by the worry about passing his test, and doing it within the time limit that he had set himself.

On the following afternoon Homer did return to the riverbank, where it was obviously his preference to sit while he was writing. He spread an old cloak on the damp grass and sat on it, and then placed his paper scroll on it so that the scroll would stay dry as well. He frowned with concentration as he loaded the pen with ink and then began carefully to form the letters.

Ryan discovered that by staring fixedly at the scroll he could zoom in on it and read at least some of what Homer was writing, and his mind received it in his own language in the same way that it had when people spoke. He began to do this frequently out of curiosity, and to avoid fretting while he was stuck in this immobile position.

So it was that he saw the story of the Iliad as it unfolded. Homer had been writing it in chronological order, just as he would have done if it had been an oral recitation instead of a written piece, and he had been nearing the end of the first book before Lyric had begun to help him. Now she appeared every so often to suggest ideas, and to help him write out some passages on smaller lengths of the scroll.

As an occultist, Ryan was more interested in the passages about how the Greek gods were worshipped in Homer's day than he was in the plot of the story, with its squabbles between gods and men over lands and captive women. He read carefully the parts describing sacrifices to the gods and tried to recall whether they matched the descriptions in modern versions of the Iliad, although it was a long time since he had last read it. This original version coming straight from the hands of Homer would contain the most authentic instructions, the best ones to follow should you want to reconstruct the sacrifices in the present day.

It occurred to him that those very gods were somewhere here in Olympus, where he was, and it should be possible to reach them and appeal to them for help. But many of them were savage and capricious, like the civilization which had revered them. Some enjoyed playing cruel games with mortals just as Carmella was doing, for she too was a member of their race. He couldn't keep switching pantheons: he had started this quest by calling on Egyptian gods, so shouldn't they be the ones to help?

Then he thought of the Christian God of his childhood. He had heard that when spiritual troubles ensue the best course of action is to forget magical techniques and make simple prayers to God. He decided to pray once each day, as well as trying other ways to escape.

As the days passed he continued to watch Homer and Lyric. Homer was polite to Lyric and thanked her when she handed him the papers she had worked on, but he was also a bit aloof towards her. He kept lifting his eyes up to the sky and calling out to Carmella, asking her to appear again. Once he took a torn scrap of paper and wrote an improvised ode on it, starting with: "Carmella, you are the muse who inspires me. I love you!"

After a few more lines, he tore it up, and Ryan felt some regret- if he had completed it and kept it, that too would have formed part of the ancient Greek classics.

Lyric glanced towards the ripped-up paper and said nothing, but she took a short break and returned later that day arm in arm with a boyfriend who looked human: a young boy carrying a shepherd's crook.

“Send him away until we’ve finished the writing,” was Homer’s comment. “I am still reciting aloud after writing, to hear the rhythm of the poetry, and I don’t want my ideas sold by some lad to another of the King’s bards.”

Lyric waved him away reluctantly, and kissed him goodbye. “I’ll see you later, when I’m not helping Homer.”

In this way the reams of paper grew from day to day and wrapped many times around Homer’s scroll, and the bloodthirsty adventures of Agamemnon, Achilles and Hector, the violent interference from the gods and the fruitless regrets and guilt of Helen of Troy flowed out from Homer’s pen.

Ryan was intrigued, but to see the work taking shape meant that an appreciable amount of time was passing, time that was Ryan’s enemy.

Meanwhile, the rescue circle was in session again, beyond the Earth on the astral plane. All seven of the members were present, including Bryan and Cathy the leaders and their daughter Samantha. The place where they were gathered was a nondescript waiting room with built-in seats around the outside like plastic-topped blanket boxes. It had tall windows with long curtains, in the same greyish- green colour as the seats. They preferred a meeting place like this, plain and functional and unlikely to attract any attention, for assembling prior to going out on their journeys. They called it ‘the holding room.’

Joe was briefing Samantha about Ibi.

“Why would you want to help HIM? If he held a bunch of strangers at gunpoint, he isn’t worth it.”

“Don’t judge without knowing his state of mind. If he was full of hate it would pull him down to Hell, but he’s still in the time tunnel. It isn’t impervious: he could fall out of it and down, but he hasn’t.”

“I don’t care. People like him I won’t help, on principle.”

Cathy recalled many conversations like this with Samantha at the dinner table or on the veranda. Obstinacy had been her trademark ever since childhood. But she had the gift, and Cathy had immediately known it and had always tried to persuade her to join the rescue circle. Finally, at nearly thirty Samantha had done so, by which time her mother was retired, the cliched Spiritualist old lady.

“Ibi was not one of our cases originally,” Joe explained. “But Ryan went to help him and has not returned, so we may have to become involved.”

“Aren’t there any angels with him?” asked Natasha, who was a confident woman around Samantha’s age.

“There are the two who came for him, when he died as Antreus and later when he died as Ibi, but he ran away from them which is perhaps not surprising, given his state of mind.”

“I’ve never seen a time tunnel,” said Bryan. “Is it usual for something like that to appear?”

“Occasionally,” replied Joe. “They wouldn’t last as a rule, but some demon has made this one more permanent.”

“We need extra help anyway then, don’t we?” queried Samantha. Everyone was looking very reluctant to make a move.

“I will check the position on that. Meanwhile, the rest of you go to Somalia again. We can’t afford to lose time when so many are suffering.”

In the tunnel, Ibi began to walk purposefully towards the Greek end. “I am going back to ancient Greece, and I will defect from the army. I’m not fighting against Troy, and I don’t care about the consequences.”

Chapter Six

Marianne was in a meditative trance, seeing visions in her mind. The darkness slid over her, and not merely darkness but a black flame pluming out in one direction after another, dynamic. It never stood still for a moment.

A white ostrich feather fluttered to the ground at her feet, and a voice spoke. “Behold the feather of truth. This is my feather. I weigh every heart after death, and although you live I see your heart and it is light and pure. Come, follow my ways.”

Marianne had encountered feathers on her New Age path, where a white feather fluttering in the air before her or lying on the road where she was walking was a sign of angelic presence. The angels came to help and guide, and sent a feather as a sign.

This different symbolic use of feathers in Egyptian religion was not unknown to her, for she had read about the feather weighed against the heart, but she had not paid any attention to it because it felt like something that would never affect her personally. Maat was not showing herself; there was only her voice and the temple room, dark like a crypt. Many paintings in Egyptian style lined the walls but it was too dim to see them clearly, unless she was to light the curved oil lamp which stood in one corner.

The lack of illumination made Marianne uneasy, and she pulled back from the place, back to the physical world which was more reassuring. She knew where she was with physical darkness: with dappled shade, or black areas under bushes, where the grass is cold despite the summer and woodlice run in semicircles in the dirt. Yet this black flame, this dim temple, filled her with foreboding.

At an internet café on her next stop, she first checked for an email from Ryan: no reply again, and his mobile phone was still switched off as it had been for two weeks.

Next, she looked up Maat. Her suspicions were confirmed when followers of the ‘Aeon of Maat’ came up on the same page as Aleister Crowley. But she didn’t want to have a closed mind: maybe she could integrate her shadow side in company with this Maat. At least she needed to find out more about her.

‘Psychopomp Gods’ proclaimed the banner title in one online reference book. ‘There are many gods and other entities from various traditions who act as psychopomps, guides to the dead. They include Anubis, Hermes, Bune and Hecate. Others like Maat are not psychopomps but are involved with the judgement of the dead...’

Marianne glanced over it, but the name ‘Maat’ was only mentioned once so she clicked away from it and carried on scrolling down. Hadn’t Ryan mentioned

psychopomps, just before she had left him to go travelling? She couldn't remember what he had said about it.

Research isn't generally easy to do on the road. She had to be thinking constantly about survival, and about appearing sharp in front of those who would rob a traveller or get them into trouble of some kind. It wouldn't do to look like a dreamy person who spent much of her time in higher realms than the Earth, but that was who she was the minute she was behind a door that would close, or even a dividing curtain separating her from other girl travellers. She still had enough savings left to spend most nights in youth hostels.

It was behind such a door that she finally met Maat.

Another check-in desk; she was thinking how they all looked the same as she leaned over and took hold of the biro on a string to sign her name in the book. Her rucksack was dumped on the floor beside her, and a cardigan was tied around her waist by the sleeves.

To one side of the desk stretched a corridor with anonymous doors, each with a black number above it in moulded plastic. "Yours is room 14," said the receptionist blandly, handing her a key.

A few minutes later she was inside the room. It was a little smaller and darker than she would have liked, with frayed brown rugs and a nylon cover over the duvet on the bed. On the bedside table stood a thick-bodied lamp and a brush with a wooden handle shaped like a swan.

Marianne took a few items out of her backpack and placed them in the wide wooden drawers and wardrobe, put her make-up bag containing some toiletries in the bathroom and then left the rest in the backpack and dumped it on the floor of the wardrobe. There was no point in unpacking everything when she would be gone the next day.

Where exactly was her final destination, after all? She would probably end up hitching around for another month or so and then turning round and going straight back home, without having resolved anything with Ryan and not even having done anything particularly spiritual during the trip. With that thought she took a couple of crystals and a small angel picture in a plastic sleeve from the front pocket of the backpack, and arranged them on the dressing table. Her group advised taking a miniature meditation altar with you wherever you go, and taking time to sit quietly before it.

A candle and incense would be useful as well. She had a stub of candle, but no incense and no lighter. She left the room to look for matches and managed to locate some on a shelf in the hostel's common room.

A little later Marianne was sitting cross-legged on one of the rugs before the makeshift altar, her eyes closed as she entered into meditation. Just as before she began to see visual images in her mind. But she wasn't sure that she liked these images: coffins all around and mummies, like in one of those absurd horror films. Yet it wasn't a tomb; it appeared to be out of doors under a starry night sky.

Suddenly there appeared a goddess, a vision of raven-haired beauty, holding in one hand an outspread black fan and in the other a royal sceptre topped with an ankh. She was elevated a few metres above the scene, standing in the night sky as though floating.

