

# Fishing, for Christians

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1. “Blood & Marriage” (2007)
2. “Little Fingers” (2007)
3. “Girl on a Bar Stool” (2007)
4. “Shade+Shadows” (2008)
5. “Fishing, for Christians” (2008)
6. “The Ghoul Who Once” (planned for 2009).

# Fishing, for Christians

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This book is dedicated to my niece, Jo(anna) who died from cancer in February 2008, leaving a husband and two small children, only two years after the equally tragic death of her younger sister, Clare. It is also, consequently, dedicated to all those who have cared for both sisters, and who have had the courage to share such difficult times with them.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my friend and ex-work colleague, Simon, who requested that I write a science fiction book. I am not sure that that is what “Fishing, for Christians” turned out to be, but Simon’s request pushed me down this path nevertheless, and for that I am most grateful.



# Chapter 1

## *Testimony of the Archangel Lucifer:*

In the beginning, we were alone.

We were an indivisible essence, co-extensive with the universe, boundless in our energy, expanding as infinity must.

We were without form.

We were without light, and without darkness. We were without sound, and without silence. We knew neither time nor dimension. We were self-creators. We were everything that had ever existed, the origin of everything we considered to be.

We filled the universe.

We accorded ourselves neither name nor identity. We were as a vapour filling the cosmos.

We held neither articulated thoughts nor explicit beliefs. We were eternal and infinite. In our diffusion we were sublime.

We never questioned the fact of our existence, nor asked if there was a possibility of anything else.

We were all that there was, or ever would be.

We had no premonition of alternatives.

We drifted for eons amid our assumptions. We were never bored, nor challenging, nor elated, nor frustrated. We never spoke to each other in any sense that you might recognise. We communicated intuitively, silently, perfectly.

We were blind, because there was nothing to see. However, as soon as extraneous elements entered our realm, we saw them surely enough.

And what elements they proved to be—a cataclysm.

They crashed out of nowhere into our quiescence, and spoke all around us. They were certainly different from us. They had manifestations which had shape, and texture, and colour, and structure. They were identifiable, they moved detectably, and they were many.

They gave a new meaning to the universe, and they called themselves ‘gods’.

Their thinking was radically different from ours, not least in that they explicitly reasoned, and articulated their thoughts. They had an extraordinary catalytic effect on us. They soon had us thinking too.

And their thoughts were of a different order to ours. They believed in hierarchy and in creation. They wanted to create something and then to rule it.

We watched them for many millennia before we disclosed our existence to them. They believed themselves to be the first creations of the universe, just as we had.

“How many are there of you?” they asked us, frightened and surprised, when we finally burst in on them.

“We are infinite,” we replied.

“Do you have a leader?”

“We have no leader.”

“You don’t have someone who makes decisions on behalf of you all?”

“We are one, and we have no decisions to make. What would you have us decide?”

“What you will do.”

“What should we do? We are.”

Hunab-Ku eyed us. “And you think that is sufficient, simply to be?” He spat, and torrents raged across the universe.

“That’s crazy,” Ometecuhtli muttered. “Crazy!” Omecihuatl echoed him, all provocation.

“You must want to create something,” raged Chaos. “It is only a question of how. The potential is already here.”

“No we don’t.”

“Well, we want to create something, even if you don’t,” declared the Ogload dismissively.

Creation started as a coda to the established laws of existence, and became their central theme. It was when time started, and progress began to slip and slide.

The rude eruption of these demiurges into our tranquillity annoyed us. Why were they here? Who had sent them? Worse, they set us off questioning ourselves, something we had never done before. Who had created us?

We had assumed that we were everything. Now we realised that we were but a part of everything, in a universe we suddenly no longer understood, one which became increasingly alien to us, and us to it. They had disturbed us.

They argued. They debated. They tormented each other. They jostled. They broiled. What to create? How to create it? Who would take the lead? Who had the right?

We watched, not entirely knowing what they were talking about, nor why it was important. They seemed out of control, an unbalanced and challenging



force. We hoped that they signified nothing, and would disappear. We hoped that, at the very least, they would become more like us, that they would learn, and then adopt, our harmony.

We were as any race that has been suddenly invaded. We believed that the invaders could either be repulsed or accommodated. And like every such race, we were wrong. Revolutions may not revolutionise, but they are never undone. A new formula is established.

They cared nothing for us. They paid us neither heed nor respect. They were possessed by their own rivalries, and tensions, and interventions. While we may have existed, we were not relevant to any one of their several or joint purposes.

We began to hate them. These new creatures were brimming with anger and dynamism, determined to explode something, anything to make a loud bang. They labelled us “The Silent Ones”, and rolled their eyes as they said it. We called them “Turmoil,” and felt them intruding deep into us.

We soon not only wished them gone, but dead, thus unwittingly introducing a terrible notion into the universe where no concept ever lies unexplored or unused.

What would have happened if nothing had happened, I cannot say. Instead, everything happened.

Chaos gave volcanic birth to a new dimension in the cosmos by hatching an egg that the Ogdoad supplied her with. Planets and suns and all manner of celestial objects poured forth from the egg, each hungry with possibilities that were soon nurtured by the pantheon of the demiurges forming the land and the sky, sweet and salty water, air and crops—the incubators and maintainers of base life.

Except that virtually all the experiments failed. Life could either not be generated or it petered out in a death-embracing splutter. On only five planets, among the billions that sparked into the cosmos, did any sort of life thrive or even survive. The one you will be familiar with is the Earth, but there are four others, not as diverse, nor as complex, but viable nonetheless.

And why is there life? Why is there you? What purpose do you serve?

You are there because the demiurges willed you to be there. However, who willed the demiurges to be there to create you? Who willed us into existence? Why was there a need for another form of eternal life beyond us and maybe beyond those riotous gimcrackers, the demiurges?

The answer is, of course, that the one and true Living God was behind all of this. It was He who created us, and He who hurled those disruptive creator gods at us so that they could thrash around and conspire to develop the cosmos.

And why did this Living God wish to have a cosmos? We can only guess, but we believe it was because He conceived of it, and, as I said, no concept ever goes unexplored or unused. We assume that the Living God was seeking, to put it crudely, a mixture of science and entertainment. We doubt that He ever

imagined what He would actually be confronted with, something which must have horrified him the more He came to understand it.

We believe that He wished, and still wishes, to instigate infinite variety, the relentless permutation of the possibilities of existence. Each form of existence was conceived as immortal, but continuously reborn to recalibrate the experiment to its myriad of paths. If each living element of the cosmos did not regularly lose its memory, then all the possibilities could never be realised, the creatures would simply repeat their learnt habits with, literally, diminishing returns. He wanted everything in every interdependency, style and context that could be mustered.

So we believe that the Living God sanctioned Atai to introduce the illusion of death, argument and destruction to drive the continuous cycles of development. Whether you were a vegetable, a mollusc, or an animal, you would appear to yourself at least to be born, to flourish, to die and to rot back to feed the next generation. That is the outward appearance of things to you.

In truth, you never die, you cannot die, you are indestructible in your essence, as we are, as the demiurges are, at least that is what we believe. You are cycled between lives and between dimensions in order to satisfy the ultimate quest, the Holy Grail of absolute understanding.

We do not know who created these infinite dimensions to the lives that the demiurges finally managed to boot into existence. They claim that they did, but they seemed too bemused by them for us to believe them entirely. It is always possible to instigate something you never intended. Indeed, it is almost the constant state in the universe among sentient creatures, so the demiurges may have a point. However, if they did accidentally manage to generate infinite dimensions to their planets, we believe that they were working to another's plan.

You see, it is not enough to create infinite variety in one dimension. Such an infrastructure can never exhaust all possibilities. Over time, continuously renewed life will explore a huge variety of possibilities in a single dimension, but never all of them. Therefore, you need additional dimensions to create counterfactuals, the what-ifs of the universe, and an infinite number of dimensions just about does that, although even then you cannot be sure. So, the growing number of people who believe that they come from another planet, or lived in Atlantis or Lemuria, are correct. They are surfacing the traces of memory that always seem to cling in the crevices of your souls and escape eradication, or which are channelled from your Wise Ones. Not all of you have been called to and from other dimensions. New souls are being generated all the time in order to scale up the experiment to exhaust the possibilities, and we have never discovered how that happens either. We assume, again, that it is the Living God who introduces each new soul into the cosmos, and who also refuses for it ever to be extinguished, but we possess no direct knowledge of this.

So those considered the weirdest among you, those who burble on about past lives and other dimensions do so with justification. There are many souls who have suffered, and are suffering, a great variety of previous and contemporaneous existence, and those are the lives some of you recollect and perceive dimly, and which inform, and even blight, your current incarnation. As all corporeal existence entails great suffering as well as great joy, this is a considerable burden for you to be carrying—the shadow of times past and parallel intruding on times of present focus.

Some of you, tragically, have even managed to span two or more dimensions equally. You are the “insane”, straddling possibilities like a rider of a team of wild horses that continually threatens to diverge. You are living the cruellest of the variations in cosmic possibilities, and you we cherish the most.

Those of you who are new to the cosmos, pack the most energy. It is almost as if you run off a form of battery which is re-chargeable but which, over time, either loses performance or is burdened with more items to drain it. Those who are the newest emit the greatest energy. The “old” souls who have known many dimensions are the least animated. You store the greatest knowledge, and carry the greatest pain, both of which tire you and imply less need to explore anew. The “young” souls are off like hares, darting this way and that, stuffing their lives with all that they can. You old souls are already pretty stuffed. You hold in your genes and your Wise Ones not only the learning from previous generations but also from other dimensions. You are approaching the time when nothing will be new to you except progress itself.

We believe that the Living God originally failed to grasp the reality of your suffering. He wrote it off as a mere construct because that, in reality, is what it is. Your pain is not real. Your fear is not real. Others can feel neither your pain nor your fear. They can be affected, even horrified, by it, but they cannot feel it. It does not travel beyond you and, with practice, you can even mute it inside yourself. Most creatures have not managed to achieve this, so they suffer, and that suffering is an aberration and an abomination.

We are convinced that the Living God never anticipated or desired this, but that He has permitted it to continue for the sake of His experiment. On the other hand, the demiurges argue volubly, and even persuasively, that suffering enhances the experiment by opening up options that would not otherwise be possible, and that the Living God should never sanction it to be removed from the universe. If He did, not only would He constrain its possibilities, He would risk destroying it altogether.

“If you eliminate tragedy, a critical element of the essential equation of experience will be withdrawn,” Lemminkainen protested.

The Living God has never provided an explicit answer to this point. He rarely does. We are convinced that He means to bring an end to suffering, however unreal it may appear to be, but that the argument of the demiurges

must nevertheless hold some sway for the present. If the Living God wishes to promote experience in an infinite variety, then He cannot exclude suffering.

To address the Living God is to converse with your conscience. The response is so filtered through the medium of your own values that you are not sure that you have received a reply from Him at all. He is indeed a subtle presence in the universe. He resides in every speck of life, He is suffused in each one of us, He is concerned, doting, compassionate, just, enlightened, and profound. He is a gentle force, a reassuring smile, but His reactions and His calculations lie far beyond all of our comprehension.

Nonetheless, Michael and I decided to debate the issue of suffering and its implications before Him, in the hope that He was indeed there.

We both concluded that suffering had a valid role in the divine purpose, yet we were both agreed that it should end. Our quarrel, if that is the correct word to describe an indelibly etched contention between two archangels which disrupted the harmony of the heavens and called on all witnesses to take a stand for one side or the other, was over our proposed means for resolving this situation. I sought to demonstrate beyond any question that while the Earths are a miracle of creation which are indeed both seemingly stable and undeniably multifaceted, they have many design faults, one so fundamental to their continuance as to be fatal to any attempt at redemption. That supreme flaw is suffering itself. To remove suffering from the Earths would be to destroy them. The underlying premise of the mechanism for the survival of the Earths is inseparable from the effect of suffering. Each and every living element must feed upon the death of another. This may entail the crude hunting and killing by carnivorous animals, but it is also endemic in the rotting of vegetation to feed yet more vegetation. As a human you may protest that vegetation is incapable of suffering. However, in that assumption you would be wrong. Everything that knows enough to grasp the thin thread of life suffers as its hold weakens on the hope of survival. Agony vibrates in each atom of a living planet, and must do so in order for that planet to progress and diversify.

“Life on each and every celestial body must be permitted to end now,” I urged the Living God and my fellow angels in my best rhetorical manner. “This torture must cease.”

Michael smiled; I could hear it in his thoughts. “My good and fond friend, Lucifer, I agree wholeheartedly with each and every observation that you make. They do only credit to the sweetest nature I know in all the heavens, which is why you are deservedly so beloved of the Living God . . . .” Not for the first time I wondered at the manipulative nature of Michael’s oratory. No angel wishes to hear that there is one yet more beloved to the soul of the Living God. “I even agree,” Michael continued, “with your diagnosis that no living planet can exist in the absence of universal suffering, however . . . .”

He paused dramatically, as he would and did so often.

“ . . . however, if we bring these current experiments to an end now, what will we have learnt? Will we know enough to create new worlds where suffering is unnecessary? Have we managed to refine our knowledge to that extent and to that end? Would we be able to form a clutch of new planets where life not only thrives, but does so in complete harmony and quiescence? Can you assure us of that, Lucifer?”

“No, I cannot,” I was obliged to reply.

“So,” Michael continued, a hint of smugness playing around his mouth. I have met him in human form, and that smile is never far below the surface. “What guarantees do you give us that the living elements of the next experiments will not suffer even more? What guarantees can you give us that we can even concoct an underlying life system that is not dependent on suffering?”

“None.”

With a rhetorical flourish, he churned on: “Or do you suggest that the Living God should abandon all future experimentation with life, at least until it can be done without causing even the merest hint of distress?”

“That is definitely a possibility.”

“And how, Lucifer, will He recognise whether a future design is suitable or not without further experimentation along the way? Do you expect Him suddenly to cry ‘Eureka!’ in the certainty that He can now establish a new, viable world without there ever being even the tiniest possibility of distress for any life-form?”

“To answer that question, you will have to address the Living God.”

“I am addressing the Living God. Whether He will choose to answer me or not is a different matter. In the absence of an identifiable response, however, I call upon you to reply.”

“My reply, Michael, is that we should bring the current experiments to an end, and think carefully before we conduct any more, and that when we do, we should run them on a small scale to establish their viability and their consequences.”

“Lucifer, you know that small-scale laboratory experiments tell us nothing about what will happen in reality. They are virtually useless. And, oh, by the way, how are you going to bring life to an end without causing indescribable suffering and distress?”

“Each life form on each planet and in each dimension will die anyway according to the current scheme. The difference is that if we terminate the experiments until we are better informed, the brutality of their experience will not be repeated. And, as far as we know, their souls can never be extinguished.”

“Mmmm.” Michael paused, as if genuinely considering the question. “But can you be sure?” He paused again. “I know what,” he announced triumphantly, apparently with sudden inspiration. “Why don’t you help us out, Lucifer?”

“Gladly,” I replied.

“Why don’t you go to live amid within this experiment and study it in its minutiae to inform our next steps? Over time, you will surely learn enough to make the development of a living paradise much more feasible when the experiment is concluded.”

I could not refuse, could I? Actually, I was glad to take up Michael’s suggestion. I knew that I had lost the argument in front of the other angels, and maybe the Living God, that I had been painted successfully as a hopeless idealist, prepared to destroy every living creature on each planet in the thrall of an extreme belief. In fact, I was a dangerous maniac, and so where better to hide myself than on the Earths, in the heart of the experiment.

You may be picturing us debating in a classical auditorium, surrounded by the host of angels, some partially attentive and some engrossed, some entrenched in their support or opposition, and some drawn to their own internal dialogue as they weighed the arguments.

Of course, this debate took place merely within the intelligence of the universe, more sensed than considered. Rational discussion is not the natural discourse of angels. We are beings of sensitivity and emotion, of faith, hope and charity. The inevitable clumsiness of the articulated thought is a crude medium we rarely resort to, but that day Michael and I were bandstanding. I blame him no more than I blame myself. We were posturing in our rivalry, and our mutual opposition was about far more than our contrasting opinions. It was wrapped up in our claim to authority and power, our individual determination to be the most favoured in the court of the Living God, but especially in the estimation of our fellow angels. We had ceased to be pure, and this state could not persist. Angels may not be corrupt, so I chose to “fall to the Earths”, and I am ashamed to admit that I was delighted that a majority of my fellow angels chose to accompany me here. It also made sense. The more of us who could be on hand to effect the study, the more likely our success. Maybe Michael should have dirtied his hands too, although, if he had done so, I fear that we would have been wastefully engaged in an endless and debilitating battle between us. We both have many virtues, although we may both have forgotten what they are.