Marianne knew it was Maat, even before the figure looked full at her and beckoned with one arm. She was startled and almost opened her eyes, but then the vision was gone and replaced by a scene more like the ones she usually saw, a path winding through woodland. She followed the path, and encountered her usual symbols of nature and Celtic folklore.

Two days later found her researching again, this time on the internet in a public library. She began to read the teachings of Nema, of Maat Magick. She could see what Thoth had meant in her dream; there was something very feminine about this system, almost nun-like in its tone (although at the more advanced stages, there were sexual ceremonies.) However, she noted that it was a branch of Thelema, which she did not wish to follow.

“Why can’t I serve Maat the way the ancient Egyptians did?” Marianne pondered. “If she is a goddess of truth, that can be found everywhere, and her style of truth is best approached the way they did in ancient Egypt.”

But it wasn’t as simple as that because Maat didn’t have an actual priesthood; she was the embodiment of righteousness in society, order and harmony, what the Hindu sages would call ‘dharma’. She had no temples of her own, just shrines located in the corner of temples of the other gods, where her followers would come to leave offerings. To find a way of practising that religion today would be a challenge.

Marianne sighed and logged off the library computer. There must be a reason why Maat was calling to her. She didn’t have a black fan in the original sources; however, she did hold the sceptre and ankh, usually one in each hand. The fan made sense in terms of bird symbolism and the element of air. “Maybe it’s about this journey, and Maat is the one who will mend the rift between myself and Ryan.”

But how, and had there really been a rift to begin with? It had only been a small argument, and to an outside observer it would look as if she had over-reacted and had taken off for no real reason. Ryan might get fed up with waiting for her to come to her senses, and find someone new. That could be what he was doing now- why he didn’t answer her emails.

Abruptly Marianne got up from the library desk and checked in her backpack to make sure she still had her ticket for travelling to the next town. She wanted to keep moving, keep checking for omens along the way that would indicate where she was heading- emotionally.

After a few more research sessions in various public buildings, Marianne finally came across references to a sect of Kemetic reconstructionism who aimed to interpret the ancient Egyptian religion for modern times. They were based at an old farmhouse in southern Scotland, and it wasn’t far from where

she was because her trail had led her into the north of England. She decided that this would be the next stop on her journey; she would visit to see their ceremonies, stay for a little while if they would let her, and meditate on Maat. Guided by the insights she was sure of receiving, she would make her plans for the future.

Chapter Seven

It was February 2009, six months before Ryan's quest began.

Samantha sat at her desk at the bank, her mind wandering. For a while now she had been having doubts about her path in life. This large Canadian bank, where she had been working for ten years, didn't always give the customers the best deal on interest and insurance. But she wasn't allowed to tell the customers that. Wouldn't it be more ethical to do a job that was spiritual or psychic?

She felt as if her role in the rescue circle, and the healing and mediumship circles, was cut off from her working life by an impassable wooden wedge. It was like cutting herself in two.

It occurred to her that some people in psychic and spiritual occupations are charlatans, and her hand froze over the ledger sheet. Imagine if someone were to assume casually that she was a charlatan, and say so to others.

Her boss Mr Bain glanced towards her and raised an eyebrow. She shouldn't be thinking about this at work, she should be concentrating on the figures: one slip and something could go very wrong.

But as she resumed working the ideas continued to push into her mind. Without the security of the regular wage from here, wouldn't it be a temptation to fake some of the psychic material? Sometimes there are no answers, no connections, and even something more fixed than mediumship, like an astrological chart, may refuse to give up its secrets. It wouldn't always be one of her good days.

She tried to push these thoughts aside until later, but throughout the day they remained at the back of her mind. On the drive home she found herself thinking about that day at the swimming pool, when it had all begun.

She remembered the smell of chlorine, the lit-up cubicles so bright they were almost dazzling. Mixed with the sensory impressions was a psychic one of someone screaming again and again for help.

"Mum, there's someone in trouble in that cubicle opposite."

Cathy looked at her quickly. She was standing with her arms full of bags and jumpers, ready for them to leave the swimming baths.

"Are you sure, Sam? She won't want us barging in- she might be undressing."

"I'm REALLY sure, Mum."

Her eyes must have reflected the pain she felt, that other girl's pain, because Cathy looked at her once more and then dropped all the items she was carrying and moved quickly.

The girl was having a severe asthma attack. Some asthmatics gasp and cough loudly, but on this occasion, you couldn't hear anything. She was fifteen, two years older than Samantha at the time, and although cold water and chlorine

affected her sometimes she had been fine all through her swimming session, right up to that moment in the cubicle. She needed someone to find her immediately and get medical help.

Afterwards, Samantha was struck by how impressed her mother looked. “you’re becoming psychic and empathetic,” she had said. “As soon as you’re old enough, you should join our circle and use your gifts to help people.”

There had been several further incidents, but when she finally did become old enough to join the circle (which her mother seemed to judge by when she could legally vote and drive a car) Samantha hadn’t wanted to do it just yet. She was young; she wanted to live first. The members of the circle took part in a lot more activities at the church besides the rescue circle meeting, so that they ended up with commitments on most nights of the week.

When she finally did join, she was twenty-eight. The dates and parties and the holidays in Europe had slowed down and she found herself still single, having never been deeply enough in love with any of her boyfriends to move in with them. The house was her own, nearly all paid for, and there wasn’t much housework and cooking just for one.

As soon as she started joining in, she quickly became involved with the varied circles on different nights, and a lot that she had noticed over the years about the way her parents spoke to one another suddenly made sense. Bryan and Cathy took their role as leaders very seriously and put a large chunk of their life energy into the activities. On rescue circle night they were almost as much ministering angels as the real angels who always came with them, and on absent healing nights they were like dedicated doctors or nurses despite being at a distance from their patients. The clairvoyance nights counted as practice, when they tried out giving messages to one another, to improve their accuracy and technique when they would give them to the congregation in the church, at the twice weekly services.

Samantha hadn’t given messages at first. Those intuitive feelings she had about troubled people at unexpected moments were different from speaking to the same people’s departed relatives. She had to learn that gradually as a new skill, and Joe had been an immense help. When she started to see and hear Joe, he made it easier by bringing the spirits to her and letting her get the feel for picking up facts about their lives, and what their relative who was sitting in the congregation was concerned about.

Sometimes Samantha found it hard to tell what the spirit had looked like during their life, and most mediums described them to the sitter in the congregation, so she had to try. She found it helped to imagine it was Joe that she was learning to see all over again. He always had a kind and reassuring look on his face, which made her really want to see him, and that had proved useful.

When she had first started working at the bank, it had seemed like a fantastic job, and everyone was always saying how fortunate she was. Now in 2009 there was a lot of turmoil in the world’s financial markets, but Canada had fared well

and escaped most of it, making her job a good prospect for future security. But more and more it was conflicting with the ideals of the Spiritualists. It felt like a choice between the material and the spiritual, and yet wouldn't it also be choosing the material to become a paid reader?

All this procrastination was unbearable when she had always been so decisive. She made up her mind that the best thing to do would be to go to one of the psychic fairs that were sometimes held in the area, and observe some people who worked as professional psychics.

The following Saturday there was a fair at one of the community halls in Toronto, near the large St Lawrence Market, and Samantha went along. She wandered around and looked at the stalls critically; they were too slick and commercial.

She asked a middle-aged brassy blonde lady how much it would be to have her astrological chart done.

"Fifty dollars", replied the lady.

"How long would it take you to draw it?"

"Oh, I'll be using the computer app. It will print out in about five minutes."

"I'm thinking of doing them myself, and I say we should draw them out by hand. It's an art, not a science."

The lady stiffened in her chair. "You're entitled to your opinion, but you wouldn't get through many clients, and we have to pay for the stand at fairs like these."

Samantha carried on walking around, and now she looked at the mediums. She didn't like to stand too near, because when they had a client with them they withdrew to the back of the stall for more privacy. She imagined herself doing that. What would happen if your mind went completely blank- would you admit to it and halt the reading?

She sat down at a table in the café area and drank a slightly too milky coffee. An image came into her mind of her visits to Somalia with the rescue circle, where the people had nothing and were being killed, their homes destroyed.

She decided to give it a try just a couple of times a week: put out the word that she was a professional reader and see what it was like. Then if she wanted to do it full-time she could, or she could drop it and stay at the bank. The rescue circle worked hard at helping people, never asking or expecting any reward, but that was in the spirit world where no-one had to support themselves and their family. Samantha decided the only way to resolve the conflict would be to live it and experience what would happen.

Chapter Eight

Samantha's first client was an intense-looking young man with black-framed glasses named William. She wasn't confident about seeing people in her own home, at least not for the time being, and had hired a small room in the local community centre for the afternoon.

It was hard to create any real atmosphere in a public room; they were so functional looking, almost municipal like a government office. She had turned out the strip lights and put a lamp on one of the tables, standing on a table mat propped on a fancy scarf. She hoped the dim lighting wouldn't give the impression that she was doing something fraudulent and trying to hide it.

William didn't appear suspicious, just hesitant and a bit troubled. Samantha pretended to herself that this was a regular free reading during the church service, but she didn't tune in to the same spirit guides she used at those times. Instead she had a guide named Mary with her, who she had come across a couple of years ago while taking a one-day training workshop. One of the other people at the workshop had been a lady who right from the start intended to be a psychic reader as a business venture. She didn't know Mary that well, but knew she had helped that lady a lot.

"Just relax," Samantha said soothingly to William. "What would you like to ask me first?"

"What I actually want to know," William said, "Is..." he paused for a moment and then finished the sentence quickly. "what Ginny's thinking."

Samantha was about to say that whoever Ginny was her thoughts were private, but reminded herself that would sound like a refusal to do the reading.

"Why do you think Ginny won't tell you?" she asked gently. At the same time, mentally, she asked Mary if she could help with William's enquiry.

"I think Ginny's fed up with him, but doesn't want to tell him straight," said Mary. "I'm not supposed to talk to the living during mediumship, but if you like I can talk to Ginny's grandmother in spirit."

Samantha replied, again telepathically. "Just briefly- don't worry her. Especially as it isn't Ginny I've got here."

She switched her attention back to William, who was mumbling that when it's something very important, Ginny always closes down.

"Does Ginny have a grandmother who passed away?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Her grandmother loves her, and wouldn't want her to make any mistakes. Tell Ginny you know she isn't sure if she's doing the right thing when she accepts things as they are. Tell her you've got to talk about it together, and you won't judge her whatever she says."

"Yes but.... what's she thinking?" William asked.

Mary, who had gone away for a few minutes came back and said, “her Gran agrees with her, that it isn’t working between them. I need to fetch someone who William knew and loved, and bring them here. That’s the way we should be doing it.”

Samantha made up her mind she WOULD say it. “Thoughts are private. I can’t tell you Ginny’s thoughts, because they’re personal to her. Let’s talk about you.”

“But that’s the only thing I want to know,” objected William. “What Ginny’s thinking. I asked another psychic, but she wasn’t very good. You should be good because you’re in the Spiritualist Church, aren’t you?”

Samantha felt like she was in a corner. It shouldn’t make any difference that William was paying her, but of course it did make some difference. She told him that Ginny was not happy with him, she was likely to leave, and he would have to try hard to make her change her mind. William looked sad but relieved, and said he thought that was probably what she was thinking all the time, and why couldn’t she just have said so?

After he had gone, Samantha was left with the thought that she could easily have guessed the answer, and she hoped it didn’t look like she had guessed.

But as she carried on, it became easier, and she soon began to know what to expect with these kinds of readings. She learned to set some ground rules at the start, and to make it clear that she didn’t want to snoop into living people’s thoughts. It didn’t matter that the clients were mostly not Spiritualists, because they shared with them a desire to speak to a lost loved one who they missed.

The following Thursday, Samantha had just arrived for the usual Spiritualist meeting that took place that day: the absent healing ministry which was held in the church hall. She opened the flap of her shoulder bag and checked that she had her snack to eat at the end of the service. After the service they always had hot drinks and a chat, and would then decide whether to go on for longer into the evening.

When everyone was seated, Margaret began reading the opening prayer. She was a dumpy elderly lady with grey hair tied back off her face, and healing was her particular strength. She did contact healing by laying on of hands at the end of the church services, and also offered free healing by appointment in her small third-floor apartment.

The first prayer was to God, and then they called on healers on “the other side” to join with them. Samantha could sense them approaching, and then she concentrated on seeing them as well which was so important for fine tuning her mediumship. They nearly all looked like everyday people, although those who had been doctors in life liked to wear a white coat as a kind of official uniform. It boosted their confidence to show exactly what their function was in the circle.

Often some healing angels were there as well, employees of Archangel Raphael. They had a prayer to Raphael, but Margaret didn’t always say it because she was conscious of the different religious backgrounds of those

whose names were on the healing list. For some of them it would be too much of a Christian prayer, even though Raphael is also revered in Judaism and in the western occult tradition. Some say that he too is a psychopomp.

When the spirit healers were all gathered, Cathy began reading out the names on the absent healing list. Everyone in the circle did a mental visualization of sending healing energy to each person, but to the clairvoyant sight it wasn't as strong as the pulses of blue light which the assembled spirit healers were sending out. It made Samantha feel as though she was only their assistant; however, it was still a positive feeling, without jealousy. She always made sure of that.

They said the closing prayers, and then they moved to the back of the hall for their break, and Samantha ate some peanut butter sandwiches and an apple. All the others apart from herself and Natasha were retired and had time to cook at lunchtime, but Samantha was usually busy at that time and barely ever managed a whole lunch hour away from her desk. They decided not to go on into the evening which meant she could go home soon and cook a proper dinner, which was good because she was hungry tonight.

She went home and made herself a pasta Bolognese with salad, followed by French bread and fruit. But a couple of hours afterwards, most unusually for her, she began to feel sick. She wondered if it was a stomach bug, but it didn't feel like one- it was different somehow. She sucked some mints that were supposed to cure indigestion, then went to bed.

Chapter Nine

The trance meditation had just ended. Cathy poured out the coffee and passed a cup to each member of the rescue circle. They were seated in her living room which she had perhaps unconsciously decorated a little bit like the church hall, with a long table down the middle of the room, window blinds reaching down nearly to the bottom of the walls and wooden chairs with floral upholstered backs.

Many experts on trance work advise that it is best to ground yourself afterwards by eating and drinking, but even if that hadn't been the case Cathy would have wanted refreshments and a chat afterwards to make it into a social occasion. They always talked about down to earth matters; no-one was sufficiently fey-like to make comments about Joe and the world he inhabited once they had opened their eyes and returned to Earth. (Although there do exist ethereal souls who might have talked about Joe- such as Marianne.)

Cathy was looking a little preoccupied today; when she had finished with the coffee pot she sat twirling her teaspoon and staring off into the distance.

"I guess Samantha couldn't make it today," remarked Natasha.

"Well, she should have been here," said Cathy, "but she's been ill this week. She's got some kind of stomach cramps, and feelings of nausea after she eats. It's been coming on gradually over several weeks, and now it's quite bad."

"Poor Sam," said Margaret, "We'll have to do healing for her. Has she been to the doctor?"

"Yes, and he's given her some pills, but they haven't made any difference. He wants to do some tests, but she's not keen."

"She should have them," declared Margaret. "People should always do what the doctor says as well as having healing. I tell all my clients that." She tossed back her bunched grey hair and looked proud of her professionalism.

"It's been a terrible year for illness," Justine said. She was sitting at the next table with her husband Eddie, who didn't speak much but gave a lot of hands-on help to the victims while they were engaged in their rescue ministry.

"The swine flu's taken so many people right here in Canada," Justine continued. "I've had to help them with sudden transitions right on my doorstep, never mind in war zones overseas."

"I know, it's scary," said Cathy. "But Samantha's never ill. I'm going to phone her after we've finished tonight and see how she is. These kids don't know how it feels to be a mother, do they?"

"How are your other two?" asked Natasha, sipping her coffee. She was sitting forward right at the edge of her chair.

"They're fine, thank you. Young Bryan's working on boats for the summer, taking tourists on trips."

“Lovely- I’d like that job!” exclaimed Natasha. They talked for a while about Bryan junior’s job, and how he had got it.

When the others had gone home Cathy did phone Samantha, and was worried about how listless she sounded.

“Mum, it’s my fault,” Samantha said. “It’s since I’ve been charging money for readings. I’m being punished.”

“Don’t be stupid. We don’t believe in that. You might punish yourself if you feel guilty about it- but no-one else is going to punish you, and it’s nothing to feel guilty about anyway. It’s up to you what you do as a medium. Go and see the doctor again, and Margaret wants you to have healing as well.”

“I think I’d rather see my friend Evaline who does reiki. It’s more scientific, but don’t tell Margaret I said so.”

“Go on, then. Do anything you like. We’re not dogmatic in our church. I just want to hear that you’re feeling better, Sam.”

Samantha made an appointment to see Evaline the following Tuesday evening after work. She was still showing up at the bank every day; she didn’t want to take time off sick if she could avoid it. But lunch was difficult. Too much would give her a stomach cramp that was distracting, while too little left her hungry and lacking in energy. Then when she got home her evening meal would make her feel sicker still and it was hard to sleep. She couldn’t go on like this.

Tuesday morning, she got up early and made a couple of pieces of toast, just to get something in her stomach. Ten minutes later as she was washing up the breakfast things she almost retched. Strangely her psychic powers wouldn’t work when she tried to probe into the meaning of this and what could be wrong with her. They had always worked better for other people’s problems.

It seemed a long day as she tried to concentrate on what her boss and her colleagues were saying to her. Finally, it was time to visit Evaline.

Reiki treatments are given while the patient is lying down on a couch. The healer starts the flow of healing energy down into their hands and then places them just above the patient’s body, staying in each position for some minutes. Usually the healer feels warmth flowing down and the patient feels the warmth flowing into them, although it can turn cooler for a time if that is what’s needed.

Evaline’s therapy room was a little attic space on the corner of a row of shops, up three flights of winding stairs, and the couch took up most of the room. Evaline was wearing a loose white coat like a doctor’s, and had her hair tied in a ponytail.

“Hey, Samantha!” she said brightly. “Make yourself comfortable while I’m getting ready.”

Samantha sat down on a stool by the window, and at once she sensed the presence of a healing angel standing beside Evaline, all blue and lilac. “Don’t pay attention to me,” he said by telepathy. “Listen to Evaline-she is wise.”

Samantha obediently looked away from him, and out of the window. Right opposite the therapy room was a stone church, and from this height she could see right into a roof garden that was perched halfway down from the main tower. There were no flowers, just two stretches of moss-covered ground and a curved L-shaped block on each side to serve as a seat. It was a sheer drop: no railings, and Samantha thought how dangerous it would be for anyone to sit up there.

“You can go and lie on the couch now,” Evaline told her, so she did. “Close your eyes,” Evaline added.

As Samantha closed them, she saw the roof garden once more against her closed eyelids, and a man and woman hanging by the neck at the far-right corner, their bodies dangling and bumping against the church wall.

Her eyes snapped open.

“What’s wrong?” asked Evaline, clutching a towel and a bottle of hand gel against her chest.

“I just saw a horrible vision. That’s what’s been happening lately- nausea, stomach cramps, nasty images. It’s ever since I’ve been charging money for psychic readings. I’m being punished.”

Evaline shook her head, and started to rub her hands with the antiseptic gel. “You mustn’t think like that, Samantha. That’s probably got a lot to do with what’s wrong with you. I’m a professional; I charge for Reiki in this studio, but there are a few different things going on. One is my job- it’s just like doing any job. Then there’s the social side, meeting other healers and psychics, getting together swapping therapies and trying them out on each other. And then there’s the charitable side. You bump into someone who can’t afford to pay, and you just know it’s right- so long as your other customers don’t find out. Now, close your eyes again and relax.”