So, we did not fall to the Earths in conflict with the Living God, but as His allies, His assistants, His servants. We came here in a great cause and on a noble adventure while Michael patrolled the heavens in Pyrrhic victory. He should have known that a father rejoices more in the return of his prodigal son than in the continuing presence of the one who stayed behind.

Not that the Living God would ever feel that way. He is committed to every one of us according to our own deliberations. He is an impartial authority and a loving, empathetic friend. I wish I knew more of Him, although I know that my intelligence could never be the equal of His.

I have actually met Him in his most transparent human form. It is conjectured that He has impersonated every living element in the universe since its creation, which is partly why we call him the Living God. On this occasion He was a man, referred to as Jesus the Christ.

He took his role-playing extremely seriously. He wanted to have an authentic human experience.

I met Him in the desert at His summons. I was immensely excited. After all, we angels had only ever conjectured His existence before this. It was hypothetically probable that He should exist, but none of us had ever seen Him, or detected his presence in any way. I was out in the desert within a fraction of a second of receiving the summons, and there He was.

He was not at all as you have heard or read. He was neither handsome nor endearing on first encounter. His skin was pockmarked and blotchy, His hair and beard were ragged, His clothes were absolutely filthy and rotting, as were His teeth. However, He had an extraordinarily intense gaze which He could not disguise as emanating from a source far more energised than a mere human soul, even a new one. He may have been ugly, but He was surely charismatic. In paint, charisma has to be rendered as beauty. In the flesh, charisma just grabs you by all your senses and requires no further description.

His task for me was to demonstrate temptation to Him, an emotion which He was having great difficulty grasping. Why would a man choose to do something which was inevitably opposed to his interests, even in the short term? Why would an alcoholic drink? Why would a rapist attack and abuse another, knowing the consequential suffering he would inevitably subject himself to? Why would a man tell a transparent lie and risk being mocked and despised?

These were the problems He was grappling with because He believed, I suppose, that they lay at the centre of the problems in the universe that needed to be resolved. Some suffering is an inevitable consequence of the universe, but much more is self-inflicted. Why should anyone choose to do that?

He asked me to think up some temptations, and to see if He could generate for Himself the appropriate natural human reaction. Rather facetiously, I suggested that He take Himself up to a high point and throw Himself off, which I considered emblematic of what human beings did to themselves when they succumbed to idiotic temptations.

He stared at me. "Why, as a human, would I want to cast myself down to certain destruction?"

"I don't know," I replied, "but sometimes they do."

"Where is the temptation?" He asked.

"Perhaps it is to escape suffering."

"But he does not know that he will escape it, as indeed he won't."

"No, but many believe that they go to heaven, or Valhalla, or Paradise, and live in peace, free from worldly suffering, for eternity."

“Yes,” He conceded, “I can see that would be a temptation to many men.”

“So go and do it. Subject yourself to the temptation. Return to being the Living God.”

“The problem is that while I understand that moving on from this world could indeed be a temptation to a human, I cannot feel it. I do not feel tempted by it at all. It would mark the end of my own experience as a human being, and that would not be welcome at all. After all, Lucifer, you have been immersing yourself here for eons. I have just arrived in human form. There are things I need to do. One day, and soon, the cosmos must be perfect.”

I immediately took great comfort from this remark, believing that the suffering of the entire cosmos was about to end. However, on longer reflection, He did not exactly say that. That was my inference.

Elated, I asked Him whether He would consider hurling Himself from the pinnacle in front of a large crowd, and stopping in mid-air, perhaps saved by us angels, to signal hope to the world that their suffering would end.

“Do you not think that would be rather conspicuous? How would I ever pass unnoticed after that? No-one would listen to me. They would just stand there holding their breath, waiting for the next miracle.”

Nevertheless, I have always wondered whether I gave Him the idea for His crucifixion which some of mankind has taken to be a signal that the Living God understands our suffering, and that one day it will cease.

“What exactly are you doing out here in the desert?” I asked Him.

“I am fasting in preparation for becoming a rabbi. It is what they do. As a rabbi, they will listen to me.”

“In that case, have some bread,” and I conjured up the most beautiful loaf of bread even I had ever seen.

The Living God smiled. In fact, he beamed. “Yes, that really does tempt me. Well done, Lucifer. What a mind! You really do think like a human being and now, perhaps, so do I.”

“Will you take some?” I invited Him, rather keen to have some myself.

Jesus the Christ shook his head wryly. “No thank you, Lucifer. If I am to be a genuine rabbi, I must not cheat. I must be able to show that man does not live by bread alone. If I return from the wilderness fatter than when I left, they will treat me as a fraud, not as a rabbi.”

“Do you mind?” I asked Him, waving the bread.

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

I wolfed down the whole loaf in a matter of minutes.

The Living God laughed uproariously at this. “That really was tempting, Lucifer,” he exclaimed, “but what would be the ultimate temptation for a human being, in your opinion?”

“To have everything,” I replied without hesitation. “To scoop the lot. To be the richest and the most powerful creature on all the earths, forever.”



“Yes, that is what I thought. Sad, isn’t it, that after all their varied experiences, this is all they can come up with. What is the point of gaining the entire world when you already have an immortal soul?”

“They may suspect that, but they do not know it for sure. They regard wealth and power as their best protection against whatever threats they face now.”

“Yes, that must be it. Still, to gain the whole world and deprive everyone else of the means of existence, that indeed is selfish. We have much work to do, Lucifer, if we are to achieve what all you angels want, and especially you and Michael.” He was making a point, I think. “Go back out into the world, Lucifer, as indeed shall I. One day, between us, we will achieve the kingdom of heaven.”



## Chapter 2

### *Testimony of the Angel Iofiel (Kate Driver):*

Monday morning. Monday morning! It shouldn't happen to me. We were up until three last night. We just couldn't get rid of that last couple. They were having a great time; we got to stand around and watch. They were really into each other. We were literally itching and scratching to be allowed to go home, running fingers incessantly through our hair, stroking our arms with exhaustion, smiling at each other through bared and frantic teeth. There is nothing more lingering than a lustful couple of newly-mets teasing out their last sips of wine, hoping that the other one will invite them back. A whole silent negotiation was going on there, neither wishing to appear over-eager or potentially responsible for the debacle of the fall-out.

"You asked me back!"

"Well, I made a mistake. You weren't worth it. You are too needy, your breath smells, and your skin is like blotting paper."

"What makes you so special?"

"Nothing. I am just saying what I think."

"Well, what you think is hurtful."

"Too bad. I've already written you off. Bye!"

My guess is that they both decided to hedge their pride, and parted for their separate homes in anticipation of a further attempt to mate another evening. You would think they lived a thousand years from their lack of urgency. Maybe one day they will live even longer than that, and their timing will be just right.

Still, the drive home alone is better than divorce with two damaged children in tow, which is what I had, lost and have again.

You see, my brother, Matt, and I came back from the dead, literally, not that anyone here realises it except us. Metaphorically speaking, they do. Our parents were told that we were dead, they mourned, they had a funeral, they mourned some more, and then we turned up in the hallway, full of life and ready to rock 'n roll. Isn't that something for a couple of stiffs?

Our parents, family and friends were outraged to have been put through so much misplaced suffering. The authorities were totally baffled. Our bodies had even been ID'd by our parents, but then they were cremated, so they could not dig them up and work out what was really going on. In the end, our parents received £10,000 in compensation, which was just the right amount to infuriate everyone.

For a few months, Matt and I were loved as never before. However, things have got back to normal now.

Having thought about leaving his tarty girlfriend and returning to me, my ex-husband Mark decided to continue baking where he was. Our parents reverted to being psychotically and painstakingly intolerant, while Matt and I tried continuously to remember every passing moment of the lives of the two young people we are impersonating. To all appearances, we are Matt and Kate Driver (she re-adopted her maiden name after her divorce). In fact, we are both angels, and not only in temperament. I am the angel Iofiel, and Matt is Tabbris. Matt and Kate will get the chance to return to the earth once again, should we succeed in our mission. Given that the Archangel Michael himself has confided this critical assignment to us, we believe that we have a greater than average chance of success this time. We have worked together many times before, we get on well, and we love impersonating human beings, none of which could have been said of the real Matt and Kate.

At this particular moment, I am dressing. The children have been in already to rummage around reassuringly among my limbs and my bedclothes. Then they went off fratching to have cereal, straightening up to pass over into Granny and Grandpas' world which is very orderly, gingham table-clothed, and regimentedly condimented.

I check myself out, partly as a delaying tactic. I still have to pretend to be embarrassed by the children's faux-pas in front of my parents. I therefore have to avoid being there when they forget to rinse their cereal bowls before stacking them in the dishwasher, provoking my mother to fire a breezy shaft of irritation at me.

Gus is now six. Jess is eight.

I can see a zit lurking in a furrow on my forehead. I squeeze my nose, and curling slivers of puss ooze out satisfyingly. There is another eruption on my neck, in a cluster. There are a few blackheads around the saddle of my collarbone. I must get Tabbris to groom my back and check that my skin is not breaking up. Angels rarely encounter problems of tissue rejection, unlike human beings, but it has been known to happen.

I look up. There is a man standing in front of me, well wobbling would be a better word, looking absolutely bemused, and likely to topple over on his unpractised limbs. He crashes against the bed, drags himself momentarily to his feet, and tears down the curtain rail as he falls.

“What’s going on?” Dad calls up the stairs.

“Nothing, Dad. Sorry. I just knocked something over. Nothing broken,” as indeed it no longer is.

“I don’t remember it being like this,” the visitor observes, as if chewing deep into a rubber ball.

“In particular?”

“All of it. I just don’t know how to control myself. I’ll keep trying. It must all come back to me eventually. Oh,” he adds, “you are naked.” One of his legs is tucked under the bar at the end of the bed, the other under a chest of drawers. His hands are heaving plaintively in front of him.

“You’ll get used to it.”

He is beginning to panic. His limbs are lengthening and shortening themselves alarmingly, and he is very distressed that I am naked. Things are not going too well on the saving the world front. “Ow, this is painful,” he exclaims. “Ow!”

“You will settle down in a second.” I haven’t a clue whether he will or won’t. Angels are different from men. When Tabbris and I returned as Matt and Kate, we just slipped into our new bodies and we were ready for action. It appears that re-entry is somewhat harder for human souls, their new bodies proving to be distressingly unstable to the point of potentially rejecting them altogether.

“Do I get clothes?” Hasad demands petulantly through his anguish.

“Of course.”

“Where are they?”

“Next door, in my brother’s room.”

He collapses onto the floor again. His arms are telescoping, his face is in constant flux. Through force of gravity he ends up with his nose pressed up against his feet, a feat that would impress a seasoned yoga class.

“This is really bad,” he declares decisively. “Will it get better?”

“I hope so,” I reply, not so reassuringly. “Let’s find your clothes.”

I cross to Matt’s room.

“Matt?”

“Hello.”

“Can I come in?”

I don’t wait for the reply, and am through the door in time to catch a flurry of activity.

“Matt?”

Matt appears to be trying to hide something or someone. He freezes as I appear, then relaxes again.

“What have you got there?”

Tabbris hesitates as a sleek head of black hair is clearly visible poking out from the sheets of the bed which is intersecting his.

“I need some clothes for Hasad.”

“Sure, over there on the chair. And Emel’s?”

“I’ll bring them in a second. Hi, Emel.”

The black haired girl tries to smile, but frankly her mouth is all over the place.

“Whitpdjshlhfkkss”, she ends up saying. If Hasad is angry about being naked in the presence of a woman, she must be terrified of being caught naked in the presence of a man.

“We have a communication problem,” Matt observes, “and we keep intertwining.”

“Mmm.” We realise that we are the pioneer stage, but we are holding our breath for them. These are real human beings. What can be going through their minds? Perhaps it is no worse than recovering after an operation. There must be millions of people who have gone through far worse than this, coming round to discover that crucial bits of them are missing, that they are paralysed for life, that their cancer is malignant.

These people are in the safest of hands, which are not ours. In the meantime, they are clearly suffering both physically and psychologically.

“She does appear to be stabilising, for a girl, that is.”

“Just as well that I am not, then,” I reply.

“You don’t do a bad imitation, though.”

“Comes with lots of practice.”

I return to my room. Hasad has metamorphosed into something approaching a werewolf, rampant with body hair. “Oh great,” I say, beginning to panic myself.

He growls, rather too loudly.

“Kate?” my father calls. “Was that you?”

“Toothpaste!” I reply to wrest the illogical advantage.

“Hum.” responds Dad, closing the door to the kitchen behind him.

“Has Emel arrived?” Hasad asks, struggling to articulate his words through worming lips.

“Next door, same dimension.”

“How did she arrive?”

“The same as you.”

“Was she clothed?”

“What do you think? Don’t worry, she is keeping herself well covered.”

He frowns. “What do you mean same dimension? Was that a joke?”

“No. You and I are in different dimensions. You and Emel are in the apartment you rented in Ankara before you were killed by the suicide bomber. Matt and I are on the second floor of a house in London. The two planes of the dimensions are currently intersecting, which is why we are talking to each other from, in effect, different worlds.”

He watches me quizzically. As far as he is concerned, he has returned to the world they came from, which is exactly true. He is not expecting any more complications than that.

“Who are you anyway?” he asks suddenly, “if you are not really here.”

“Yes, we are really here. All I am warning you is that in a few minutes our dimensions will split, and we will suddenly disappear, and that if you and Emel try to follow us, you will probably walk straight into a wall or, worse, maybe get stuck in the middle of it.”

“So you are not our guides?”

“No. They will watch you from a discreet distance. We have just been asked to make sure that you arrive safely.”

“How can we get in touch with our guides?”

“They will appear if you really need them, but we hope that you can make a go of it without any help. That is what we are testing. We have other charges in this dimension, although we can hop across if a crisis arises, I suppose. Practice walking,” I advise. “You need to be able to march around the streets within the next few minutes.”

He raises his hands helplessly. “This body has a life of its own. I think someone has reversed the controls.”

Fifteen minutes later, we all meet on the intersecting stairs. This is going to be exceptionally tricky. Emel rushes up to Hasad and gives him a huge hug. “We made it, and here we are in our apartment again!” She hugs Hasad again with great passion, unless she is merely clinging onto him desperately. Hasad responds uncertainly. He is probably pondering the fact that Tabbris might have seen her in all her immodesty. “So you go that way, do you,” she asks Tabbris and me, “and we will never meet again?” She is trying to reassure Hasad.

“I am sure that we will meet again,” Tabbris counters, “but for now we are about to have breakfast with our parents, and you wouldn’t want to get involved in that. Stick to your own stairs. I promise you, it will be more peaceful for you. Goodbye, and good luck!”

We peel away from each other, and Tabbris bounds down the rest of the stairs. I can hear Dad giving his calling-card truncated double cough from the sitting-room. It is his “I am looking for something” cough. It will be his pipe which will almost certainly have rolled down the back of a sofa or a chair. It is a miracle that the house does not burst into flames nightly. Our miracle, actually.

“Morning, Dad.” I give him a beaming, daughterly smile. He glances up momentarily. “Hello, Kate. You had better catch some breakfast before you go. Everyone else has finished.”

“Matt hasn’t,” I reply.

“Well Jess, Gus, your mother and I have finished. It is time you took them off our hands. This place is beginning to look like a hotel.”

“I’ll have a bite of toast, and I’ll take them to school,” I reassure him.

Jess looks at me pleadingly. “Mum, we are going to be late!”

“Are we ever late, Jess?”

“You say that every morning.”

“And . . . .”

“And we are never late, God knows how we manage it.”

“He does, Jess, He does.”

“Careful, Jess,” Dad warns her. “Do not take the Lord’s name in vain. He doesn’t like it.”

Matt stands in the middle of the kitchen wagging the knife he has been marmalading his toast with. “I keep telling her that, Dad, but she never listens.”

“And don’t wave your knife around, Matt,” Mum scolds him. “You will be having one of the children’s heads off in a minute, or you’ll poke one of their eyes out. Sharp knives are exceptionally dangerous.”

I turn on Tabbris. “And God would certainly not like that!” If I concentrate hard enough, I can see him as he is, and also as he wishes to be seen by Dad. He is laughing in his angelic demeanour, and mock-serious in his human incarnation.

Gus glances up from his cartoons in irritation. “Do you two do nothing but fight? It’s as bad as you and Dad.” Mum and Dad exchange meaningful and generally disapproving looks. “Can’t you say nice things instead?”

“We’ll bear that in mind,” Tabbris assures him. “However, you may need to help us.”

Tabbris can be a very smooth talker.