Tentatively she lay back on the couch and willed herself not to see the roof garden and the people hanging. To her relief she didn’t this time, but she heard the angel speak again.

“Let the doctor do those tests. There will be an answer, and in time an answer about the roof garden too.” Mentally she tried to lean towards him, but he was gone, leaving Evaline to carry on with the treatment.

Chapter Ten

Cecile awoke, and wondered if the hypodermic syringe that she could see on her bedside table was clean. She didn't want another infection; she'd had one last year, and it had been difficult to battle that while still making sure of getting her fixes. She didn't feel like getting up to go and get more supplies; maybe Jamie would get them today.

Jamie was already up, but he looked as if he had been in a car crash as he walked unsteadily around the house, red patches on his skin and his eyes and black hair both wild. Their apartment was in a slum area of Toronto, full of mean buildings with shuttered windows.

Cecile eased herself slowly from the bed and pulled her nightdress down over the damaged veins which were in her legs as well as her arms. She couldn't face any breakfast, and there wasn't much food in the house. It seemed a bother to wash as well, but she would have to wash a bit in case they went out.

Passing by the window on her way to the bathroom, she saw that lady cop on the street again. The cop knew their faces and which number they lived at, and she often stopped to look up at them on her round of the neighbouring streets. Cecile thought she was watching out for an excuse to send them somewhere: probably to rehab, not to jail, but she didn't want to go to either place.

The cop, Yvette, was hoping she could catch them buying drugs so she could get to the pusher, and it would only do the couple good to be caught. You could see how young they were despite their drawn faces, and it wouldn't be too late for a complete cure.

Sometimes it seemed to Cecile that they were living their whole life out of cardboard boxes. The place looked unfinished, as if it was a temporary home or somewhere they had just moved into. She always ended up throwing clothes into the nearest box instead of hanging them up in the wardrobe, which was built into the bedroom and all ready to be used. Living like this had come to seem normal, with piles of their possessions on the floor and the cooker and fridge always dirty and empty.

She could only imagine what her French-speaking parents would have to say if they saw it. They had always been respectable and hard-working, but because they were distant and hadn't shown Cecile much affection she had turned against them completely and refused to see them or even tell them where she was. She never spoke French, and left out the e acute sign from her name, feeling ashamed of her heritage. The French Canadians had always been a minority, considered by some to be restive and always agitating for rights, and she had long ago decided she didn't want to be associated with them. Of course, drug addicts were a minority despised much more, but she never followed the logic of that to its conclusion.

Jamie stumbled into the cramped living room, and went to the cluttered desk in one corner which was his personal den. He was always writing over there these days, and going out there in the middle of the night as well. Cecile didn't care what he was doing; she always felt too exhausted to take any interest. Usually Jamie's papers were lying face-down when he hadn't put them away in the drawer, and on the rare occasions when she had caught a glimpse of them they were covered in strange diagrams that she didn't understand.

"So, we're not going out?" she asked. She was torn between relief that she could lie down again and rest, and fear that they wouldn't get their drugs that day.

"Later," Jamie muttered. "Leave me alone now."

She sank back onto a frayed cushion on the floor, forgetting even to have a drink.

Samantha dreamed she was standing outside the church that was opposite Evaline's reiki studio, with the cobbled white stone walls. Before her stood a Roman centurion in full uniform, his dark hair oiled sleek around the earpieces of his helmet, his features chiselled and bronze.

He held out his hand. "I am Cornelius. I'm often here at this church."

She looked at him dubiously, convinced that the Romans didn't shake hands- unless of course he was doing it for her benefit. In the rescue circle, they were always cautious about encounters like these; she had been trained not to give too much away until she had more information about the stranger.

"I've been working with the church's rehab group," he continued. "we're trying to get more of the drug addicts into it. There is a link somewhere between some of the addicts and your parents' circle, and I would like to meet them to find out what is going on. Where do they meet?"

"Apply in the proper way- you should know what that is," said Samantha, as if repeating something from a rule book, and then she woke up.

She looked up a Roman centurion called Cornelius. There had been one in early Christianity: he had been instrumental in the new religion spreading from Jews to Gentiles. She would have to speak to her mother about it when she visited tomorrow.

But when she tried to get out of bed the next day, she could hardly move for the stabbing pains in her stomach. Luckily it was the weekend and there was no work. Later she vomited a couple of times, and she couldn't eat anything all day. She wondered if it was a bug this time, but it felt too similar to the symptoms she'd been getting for the past month. She'd been to the doctor for the tests, as everyone including that angel had advised, but the results hadn't come back yet- those kinds of things were always so slow. She would just have to miss the meeting again.

Marianne had to hitch the last fifty miles to the farmhouse, which entailed trusting an unknown van driver and getting a lot of dirt in her nails from scrambling over the tools that were loaded into the van. It was five in the evening as she made her way up the long drive carrying her heavy rucksack, and she hoped it wasn't an inconvenient time to show up.

She rang the bell, and was let in by a young lady wearing a smart black and white dress, and looking quite conventional. "Hallo, what can I do for you?" she asked in a mild Scottish accent.

"I've come to visit the Egyptian temple, if that's all right. I would like to see the rituals."

"We're fine with visitors, but at this hour you know you'll have to stay the night. There's no transport back."

"I can make a donation for my board," Marianne offered. "I've been travelling for a few months, staying in youth hostels."

"All right- so long as you keep the rules: no drugs or drink. What kind of rituals are you wanting to see?"

"I was hoping.... some rituals with Maat? I've read a bit about this temple online."

"Well, now," The girl said as she led the way along a stone-flagged corridor, "You know our biggest daily ritual is the one to Amun-Ra at sunrise. I hope you like getting up early. We have some later in the day that include goddesses, but there are so many Egyptian gods, all worshipped at different periods in the history of Egypt, that we encourage each person to choose their own small group of gods and goddesses for personal devotion. We can show you how to make miniature statues of the ones you like best, and how to bring them to life."

"I was thinking more of connecting to the gods and goddesses themselves, in the spirit world," said Marianne.

They were heading now into a large square temple room which was filled with many fully coloured statues, and before them stood trays of burning candles and incense, and nuts and fruit at the front of the trays. The room was dimly lit by heavily shaded light bulbs, and had small windows with blinds pulled down over them. Only two other people were in there, a man and woman adjusting items on one of the shrines at the far end. The girl inclined her head reverently towards the statues, but still carried on talking to Marianne.

"That's all right," she said, "But whose ways will you use to connect? Which dynasty? People who've only read the Bible think all the pharaohs were like Rameses the second, so they don't like pharaohs very much. But Egyptian history spans thousands of years, and there were some ages when it was seen as a tyrannical nation and others when it was held up as a model of virtue for other nations.

All these varying Egyptian civilizations had their own ways of worshipping the gods, different names for them and different stories about them. This temple

was founded by a scholar who was doing postgraduate Egyptian studies, and he chose the particular papyri and inscriptions that he liked, and took the rituals from those. There were hundreds of others he could have chosen, and some other Kemetic temples use completely different ones from ours.”

“I’m looking for simple rituals,” said Marianne, inspecting the nearest shrine which was to the goddess Nephthys.

“What could be simpler than these shrines, with little candles and pure offerings? You can make one for Maat, and as I said before, we’ll show you how to make the statue alive. If you live near enough, you can come and join us for the new moon ceremonies.”

These people’s approach to spirituality was not an exact fit with Marianne’s, but their temple would do as the goal of her journey, transforming it from a hasty and ill-advised running away into a pilgrimage. She assumed that this group, like the other modern Kemetic ones, must count as a Pagan religion. The whole spiritual landscape had become so odd with all these new Pagan religions: some featuring the Norse gods, others ancient Greek gods, others African or Celtic gods. It was one of the results of mass-communication: potentially quite egalitarian, but from the seeker’s point of view, often simply bewildering.

“I couldn’t make it to regular meetings from where I live,” she said.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It’s fine with us if you can only be here this once, and then take some ideas away. You must be hungry after your trip- you’re welcome to join us for dinner at half-past six. I’ll show you where you can sleep tonight as well. I’m Marnie- let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“Thank you. I’m Marianne.”

Everything at the temple had wooden beams and low ceilings: the guest bedrooms upstairs and the long refectory which had been converted from several rooms of the old farmhouse. There were eleven other people at dinner, all different ages and looking as if they were from different backgrounds as well. Marianne told them a little about herself and Ryan, her journey and experiences with Maat.

They all agreed that she was being called to a relationship of devotion with Maat, and through this she would receive guidance for the rest of her life, not just with her present problem. They encouraged her to find her own way of honouring Maat, guided by ancient texts without being restricted by them. Marianne talked with them until late in the evening about spiritual subjects, and when she retired to her room which was like a rustic loft she fell into a deep sleep in which she saw no visions or dreams and felt only a sense of peace.

She did want to join them in the temple the next morning when they went through their devotions for the beginning of the day, so she set the alarm on her mobile phone. The sun was rising a bit later now as it was the end of August, but it still rose reasonably early.

She duly got up while it was still dark and dressed in one of the shower rooms. Most of the others were already down for breakfast, except for a few who had got up even earlier to get the temple ready and dress the statues.

The members of the temple wore white robes over their clothes for group ceremonies, and they lent Marianne a robe. The ceremony was all about Ra in his sun boat starting the days' journey; most of it was in English, with a few passages in the ancient language, and they gave her a booklet with a pronunciation guide and translation. Marianne found it uplifting, and the statue of Amun-Ra in his golden robes seemed to smile at the participants and sweep them up to join him in the sky.

She would have to stay now for noonday and sunset and complete the cycle of the day. Marnie was happy to agree that she could spend another night with them.

The other two ceremonies did indeed include prayers to some goddesses: Isis, Nephthys and Hathor. The participants sat by their statues which had been adorned with clothes and jewellery; however, they didn't add the offerings to the trays at these times. They were brought in by individuals in between the services.

At the end came periods of silent meditation, and during these Marianne thought about Maat, and formally asked Maat to become her guide. That sounded more appropriate than Maat being an object of worship, which could easily become an outward observance only, when what Marianne wanted was contact teaching in the inner astral realm. She didn't see any visions during the meditation, and she still wasn't sure what she was going to do about Ryan. But it was a start.

When she returned home, which would probably be soon, she would make a shrine to Maat and include a statue with it- but without all that fiddling around to 'make it alive' by the rite of opening of the mouth. On the higher planes, goddesses are always alive, and she would seek her there.

Later that evening, sitting quietly with the others in the comfortable living room, she reflected how beautiful this border country was. Although she was about to leave the temple, the surrounding area would be well worth exploring for a couple more weeks. There were bound to be more youth hostels and cheap guest houses, and at this time of year it would feel like a holiday. She was satisfied that her trip had found its focus at last, and it was ending well.

Chapter Eleven

The dog wasn't quite black; it was dark tan, spaniel-sized, and it was joining in enthusiastically with the games the nymphs and godlings were playing. It jumped onto the swings and leaned back in them as they rose and fell, wagging its tail. It raced across the grass after one of the golden beach balls and flew up into the air to punt the ball with its nose, sending it through a hoop suspended on a pole which reminded Ryan of netball and basketball games. When the ball went through the hoop, three of the nymphs clapped their hands and shouted, "hurrah!"

Then Ryan heard words sounding urgently in his head. "They don't suspect me. Give no sign that you can see me." It seemed to be the dog that was speaking, although Ryan wasn't sure. He looked down towards Homer's meadow on the other side of the portal so as not to look at the dog. Homer wasn't there today; all he could see was grass waving in the breeze. In amongst the stalks he detected some new barley-like ones, and new thistles and flowers. Several weeks had gone by, and the vegetation was changing as Autumn approached. A couple of weeks longer and his body would drown in the cave back on Earth.

He had managed with a supreme effort to remain calm. He kept trying new variations of his daily plea to Carmella to let him go, which met with no response, and his daily prayer for help to the Christian God, also with no response, and his daily attempt to find a mental exercise that would reach the string of light in his pocket.

The dog came closer, dancing and playing excitedly and wagging its tail constantly. Ryan continued to look towards the meadow, but at the corner of his vision he noticed the dog bounding behind a low shelf of rock where it was hidden from the revellers. Then it began to change. The ears, nose and body all morphed into the familiar shape seen in Egyptian statuettes, of Anubis in his jackal form.

Anubis now headed straight towards Ryan, and when he reached the force field that was so much like a pane of glass he slipped through it like a sheet of paper sliding into a plastic sleeve. Now he was inside it, flattened against the glass, and he seized Ryan's arm in his jaws and pulled.

The voice in Ryan's head came again. "Quickly, while Carmella's occupied. Come with me."

Ryan still felt paralyzed, and all he could do was consent mentally to leaving. Then he felt himself slipping out through the glass in the same way that Anubis had come in, as if he was a letter being posted.

He was standing on the lush grass of Olympus for the first time since he had seen it through the end of the time tunnel. It was just as soft as it had been that

day, when that entire realm had appeared so inviting, except that now Ryan wished he had never seen it.

With the tension suddenly released, he trembled violently and almost sobbed. “Why did no-one answer? Why, Anubis? I cried out so many times.”

The jackal shook his head, in the admonishing way a human sage would. “You asked for a hard test. That was the first part of it- keeping calm while trapped for a long time. The astral realm has many prisons in which people trap themselves, as you should know from nightmares and tales of haunted houses. To be a psychopomp means to keep calm in face of that. And your invocation while you were in the cave was to me, so you should have realized that when the test was over, I would come. It’s all right to call out to others, but this is not their affair so why should they answer? This concerns you and me.”

Ryan knelt down on the grass. “Thank you, Anubis! Thank you for saving me from Carmella’s trap. Take me to Ibi now and I will finish the task.”

“No need,” responded the jackal. “I have done it myself. Don’t look so put out- Iblis was involved, remember? So this was work for me, not you. The test wasn’t to help Ibi: as I have just told you, it was to stay sane while you were trapped, and you have passed it. There will be one more test, which Joe will give to you when you return to his circle. But first, as you are interested in Ibi’s case, I will tell you the story of what happened. Time will not flow while I am telling this tale, and you will still get back to Joe as soon as you touch the string of light.”

This was the story told by Anubis:

“At the same time that you were hastening to the tunnel in search of Ibi, I began to move towards it myself. I wanted to get there before you to avoid some ugly scene with Iblis, who would easily win against you. When I reached it Ibi was journeying with purpose towards the Greek end, determined to step out and try to return to his lifetime as Antreus.

I took the form of a travelling man in middle eastern robes, one from the same kind of background as Ibi himself, and began to walk beside him. He looked at me, questioning in his mind whether he could trust me.

“Ibi!” I said. “I know where you are going. You must have already seen both ends of this time tunnel. Have you considered why it is that the Iraq end is on Earth, while the Greek end is above the Earth on Mount Olympus?”

Ibi frowned. “No,” he replied.

“It is because of your destiny. If you rise from the dead against the wishes of God, you will become a violent and terrible man in Iraq. Many people will suffer and die because of you. The way to that is open, but the way to your Greek life as Antreus is barred. That’s why the Greek end of the tunnel comes out on Mount Olympus, which is a part of Heaven, and if you leave it from that end you will continue to be dead. All you will do is travel back in time, temporarily, to an earlier identity.”

Ibi kicked the tunnel floor slightly, even though that caused his foot to sink into it. "How do you know this?" he asked. "How do you know I won't fly down from Olympus to be Antreus again, to marry and live by the vines with my wife and sons?"

"Because I am one of those gods, like the gods of Olympus," I explained. "Don't be deceived by my appearance; I am in disguise. To prove it I will fly with you now into Olympus, straight from this tunnel, and you can converse with the gods and goddesses and hear from them that they have no intention of letting you go back to Earth."

Ibi turned his head and looked me up and down with great intensity. What a scrutiny that was! I in turn looked at him and took in his beard, the maturity in his young face due to his experiences in the military, and his soft lip hinting at emotions barely held beneath the surface. The newly dead always assume an appearance very like their physical selves, although later they may change it to something younger or wilder, like an ideal of themselves that they have always cherished.

I could also read his thoughts and he was not completely disposed to believe me, but having already since his demise met angels and djinn and been in Thoth's library, his mind was more open than it would have been before.

He held out one hand a little stiffly, making the sleeve slide back on the garment with which his mind had clothed him. "Pleased to meet a god. Hail, as the Greeks would say. Show me now Olympus, and I will endeavour to be Antreus again, with reverence for that place and its gods."

Then I took his hand, and at once we were flying out of the tunnel, and then we were on Olympus. I paid no attention to the junior denizens of the place such as Carmella and her friends, playing childish games and baiting human beings like you, putting them into lobster pots. Instead I went straight to those comparable to me in stature, Zeus and his entourage.

As I entered the palace, Ibi was overwhelmed; he lowered his head and walked, as he would call it, like a donkey being led by a halter. Myself I assumed my more usual form of a jackal-headed man. The walls and floor and ceiling were all made of beaten gold with intricate designs in it, some of them as delicate as fine lace. There were hanging jewels and white statues, those being of animals and natural features, because gods don't make statues of themselves.

I heard Hera whisper to me, a private whisper heard by no-one else. "A visitor from another system! Stay with us a while; we have daily parties here."

Zeus and Athena looked up from something they were doing with plant pots full of waving ferns. "Who are our guests?" asked Athena.

"I have brought Antreus," I said. "He died in the Trojan wars, and wants to know from yourselves that he cannot be resurrected to continue his life."

"We are in the time period a little bit after those wars now," said Zeus. "The story is just now being written- The Iliad. You are from the future and will be

the ones reading it. Antreus- go back to your own time and read the Iliad. Read all about my fame and power!”

Ibi spoke in a tiny voice. “Hail, Father Zeus. So, when we die, we travel in time?”

Zeus smoothed his beard, which was like Ibi’s. “Not always,” he said. “You are special- you have made a time tunnel. Make the most of it. Jackal of Egypt here will take you on a tour of Olympus, so you can experience for yourself the glory you heard about when you were Antreus the young child.”

Ibi looked as if there was something he wanted to say, but was afraid to.

“You are very honoured to see Olympus,” said Hera, walking towards us from the far end of the stately room. “What is wrong? Out with it.”

“You gods and goddesses are.... very sexy,” Ibi muttered. “As Antreus, I had no love life, only fighting. The chiefs of the military divisions had their mistresses, taken in plunder against their will, but the common soldiers- nothing, and I was supposed to sacrifice myself for them. As Ibi it was the same again, no love life- and there they even demanded celibacy from serving soldiers.

I want to come back to life as Antreus and marry, and live on the green slopes with my family. It isn’t much to ask, surely.”

“Ah, I understand!” exclaimed Athena. “Some element lacks in a place. In the desert, it’s water. At the north pole, it’s heat. Several lifetimes as a warrior or a monk are unbalanced, for the love that is a blessing from Aphrodite is lacking. You can only put it right on Earth, so go back a third time. Go back and live a romantic life full of love.”

Ibi was getting too angry now to be afraid, and he looked up defiantly. “A third time? Am I a rubber ball? Bounce back and back to look for what I should already have?”

“We can’t let you be Antreus again. It will have to be a third bounce, I’m afraid,” said Zeus. “Jackal of Egypt, your guest is a little disagreeable. Finish your job of straightening him out please, and then go back to your Osiris and such, in your Nile land. Goodbye.” He strode away, and the palace dissolved around us.

Ibi was sullen, but I continued to offer him the tour of Olympus he had been promised, and at last he started to pay attention as we glided through these beautiful groves, the higher plane of the Elysian fields: the very fields that you are standing on now, Ryan, that you wish you had never jumped onto. We visited the Fates and the Furies, centaurs and satyrs, the maenads and Pan with all his nymphs. We conversed with sirens in the ocean and sylphs flying in the air.