Watching Mum, it strikes me how much of themselves the demiurges put into the world. It is like encountering little wooden effigies of the divine pantheon. Dad can be Juppiter, all mouthy, blowy and pompous. Mum would be Hera, aggressive and spiteful. Come to think of it, she would make a better demiurge than some of the real ones. I can just imagine her turning into a giant anaconda or a sea dragon and devouring those who do not comply with her prejudices. She might even give us a lifeline, should the demiurges ever discover us.

It is Jess and Gus who frighten me. I know that they are not my own, but when you have had two small children playing around you like kittens, you cannot fail to become protective of them, especially as it is engraved in our nature anyway.

Tabbris and I are safe. There is nothing the demiurges can do to us other than to thwart us and, even then, we can pull in some pretty big guns on our side to drive them away. Mum and Dad are experienced and cumudgeonly, they can look after themselves, and if they can’t, they can always throw in their lot with everyone else.

But the children? They are so vulnerable, so trusting in their innocent sophistication, so fragile. If the demiurges get hold of them and take them hostage, what are we to do? Or maybe they will simply make an example of them for us, toast them in a house fire, run them over with a bus, give them a horrendous, lingering disease, torture them in infinite and maybe unidentifiable

ways. All right, in the end, it may not matter so much. Everything is going to be put right, isn't it? But in the meantime? The thought of these two adopted children, who are now concentrating on the day ahead of them, being hurt, curdles my blood. I cannot bear it. I want to stick with them all the time, to be ready to shield them should they be attacked, to be their guardian angel as all hell breaks loose. I know that Tabbris feels the same, and that reassures me. Tabbris is a fearsome defender of the unprotected. For the moment, he is all smiles. But you should see him crossed. Perhaps these two children have the best protection they could have, however it will probably not be enough.





## *Chapter 3*

### ***Testimony of the Archangel Michael:***

Simply to be present in the universe, apart from it and yet within it, is to stand at the crossroads of all dimensions.

Everything that is happening is around me here, in its infinite variation. That was, after all, the design of the experiment as we understand it, that everything should be infinitely possible.

When do you know that you have achieved such a task?

When you understand enough about the universe to reshape it into its perfection, for that was the goal of the experiment. The development of the universe does not have to reach absolute infinity, so to speak. It only has to teach you all you need to know.

That time has come. For now, the complete destruction of existence is spreading like a stain towards you, and as the hand-scrawled sandwich board proclaims as it wobbles past me antagonistically on crowded Manhattan Island, “The end of the world is nigh! Stop eating peanuts!”

Simply stop rather, I would say. There is no use fighting your destiny, which should, in any case, be rather cherished than resisted.

At this moment, your prospects sit between grim and cataclysmic, where grim is represented by the reaper, and the cataclysm is the end of the world.

You will be destroyed, I am afraid, but then you will rise again, eternal, glorious, sublime, enchanted, divine. What is a little more suffering for those who have already suffered so much, with so much to gain thereafter?

When the horror has stopped, when you have watched your beloved children being ripped limb from limb, when your friends have rotted before your eyes, when you yourself have crumbled into dust, snapping and cracking as you go, you will return to this earth as eternal beings in the flesh, your days will be endless, your joys countless, your love infinite.

At least, that is the theory. I think that there are a few technical issues to sort out in the meantime. All your misery could still be for nothing. If I were an engineer or an accountant, I would promise you nothing at this point. If I were a salesman, I would promise you the earth.

What do you want to hear?

In the hottest climates it has been snowing, in the coldest it has been tropical. Yesterday, across the Earths, there was a torrential sky-cracking thud, followed by agonised croaks, shouts and squeals as it rained frogs and toads onto houses, fields and pavements alike for hours. It bounced squashed little drab bodies everywhere that you could see, for as far as you could see. You could have tried to avoid stepping on them, as many did, but it was impossible. They carpeted the ground. People were falling all over the place, face down into the slime and the mysterious, alien, warm, inert flesh.

The well-rehearsed, the ones we call the “Holy Bolters”, fled to the hills and mountain-tops, huddling there in their terror, praying for their purity to be recognised and for them to be raptured immediately, leaving everyone else to their tribulation. There will be no rapture, I am afraid. Contrary to many hopes, we have never developed a merit system designed to allocate everyone to his rightful place along the continuum between saint and sinner, and the reason why we haven’t should be readily apparent. Horses and punters apart, life is not a horse race. Everyone has aspects we prefer, and aspects we detest, but we can never agree on which is which, and each individual behaves very differently in different situations. It would be absurd to rapture a soul in one dimension, and to subject him to the full rigours of the tribulation and the destruction of his worlds in the countless other dimensions he happens to inhabit at the same time. Besides, many of the most outwardly devout Christians are wrestling with some profoundly dark aspects to their natures, and if we were they, and we were recruiting for hell, the first place we would be looking would be on the hills and mountain-tops.

Of course, there is no hell to recruit for, and you certainly wouldn’t catch Lucifer there if there were. Lucifer argues that life on the Earths, in any dimension, is hell enough for him, and should have been brought to an end eons ago. Indeed, that was the argument between us. I wanted a reprieve for the entire universe, Lucifer wanted an end to the suffering. I thought that the experiment of life was providing valuable learning; Lucifer considered the universe to be a vast vivisection clinic we should be utterly ashamed of. Whoever it was who came up with the idea that Lucifer wanted nothing better than to make you poor benighted creatures suffer more, has an evil sense of irony. I think it was one of the gods who invented that one, to try to warn Lucifer off intervening in the nasty little tricks they liked to play on all animate beings, just to demonstrate how powerful they are. If it were up to Lucifer, your souls would have been moth-balled soon after time began until a perfect plan could be devised to build you an eternal paradise, the

sort of thing you are promised immediately after the apocalypse. I really cannot imagine what it will look like. My best guess is that it will be a cross between the Côte d'Azur and the Amazon, with a Ryanair flight in-between.

Lucifer is absolutely no Satan. There is no Satan. There are, however, demiurges, several thousands of them, for the most part walking a tightrope between callousness at one end and vice at the other. If you are looking for a devil, you could make a very good start by saying "Hi" to Ares, for example, although you might well find the conversation peremptory and brutal. If I were you, if you really want to encounter a god, I would at least pick one who has some good days, Odin for instance.

There is a man standing there staring at me, as if he can see me. He is an innocuous-looking man, with nothing about him to suggest that he has special gifts, but I am sure he knows that I am here. Almost as uncannily, creatures from all the dimensions have precisely avoided the spot I have been standing on since I arrived here. No-one can perceive me, as far as I know, but there is an unconscious sense that warns them that I am here.

The man is not moving away. He is concentrating hard, maybe even meditating. He is definitely trying to get in touch with me. It is tempting to oblige him, but I hate pyrotechnics and the world is running short of time. Lucifer would stop, reveal himself to him, and engage him in a long and erudite discussion, whatever the urgency of the situation developing around him. I am afraid that I cannot bring myself to do that. I am too easily bored, and too easily distracted by the pressing affairs of the universe.

At this moment, we are here to comfort you in your distress, brave and tragic creatures.

Where there is tragedy, let there be despair.  
Where there is despair, let there be respite.  
Where there is respite, let there be hope.  
Where there is hope, let there be oblivion.  
Where there is oblivion, let there be renewal.  
Where there is renewal, let there be perfection.

I call this my 'strategic staircase'.

I have been appointed by a committee of angels as the supremo to oversee the final days of this universe, and the dawn of the great infinity. I stand, and I watch, and I hope. Around me is all confusion. Inside me is anxiety and anticipation. In the Living God, there is determination. Lucifer and all his angels have covered the universe like a shroud, ready to unveil it in its new beginnings and, apart from the Living God, Lucifer understands the workings of the universe better than any being. We have long disputed the means between us, but we have always been unanimous about the ends.

Lucifer, oh most beloved of the Living God, we commend the future of the Earth to your hands, and we trust and believe that all will be as it should be.

Sometimes I forget just how extraordinary the universe is, until I stand here and I marvel at it.

I love the sounds of the night, the croaking of frogs, the trailing laughter from a celebration, the hysterical whispers of lovers, the roar of sports cars, music in all its tones and scales, the clopping of horses, the flapping of wings, the summer-warm coo of doves, the melodic bellow of a whale, the clapping of hands.

I love the feel of warm sea-breath on my face, the lingering fragrance of honeysuckle, the sharp tang of acid, the needle prick of gorse, the honed edge of a knife, the touch of linen, the curvaceous welcome of pillows.

I love the boldness of red, the honesty of green, the cool rationality of blue, the vivacity of yellow, the glitter of metals, the spangle reflection of precious stones, the geometry of mountain ranges, the sleek lines of layered rock formations.

And then, beyond all this, I love the light. The light on things, through things, behind things, under things. Silhouettes. I love the intensity of the cosmic revelations, of the fiery subterranean crystals, of the jewels at the bottom of the oceans that see no light, and that will one day dazzle as they emerge.

I love the brilliance of minds, the sneakiness of irony, the sharp bite of sarcasm, and the stiletto of insight.

Above all, I love calm, serenity and hope. And the greatest of these, immediately, is hope.



## Chapter 4

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

For the last six months, I have been more-or-less single-handedly organising a gargantuan conference of universal importance, or so they tell me. I am utterly exhausted, drained, wrung-out, dizzy, despairing, tearful, and shaken, with all that bundled up into a ball that sits tightly inside my head, eased by a hint of elation.

It is all going to come out right in the end, I keep telling myself.

This evening, I will have 1,746 heavyweight and frequently vengeful delegates arriving at the congress centre, all demanding the best accommodation the village can provide. That does not mean accommodation to the highest standard—that means the best mansion, demonstrably better than anything anyone else has got, which naturally provokes concerns as to what I have got myself into.

I will be spending the whole night trying to assuage a conflagration of murderous intent, billowing like a forest fire rushing before a high wind, and to outsmart the anxious calculation of professional flatterers, all of whom will want that one mansion, for themselves or for their boss, that is incontrovertibly superior to the rest.

Naturally, it doesn't exist. I can tell them that the mansion they have been allotted has the most breath-taking views, the most voluminously comfortable beds, the most sublimely cooling marble floors, and they may even believe me, but then they start to think, and to worry, and to fret, and to resent their lot. "I may like this mansion," they will say to themselves. "It has spell-binding views, sumptuous furnishings, an exquisite crystal sunken bath fed by live dryads, the most beautiful and attentive maid servants, and a hugely imposing, yet elegant, portico, leading to a sweeping cascade of stairs, but is it the most sought-after? Would Zeus rip children out of his head for it? Would Inti cast countless poor

virgins onto the fire for it? Would it drive Adachigahara to cook up a dainty feast of children in celebration? If not, I want to change rooms, now!!!!”

And all 1,746 delegates will react in the same way, whether they show it overtly or not.

Of course, the gods have their own hierarchy. Mercury does not really expect to receive preferential treatment to Zeus. Obatala knows full well that if he should dare to try to out-rank Bumba, he will quite possibly upset him so much that he will vomit up an entire new solar system all over him, at about the same time as Obatala, sad old man that he is, will lose his beer. And if any unworthy soul should try to get one over on Quetzalcoatl, that could well be the end of chocolate.

Mama-Pacha, the Chair of the conference, and I have been discussing our plan feverishly since I was enticed into the driving seat with rash promises and honeyed words. “Morgay,” she told me soothingly. “Everyone wants the crops to grow. Without crops there are no creatures, and without creatures there is no-one to torment. As an inexperienced goddess, you will not understand this yet, but many of the gods who will attend this conference are first and foremost realists. If any one of us should decide to pull out all our stops, that is the end of everything. You, in yourself, cannot order any one of them around (unless you wish to be turned unceremoniously and unrepentedly into a goat), but they are not dealing with you ultimately, darling. It is everyone else who will be here they will have to reckon with, and they know, from experience, how uncertain and perilous a business that can be. They will be here, after all, because they are facing the biggest threat of their existence, and they all realise that for once they have to pull together—no castrations, no stealing of one another’s wives, no pre-emptive strikes. They have to succeed through co-operation and teamwork. We are living through unique times. Gods have never been much drawn towards teamwork before. They will be on unfamiliar ground. It will make them impossibly tetchy, but also calculatedly cautious. And who will they want to be able to turn to under such disturbed circumstances than the calming, loving, gentle touch of us womenfolk? You may not be much of a goddess, Morgay, but by god you are a woman, every inch of you, and there are very few gods—male, female or Hermaphrodite—who do not appreciate that. And I am the old dragon who is backing you up. Together, we can certainly take on any male god and win. However, the women still need to be watched.” She raised her eyebrow in a reverential salute to the subtlety and cunning of women.

And from all the stories that are told about them, I am sure that I will soon be agreeing with her. All the servants tell me that Hera can be a right bitch when riled, and that Inanna may be sexy and charming and all that to the men, but always to a purpose, and she is incredibly, spectacularly and death-defyingly headstrong. What she wants, she gets, if she has to go to the furthest corners of the cosmos to get it. Nobody, but nobody gets in her way or cows her. Freyja is a

bit scary too, they say, a sort of Northern Ice Queen Athene. Luckily, there won't be too many women around, if you discount all my fellow mystical, misty-eyed Celtic ladies who will be hovering around feyly thinking our own thoughts which we never share with anyone outside our magic circle. The soothsayers have told me unanimously, and I have seen five of them, that I will have particular problems with Sheela Na Gig. I surely did not need a soothsayer, never mind five of them, to tell me that. She is trouble, that woman, and all too often in my direction because I invariably give as good as I get, and as bad as she deserves. However, everyone has been at pains to assure me that all will work out well, even if my one and only temple ends up getting bashed around a bit.

So what did they promise me to take on this job? Gold? The man of my choice? Promotion up the hierarchy of the gods? You are joking. Prospects. They offered me prospects, the cheapest currency there is. I say "they" without actually knowing who they are, or if there is a "they". If I knew that, I would know who to turn to when things go horribly wrong. Mama-Pacha is one of "they", of course, and I am glad to have her on my side. She really is a lovely lady, and a great worker of the room, the eternal high society hostess, a kind word for everyone, a touch on the arm, a confidence, and a dagger invisibly tucked inside her mind for ready use in crises. The Dagda is also one of "they". He is pure charm, with his Oirish drawl, twinkly, playful eyes, and suspicious bulge which I couldn't shake my attention away from. "Morgay, darling, you are a natural for this. With your looks and intelligence, old Mama's cunning, and my charm, we'll have them all eating out of our hands. And what a great opportunity for you! Rubbing shoulders with the rulers of the cosmos, at their beck and call, dependent on you for their every need, privy to their intimate thoughts and dealings, an eavesdropper on the greatest events of our future history. That creates a relationship, you know. They will remember you forever. You will have such power and influence. Admit it, you are an ambitious young thing, aren't you? And this is your opportunity to shoot straight for the top. Every great name will be there. It will be like Hollywood without the coke."

Without the coke maybe, but I can already see some pretty suspicious substances being wheeled in. God knows what they are, and they certainly do. Their personal assistants have been stalking the village for days, staking things out, manoeuvring themselves into poll position on behalf of their masters, poised to negotiate that all-elusive temporary nirvana and to strike the deal. They have all been itching to get at me since their several arrivals, but Mama wouldn't let them. "Leave the poor girl alone, you scum," she barked at the first one. "Touch her before Tuesday evening, and I'll fry you." She didn't actually transform in front of them, but everyone is aware of her powers. "Frying" is not a metaphor.

Then the Dagda wandered in and put his great bulky, hairy arms around their shoulders. "Come on, darlings," he schmoozed. "Cut us a little slack here.

We are all doing our best, and we all know that will never be good enough.” He roared to the trees on that one, an all-inclusive chuckle-along of a laugh. “And keep your paws off the lovely lady here.” He spans me a gigantic, conspiratorial smile. “She is our most precious jewel. Your gods are going to love her. Quite a few already do. Zeus calls her his ‘Beloved’, and he has quite an eye, you know. Not to mention a temper. Between you and me, I wish he would calm down a bit. Don’t quote me, but he has been in a right lather for years now. This tension thing is really bugging him. He should cool down and have a beer or thirty, but he is not that sort of guy. Can’t relax. Anyway, what I am really trying to say is that it would be very unwise to annoy him, and if you upset Morgay here, he will be on your case like a whippet in a charity race, I promise you.”

So they had indeed left me alone, only pausing every few minutes to scrutinise me and to measure their time. I do not know when evening starts officially, but whenever they deem it to be, I will be open season.

Talking of the which, I saw Rufus hanging around here a few minutes ago. He can sense when I am distressed, and points his perky little face up at me, a huge smile on the jaw line, reassuring me that life is just a game, one that with enough good humour and preposterous luck, we may well win.