I sympathised with Ibi, every bit as much as Iblis sympathised. The history of Earth has been filled with sexual frustration: servants in aristocratic houses forced to remain single, soldiers and sailors sent away leaving wives and sweethearts behind, to return many years later, or never. Ibi spoke for them all.

Meanwhile, another sector of the population reproduces to create the next generation, like the studs on some vast farm. I understood all this, and yet my task was to reconcile him to accept his death peacefully.

At last I had finished showing Ibi all the sights of Olympus and all those who dwelt there, and I told him it was time now to make our way to the River Styx.

Ibi threw back his head with an angry pride. "I am not crossing that river with you. I still believe my cause is just, and surely it will be lost once I step onto that ferry."

"There won't be any ferry," I replied, "nor a ferryman to pay. We will be looking down on the Styx flowing at the bottom of the Abyss, as it appears to human beings sometimes when they meditate. Observe this valley of the afterlife and learn about our realm- you do not need to cross."

Reluctantly Ibi followed me as we made a sharp turn away from the flowery meadows of Olympus and turned down a bleak pathway running alongside a canal with many locks, the wheels at the gates creaking as they turned. It was a very long walk past all these locks, and the atmosphere grew dimmer and more oppressive as we travelled.

The final canal ran by a narrow pathway which you could only access by turning one of the wheels, and as I turned it the wheel morphed into a Buddhist Wheel of Dhamma. Sometimes I've known it to become a wheel of fortune, although not that day. The gate slid back with a shudder and grinding noise, and Ibi and myself walked through in single file with me in front.

A sensation like a cool wind flowed over us, as though we were on a windy cliff top. Then it became a real cliff with sides of rugged sandstone, and we glimpsed the ravine known as the Abyss, endlessly deep and yet at the same time there is a place where you reach the bottom, with the dark River Styx threading through it. The magnetic pull is hypnotic, drawing you in as if to make you tumble down and continue falling forever, never to reach the base.... and yet there is the base with the Styx in it, clearly visible.

Ibi drew back, as everyone does who sees it, and clutched at my arm for support.

"Remember, you do not have to cross," I said. "we will follow the Styx upstream and observe the way it forks, so you may learn about the land of the dead before entering it."

I fixed my attention on the river as it snaked across the base of the pit, and then miraculously we were walking along its bank without having had to jump into the Abyss. Here, as I had indicated to Ibi, it divided into two branches of which the upper one flowed up to Heaven through beautiful woodland glades, taking on an appearance of scintillating blue, while the lower one ambled though Hell, becoming progressively more sluggish and black.

We began to pass human beings: many of them crowded on the banks of the lower Hell section of the river, while the Heaven part above appeared deserted.

“This crowded place is the wide and easy path to destruction, which Christianity has made famous,” I explained.

“The Koran says that Allah will guide you to the straight path of righteousness,” Ibi responded. “I see this Greek river of death, yet in this moment I have forgotten my Greek life and remember the Koran instead. But no-one is on the blessed highway- they are all down here in the gloom.”

“We do not perceive the dwellers in Heaven,” I answered. “It is a picture, which we see like this for a reason not yet revealed.”

Ibi looked down at the ground and said sadly, “I know the reason. I have not yet been judged. If I am guilty of a sin it was understandable, through loneliness, and the trauma when the bomb blasted me.”

I cried out, “remember who I am: Anubis, a god of ancient Egypt. We had a wholly different kind of judgement there- I would have to weigh your heart in the scales. Do you want to see the Egyptian Hall of Judgement? I can take you there. Every religion has a different story of what happens to you when you reach the afterlife. You can choose which of these stories to be subject to- or none of them at all. It is merely a matter of which culture you belong to. They are all illusions to carry you through your transition.”

“Then show me what is real. I wanted the second chance at my Greek life to be real, but the gods have decreed otherwise. They said no. This pit where the River Styx flows has annulled everything else. What is left?”

“I shall take you to my Hall of Judgement, but not to weigh your heart. I want you to meet someone there.” With this comment, I swept Ibi up and took him through the gates represented by the Abyss and the river, beyond into the land of the dead. The time tunnel crumbled behind us and dispersed into dust. I did not care to experience Iblis’ reaction to his defeat, and fixed my attention elsewhere.

We entered the Hall of Maat. That too represents the gateway so theoretically we had already gone past it, but this unusual situation called for an adaptation.

Maat was seated on a marble throne looking radiantly beautiful, with the white ostrich feather in her hair. Around the walls of the room were paintings in the Egyptian style, and they depicted standing human figures and hieroglyphic writing. Maat reached forward and clasped Ibi’s hand warmly. “I am only the first noble lady here,” she said. “You will meet many others: first your own hard-working mother, and other heroines of family life. Then possible girlfriends and sweethearts, and also friends, both men and women. You won’t be lonely here.”

Ibi hung his head. “Thank you- if only I’d known. I don’t deserve this.”

“Yes, you do. Everyone goes to their family, and their family belongs to a community- just like on Earth.”

“I am eager to see my family,” Ibi said.

So he passed to that Summerland realm, the one your Spiritualist friends work with, Ryan. As the story ends, go now to them. It is time for you to take hold of the string of light in your pocket, and return to Joe's rescue circle."

Chapter Twelve

Ryan bowed his head and made the Hindu namaskar gesture with his hands. There didn't seem to be a western one that quite expressed the sentiment. "Thank you, Anubis, for all your blessings," he said, and then putting his hand in his pocket he seized hold of the string.

He could feel it lightly against his hand like the tickle of a cobweb. Mentally he called out to Joe, and the landscape of Olympus rippled and faded as he rushed back through time and space. He didn't go via the tunnel, for it had ceased to exist.

Cathy's living room materialized around Ryan. Judging by the light it was early evening, and there was no one in the room except Joe.

He was half expecting that Joe would scold him for becoming trapped and unable to complete the mission. But all Joe said was, "I'm pleased to see you back. What happened?"

He explained as fully as possible without going on for hours, and Joe kept his expression impassive so that Ryan couldn't tell his reaction. At the end Ryan said, "would you give me my second test now, please? Anubis told me it was you who would give it to me."

Unexpectedly, Joe looked at him a little coldly. "I have no second test for you, Ryan. My suggestion is that you go and join a few students I know who are in training to be fully-fledged members of a rescue circle. Spend the time that remains to you here with them, and learn what you can."

Ryan had the sensation of pausing to take a breath, although of course the astral body does not breathe as such. He wanted to remain polite to Joe, and yet he felt he hadn't received a satisfactory answer from him.

At last he said, "Show me where these students are, but I am still anxious about the mission I undertook in which I vowed to be successful or die."

"The first thing you will learn with the students is that there is no need for grand gestures like that. It may not feel like pride, but that's what it is. One of them will go with you to the place where you left your body sleeping, to check when you need to return so you will be safe."

Ryan still wasn't happy, but he let Joe take his hand and lead him away from Cathy's house.

In the meantime, Samantha was on the way there. She was feeling much better, and happy. The medical tests had revealed that she had developed gluten intolerance, which had come on suddenly as allergies sometimes do. All she had to do was keep eating gluten-free food and her symptoms would fade more and more over time, and she realized it had nothing whatsoever to do with being punished for the private readings she had done.

She could see now how her guilt feelings had distorted the situation, and that Evaline's approach to it was right. Now she was going to become a full-time professional reader, earning her living by doing what she loved and felt was important. It would be a new life for her, mixing with different types of people in different surroundings, and she had a good feeling that it would be fulfilling. She might even find love.

Cathy was so relieved, and thrilled that Samantha could make it to the house this evening for the recue circle. They could have a good long chat after the meeting and dinner together too, although the meal would have to be adapted to some degree for Samantha's new diet.

Marianne was staying at a cottage guest house on the Scottish border. As she fell asleep, she saw winged Isis passing above her head and flying into the void. Behind her stood Maat holding out the scales of judgement. "I have judged Ryan a victor, but the battle is not yet won, and he will not win it without your help. If you come over to me, I will take you to him."

Marianne hesitated, wafted by a mist gathering around her shoulders which looked like ground fog. "Are you sure he wants to see me?"

"He has been thinking all the time about going after you till he finds you. But first he wants to complete the mission. Does that bother you?"

"He didn't even tell me he had a mission." Marianne brushed against rocks spread over with purple topped thistles, rough like tissue paper. Maat floated higher up, in a navy-blue sky.

The mist around Marianne began to drift and she drifted with it, turning away from Maat and towards a wispy path that opened up and led towards tangled bushes. Somewhere a part of her higher mind realized that the dream surroundings were reflecting her emotional state, but she was passive and didn't try to stop it.

Above her she heard the goddess' voice. "I will remain here to test you. One of you cannot succeed without the other- you must be a beacon for him to rely on, or else all fortresses will crack along with your union."

Marianne was still awake enough to think, and she thought of the early days with Ryan. They had been so passionate, having sex all the time and constantly giving one another little gifts. It felt unreal, outside the normal mundane time that she was used to living in, and yet a taste of how time could be for the rest of her life if they stayed together and kept working at it.

They were never going to be affected by that dimming of the flame that so many other couples experienced. Except that it did start to dim, imperceptibly at first but then increasing, with small disagreements about their interpretation of spirituality. That shouldn't have come between them: not when it had brought them together in the first place.

Once again, even within her dream, she felt the need rising to get away and straighten herself out. But her journey hadn't been about doing that after all. It had been half-hearted sight-seeing, youth hostel bedrooms, and then the farmhouse and choosing a new goddess to worship, not a great deal different from others that she had worshipped before.

As Marianne fell more deeply into sleep she ceased thinking and purely visual images began to take over. She couldn't in fact see a great deal in the thickening fog, and as she tried to focus on something her mind became drowsily dazed, and Maat's voice faded and slipped away.

Back at the beach on Earth, the tide gathered momentum as it began gradually to roll towards the cave where Ryan had left his entranced physical body. What he had risked when he began his project had come to pass after all, and the cave was going to flood earlier than usual this year.

Chapter Thirteen

The building where Joe had left Ryan looked just like a university, with lecture halls, libraries and study rooms all joined onto one another. He walked into the maze of corridors and soon found a communal lounge where the young apprentices were gathered.

They were sitting on armchairs, leaning back against the cushions, and a few of them were even sipping drinks which must have been one of the comforting simulations available on the astral plane. As for their clothes, if those were simulating anything it was a casual weekend. There were about twelve of them; some were women, and some were black or Asian, and others were like himself.

All eyes turned towards Ryan as he entered the room. No different from facing all those gods, except that with human beings there was more potential for competitiveness, with its attendant winning or losing.

"Hello," he said. "I've been sent here by a guide named Joe, to learn a bit about being a psychopomp- before I have to go back to Earth. I'm Ryan."

"Come and join us," replied one of the men. "We've all got that problem of getting some lessons in before waking up and going back to Earth. That's why they give talks all the time in the lecture halls. We're just on a break, but we're about to start again soon."

Ryan hesitated, remembering Joe's words about the cave. "Joe said that before I do anything else I should ask one of you to come back with me to the cave where I left my body, to make sure it's all right."

"You sleep in a cave?" asked the same man, sounding surprised.

"No, I'm not asleep in the usual way, for the night. I set myself a test- left my body in a trance, in a dangerous cave that is going to flood." Now that he was describing it to the others he had to admit it did sound foolish, an escapade based on pride.

"So, when is it flooding?"

"I don't know. Should be in about a weeks' time, but it could be earlier, if I'm unlucky."

There were gasps, and one of the women exclaimed, "wow!"

Another of the men raised his hand. "I'll go with you, but can we do it after the next lecture? I really need to hear this one."

"That's all right," Ryan said at once. "After the lecture will be fine."

The tutor, when he came in and mounted the stage in the classroom, was dressed casually the same as everyone else. He had an accent, and appeared to be Spanish. Ryan wondered for a moment whether everyone here was speaking English, or if it was his mind translating the thoughts, as it had been when he was listening to what Homer said. This school could be anywhere in the world, or they might still be in Canada: he wasn't experienced enough to tell.

The talk was about protective symbols, such as the cross and the pentagram, and protective ceremonies from various religions around the world. It was illustrated by a dizzying display of diagrams which popped up all around the walls and in mid-air. The tutor advised them to practice taking over any protective symbol that the victim might be using, and helping it to be effective. If the victim wasn't using any of them, the best plan would be to choose the most appropriate one according to cultural background, and introduce it as quickly as possible.

It was very interesting, but Ryan wasn't used to following such quick changes as the diagrams constantly appeared and disappeared. His mind wandered to the idea of pursuing these studies with his Lodge back on Earth, if they could find some appropriate texts. Maybe the two highest ranking members, Don and Chris, could even give a few lessons themselves, at a slower pace more suited to waking life. He would have to ask them.

It was still during the same night that had begun with seeing Isis and Maat when Marianne, lost in multiple dreams, suddenly snapped into alertness. Something was fanning her, pushing bitingly cold air against her face- a white feather or a black fan, for she could see both. Words echoed in her mind. "A second chance- just this time. Next time you'll have to be more disciplined, like Ryan." Ripples of the echo repeated "Ryan, Ryan, Ryan....."

She jumped up, ready for anything.

Chapter Fourteen

When the cops were first alerted about Jamie and Cecile climbing onto the church roof, they began to search for data about the couple. It was lucky that Yvette knew who they were, and had even run some background checks. She told her colleagues they were heroin addicts, living alone with no contact from friends or family, and gave them their address.

Several officers went round to the apartment, forced the door and made a search. In Jamie's desk drawer, they found a notebook full of diagrams and writings about black magic, in a spiky black script done with a fibre tip pen. There were demon seals, and prayers and exhortations to demons. The cop who found it felt a chill as he came to a page headed 'Suicide Pact'.

"I have decided to kill myself, as a sacrifice. I must do it soon. Cecile comes too- it's a suicide pact. May she be cursed forever if she doesn't come with me. We've done everything together: the heroin, the stealing, standing up to the pushers. Now we die together."

The rescue circle was in session. They went through their opening prayers and then projected their astral bodies first into the physical room and then to the holding room on the astral plane. As Samantha projected into Cathy's lounge she saw Cornelius at the window, waving at her urgently. "Thank God I found you. We need all of you at my church-now!" With a jolt Samantha remembered her dream; after being so ill it had gone out of her head completely. She looked around for the others, but they had already gone to the holding room.

"I'll tell them, Cornelius," she said, and sped as fast as she could to the holding room where Joe was starting to brief them about where to go tonight.

"Joe, I've had a message from the Roman, Cornelius, that we need to go to a church he's connected with, straight away. It's the one opposite Evaline's studio."

Joe gave a half-smile. "I think we can accommodate Cornelius. I know him a little and he gets attached to churches, immerses himself in what they're doing however menial the task. Come on, then- we'll go there first."

Samantha recognized the church building as it came into view, and then she gasped as she remembered her vision that day when she had gone to have treatment with Evaline. A man and a woman were standing in the roof garden right by the corner with its dizzying drop to the ground below. They held ropes in their hands, of which one end had been tied to protruding brass struts on the wall.

As she tuned into the physical surroundings more fully she realized there was a large, noisy crowd gathered in the street below, including a few with megaphones who were trying to talk the couple down.

Someone shouted, “make up your minds- either do it or get down!” and the negotiators glared in their direction while another called out, “shut up, you bastard- you’ll make them jump!”

The man, Jamie, wore dirty trousers and jumper and his hair stuck out wildly. “Go away, all of you,” he yelled, his face contorted. “This is private. We’re killing ourselves, me and Cecile. I’ve OD’d her; she’ll be okay.” He placed the rope around his neck and stepped towards the edge. Several people in the crowd screamed.

Cecile was looking straight down at the floor of the roof garden. “Me too,” she muttered, her voice very hoarse. “I must go too.” Slowly she raised the rope towards her own neck, but without looking up.

“It’s the heroin,” Joe informed the others as they hovered in mid-air, all in a bunch near Evaline’s window. “That’s why her voice is like that.”

“Hey, honey,” Samantha tried to catch her eye. “Can you hear me?”

Cecile didn’t respond to astral forms any more than she did to people of flesh and blood. She slipped the rope over her head, still looking at the ground, and again the crowd screamed and cried out. The lead negotiator put the megaphone to his lips and began begging both of them to take the ropes off their necks and come down.

“Leave us alone,” Jamie hissed, and pulling the knot tight he jumped off the corner of the ledge so that he shot downwards, the rope broke his neck and he swung and bumped against the side of the stone wall. The crowd erupted in horror.

“Oh, no,” whispered Cathy.

Cecile still didn’t look up, but she began to gasp and choke and rasped, “me too! I go too! Moi aussi!”

Speaking French meant she was right out of it- she had pretended for years not to know any. Yvette put a megaphone to her mouth and tried frantically to get her attention. “Cecile, come down. Don’t do it! Your life’s too valuable! Oh, God- there she goes.”

Cecile pulled the rope tight round her neck, and jumped off at the corner in the same way Jamie had done.

Samantha concentrated on tuning out the noises from the crowd, so that when the two-young people died and came out from their bodies she would be ready to help them.

When they did come out they appeared distorted, stunned, as if all their higher bodies had been hit with a mallet and squashed to the side. This would make it even harder to get their attention than it was just before they jumped.

“They’re damaged and sick, and they’re just kids,” Margaret lamented. “My dears, can you hear me at all?”

Suddenly a man materialized in the roof garden wearing a black hooded cloak. There was an aura of darkness around him, almost like thick smoke. They all realized he was an evil magician, and moved closer together to support one another. Jamie opened his eyes and looked up, and smiled. He almost seemed to recognize the man, but not quite.

Joe materialized a cross above the roof garden; he was using the same technique that Ryan was learning about in the lecture hall. Jamie and Cecile were nominally Christian, but they paid no attention to the cross, and the magician glared at Joe. "Are you interfering with this boy's free will decision to come to Hell with me? He's an adult, he knows his own mind. I'll be coming back for the girl as well." He began to lead Jamie away.

Joe turned around angrily and looked behind them towards the two angels who were approaching, the same two who always accompanied them on their visits to Somalia. "Help us!" Joe exclaimed. "Do you know who that man is?"

"Yes," replied one of the angels. "He's from Ryan's Lodge."

At once Joe raised his hand with the shining thread in it, and pulled on it to call Ryan. He sent out the thought, "emergency. Come and help us, Ryan."

Ryan heard it at once and jumped to his feet. He seized hold of the thread of light from his pocket, but this time it didn't transport him anywhere. Joe pulling it like a bell must be a different way of using it, and Ryan realized that he still didn't know any other way to shift his location quickly. It wasn't as simple as doing it in a dream.

"Hey! Sorry to interrupt, but my guide just called me and said it's an emergency. Please could someone show me how to go to him?"

There was a bit of headshaking, some good-natured remarks about how new and green he was, and then two or three of the apprentices grabbed him and cheerfully pushed him through a couple of manoeuvres. It was still nearly ten minutes before he managed to join Joe and the others.

By the time he reached the rescue circle there was only one newly dead spirit standing in the roof garden, and it was Cecile. Quickly he took in the situation: the two bodies hanging from ropes, the crowd gathered below in the street and the cops, who were currently making everyone move back to give them room.

"Where's the man?" asked Ryan.

"Some demonic guy came and took him away to Hell, just before you arrived," replied Bryan. "It happens. We've talked it over and it's all right; he wanted to go there. He would be distressed to be taken anywhere else. The girl, Cecile, is different; she's all befuddled. Drugs, it seems. She doesn't know where she wants to go. I'm for taking her to her family, and Joe agrees."

"Yes," said Joe. "This one is for you, Ryan- you try and reach her."