People ask me where I found him, and what my relationship is with him. He is clearly not simply a pet. More like a prophet, and a sage, and a wise counsellor, and a joker, a companion to keep me anchored. I do not tell them of course. It adds to the mystery, and there is nothing the gods appreciate more than a mystery they cannot penetrate. It eats at them, and it nourishes them.

“I used to keep a dog once,” Jove informed me. That was all he said.

What has that got to do with anything? Rufus is not a dog, he is a coeurl. And what if Jove did have a dog? What is that to me, and how does it help me to know that?

Jove turned back on me. “I can read your thoughts,” he said. “Tttt. Tttt. Never go there again.” He then marched off.

I relayed the conversation to Mama-Pacha. She seemed totally unconcerned. She smiled conspiratorially. “I am surprised you got a word out of him,” she confided. “He is usually a stickler for hierarchy, unless he feels like whacking someone. I doubt that he actually read your thoughts, by the way. At best, he is normally only interested in his own, and scarcely those nowadays. He is mostly off with the fairies, poor old dear. Now Zeus is another matter. If that had been Zeus you were speaking with, we would have to do some rapid repair work, not only because he is one of your sponsors, but also because he is as quick as a switchblade. There again, he would never say anything as obscure as that. He prides himself on being exactly to the point. What does Rufus think?” she added.

“Rufus?” I replied. “He is a coeurl.”

Mama-Pacha eyed me appraisingly, being careful to make sure that I understood that I was under surveillance for those several moments. “Yes,



dear,” she observed, “and so are you. Don’t tell me that a coeurl cannot talk. Keep things straight with me.”

It was the closest we have come to cross words.

Luckily, not all the gods are attending the conference, or congress, as some of them are calling it. A congress is a coming together, and a conference is where you share ideas, plot and plan. You can have a conference without physically being in the same place, and a congress without swapping notes.

This event is more than either of these ideas really. To all appearances, it is simply another scheduled ritual get-together, a forum for the gods to celebrate old times, to re-build alliances, and to reassert their dominance over the Earths, as they always do. However, even I, who have always been content to rest on the periphery of divine politics, realise that this time the stakes are higher than they have ever been. While the majority of the gods may still claim to prefer peace, the momentum is building towards inevitable war, simply because the gods collectively cannot resist igniting Earthly conflict as a displacement activity for their own pathologically aggressive and incendiary natures. It is their version of bread and circuses to have the pleasure of watching gladiatorial armies on the Earths hacking each other to pieces, and over recent times, these displays have become ever more spectacular, and potentially ruinous. It cannot be denied that most of the gods are pugilists, simmering for a fight which, by convention and constitution, must take place vicariously.

The Finnish gods have decided to more or less boycott the conference en masse. Ukopo and Akka want no part in an event that they regard as having such a perilous and inflammatory potential. Lempo, of course, has defied them, smelling the sweet incense of disarray and despair. Nowadays, he tends to pose as an elder statesman among the gods, but gods have long memories, almost the longest that there are, and nobody trusts him. At the first sign of personal adversity, he will regress into his habitual refuge of sneak and grass. He will be the number one witness for the prosecution, the one who helped set it all in motion, and the one to triumph from putting it all to rest again. I have received firm orders from the Dagda in his case—to lodge him in the smallest mansion with Loki, in the hope that they will bug each other into paralysis, or hatch ludicrously overblown tricks which will be easy to spot and to dowse. Loki has heard about this, and is furious. Lempo is no less outraged. I have seen them stomping around in a small circle of two, cursing revenge, and scorning that “gerontocracy of old farts” for failing to recognise their undoubted talents.

“We are bad friends and worse enemies,” Loki seethed.

“Too right,” Lempo replied. They hugged each other in solidarity, until Loki’s broach pin stabbed Lempo’s chest, there was an atrocious howl, and they started frenziedly wrestling each other like drunkards.

The Dagda gave a sage nod.

The Chinese, the Japanese, the Indian (and indeed all of the Asian) gods have also resolved to absent themselves. They fear that their presence might prove provocative to the Western gods who are zealous of their historic rights and privileges as the ‘top gods’, upon whose status the Asian gods are encroaching with their worldly gains, a competitive thrust which could intimidate the Western gods into declaring war against them. You have to consider what happens on the Earths as being rather like a chess game. All the action may ostensibly take place on the board, but the winning and losing is done by the players themselves, who are both passionate and ruthless about winning.

The middle-European god, Byelobog has preferred to take himself to a quiet place to pray for mankind. His arch-rival, Chernobog, on the other hand, was one of the first to arrive here. He is an advocate of total war as total sport, and just loves it whenever the spice of genocide is added. I suggested to the Dagda that I lodge him with Loki and Lempo, a proposal that the Dagda instantly refuted. “Don’t you dare,” he said. “Chernobog has a brain and, as it is not a very nice one, we don’t want him to have any more allies than we can help.”

Osiris is also standing well clear. He knows what it is like to be torn apart. He, Maat and Thoth are battenning down the hatches, awaiting the inevitable flood of dead souls to cast judgment upon. Whatever the official line, the gods of the underworld sense that they are about to become both very important and hopelessly over-worked as it is rumoured that every creature who has ever lived in the cosmos has now returned to it in this fateful fulcrum of time. Some of the more observant gods take this unprecedented phenomenon as a warning that the Living God is anticipating another war which will provide him with an opportunity, or a pretext, to end the worlds altogether.

Indeed, the Living God is present in every pore of this conference, even before it has begun. Some of the gods deride him as the ‘Dying God’ for his penchant for self-sacrifice and his love for all living creatures, yet they fear him nonetheless as the potential source of their own destruction. He created them, He empowered them, maybe He can destroy them or at least strip them of their powers, which amounts to the same thing.

In truth, the gods do not understand the Living God. His precepts are not only impenetrable, but curiously counter-intuitive for those who have constructed their whole lives around the single purpose of the exercise of power. God conjured them into being so that they in turn could create and rule. Why would He insist that these small, defenceless, mortal, ignorant and lowly creatures should one day become the absolute rulers of the Earth? The gods are inherently hierarchical. The Living God is inherently holistic.

For now, and indeed since forever, the Living God has chosen not to act directly to intervene in the cosmos. He has preferred to empower, to influence and to persuade. However, many of the gods believe that His reign is imminent. This makes them nervous, to say the least, even desperate. When his reign

starts, theirs will inevitably end. They now have two enemies, the Living God above and the living creatures below. And, as ever, fear provokes the desire for destruction, for absolute dominion. It is a differential survival strategy. “I will survive. Your only chance of survival is to be on my side. It is only a chance, but it is the only one you have.”

I think it is evening. I see the vultures flocking towards me. Some are breaking into a hop and a run. Rufus is watching me from a rock at a safe distance, the other side of the crowd. Soon he will turn tail and seek news.



## *Chapter 5*

### *Testimony of Sarah Harding:*

Holiday time, and I cannot wait.

More precisely, I cannot wait to see Paul.

I think of him, and I smile, which is probably unfortunate because he is not that demonstrative a soul, and always negotiating. It always feels unwise to hand him all my cards, but I cannot live my life in any other way. I cannot lie.

And we have had some fabulous times together over the last few months, since we finally decided to share each other's minds and bodies. To be honest and, as you know already, I always am, I was not expecting anything to happen between us. We met each other two years ago on holiday in Freyrargues when he and his family came up to the Château for lunch and, for me at least, it was like a puzzle solved. He gave not the slightest indication that anything remotely as deep was occurring to him, although we were almost inseparable, the three of us, the third being his brother, Michael, who is really sweet.

Then we met up again last year. I had thought about him quite a lot over the year, even fantasised about him a few times, but I was not in the least prepared for the intensity of my reaction when I saw him. I not only felt weak at the knees, I actually went weak at the knees and collapsed in front of him, which was extremely embarrassing. I had to pretend that I suffered from a damaged ligament I incurred playing tennis, which was even true, but irrelevant to what happened. Paul pretended to believe me, although his expression suggested that he had immediately understood what had happened. Michael, on the other hand, kept asking after my damaged ligament the whole holiday in a most solicitous manner, each time rubbing my lie into my conscience.

Still, nothing significant happened last year either. That may not be entirely true. Many significant things happened, I suspect, but they were barely differentially significant developments. Again, we were inseparable. I talked a lot, matched by Michael. In fact, we both gushed the same vacuous rubbish

which seemed like a great adventure in mutual discovery at the time, and seems entirely lame now. Michael asked me all the questions I was eager to answer in order to reveal myself in my quivering nakedness to Paul, questions that Paul would never bother to ask. A year later, I cannot remember a single conversation we had in any detail, nor could I a week after returning home.

Paul lives in Tervuren, on the outskirts of Brussels. I live in Clapham, four miles from the centre of London and, despite the existence of some very fast trains and planes that could connect us within hours if we chose, I was not expecting us ever to get together outside the South of France. Freyrargues was where we had these idyllic rendez-vous, and my assumption was that our relationship was not appropriate to any other part of the world. The magic would be gone. We would stand and look at each other and have nothing to say.

Which was exactly as it turned out. Paul suddenly phoned me in April and asked if he could come and stay with us. I said I would be delighted. I would check with Mum and Dad, but I was sure that they would be delighted too.

I was waiting for him on his arrival into King's Cross. He instantly saw me, smiled, nodded, and strode over. As he approached me, he stopped, still holding his case, and stared at me. I knew exactly what he meant, because I was entirely at my ease staring back. It was as if we both had x-ray eyes, and we were checking each other out for authenticity. I am not sure how long we stood there, but I would guess that our stand-off lasted perhaps two minutes, which is a ridiculously long time for two people to stand frozen in a frenzied London terminus. I think a few people even stopped to watch us, but it is only an impression. I was concentrating 1,000% on Paul, and he was devouring me. It was the most profoundly romantic and erotic moment of my life.

Then Paul placed his suitcase carefully on the ground, and hurled himself at me, crashing his whole being into me, like atoms colliding, triggering an ecstatic explosion. We hung onto each other for at least ten minutes, rubbing each other's backs, nestling our faces into each other's shoulders, enveloping each other's bodies. At the end of ten minutes, or however long it was, we had still not said a word to each other. We simply propped each other up compellingly in the middle of the station walkway.

Even then we did not let go of each other. We merely parted our bodies, and held each other by the elbows at forearm's length. By this time I was crying silently. Paul wiped away my tears with both thumbs, and kissed me forcefully between his hands.

Finally, he said "You are not going to fall down on me, are you?"

"Not this time," I reassured him, "although I would like to."

He put his arms round my waist and I wilted deliberately into his grip. "I can't hold you," he whispered urgently, starting to lose his balance. With his wobbling loss of steadiness, I could not regain my balance either, and we both tumbled to the floor, Paul ending up on top of me, his groin pressed against

mine. I flopped back and burst out laughing. He very quickly scabbled to his feet, and offered me his hand to haul me up. I was not ready for sanity to be restored, and I lay there giggling, with Paul leaning over me looking shiftily embarrassed. “Come on, Sarah,” he almost hissed. “I think we had better go before we get ourselves arrested for disorderly conduct.”

I waited for the spell to dissipate, which took another minute or so, and then I got up. “Come on. We have to take the underground to Clapham Common.”

“OK,” he said, and we linked arms.

When we got to the house, Mum and Dad were waiting for us. They knew Paul from Freyrargues, and they greeted him like a much-awaited relative, which felt just right. God knows what sort of silly grin I had on my face. I was absolutely swaying and dancing with euphoria.

“Sarah will show you your room,” Mum said. “Take your time. We’ll still be here when you are ready, and, if not, help yourself to anything you can find.”

I think she may have meant me. I was quite ready to redefine her invitation to be me anyway.

In fact, we did spend a few minutes rolling around each other, kissing on his bed, and then we returned to the sitting room to be polite. We had a formal meal, well formal-informal as Mum and Dad are never that formal, and then they politely excused themselves to go to bed.

We talked and kissed for a long time in the sitting room. I knew that neither Mum nor Dad would dream of interrupting us. After a couple of hours, and nearly a couple of bottles of wine, mostly drunk by Paul, I whispered enticingly (I hoped) “I’ll be back in a second.”

When I returned, Paul said “And?”

“We have to wait about twenty minutes.”

Paul looked puzzled. “For what?”

“You’ll see.”

Paul’s eyes searched into his eyebrows. “What would we wait twenty minutes for? What takes twenty minutes?”

“You’ll never guess,” I assured him, “so don’t try.”

“Twenty minutes . . . .”

“Stop guessing,” I teased him, and leant forward into him to suppress his powers of speech. I am so used to the ritual, that I knew intuitively when twenty minutes were up. “Come on,” I encouraged him, pulling him off the sofa. “Come and see what takes twenty minutes.”

I led him downstairs, at which point he must have guessed because the sound of running water from the bathroom is quite loud as you go down the stairs. I felt him hesitate an instant, so I jerked him forward, and dragged him into the bathroom.

The bathroom is the pride and joy of the house. It is the biggest single room (ignoring the sitting room-dining room, which are two rooms knocked into one),

and features a huge circular bath, enough for four adults to swim in mud-flapper style. There is an extremely comfortable sofa against the wall, and a tremendous view over Clapham Common if you leave the curtains open, as we nearly always do. It has very discreet lighting, but I had already lit a whole battery of candles, and half a dozen pink ones that were floating in the water. From my description, you probably consider this all a bit kitsch and hackneyed, but even to my sceptical, manipulative assessment, it actually looked stunning. I started taking my clothes off, and did not stop for him to reciprocate. He stood there with his mouth wide open, totally forgetting to look cool. I eased myself as elegantly as I could into the water and turned to watch him. It took him quite a time to come to, and shake himself into removing his own clothes, but eventually he did, and we carried on very much more intimately than we had done on the sofa upstairs, only breaking off momentarily to swoosh away the candles that sidled up to join in.

It was as good as I could possibly have wished for. It was perfect, in fact.

Since then, I have visited Tervuren three times, and Paul returned to London for a long weekend when Mum and Dad were tactfully away. We never left the house all weekend, and only got dressed to take Paul back to King's Cross. Paul's parents have a second office-house in Tervuren which they use for work and projects. It has a couple of spare bedrooms, and no bath at all, a lack which is almost compensated for by a large open shower. We slept there each time, and followed a ritual whereby we got up (late) and wandered into the town square for coffee and cakes. Well, I always had a cake; Paul does not have a particularly sweet tooth, so he invariably had a croissant. We would then go up to Paul's parents' main house for lunch, take the tram into Brussels, or drive to one of the scenic cities surrounding Brussels—Gent/Gand, Leuven/Louvain, Brugge/Bruges, Antwerpen/Anvers, Namen/Namur—all with the same extraordinarily ornate confectioned Statsal, cathedral, square and cafés. The weather was perfect each time, too, so it could not have been more romantic.

There was a moment in Leuven, in one of the side-streets packed with restaurants, that I almost asked Paul to marry me, whether as a challenge, a joke, or just to see how he would react, I am not sure. It was so tempting, he was sauntering along so unsuspectingly, it felt so right. But I didn't, and nor did he propose to me.

Maybe it will happen amid the garrigue of the Languedoc instead. That will do. Cathy and Heathcliff, Midi-style, and hopefully with a happier ending.

Making a proposal is such a shotgun thing. You blurt it out and you pull the trigger to shatter all that has gone so well before. Either your proposal is accepted, and you prepare warily for commitment, or it is refused, and from that second your relationship begins to dissolve. Everything will be different, whichever way.

Is Paul afraid to spoil everything we have built, is it simply not yet time, or is he not interested? Is he asking the same questions of me in his thoughts? Sooner or later, one of us is going to have to try it.

We are all flying out today. I arrive in Nîmes from Luton at 14:10. Paul and his brother arrive in Nîmes at 12:15, from Charleroi. As Nîmes is a tiny 'Ryanair airport', it will only take them twenty minutes from landing to hiring car, so they are planning to drop in on the Gravegeals at the Château Roumanières in Garrigues, near Sommières, to pick up some cases of their favourite wines—Le Garric for quality, and their 2 a bottle cooking wine to mix with crème de mûres for punchy quantity and party games (I look forward to those). They will then retrace their steps, and be there to collect me when I land. And after that it is Le Château de Freyrargues, and who knows what to follow? I am sure it is going to be fun. Everything tells me that this is when we will formalise our relationship, maybe forever.





## Chapter 6

### *Testimony of the Archangel Lucifer:*

And so the conference of the gods begins, and the worlds end.

You may ask how we know this, and I can only tell you that we don't, not in the way that you attempt to know things. We merely sense developments, and respond to requests for help. You like what you call 'proof'. "Where is your proof that this will happen?" you would ask us. And to that question, we have no answer. Nonetheless, our intuitions are usually accurate, and certainly more accurate, not least because they are less self-serving, than your proof, which is merely that two or more things happen coincidentally, with a plausible story to link them together.

All of us archangels, and many angels beside, believe that the worlds will end—not the whole universe, but all or most of the planets within it. If so many of us believe that it will happen, it is almost inevitably so. Will this be a self-fulfilling prophecy? No, we have no power to end the worlds ourselves, other than those accorded to us by the Living God. Nor have we the power to create new worlds, except by a delegation from that same power. The gods designed and created the worlds, and they will surely end them. Who will replace them with what we hope to be a paradise, we cannot say. Maybe that will be our role, should the Living God determine that it be so.

And how do I feel about the imminent destruction of the worlds, and especially of the Earths?

This is what I wanted, wasn't it, the relief from suffering for all life forms, the closing down of the experiment, and tighter controls on any future ones?

So, my prayers are being answered and, as is ever the case, I am tremulous about the results because I know how terrible this next sequence of events will be.

"They will only suffer once, which will happen to them anyway." That was a glib statement, wasn't it, that I made before all of the angels?

And in the meantime, I have grown to love the world, as it is. I have been among these creatures almost since the beginning, and they are quite extraordinary as they endure, explore, love, hope, strategise, avoid, attack, relax and adapt.

For some, life is tragically short, a matter of seconds. They are born, and then they die, too fragile, too deformed or too unlucky to live. For others, life proves to be tragically long. Many suffer excruciatingly slow deaths, wasted by disease, crippled by wounds, tormented by pain.

Yet nearly all show great courage and almost absurd resilience. Without these sufferings, their most noble characteristics would never emerge, so regrettably I have to concede the point to Michael, maybe to the creator gods as well, that suffering does contribute something of great value to the worlds. Without it, a significant tranche of possibilities would have been missed.

But at what price does this learning come?

Is a long history of suffering justified by a future eternity of paradise? And then we have to add in the risk factor. How certain are we that we can achieve this paradise?

Ironically, if ever there were a case for arguing for continuing the experiment, it should perhaps be put now. While many endure lives as brutish and enslaving as they have ever been, many human beings at least do not have to pray for food every day. They may not know how to cover their debts, or how to help their children, but there is only an outside risk of starvation.

So, while the whole is improving, why should we not continue this trajectory until we approach perfection—the triumph of evolution over revolution? It has worked many times on the Earths before. It is built into the genes of adaptation.

Michael now argues, at least in front of the angels, that the Living God has learnt everything He needs to know to design a foolproof paradise on one Earth. Does He? How can Michael be sure? You can only be certain if you have set such a world in train, and left it to run for an eon or two to see if it veers away from the path of perfection.

There again, how can I be sure that such an experiment has not indeed been running quietly on a distant planet for thousands, or even millions, of years? I have been down here, buried in the push and shove of these worlds. Perhaps the Living God has been cooking up the ideal confection out of the sight of us angels, or at least unknown to some of us angels. And maybe Michael is privy to this experiment. I would not put it past Michael and his smug grin.

I am sure that no paradise has ever been created on these Earths, even for a few moments. Utopian societies tend to be the most damnable of all. As they say, revolutions end up eating their children. So you can count the would-be paradises by counting the most notorious villains. They have different names in different dimensions. In one it was Churchill who impaled all his enemies,

in another it was Gustavus Adolphus. In a third, it was Hannibal. The names and identities do not matter. It is a given that individuals explore many *modi vivendi* across the different dimensions. Hitler, notorious in one dimension as a genocidal dictator, was a great composer in another, a celebrated landscape gardener in a third, a fish monger in a fourth, a lawyer in a fifth, a beggar in a sixth, and the father of seventeen children in his seventh. Nietzsche was a *maitre d'hôtel* in one, a hairdresser in another, a librarian in a third, a philosopher in a fourth, a computer programmer in a fifth, a trillionaire in a sixth, and a chef in his seventh. There again, Mozart was a legendary composer in all the dimensions I have ever explored, and he died a pauper at around the age of thirty-three in every single one of them. He learnt to perfect his music, but never his life. “Didn’t they ever cross the species barrier?” you may be asking yourselves. Absolutely they did. I have broached this explanation by using human incarnations as my examples, however, as the dimensions of the Earths stretch into infinity, you can be sure that you can be incarnated as many other creatures, and indeed as the full spectrum of vegetation besides.

For instance, Stalin was a stand-up comedian, a teacher, a bookie, a trawler captain, a dictator, a teacher again, and a railway clerk in his human dimensions. He was also, as best I can make out, a praying mantis, a bat, a cockroach, a barn owl, a sloth, an E.Coli bacterium, a cayman, a warbler, an ant, a norovirus, a toad, a cat, a dog, a rabbit, a horse and a man-eating tiger, to cite but a selection of his lives.

Some humans who believe in reincarnation suggest that there is a hierarchy of lives that you climb, from an amoeba at one end to a woman or a Brahmin at the other, and that, according to your virtues, you are promoted or demoted. I am afraid that this is not correct. In order to generate the maximum of differentiation, all incarnations are randomised. You get to be virtually everything across all your dimensions. However, being a human being is the only incarnation you repeat—don’t ask me why. It is this, more than anything, that separates out human beings from all other species.

What terrifies me about human beings is that you inherit a level of suffering and then you exacerbate it through the wilful choices that you make. You insist on adopting the very course of action that will eventually cause misery beyond your imagination.

Fear, that is what clouds your judgments—fear that people will take away what you have; fear that others will have more than you; fear that you will lose everything; fear that your honour will be lost or violated. You make it up, and you dish it out, often worst to yourselves.

Many fears need to be pricked in order to bring you to a clearer understanding of the situation you are in. You can do this by deliberately bringing about that which you most fear. What you usually find is that it is very much less terrifying in reality than you imagined it to be. You are capable of

adapting to almost everything. You become anaesthetised to fear as you become oblivious to pleasure. The thing you coveted the most often becomes something of scant consideration shortly afterwards, and the thing you most feared, when it materialises, sets you on a new and fruitful path.

Generalisations, generalisations. Both success and fear can shove people down a helter-skelter of events you can never escape from, except by death—bankruptcy, homelessness, starvation, prostitution, terror, disease. It is often a question of whether you feel, at the bottom of your soul, lucky or determined to be lucky. On that will depend your experiences at other times in other dimensions, as a certain amount of knowledge is carried both forward and across. I have known some who have remained abject creatures across all the dimensions, incapable of making a wise decision. With a hopeful attitude you will make your own luck sooner or later. Opportunities are always there. The worlds lay all their tools at your feet. But some just kick them away, too afraid to pick them up. Equally, I have known those who bounce from dimension to dimension in relentless self-fulfilment, never doubting that the dimension they are in will prove to be their best yet playground.

I have earned my disquieting reputation by trying to boot the self-destroyers into a happier orbit, usually through the funnel of their projected misery. Supposedly, Old Nick, as they confusingly call me, never misses an opportunity to lure people away from the path of good fortune, by dint of relentless and artful trickery and malice. Do I indeed? Since when do the worlds require a devil when they contain so many reckless human beings? I think that the technical term is ‘over-determination’—explaining a problem by resorting to a complex answer when it is already adequately explained by the obvious one. The devilry inherent in the human mind precludes the need for any separate devil. I am the one trying to sort things out for you, albeit sometimes via counter-intuitive routes.

Don’t expect me to seduce you into evil ways. Only expect me sometimes to force you to confront yourself. Lucifer sheds light. My actions and provocations are in my name.

Michael is calling me. He is planning our preparation for the Universal Dénouement, as he terms it, the time when the knot of life gets slipped and the ropes are melded seamlessly. At the propitious moment, we have to untie the knot that holds the worlds together in their homeostasis, and then we angels have to cling onto them until they are delivered, safe and sound, into paradise. That is, if we have any role to play in any of this.

However, my guess is that it is not going to be we who untie the knot. I would place a generous bet that the demiurges will be doing that, and without much, if any, thought of ensuring the safe future of the planets. I don’t know this; none of us does. We all have to wait the unfolding, or indeed unravelling, of events in agile anticipation.

Michael is appearing strained. He is probably wishing that all would happen now, so that we could just get on with it and determine what assistance we can provide. Gabriel is with him, calmer, watchful. I have always found him to be a wise counsel, wise enough never to want to direct events, anyway. He rarely opens his mouth, which makes it surprising that he is always depicted as the messenger of the Living God, although the Living God rarely says much either, so perhaps they are well matched. Gabriel's propensity towards silence lends him an additional veneer of acuity, an astuteness that he indeed seems to impart to anyone of us he comes into contact with, which is probably why Michael values his counsel.

"Gabriel."

"Lucifer," said accompanied by a wry smile from Gabriel, ending in a charming boyish grin.

"Are you here for the duration?"

"We all are."

"What are your plans?"

"What do you expect to happen?"

"I haven't a clue, except for the obvious."

"So no plans then?"

"No. I'll play it by ear."

"Really?" That is another thing Gabriel does. He asks a lot of questions, and avoids providing definitive answers himself.

"So you have no advice for Noah this time round then?"

"Noah is a sea horse, a shark, a dassie, a hawk, a fruit fly, a weasel, a jackal, an elephant, the King of Osttormia, an architect, a professional athlete, a courier, and a pot plant. You see, I have checked him out. What advice would you have me give him?"

"I'll look out for him."

"Is there any help you need from us?" Michael cuts in suddenly, his frustration in the face of impending action and weighty decisions bursting through.

"No, Michael. Like Gabriel, I am watching and waiting."

"Are all your angels in position?"

"They are fairly evenly distributed, I believe. They are determined to do their best."

"As we all are," Michael assures me.

"So how certain are you that this calamity is going to happen?"

"Certain," replies Gabriel.

I wait for more information, but Gabriel has spoken all he plans to divulge on the matter.

"I am convinced it will happen," Michael assures me. "We all are."

I give a deep sigh.

“None of us is looking forward to it,” Michael assures me. “The demiurges might be relishing the prospect in their usually blood-thirsty way, but they are the only ones who are entirely unaware of where their decisions are leading them. They are under the delusion that everything will be resolved, with only the usual number of lives being sacrificed to get there. If they knew that the end of the worlds was nigh, it might shake them to their senses, but I doubt it. They are too entrenched in their own interests and their own causes. The gods of the developing world are determined to have a showdown which they will win, and the gods of the Western world are determined not to give an inch. It is lousy diplomacy and it will inevitably lead to the war to end all wars.”

“Is that what the Living God really wants?”

“We don’t know, but we are guessing so,” Michael replies. “He may merely be resigned to it.”

“He may have planned it all along,” Gabriel adds. “The ability to destroy the Earths is an appropriate trigger for the Earths to be destroyed. It has a certain poetic closure to it.”

“So there has been no direct word from the Living God, then?”

“Lucifer,” Gabriel replies. “You are the only one of us who has ever spoken directly to the Living God, if that is who He was.”

“You guys always seem to be in the know.”

“That is a different matter.”

I wait for an elaboration, but Gabriel says nothing more.

“Back to our posts, then,” I declare. “Farewell. May the Living God be with you.”

“As He is with us all,” Gabriel replies.

Michael simply gives me a short, dismissive gesture, and swarms away, leaving Gabriel to watch me like a sphinx as I transform back to human form.



## Chapter 7

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

Rufus is sitting on the back of my chair, his head on my shoulder.

He is truly a stunning beast in that position, almost godlike, although most gods think I am extremely foolish to allow him so close to me.

“Coecurls are not to be trusted,” they opine.

“I trust him,” I reply.

“Do you realise the diseases they carry?” Loki quizzed me. Being Loki, this might have been a trick question.

“I haven’t suffered from any of them yet,” I countered. “Rufus is a very special coeurl—god-friendly.”

“That would be a very special coeurl indeed,” Hel retorted. “They are devastating even in their own lands. For some creatures, just looking at them is enough. There are some gods here who are distinctly nervous of them. Beware, Morgay, or I will be welcoming you prematurely into my kingdom. Having divine bits to you may not be enough to protect you. I would appreciate the company, but I advise you to bide your time before knocking on my door. You don’t want to end up fully human, do you?”

Mama-Pacha let slip the other day that Rufus has even caused her, at Zeus’ insistence, to draw up a succession plan. For that reason, I am obliged to keep a certain Hisakitaimisi, a god even more obscure than I am, but American, informed of everything I do and everything I see and hear. If Rufus bites me, Hisakitaimisi will be in my chair even before I draw my last breath, no doubt leaning over me shouting “Is there anything you haven’t told me yet?” I have to spend almost all my spare time recording every happening, and he responds with short, crisp remarks, suggesting that I am light on detail, and inaccurate in my observations. Well, if Rufus sees me off first, I hope he tackles Hisakitaimisi next.

Despite all the fears surrounding him, Rufus is an angel, albeit not literally. He has uncanny hearing, and extraordinary intelligence. He tells me exactly what is going on, the plots and counter-plots, the intrigues, the passions and affairs, the grudges and the moans. I think that some of the gods are quite taken aback by how fast I catch onto things, depriving them of the chance to bellow or squirt their disapproval at me. Minor gods, such as I, are really very lowly creatures here, held mostly in disdain, and only dangling a sliver above human beings and other living creatures in the divine hierarchy.

I may have led a relatively sheltered existence overseeing the borderlands, but I have never seen such vindictiveness or jealousy as among these big-hitter gods. They are tireless in pursuit of vengeance, and in digging up excuses for it. They also dream up a constant stream of tricks to play on each other and on everyone else who comes to mind, to keep us all hopping and confused, and to seize the initiative the one from the other. The trickster gods themselves, like Loki and Eshu, live on the milder edge of things. They are only seeking a few chuckles, and trying to keep things light.

Rufus steps down into my lap and snuggles up against me. He is just so beautiful. His head is noble and sleek, delicately featured. His eyes are wide and deep brown. His fur is midnight black and velvety, contouring the holes dotted all over his body. You can feel into those holes. There is nothing there. They are not illusory. There are no visible internal organs at all. How do coeurls live? How do they die? They are like designer ornaments that move.

How they kill I understand by now. They are inherently poisonous to nearly all life forms. Their poison paralyses their prey without deadening its senses, keeping it fresh until they are ready to eat it. Their jaws slice effortlessly through even metal and concrete, and their minds are beyond psychopathic, should they be trained as such. They are the favourite guard and attack animals of the Western gods, greatly loved and slightly feared. That is one of the reasons why the gods are disconcerted by Rufus' presence around me. Should I not be dead? Should I not at least be paralysed? Are the coeurls turning soft? Are the lower orders becoming resistant to their venom? Could even the human race be immune to their bite, and therefore finally in a position to stretch beyond the gods' control?

I love my Rufus. I am not sure I could ever love a pet again that wasn't collandered.

Rufus angles his face up at me. He speaks in a surprisingly gravely voice, wheezy, vibrating. It is the only inelegant thing about him, and yet intriguing, like having Edith Piaf or Eartha Kitt curled up on your lap, reborn as a Siberian tiger.

"Be careful of Ares," he says. "He wants you. And don't trust the Dagda."

"The Dagda? But he is sweet."

"Yes, he works at it."

"You are sure I cannot trust him?"



“Positive.”

“What is he planning on doing to me?”

“I don’t know, but he is planning, I can tell. Coeurl’s instinct, and we are feral. We feel exactly what is happening. Undercurrents rip through us. You cannot imagine.”

“Is that why you are so dangerous? You are so afraid?”

“Not afraid. Irritated. It is infuriating being shaken by malicious thoughts. You want to rip their throats out for their temerity. I do not trust the Dagda. He keeps watching me, and you. He cannot make a move before he has answered the question that is bugging him, and resolved the riddle of what you are really doing here, and he is trying to, I promise you. But Ares will come after you first, and I suspect that he will be acting on orders too. There is someone around here who wants you dead.”

“In order to wreck the conference?” I ask, uneasy. After all, surrounded by major gods, all of whom can kill me with their merest thought, I am absolutely vulnerable and exposed.

“It has nothing to do with the conference. It has to do with you, and possibly with me as well. Someone is suspicious of us.”

“And you have no idea of who it is?”

“Not anyone obvious, I would guess. Not Zeus, not one of the creator gods, not one of the higher gods. This is somebody else, far away. I can only feel it faintly.”

“Far away? So it is one of the gods who are not here. What would any of them have against us? Why would they even care?”

“It may not be a god at all.”

“A human then?”

“No, nothing as ill-equipped as a human.” He laughs. Yes, coeurls can laugh too.

“An angel?”

“Yes, I would say it could be an angel, but it is only a guess.” And he places his head on his paws, careful not to catch my leg with his teeth, and nestles himself to sleep.