Ryan moved through the air towards the corner of the roof garden. But before he could reach it, the magician materialized again. With a shock, Ryan recognized his friend and colleague Don.

"Watch it- that guy from before is back," Bryan warned.

In Ryan's lodge, everyone was encouraged to choose just how satanic they wanted to be, and there was no judgement. In Marianne's group you couldn't choose; you had to be a light worker, and that was one of the things he had disagreed with her about. He still believed in giving people a choice, but Don had taken it a bit far. He looked like a maniac. Ryan was embarrassed to be seen by Don, and hung back behind one of the jutting balustrades of the church. Joe saw Ryan's discomfort and didn't press him to approach; instead he glided nearer to Cecile himself.

Don reached out and gripped Cecile's shoulders hard, making her shudder, yet still she gazed at the ground. "She has to come with me. There's a curse in place. If she doesn't go with Jamie she is cursed."

"No!" Joe countered, in a tone of authority. "Jamie's diary doesn't say she has to go with him to Hell. It only says she is cursed if she doesn't kill herself along with him. She's done that, so now she is free."

Ryan was amazed that Joe should know the contents of Jamie's diary. That certainly was a wonder, for only the cops had seen it.

Cecile began to sob, still without raising her head. Don snarled like a wild animal, embarrassing Ryan even more after all the rituals and social activities they had taken part in together. Then he faded away and vanished.

Joe looked at Ryan. "Your turn now- go on."

Slowly Ryan approached Cecile, as if circling a trapped kitten. She looked up for a moment, but didn't appear to see him. He called her name several times, touched her gently on the arm, but still she didn't respond. She had withdrawn deeply into her own mind. The others in the rescue circle stood still and silent, watching.

After trying fruitlessly for a while to communicate, Ryan thought of probing her mind. It sounded like science fiction, but on the astral plane it should be possible. He concentrated on believing that he could unite his mind with Cecile's, and that he was doing so.

For a few moments nothing happened, and then he received an impression of hopelessness that hit him like the jolt of a fatal accident. Cecile's parents hadn't loved her. They were never actually cruel, but they had neglected her, making her ashamed of her origins and determined to numb out the memory of her childhood. That was why she had spent her life getting as far away as possible from everyone she knew as a child.

The sensation caused pain to Ryan's mind, but he persevered through it and sought for a sliver of happy human contact somewhere amongst her memories. At last, buried in an obscure corner of her consciousness, was the memory of her grandfather holding her and swinging her through the air whenever she had visited him with her parents. She must have been around five or six at the time. "Cécyl, petite Cécyl!" he would cry.

Ryan locked his arms around her and lifted her softly from the roof garden. He began to swing her and to repeat, "Cécyl, petite Cécyl!" again and again. At

last she responded, flinging her arms around him. “Grand-père! Take me home! Take me home.”

“Couldn’t we fetch her real grandfather?” Natasha whispered.

“No chance,” Joe whispered back. “He’s still alive, still on Earth. She’s only twenty-five. But it’s better he isn’t here; he’s Catholic, and suicide and drugs are both mortal sins to him. He would want her to go to Hell.”

Ryan was hugging Cecile, stroking her hair. “Little one, we’ll take you home. We’re going there now.” He looked up to see one of the two angels reaching out for her hand, and he stepped back to let the angel take her.

“Well done, Ryan,” said Cathy. Joe smiled, and it was then that Ryan realized that had been his second test.

The rescue circle was withdrawing from the scene, and he started to follow them. But suddenly his heart jumped as he spied a figure in the air racing towards the roof garden, and recognized it as Marianne.

“Ryan! The cave is going to flood early. Go back now! You’ve got about twenty minutes.”

“Marianne... I’ve missed you. How do you know about the cave?”

“Maat told me. Now! You have to go back now!”

Ryan was disoriented, remembering that he hadn’t fully mastered swift changes of location, and without the apprentices he could never have got quickly from the study hall to this roof garden.

He began to tell Marianne that he wasn’t sure if he could whizz back to the cave that fast. But before he had finished, Marianne was calling on Maat. He felt the presence of the ancient Egyptian goddess, her aura of wisdom, and he felt himself moving smoothly as if from one dream into another, with the details of both dreams only a blur before his eyes and the rushing of wind in his ears. Then he was standing on the shore by the cave.

The water certainly looked furious, lashing and boiling in its rage as the flood tide moved nearer. In the distance, he heard Marianne call. “I’m coming home! I’ll start back tomorrow.”

Ryan descended into the cave. His entranced body was lying partly over the backpack, against the shelf of rock. Suddenly it occurred to him that after four weeks, his muscles could have seized up. He might have to learn to walk all over again. But of course, he had used advanced yogic pranayama for going into trance, and it should be adequate to use the same one for coming out of trance. The pranayama would fire his muscles back to life. But he could have done without the pressure of having to do it so quickly.

It all took iron control: the aligning, the breathing, the prayer of thanks to Anubis and Maat, and finally sitting up, getting to his feet and putting on his diving gear before exiting the cave.

As he started to walk back to his house he heard the water crashing in and filling the cave to the top. He knew that he was now a psychopomp, and Marianne was coming home.

About Candy Ray

Candy Ray comes from London, UK. She is passionate about the occult and religion and has a university degree in Religious Studies. For many years she worked in office administration, and on retiring she discovered internet forums and Chaos Magic, and adopted a new identity as a fiction writer. She lives in the south of England with her small family.

Other Books by Candy Ray

All available as free eBooks.

Novellas

[‘The Wizard From Vahan’](#) (Fantasy/Science Fiction)

Jasper is an apprentice magician in a society of the future where chaos magick has become the dominant religion. He does a time-jump which is supposed to be a meditation, but it goes wrong, and he finds himself in a parallel world about to embark on a mission as a heroic knight: a mission that he does not want, as he is more of a mystic than a warrior. He encounters Emin, an advanced magician who offers to help by swapping places with him, leaving Jasper in his Retreat up in space. The story explores the role of magicians in society, and the contrast between a great adept and a junior magician.

Copying A Master (channelled from Ino)

Maurice, an idealistic painter, is pulled into an art fraud against his will. It is the 1950’s, the time when Austin Spare was alive, and the premise of this book is that artists had already been painting magical sigils for millennia. So Maurice seeks a solution to his problem through a sigil spell. Meanwhile the crisis of the fraud uproots him, wrecks his domestic life and drags him across three European countries as he flees the revenge he fears.

Short Story Collections

Chaos Dreams Part 1

These short stories were channelled by Candy Ray from a non-human chaos muse called Ino. Each one creates a vivid and enchanting world, sometimes in the past. Some of the stories have a narrative style that roves around observing. The tales are a showcase for Ino’s unique views about human beings; her observation of people is very sharp, yet with a motherly quality.

Chaos Dreams part 2 Astral Tales

The common theme in this collection of Candy Ray’s short stories is the astral plane, which is both the realm of the dead and the plane of dreams. In each story the action focuses on a different aspect of this plane: mediumship, lucid dreams, life after death, visionary alchemical experience and esoteric magick. Dive deep into these other worlds and you will find that they intersect with your own.

Chaos dreams Part 3: Fruition

This is a compilation of three chaos magic stories. The first one 'Eoss and Bidskimmer' was part of an ambitious servitor project, which was carried out by chaos magicians in an online group. It is about a servitor and an egregore who make life much better for a group of young people.

The second one 'Arcana' is a hypersigil, a chaos magic spell, and it is the story of a lady chaos magician and game designer, her cute servitor, tarot cards, an angel and a demon.

The third one 'Beads Falling, Falling Into A Design' was channelled from Ino, and the main character is based partly on herself. This story is narrated by a spirit from the mineral kingdom who finds herself within a bead in a ladies' necklace, and through this becomes closely involved with a human family.

Chaotic Dreams

Five short stories of surreal and slightly dark fantasy. An ancient legend meanders into strange directions. An inner demon seems to depart- but has he really gone? Alchemical fantasies sweep one man's world into disarray. A living doll yearns to escape. Trading in crystals leads to an unexpected magical drama. Last two stories channelled from Ino.

Novellas under the pen name Lena Chere

The Eoss Trilogy

1. Platara Mountain: (Paperback: only available from the publisher)

Imagine magicians of the modern-day internet becoming involved with a parallel world where human beings are still in the Stone Age. Imagine this involvement precipitated by a kind but much-feared Horse Goddess who was created on Facebook.

Alexandra has just left school and is looking for love and a vocation in life when that scenario becomes her reality. She comes to care deeply about both the Horse Goddess and a young family in the parallel world; it dramatically reveals her past and changes her future, transforming her into a magician.

2. Mount Clexa: (Self -published, paperback and eBook)

This is a book of serious occult fiction told in the first person by Clexa, the daughter of the Horse Goddess Eoss.

Bound to a magician in service, she finds herself forced to explore the aethyrs of the Enochian magic system with him, and to carry out a revenge curse on a girl when she would prefer to spare her.

Clexa thinks for herself about how to interact with the human beings she meets and also the aethyr guardians, and this results in her being chased and harried across the inner realms, so that she has to evolve much faster than she anticipated.

3. Silver Manes: (Self -published, paperback and eBook)

Arran is a Kabbalist, a young professional man from the UK, and his accident comes at a critical moment in his love life. It also serves to deepen his emerging connection with one of the kingdoms of Hell.

He enters into an extended coma, which becomes a test of character both for himself and for his secret enemy, Jez. As Arran learns lessons about love and about the phenomenon of archetypes, many of the people around him get the opportunity to petition a Wishing Horse for three wishes- or for anything else they want.

Non-Fiction

Alchemical Journey: (Autobiography)

Now available as an eBook, Candy Ray's popular account of her six past lives, and the times in between them. She has been a demon, a warrior in ancient India, a sacred cat in the time of Moses, a scholar in Medieval England, a witch during the English Civil War and a Quaker in the era of slavery.

The account is a concise summary of many events covering the past five thousand years. It focuses on how the Law of Karma works, and gives insights into some important world events. This edition has added end notes which give more details about consequences in the present day.