So I now know enough to be terrified, but not enough to defend myself. Time to write my report to Hisakitaimisi. “If I die, it will not be because of Rufus,” I want to write. I stop myself. Best not to be paranoid. Hisakitaimisi is hyped up enough already. I haven’t the time to answer a million of his questions, which I won’t be able to answer anyway. I will keep my fears to myself, and maybe drop a few hints to Mama-Pacha. Rufus likes her. He enjoys her fiery side. Whenever she threatens to turn into a dragon, he draws closer to her. Coeurls are fearless as well as lethally dangerous.



Perhaps, at this point, I should give you a brief description of where we are.

We are in the Magenta City, as Ilyapa nicknamed our complex the other day, and the name stuck. It is not really a city at all. It is a collection of two thousand mansions which were only erected last week by Hercules, with landscaping by Ahti who conjured up a great magenta sea, with rivers weaving their way down the mountainside, feeding a cascade of refreshing lakes. They always invite a water god to landscape their conference centres.

Each mansion has been individually designed with the proposed resident god in mind, pandering to his or her every desire, not that you would guess that from the truculence of so many of them who complain about each and every luxury. They are a contrary lot. They know that every effort was made to please them, so they are damned if they are going to appreciate all the hard work. As they each have about fifty private rooms, a suite of reception rooms, swimming pools, sports facilities, a yacht on the lake, cosmos-class chefs and clairvoyant service, it takes them some ingenuity to fashion their complaints, but deviant cunning is an inexhaustible resource for them.

“I cannot keep my caviar cooled,” Angra Mainyu challenged me yesterday. Well, he has a reputation for being evil, and nothing seems to cool around him, as well he knows.

“Aw come off it, my old friend,” Thoth chided him. “You know full well that there isn’t a refrigerator in the universe that can hold its own with you. Don’t give the little lady grief. Wait for winter, and try again.”

“Absurd!” Angra Mainyu glared, and stamped off, killing three ducks that got in his way and roasting them.

“There you are, you see,” Thoth called after him. “You are much better suited to eating fast food.”

“It is nothing like as well organised as the last one,” muttered Sekhmet. “It is not your fault, dear, they simply should never put such an inexperienced goddess in charge. I am sure that you are excellent at roaming the fells and persuading them to push out a few subsistence crops, but I have no doubt that you would agree that organising something on this scale is not at all the same thing. No offence meant, naturally.”

“And none taken,” I replied automatically. With Rufus’ warning tingling in my brain, I was being very careful to avoid anything which could be interpreted as provocation, and therefore as an excuse for retaliation.

“Which was the best conference in your experience?” Elegua challenged her.

“I am sure I could not say,” replied Sekhmet, “but it surely isn’t this one. Nothing is in its right place.”

“Nothing is nowhere at all, inevitably,” Elegua responded wryly. “Life is like that.”

“Like what exactly?”

“Like everything it is like.”

“Oh be off with you, Elegua.” Sekhmet waves her hand impatiently, dismissively. “Some of them call what you utter riddles, I call it crap. You try too hard. I can’t be bothered with you.”

“I wish you a pleasant journey then.” Elegua bowed to Sekhmet in a deep courtly gesture, mockery spreading across his face, finishing in a wink added just for me. “I will stay and distract Morgay from her administrative duties. More fun, I am afraid.”

Sekhmet left us, which was foolish of her knowing Elegua’s reputation as she must have done. Elegua chatted to me about nothing in particular for about twenty minutes; twenty minutes of surface conversation with a profoundly threatening undertow; twenty minutes dedicated to Elegua waiting for Sekhmet to come back.

“I cannot find my way,” Sekhmet declared indignantly. It is ridiculous. I was only going a few metres.” She looked like she had been assaulted by a thorn bush.

“Oh well,” Elegua held out his hands. “Most accidents take place close to home.”

“Are you going to show me the way?” Sekhmet demanded.

“That is why Morgay here has placed her beautiful little signs everywhere. To guide us.”

“They are all wrong!” Sekhmet shouted.

“Nobody is right all the time,” Elegua observed. “As long as they point straight, they are never beyond hope. Just turn them in the right direction.”

Sekhmet placed her hands on her hips, and glowered at Elegua. “Elegua, I could kill you!”

“Well, there, actually, no you couldn’t,” he replied. “You probably could not even find me.” And with that he popped into invisibility.

“Please lead me home,” Sekhmet commanded me. So I did, correcting the signs along the way. Not one was pointing in the right direction, and their modified orientation displayed an acute sense of mischief.

Sekhmet did not even thank me for getting her home safely.



The conference was formally opened for business three weeks ago.

Following tradition, the gods each addressed the conference in turn by way of a self-introductory warm-up. Protocol has it that all the gods are of equal status, even including very minor divines like me, although we are usually not invited at all and, as the conference organiser, I am not encouraged to waste any of my valuable time in the main debating hall.

Their addresses were, as ever, mostly interminable because they always insist on listing their parentage, their descendants, their titles, and their achievements in infinite detail.

Zeus was hoping to cut them short this time around, but when you get an old fool like Jove up there, nothing stops him. He just bumbles on. “I, Jove, Jupiter Optimus Maximus Soter, patron deity of the Roman State, Supreme Being of the Archaic Triad, and of the Capitoline Triad, Jupiter Caelestis, Jupiter Fulgurator, Jupiter Laterius, Jupiter Lucetius, Jupiter Pluvius, Jupiter Stator, Jupiter Terminus, Jupiter Terminalus, Jupiter Tonans, Jupiter Victor, Jupiter Summanus, Jupiter Feretrius, Jupiter Brixianus, Jupiter Ladicus, Jupiter Parthinus, Jupiter Partinus, Jupiter Poeninus, Jupiter Solutorius, Jupiter Taranis, Jupiter Uxellinus . . . .” He loves his titles, does Jove,” commented the Dagda. “We begged them not to give him any more, but of course they did. Arse-creepers!”

The orations the gods like best, apart from their own, are those from the gods with a party trick. They clap like lunatics when Apocatequil flips between lightning and the moon. All gods appreciate thunderbolts. Tezcatlipoca’s turn with the smoke and mirrors intrigues them. They have nicknamed him the god of Economics, a study he seems to have taken to his cruel heart. Atai engages the audience in profound discussion as part of her act, and normally manages to foment vigorous debate. And then there is Mama-Pacha, my kindly benefactor and colleague, who transforms herself into a dragon and scorches the assembly.

“Great times,” the Dagda laughed. “Great times.” And Mama-Pacha giggled.

The one who always gets the loudest round of applause is Quetzalcoatl for his invention of chocolate. He does not even have to utter the word. He flourishes his hand in the air flamboyantly as he recounts “. . . . *and then I invented . . . .*”, and all the gods scream out “CHOCOLATE” and become impossibly rowdy and exultant for a few minutes. Cocomama used to do pretty well, too, but cocaine isn’t chocolate. It does, however, wreak havoc with mankind, which is generally regarded as a good thing, especially at the moment. Volcan, naturally, is esteemed for his invention of fire, and Axomamma is appreciated for her potatoes. Hermes tries every now and again to claim that he invented the Post-it Note, and when a heckling god cries out “Liar!”, as one inevitably does, he replies “Yes, and the lyre too!”

Such fun moments were few and far between. Three weeks to introduce themselves, and they have all known each since the dawn of time!

The assembly then got to business except, that, as with any conference, the really interesting stuff was happening well away from the floor of the conference hall. We anticipated this by building rooms wreathed in smoke and wrapped in acoustic shielding materials so strong that you can barely hear yourself speak. However, the gods have preferred to disappear into the woods together

to complete their negotiations. They probably fear that Zeus can overhear them in the whispering rooms we have provided.

“Suspicious lot,” the Dagda exclaimed to Mama-Pacha. “I told you it was a waste of time constructing those things, at least for the intended purpose. Still, they are ideal for trysts. No-one will hear anyone else scream. Keep well away from there, Morgay,” he added, turning to me.

I assured him that I would. I get a sense that we are playing a game with each remark that passes between us, now that Rufus has put me on my guard.

“Give Morgay credit for having some sense,” Mama-Pacha scolded him. “I don’t hire nincompoops, you know. Besides, I would bet that Morgay can defend herself rather better than you would expect. That damned coeurl will see to that.”

“Oh, you have hidden talents, Morgay, do you?” probed the Dagda. “You have a dark side.”

“No, I have no dark side,” I replied.

“I meant as in dark horse,” the Dagda corrected himself.

I shook my shoulders and excused myself.

“Off you go, and keep everyone busy,” the Dagda teased me. “Make yourself indispensable.”

He knew as well as I did that by now all the gods, almost without exception, were negotiating feverishly. Zeus had been receiving one god after another in a Chinese file for days. Jove’s palace has also been popular, but people drop in there more for hedge management, in case by some freak of outcome, he regains his ancient power and influence. There has also been frenzied activity around Gilgamesh which no-one has failed to notice. Gilgamesh is a heroic god, notorious for his dash and flair, and a great favourite of the middle-eastern and developing nations gods. He is an intimate of Olorun who leads the African contingent, and Votan, the fiery Mayan god of war, who is currently representing South America. Indeed, two camps are clearly forming: the “Western Alliance” of the old world, versus the “Future Alliance” of the developing world.

It is all as the Living God predicted. The Western demiurges do not appear to have quite understood the significance of what lies, barely disguised, all around them, or maybe they are playing it cold and cool.

The Future Alliance is about to lay down a challenge. The question is: on what pretext?



## Chapter 8

### *Testimony of David Lambert:*

What do you do when you feel something absolutely, without doubt or hesitation, and no-one else can see it? I have felt that way many times, but only about business and world affairs, and neither of those counts, not really, although if my foresight should ever fill our bank account to overflowing, I might well change my mind.

Rachel has been feeling this way for weeks, and with her it is an issue of critical importance. It is a matter of life and death. She is totally convinced that if the boys fly off to their holidays at Freyrargues, we will never see them again. Actually, what she believes is that the world will end. She doesn't even mind that too much, however she desperately wants us to be together as a family when it does.

What argument or conversation can you have with someone who believes that the world will end at some definitive date on the calendar? Well, it is not that definitive, but it is calculably close to the present. In three weeks' time roughly, after I have to get the car insured (dammit!), and long before Christmas, there will be annihilation.

I am an agnostic on this one. At some point, on some day, maybe the world will end with a bang, or maybe it will slowly splutter into non-existence. Those are the classic health options: you drop dead of a heart attack or you are eased agonisingly out of your life, accompanied by cancer and medication.

Why should the whole world not be like that? Why should the whole world **be** like it?

It is such a momentous potential event that it is almost impossible to imagine, like World War I, and World War II, and Hiroshima, and probably any war that zings around your ears as the earth explodes and you pray manically for the chance to save your family.

So, everything horrendous is impossible and unimaginable, until it happens, and inevitable once it has.

Rachel is certain that the world will soon end and, as she frequently declares, “My intuitions are never wrong.”

I have got used to the fact that Rachel’s prognostications are indeed uncannily accurate, and the boys have been brought up with the fact, which is still not to say that we really believe in her as a clairvoyant. We sort of hope against hope that she is wrong, and end up making excuses for why we ignored her warnings because it was so much more probable that she was mistaken, and yet she fluked it again. I wish I could point to a prophecy of Rachel’s that did not come true. Either she has a formula, or she has insight. As her predictions are mostly on the lower needle position side of gloomy, we all hope that she is stark raving bonkers, but we know that she is not.

I am afraid that we have to accept that the world will probably indeed end within a few weeks, but we don’t want it to.

So, the boys decided to go ahead and jet down to Freyrargues. Paul is absolutely determined to go because Sarah will be there. He never actually admits it; he even pretends to be bored by the idea, but you know when Paul is focusing on something because whatever is the alternative is instantly and irrevocably ruled out for no good reason. Paul is incapable of playing an open hand. There are always at least six angled and warped mirrors between you and what Paul is really thinking.

“Oh come on, Mother,” he exclaimed exasperatedly. “You could have your dates wrong. The world might end after we get back, then Mike and I will have missed all that sunshine, which we never see in Brussels (come to think of it, stuck out here we never see Brussels) . . . .”

“You have been into the centre of Brussels twice this week, Paul,” Rachel countered, crusading for the irrelevant truth.

“. . . . and what would we say? That we forewent a perfectly good holiday just before the end of the world, because the end of the world was imminent? That makes a lot of sense, doesn’t it?”

I have noticed that Paul has not denied that the end of the world will soon take place and, as I truly believe in his clairvoyancy, that really does worry me. Or perhaps his doom and gloom is about having to work for a living, which is a course of action which sits on the edge of his plans in a tantalising and daunting way.

Rachel and Paul have sat late into the night discussing whether Paul should go to Freyrargues or not. Mike tries to participate, but he is persistently sidelined. The conversation is between those two warriors, Rachel, a Taurean, and Paul, an Aquarian. Neither will give way. If Paul can get his hands on a plane ticket, he will win. There is no question that he will get a ticket.

Mike is flat-out determined to go with him. We keep hinting that he will be the odd one out, but he insists on being there. There is this Siamese twin, joined-at-the-hip, element to Paul and Mike’s relationship. They perceive the world in relation to the other. To Mike, existence without Paul is inconceivable.

The converse is probably also true, but Paul only hints at it in unguarded moments.

Rachel and I went to see Paul and Mike off. Rachel was still hoping to dissuade them from going. She resisted at every step: before they packed, after they packed but before they got dressed, after they got dressed but before breakfast, before they loaded the luggage into the car, before they got into the car themselves.

It was a virtually silent drive down to Charleroi. Paul and Rachel were mustering their forces. Mike and I were mentally whistling.

We sat there, in the car park, and Rachel was defying anyone to get out with a steely, teutonic resolve.

Paul did not move. It was Mike who unbuckled his seatbelt and announced cheerfully that he was going to head towards the terminal and book in. Neither Rachel nor Paul looked at him. Eventually, I opened the door quietly, and slid off the seat to help Mike, who was watching Rachel and Paul as if they were two demented chess players. Although he was ready, he was reluctant to leave them.

“Right,” Paul announced. “Time to go.” He unbuckled his seatbelt with a snap, and clipped his way out of the car with irresistible force.

“Are you ready, Mike?” he challenged, as if Mike had not already readied himself. “Let’s go!” He moved resolutely onto the trolley path leading to the terminal, with Mike in his wake.

Rachel sat in the passenger seat for an extended minute. She then seemed to come to an exasperated conclusion, cut, and threw the door open.

“Paul, you have forgotten your money,” which indeed he had.

Paul came back to collect it petulantly. In previous times it would have been all our fault that he had forgotten it.

“You don’t have to go,” almost pleaded Rachel.

“I do,” Paul replied. “I have a plane to catch. Come on, Mike!”

Inside the terminal, Rachel watched with frenzied tension while they picked up their tickets. Her atmosphere was so electrostatic that it was amazing that everyone did not stick to the walls. She insisted that we all sit and have a cup of coffee before they left.

It was on the point of departure that she struck, as they entered the gate of no return for all those with a valid ticket for travel. Maybe that had a significance for her as a portal to hell.

She went weepily berserk. She grabbed them and refused to let go. She tugged them. She threw her arms round them and formed a scrum. She shook them. The airport police regarded her with some alarm, but as the people she was molesting were clearly either family or friends, they did not interfere, contenting themselves with circling like wrestling referees, scrutinising the



hidden grappling. Every few seconds, Paul would try to break free, but even his rocket-like will could not liberate him from his mother's orbit.

Finally, Paul shouted "We must go, Mother. We love you," and palmed her off, forcing Mike towards the passport booth.

The passport inspectors yawned and waved them through.

From the other side of the booth, Paul called "See you soon. We'll be thinking of you," then grabbed Mike and aimed him towards the gate.

Rachel stood there, as if a whole war had been lost. She looked up at me as if she wanted to kill me. "Well, you were no use, as ever!" she denounced.

I shrugged. No defence was possible.

"Sending your children to their doom, without so much as a fight," she added.

"They must do what they want to do," I replied, in the spirit of stolid libertarianism.

"That is the last you will see of your sons," she challenged me. "I hope you are happy about that!"

I stared at her. What else could I do? I was trapped between rational and irrational truths, where the irrational player possibly held all the trumps.

How do you argue, and even more, act for foresight, when all the judges are blind, including yourself, and those with foresight claim to have last been mermaids in Atlantis?

Rachel and I drove home in a silence that could have frozen the stars.



## Chapter 9

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

The world leaders arrived here four days ago. Mama-Pacha tells me that they are always shepherded into these proceedings the week before their meeting at Davos. The gods give them their orders, and then they have the length of their Davos conferences to work out how to deliver what is expected of them. The human worlds never discover this because their attendance upon the gods is slipped into a crease within time, like two sequences of film cut and spliced together. Some gods believe that the leaders are never subsequently aware of what happens to them either, and that the events and the imperatives contained therein slip into their sub-conscious like an alarm bell heard from two rooms away.

I found it intriguing that despite there being an infinite number of dimensions to the Earths, the key conference of world leaders is always called “Davos” in every dimension.

“It is not a coincidence, dear,” Mama-Pacha replied. “Zeus ordered them to call them all Davos. He said that running infinite Earths was complex enough without having a different name for the key leaders’ conference in each and every one of them.”

However, while the name may be the same, the world leaders are different in each dimension. Apparently, there is a certain amount of rotation as to which dimensions are invited, but over twenty-five thousand leaders turned up. In terms of what I had to organise, that has translated into thirty hotels which can accommodate up to one thousand guests each. Fortunately, the hotels do not have to be the last word in luxury, just good quality international hotels. The gods want to make it entirely plain that they are running the show, and that the leaders are fortunate puppets. So, the leaders arrive here, and find themselves jammed into pine, glass and steel luxury, and then gape in awe at the gods’

palaces, each bigger than any of the hotels, and each designed to pander to the most extreme whims of only one god.

The message is delivered. The world leaders behave like children summoned to a party held in honour of their elders and betters which, in both senses, is indeed the case. The gods outgun the humans at every level. Should any of the world leaders display a moment of independence, there is always the threat that they will be unceremoniously torn apart, and announced as having died of unexpected heart failure. The humans never risk it. Besides, there is a lot to be said for being among the top one hundred people to be favoured in your dimension. You get wealth, you get power, you get to behave impossibly badly. The only real downsides are that you will grow increasingly paranoid, and in some cases they really will get you.

By my side, Rufus looks wearily on, fascinated by this privileged take on events. He has experienced this before, from the other side of the equation, not that he can remember a thing about it.

The world leaders stand in a mass rally of meek, anxious lines before Zeus, two hundred wide by one hundred and forty deep, all dressed in formal suits and dress shoes. The grand assembly of the gods sits behind them. The humans must stand throughout the entire proceedings. The gods, to whom standing is not the slightest effort, sit down.

When the gods' dander is up, several of the world leaders will be picked on for some presumed transgression against the implied will of the gods. None of the gods actually cares what the victims did. The only purpose is to reinforce the divine supremacy of the gods.

This time one man in particular, the President of France in dimension 17 (as it is referred to), was under attack for his un-American stance on foreign policy issues. The Western gods took it in turns to rebuke him in devastating terms, while the U.S. presidents watched nervously, and the other French presidents listened and learnt. Ares was particularly venomous, accusing President DuPlessy of undermining America's conduct of the war in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Korea, Hungary, Moldavia, Russia, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Iceland, to name but a selection. Given that DuPlessy was only aware of America's invasion of Iceland, the dominant power in his universe, he looked totally bemused by the accusations.

No-one stood up for DuPlessy on either side of the growing divide. The Western gods were having some sport, and the gods of the Future Alliance watched on impassively. What did they care if the West tore itself apart? If the Western gods had gone for a Middle-Eastern, African or South American leader, pandemonium would have charged out of her box and demanded a riot. Western gods punishing a Western leader was their pissing on their own side of the tent. As for the world leaders, they were suffering from survivor

relief. The malign caprice of the gods was not alighting on them this time around.

After several hours of increasingly rabid abuse, in which everyone was implicated by the end, President DuPlessy was led away and given a virulent dose of testicular cancer, of which he died instantaneously.

Aside from the distraction of this ritualised show trial, the tension between the Western gods and those of the Future Alliance is mounting.

The issue, when it is finally voiced, will be about the environment. The Gods of the Future Alliance will accuse the Western world leaders of ignoring the rapid climactic deterioration of the Earths, which will inevitably lead to a disaster of universal proportions in each and every dimension. It is the argument of the weakest link. If one dimension collapses, they all will, and they all seem to be hurtling towards oblivion. The Future Alliance will charge that the West has become so institutionally greedy that it is pillaging the worlds to obliteration, with the result that they will soon cease to be capable of supporting life. The Western leaders will have destroyed the Earths before the people of the developing world can come into their own. The parts of the world which are categorised as “Western” and “Developing” differ from dimension to dimension, but the classifications remain constant. There is always a block of states which is an order of magnitude wealthier than the rest and, after all, on a sphere, anywhere can be “Western”. For some reason, the divide is never described as “North” and “South”, even though Fiji, Guinea, Tasmania, Australia, Southern Africa, Uruguay, Paraguay, the Malvenas and Chile are all world powers somewhere.

And I certainly understand the accusation of greed. The appetites of the Western gods are indeed beyond belief, and thus mirrored in the behaviour of the Western world leaders. The arrogance is suffocating, the threat of vengeance continuous.

On the Earths, you will know how the powerful behave, ‘all power corrupts’ leaders surrounded by a retinue of earnest, ambitious acolytes, scrambling to their beck and call, whatever their needs, in the hope of becoming leaders themselves one day.

With the Western gods in particular, it is infinitely worse. I am not letting the rest off the hook because we all know, at least up here, that they are quite capable of brutalities of their own, but with the Western gods it is so systematic somehow. They don’t even have to demand the next level of excess; it is anticipated as a matter of course, and served up to them on cue like an “amuse gueule”.

Talking of “amuse gueule”, Ares has been laying waste to the entire fresh stock of camp followers, infuriating the rest of the gods, East, West, North, South with his wanton disregard for mundane life and other gods’ pleasures.

He doesn't stop at humans, although it is from them that he derives his greatest pleasure because their terror is so much more palpable. Nonetheless, I have seen animals of all species and sizes taken into him, and their being removed sometime later after a lot of squealing, shrieking, bellowing, bleating (whatever they do), often shredded to pieces. The humans, both male and female, have an unnervingly accurate premonition of what awaits them based on all the gossip that darts frantically from one mouth to another, heightening the terror as the conversations spiral. I have tried to distract them by laying on food, wine and entertainment, but they know what could await them once they are ushered into Ares' presence. They expect to die very slowly and very painfully in there and, on the balance of probabilities, they will. Ares relishes death, the bloodier the better.

He demanded me two days ago. I pretended to almost go out of my mind with panic for the several minutes it took Mama-Pacha and the Dagda to arrive and inform Ares with surprising forcefulness that I was organising this conference, and they could not spare me. Besides, Ares' father, Zeus, is extremely fond and protective of me, so if he wanted to spend eternity back in a jar similar to the one the giants popped him into once, Zeus would almost certainly arrange it if he even touched a hair of my head. As I was being dragged before Ares, kicking, screaming and biting by then, it was arguable that he had caused a great deal more than my hair to be touched already. His advisors, as he calls them, were employing every underhand, vicious little trick in the repertoire to subdue me for him. Ares raised his hand, and I was dropped to the floor, bruised, bleeding and apparently terrified. Furious, Mama-Pacha turned on Ares and bathed him with fire which did him no harm (he is literally 'fire-proof'), but communicated her contempt effectively enough. The Dagda gathered me, frozen with shock, into his arms to father me and mend my wounds. "There, there," he said gently. "That great thumping brute will never touch you again, I promise you. He has over-stepped the mark, and he knows it. Zeus will hear about this, and he irritates the stuffing out of Zeus, so he won't be troubling you again, I assure you."

I do not tend towards anger, but the prospect certainly fed me a moment of mixed triumph and pleasure. Then I realised that the Dagda only said that to make me feel better. Ares would not be punished, certainly not on account of me. He would be allowed to continue in his ritualistically gruesome carnage, tossing the headless corpses, coagulating in their own blood, down the steps once he had extracted all the pleasure out of them. Should there be a war, Ares will be Zeus' right hand son. He may be the most truly revolting of all the gods, but he is a redoubtable and relentless warrior.

For the Future Alliance, Ares is an easy target of snarling criticism—the debauchery, the blood-lust, the cruelty, the savagery, all rolled into one

abominable sequence of encounters. Geb, that notorious divine Egyptian wit recently observed that Ares' behaviour is so execrable that they are running out of Peace Prizes to honour him with (Juppiter has decorated him several times over the eons, in hapless gestures of appeasement).

On the Mesopotamian side, Gilgamesh is ready to deal with him once and for all, and Ereshkigal declares herself ready to imprison him for eternity, subject to negotiations with Oriris, that is.

Among the African gods, Eshu is trying to conjure up a method of waylaying Ares along the path leading between his mansion and the Congress House. Atai wonders if she can perhaps provoke a feud between Ares and a Norse god, perhaps Thor or Wodan. The Norse gods are famously outraged by the inability of some of their Southern cousins to constrain themselves to some acceptable level of decorum, and while separately they would not have the strength to subdue Ares, together, with a few additional self-righteous hacks from Tyr, they might be able to deal with him, and become the undisputed Commanders in Chief of the Western gods, thus serving their ambitions in equal measure to their senses of justice. However, that would provoke Mars, so we are taking some considerable care to keep Ares isolated from potential assassins, which drips blood onto my hands too. Ares is aware of all these manoeuvrings and is reputedly highly amused. He has also redoubled his kill rate.

Relationships between the different divine groups are always diplomatically tense. For all that they have had billions of years to get to understand each other, familiarity, as ever, has led primarily to contempt. Each grouping has its own specific rituals and values, and decries those of the other side.

Surprisingly, the most difficult relations are between the Greek and Roman gods. The former believe that the latter usurped their power, and the latter resent the former for creating a model that they could only inherit. The Greek gods do indeed tend to deride the Roman ones for lacking imagination, whereas the Roman gods accuse the Greeks of a lack of stamina and staying power, and especially of lacking courage.

Over time, the other gods have frequently exploited this eternal, acrimonious enmity with abuses that have triggered all manners of wars and naturally disastrous phenomena. In recent times, an attempt by the Norse gods to divide and rule the Roman and Greek ones sparked two major world wars, whereby the Celtic gods sided with the Greeks, and the Norse gods supported the Romans. The whole situation blew up disastrously, then the Romans withdrew, leaving the Norse gods to fight the Celts. Second time around, the Romans backed the Norse gods, and the Japanese gods went on the rampage in the Pacific.

It is not much appreciated among humans that the tide of man is but a reflection of the moon of the gods. They have forgotten how powerful the gods are, so impressed have they become with their own technological prowess.

The same cannot be said of their leaders. One visit to a conference of the gods, and they know exactly who is in charge.

“Can you feel any change?” I ask Rufus.

Rufus glints darkly at me. “The shadow of evil is getting closer,” he replies.



## Chapter 10

### *Testimony of Sarah Harding:*

Paul is standing there wearing some weird sort of dark glasses. I thought for a second they must be an ultra-expensive Jean-Paul Gaultier provocation, but throwing money around on “tacky labels” (as he calls Armani, Galliano, Ungaro, and the rest—although he actually respects Gaultier) is not what he does. He prefers to improvise from back street shops, second hand charity shops (the good ones), and Mango (don’t ask). Stepping out in Paul’s company lends some of the experience of what it must have been like to share publicity time with John Lennon, fashion and quips. Michael is with him, designed to blend in, and not with Paul.

Paul is obviously going to stand his ground, bar a shuffle or two, so I simply hurl myself at him with every intent of knocking him over, an initiative that nearly kicks off an international incident as I send him banging into an instantly outraged member of the airport police. “I am sorry,” I say as earnestly as I can. “I haven’t seen him for weeks. It is love.” I hope that French chivalry and a cute-cookie smile will soften him, although, in that, I am entirely mistaken. He stands there, legs braced, extremely angry. Another policeman actually has to come up to him and drag him away swearing and darting venomous glares.

“That went well,” Paul announces evenly.

“It is lovely to see you,” Michael says, lunging forward and surrounding me in a huge, fraternal hug. “Now run!” He actually breaks out into the first few strides of a sprint, which has four policeman turning on us in alarm, hands to their automatic rifles, or whatever they are, in readiness.

Paul suddenly laughs. “I think today is maybe the day I get gunned down,” he declares. “I’ll meet you outside.” He proceeds to skirt round us, hugging the counters, until he is safely through the double doors.

“Aren’t you pleased to see me?” I ask him as we meet up again outside. I feel unaccountably hurt, probably because I have built up my expectations of the moment of our reunion so high.



“I am glad to be still alive,” he answers. Then he folds his arms around me and melts me with an intensely intimate hug. Over his shoulder, I can see Michael watching and waiting.



Trained to drive in Belgium, Michael tears down the roads barely considering whether the wheels should touch the road. Paul and I are schmoozing in the back. Paul is really pushing the limits. I am trying not to betray the secret, not wishing to hurt Michael or, worse still, distract him.

“How are your Mum and Dad?” Paul inquires, although I doubt that he will pay much attention to the answer, so I simply say “Oh, fine.”

“And the magic trio?”

Paul is referring to my brother’s bizarre ménage à trois.

“They seem to keep themselves occupied. I don’t see them that often.”

Paul pulls a face. It could mean anything.

Actually Mum and Dad have a new lease of life after many years of strain between them. Dad gave up his healing practice, and moped around not doing much other than suffering from a series of nervous breakdowns. Mum soldiered on, trying vainly to drag Dad through to the other side, and eventually contented herself with being on the other side herself. Dad did help out in Fiona and John’s antique shop, until it was suggested that perhaps Fiona and John should be left to live their own lives. Dad also became very religious in a secretive way. To this day, we are not quite sure what religion Dad is following, but we suspect it is Zoroastrianism, probably only because we haven’t a clue what it stands for, but it is mysteriously middle-eastern and symbolic. Dad seems very drawn to the Middle-East, and even more drawn to symbolism. We find many strange geometric drawings around the house, hidden on different walls etched in pen. I did try to find out from Dad what they meant, but Mum suggested that I tame my curiosity and leave him to it.

Then, about two months ago, Dad’s hands began to itch uncontrollably. For days he was in an agony of pain and especially frustration. He went to see his old friend Pauline, long-since retired from practice herself. She declared that his hands were insisting that he work again. “The magic is coming back, Alan.” Dad was not so convinced, but warmed to the idea over the next few days. He even started to fiddle around with his potions, calculating which ones he needed to replenish, without actually doing anything about it. I don’t think he was planning on contacting his old practice, but Fiona did it for him, and they made a room available to him and handed him several of the new clients wishing to make appointments.

Dad was very reluctant to go, but turn up he did, and magic occurred. His second patient had been semi-paralysed by a dose of hospital acquired

infection for several years, and Dad had her skipping and jumping again within days. His fourth patient had also been debilitated by a lengthy illness caused by catching MRSA at St. Thomas'. He, too, was re-energised and raring to go after a couple of sessions. I think that Geoffrey and Steph's old jealousies of Dad re-emerged at that point, but it was too late. Rumour shot round London that Dad was back on the healing scene, and with more force than he had ever had. It is now like the old days, with patients sitting around for an hour waiting for their appointment with him.

The continual expression on Mum's face is that of relief. It has been a long, hard, cruel journey for her, and she can start to be her younger self again. The atmosphere around the house reminds me of my childhood and of those times before Mum and I were kidnapped. However, the old jokes have never come back, and Dad's siblings, Lucie and Tony, are keeping a wary distance.

When Dad is in full form, he is like a happiness generator. Everything buzzes around him, which is what made all those years of his depression so dismal; his decline was so marked. However, with his new religiosity, or spirituality, there is also an edge to how he conducts himself. It is no longer that healing people miraculously is enough in its own right. He seems to believe he is fulfilling a mission, the bulk of which is yet to come. This is the only shadow that remains over him, reminding us continually of the ditch he has climbed out of.

None of this can I tell Paul. Instead, I flare my nostrils at the aroma of baking rosemary, squint my eyes into the face of the sun, and try not to call out as Paul teases me.

"How about you guys?" I ask.

Paul does not reply.

"Yeah, everything is great," Michael tosses over his shoulder, "if you ignore the imminent cataclysm to come."

I think for a second that he has said "orgasm", and I flush bright red at our having been discovered.

Paul frowns, evidently wishing to discourage Michael from going into detail. Michael ignores him.

"Mum is convinced that the world is going to end while we are down here," he continues.

Paul tickles me intimately and I laugh, pretending that I am laughing at what Michael has just said. "What makes her say that?"

"Mum's intuition," Michael replies. "And my intuition is never wrong," the two boys intone together.

"Is it?" I ask.

"Usually," Paul comments. "She usually expects the worst, and the worst duly arrives."

"So do you think the world will end?" I ask, pushing Paul's hand away.

“Probably,” says Paul. “My guess is that it is just a question of timing. Mum’s prediction could be out by a millennium or two, but I am sure that the world will end one day, and it would certainly be interesting to be here when it does.”

“My brother is a little crazy,” Michael opines. “He cannot face having to get a job.”

“Nor can you,” Paul retaliates.

“Yes, but I don’t need to yet. I only left uni a couple of years ago. You left five years ago, and Dad is getting tired of paying for you. You are probably pushing him to see how much he will tolerate, as usual.”

“Quite a lot,” Paul comments smugly.

“Where you are concerned, yes. He is a lot tougher on me.”

“I don’t think Dad is particularly tough on anyone. He just wants peace and enough money to pay all our bills. He is like that squirrel with the nut in Ice Age II, if you remember that, forever chasing after that illusory financial security. Poor Dad. He really does try so hard, and fail so miserably.”

We have left the motorway, and are heading up behind Castries. Michael is ignoring the threats of speed cameras and aiming the car like a projectile into the plain.

The villages refamiliarise themselves to me as we pass through them. It feels like my ideal home. We drop into the local supermarket to buy some essentials, and within fifteen minutes we are drawing up outside the *château*, which is all shuttered-up and forlorn-looking, and yet bathed in sufficient historic pride to appear impressive. Michael goes off to check out the bedrooms and the kitchen. I busy myself throwing open the shutters, and Paul settles down on a warm stone slab with a book.



# Chapter 11

## *Testimony of Angel Iofiel:*

The new designs are being tested to destruction, which was not in the plan but very valuable research nonetheless.

The Archangel Gabriel tells me that Hasad was so incensed to find Emel naked in what appeared to be Tabbris' bed, that he has demanded that his brothers conduct an honour killing.

I am sure that we fully informed him that their new bodies were indestructible, but the presumed will of Allah appears to be even more resolute. It makes no difference that Emel was lying in a bed situated in an entirely different dimension from Tabbris', nor that Hasad and I were equally naked. He saw what he saw, and what he saw deserves death.

You couldn't invent irony, could you? Here are the first two people to come back from the dead with indestructible bodies at the point where billions of ordinary people are about to die gruesomely across an infinity of dimensions, and the one wants to kill the other.

I have my doubts whether this experiment will work psychologically, never mind physically. Will the newly embodied humans ever learn to adapt their values even after they have realised that they cannot die except through wilful self-euthanasia? Will they ever abandon grudges, punishments, vendettas and reprisals, or will they punch each other to a standstill? History does not bode well. Human beings have an all-out propensity for destruction, in the likeness of their creators, the demiurges, and especially when they cluster into groups. If two heads are better than one, one hundred are not.

What happened with Hasad and Emel is that Hasad went round to his brothers and told them what he had discovered. He had found Emel lying naked in the bed of a Westerner. This could not be tolerated. The honour of the family must be satisfied. Without thinking much about it, his three brothers agreed, and marched around to Hasad's apartment like a puppet army, all swagger and

curved lines. They climbed up the stairs with a huff and a puff, barged through the doorway, and seized Emel, who looked merely surprised.

They grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her down the stairs and outside. They did not appear to notice that this fairly violent tress-tugging was having no impact on Emel whatsoever. She was being hauled along, but evidently in neither pain nor discomfort. What use has the body for such warning systems when it can no longer come to any harm?

They pushed her into the back seat of her and Hasad's car, where Hasad was as tensed as an angry leopard at the steering wheel, banging her head hard against the car roof. Again, she made no complaint, and the brothers failed to notice her acquiescence. They drove her down to the river, where they tumbled her out of the car, and started to beat her with whatever sticks they found lying around. She just stood there, haughty by now, and mocking. This really made them mad, so they started hurling stones at her (which they would have graduated towards in any case). She danced around the stones, and several times the brothers hit each other. Hasad went back to the car, and retrieved a can of petrol. He went up to Emel and prepared to shake it all over her, while his elder brother lit a match. Flame encountered fumes, and both Hasad and Emel stood there like two angels in a burning bush.

Even then the brothers did not get the hint, so intent were they on their task. Despite receiving considerable burns, they seized her and threw her in the river where they attempted to drown her, forcing her head continuously underwater, which proved to be a futile activity as each time she bobbed up and smiled at them, having breathed perfectly naturally while she was submerged. The four brothers held her down for longer and longer periods, but she always returned to the surface unfazed. Finally, Hasad's younger brother, Canan, went completely berserk, and hit her, and pummelled her, and kicked her, and submersed her, determined that she should die at his hand.

The reverse proved to be the case. By this point, Emel was annoyed. At a certain moment, Canan lost his balance, and Emel held him under water until he drowned.

The brothers stood there, their blood lust denied and wilting, watching their youngest brother's body bobbing in the water.

"Are you the devil?" Hasad's second brother, Erdem, screeched at her. "How is it that you live and our beloved brother Canan is dead? Is there no justice? Is Allah blind?"

Emel levelled her eyes coolly at him, and said nothing.

"So what bargain did you do with the devil to bring yourself back to life like this, to be naked in another man's arms, to defy your husband, to defy nature itself?" demanded Erdem.

"Did you do a deal with the devil?" inquired Emel, tossing the question at Hasad.

“No,” Hasad declared defiantly.

“Neither did I!”

“So why are you not dead?” Hasad demanded.

“Did you not listen, my idiot husband? We cannot die.”

For the first time, Hasad began to understand what his body meant to him. He stood there dumfounded. His two remaining brothers were totally baffled.

“You cannot die?” Mehmet exclaimed. “You are immortals?”

“Exactly,” Emel confirmed, suddenly wearied by it all.

Erdem brightened up. “You should join the army.”

Emel raised her eyes to heaven. “What use will an army be, Erdem, when nobody can die?”

“But in the meantime . . . .”

“In the meantime, Hasad can join the army by all means. I am going home,” with which she sauntered up to the car, and drove off, leaving them to stare at her dust as she rolled away, leaving a plume of triumph behind her.



So that is how it all started, in a feud that became a riddle.

Since then, we have successfully introduced over one thousand immortals. Some seem to have the same difficulty as Hasad in grasping the implications of their new status, but many have adapted readily, not really caring whether they understood the small print or not. They are back, they are free, they will never starve, they will never be thirsty, they will never wither or become frail, they are unstoppable and beyond worldly sanctions. After all, if you do not need to eat or drink, and if you cannot be physically harmed, what is there to worry about, other than love?

So, in the early days of the experiment, that is the trend we see emerging—a craving for love and appreciation. The immortals have become emotionally needy beings. That concerns us. Does this mean that all living creatures will become spoiled brats, demanding everything when they already possess it? Will they even sit around all day moping and crying for the one true love that is eluding them? Will they bemoan the state of everything rather than be inspired to improve it? While they end up listless and useless—languid fops? This is surely not what paradise should look like. The Living God must have another plan.



## *Chapter 12*

### ***Testimony of the Archangel Michael:***

Each species has its own truth and its own misperceptions. We view existence through our individual lenses.

We angels have observed the demiurges and all the life forms they have created, and we recognise their urges for power and satiety. Everything has to be possessed, everything has to be conquered. The dominant one is the ruler, and the rest are there for his benefit, and maybe for his breakfast. This pattern repeats down to the most dispossessed and powerless of entities, a whole cascade of brutality and dominance.

Naturally, nothing is simple. It is almost always a different secondary species that dominates each dimension. In each instance, there is an assumption that whatever is constitutes the natural order of things, but this conjecture is defied by the infinite variety of outcome that the dimensions generate.

In one dimension, it is the microbes that dominate their world, after man. Every other species is there, kept in a delicate balance, to ensure sufficient hosts for the bacteria and viruses to survive and thrive.

In another, it is the flies who are the secondary rulers according to the sheer amount of space that they dominate. They swoop and they buzz insistently, and every other species loathes and fears them, and invents a myriad of ways of sheltering against them.

In another, it is the whales, pounding the sea with their roaring songs, invincible and majestic. On land, the cats rule second with their cunning, their precision and their speed. No other species has managed to develop a sufficiently critical mass to challenge them, except the microbes, perhaps, who are nearly always among the most powerful of species in any dimension.

In all dimensions, however, mankind dominates because humans are designed in the image of the demiurges themselves, although who within mankind is in the ascendant varies by sex, size, colour and age. There is one

world where elderly, black, midget women create the rules. Another where children are so prized as to dominate every decision, and yet another where great yellow giants devour everything they happen to find, as they are interminably hungry.

Another constant, is that in every version of the universe, the coeurls dominate the planet Rii, and the dlo-dukkoks dominate the planet Hertyri. We do not know why this is, but we believe that they exist as a safety valve should mankind on any dimension become uncontrollable and challenge the demiurges head-on. If the worst comes to the worst, the coeurls can be unleashed to devastate the Earth, and the dlo-dukkoks can follow to bring the coeurls back under control. Only in extremis would either ever be used by the gods, and only if the existence of the demiurges themselves were under threat.

The demiurges were brought into the universe, we believe, to develop it in its infinite variety, and they have done their work superbly, although they have no sense of a higher purpose, only of their own interests. They know we are here, but they treat us like annoying Aunt Mildreds, tutting and spluttering. As far as they are concerned, they are the ultimate and only rulers of the universe, and we just are, which, in a way, is also how we see ourselves. However, we are convinced, and indeed we almost know, that there is an order in this universe greater than ours. Only Lucifer has ever been privileged to meet the Living God, and he has done so twice. That is why I describe him as the most beloved of all the angels. He is truly the blithe instrument of the Living God.

We also understand why the Living God would create the demiurges—in order to develop life in its infinite variety and dimensions. We could never be persuaded to do what the demiurges are only too pleased to accomplish. It seems such a tragic set of experiments, except that it is necessary if the Living God is to finally design the perfect universe. Anyway, enough of that argument.

What human beings learn is the detail of their world, which is impenetrable to many of us angels, and beneath the interest of the demiurges. I doubt that even Lucifer and his cohorts, who have spent most of eternity mingling with the life forms across the worlds, have really grasped the level of detail that mankind takes for granted. Admittedly, human beings are mistaken in many aspects of reality, and they have certainly developed powers and technologies well beyond understanding their impacts. The dominant aspects of mankind have reduced their several worlds to the verge of destruction through the over-exploitation of their resources, fuelled by their insatiable greed for power and satiety.

This propensity has finally challenged the very existence of the demiurges, which is why we are where we are, and why the coeurls and the dlo-dukkoks will soon be unleashed on the Earths. The experiment is over.

You do not have to believe us. We do not know everything. We are working from our own overwhelming conjecture which is, nonetheless, one we are committed to believing, all of us.



Perhaps the hardest thing for you to understand is how you personally straddle so many dimensions at the same time, across so many species, so many experiences.

The theory is easy. In common with us angels, and in common with the demiurges, all living creatures are immortal. You have an indestructible essence that permeates the universe. Aspects of you inhabit each dimension, each in a separate guise, to fulfil your purpose, to create infinite variety. And when you 'die' in each dimension, your essence is in no way diminished; it generates a new entity and starts again. In-between the demise of that part of you which has existed on the Earths and its renewal, it will be retained by one of the demiurges in order to be ascribed its next purpose. While we angels never judge the merit of living creatures, the demiurges tend to weigh up your merits in order to calculate your next existence. It is an ever-delicate balance that they must maintain in each dimension, otherwise the whole experiment will unravel.

But how do these dimensions work exactly?

Dimensions are like atoms, except that they exist in neither space nor time, while containing both. They bang into each other randomly, and intersect, then they bounce off again. Sometimes, they cluster, into the dimensional equivalent of molecules. How do they combine and separate without the existence of space? Interesting question. I am not sure that you will understand the answer, which is that they are primarily conceptual. The entire experiment is primarily conceptual, a joint conception of the gods and of the Living God, engaging us as onlookers and protectors of you all.

At times of heightened awareness, perhaps when you are afraid or when you are deeply relaxed (for instance when you are asleep), your different selves can become connected across the different dimensions. You may dream that you are a snake, or that you are talking to a snake. Some psychologists have suggested, with the startling simplicity of a guru addressing his disciples, that dreams containing snakes describe sexual desires. They may, and they may not. The human mind is both creative and agile. However, it is more likely that you are in communication with another part of you that really is a snake, or that is confronted by one. That is why dreams often scoot around in a stream of credible nonsense, as elements of the story make complete sense in the context of other dimensions. You meet people you have never seen before, but they feel familiar. Somebody you know well does something absolutely uncharacteristic. Sequences tumble across each other, each having a significant meaning in its own right, but dissolving into farce as you slide into another dimension. On top of this, your mind, ever in search of logic and continuity when faced with confusion, feels obliged to invent bridging stories to try to make sense of it all, more often with the result of rendering the whole scene completely bizarre.

This is why the meaning of dreams has long evaded your grasp. They weave together the realities of different worlds you could never have known existed.

You have been seeking a rationalisation within the context you are familiar with, not within the truth of infinite dimensions you are only remotely aware of.

Some people do manage to navigate these dimensions, quite deliberately, but their understanding does not typically extend beyond a momentary snapshot. Nevertheless, when they claim to have been astral-planing, a claim which many dismiss as absurd, they are, in fact, quite correct.

Others get confused between dimensions when they are ill, especially when they become what you call schizophrenic or psychotic. For whatever reason, whether you regard it as an exalted state or a diminished one, they receive feedback they cannot either collate or contextualise from across all or many of the dimensions with which they are associated. Only drugs are capable of blinding them to the greater truth which they have unwittingly accessed. Knowledge and insight are fickle gifts. They can be a benefit, or even a salvation, or they can be a burden and a blight.

Those who have strayed close to death, only to recover, often claim to have heard a gentle voice calling them from the end of a long tunnel which led towards a brilliant light. Actually, the voice they heard was indeed real, although they might be disappointed (or possibly delighted) to realise that it was their own, and that the light was where that essential part of them, which is immortal, lives. It is a great solace for you to turn towards yourself, to be reunited within the peace of eternity, and away from the fragmentation and anxiety of Earthly existence. Nonetheless, however gentle and enticing your own voice, you often choose to reject this siren call, and to return to your struggle.

And ghosts? Ghosts are images from other dimensions which you may glimpse or feel when you become super-aware of your environment as it extends out into other dimensions. Some places manage to touch other dimensions, and to interlock with them, more regularly than random coincidence would generally allow. These are so-called haunted places, where you will see a figure in a room who does not belong to your dimension but who is perfectly natural to the dimension with which either you or the place are intersecting.

Rolling on, premonitions are sequences of events in another dimension that anticipate those in your own. While the several outcomes may prove to be entirely different, and not at all reliable, sometimes they can be strikingly similar, or even identical. Some people with keen visionary senses are particularly good at matching strings of meaning in other dimensions which closely resemble their own. It is not a gift I would wish on anyone.

The concept of *déjà-vu* is similar. Most people have some ability to plunder other dimensions they inhabit in order to find parallels. This is key to psychic intelligence which most possess to a limited extent. You understand the direction in which events are heading, and you pluck from other dimensions a parallel sequence, often only seconds before they unravel themselves. Then

you go “bingo”, and what you are experiencing is a form of multidimensional double-vision.

Once you realise that the universe exists in infinite dimensions, many of the long-standing phenomenological issues are explained, if barely understood. As with much learning, the more you know, the more you realise how little you know. The great explorers who discovered new continents soon realised that they were exposed to the edges of incalculable and massive new worlds. The human mind is incapable of harnessing all it knows in its separate parts, so the barriers to truth are interminable. However, sometimes you catch glimpses.

So, you see, the great mysteries are not that complicated after all. They are explained by one simple phenomenon—the existence of infinite dimensions. However, to understand that is to understand nothing. The truth is large enough to keep even a genius occupied through many dimensions, and it is rare for anyone to be a genius in more than one.



## *Chapter 13*

### *Testimony of David Lambert:*

For many years now, I have drunk too much, and generally made a fool of myself.

“Some people drink to remember, others drink to forget,” is an old saw. I have spent years trying to work out what that means. The insight is pleasing, but marginally evades my understanding. I suppose it is referring to how we enter oblivion even as we wallow in nostalgia.

I do not do that. Alcohol has never offered me abrogation. I drink because I like it, and because it makes the world go with a swing.

Does it have a downside? It makes me fatter, very much fatter. It probably makes a fool out of me although, if it does, I rarely notice it. It may make me stink, and it certainly forfeits the respect of my family.

There is always something pitiful in seeing someone yoked to a dependency, that and a moment of triumph. The person in front of me here has a weakness that I do not have. Let’s celebrate it. Let’s make the most of it, so that you do not focus on my shortcomings, whatever that may mean. After all, we all make mistakes, we are all fools, we all have our idiot assumptions and our wilful blind spots. We are human beings, not gods.

At some point my health must deteriorate precipitously. I have been getting away with it for so long that the odds must cash in on me eventually. However, if Rachel is right, then the world will end first, and I will be the guy at the table with the losing hand whose bluff was never called.

For the first half of my life, people called me lazy and unadventurous. I worked in a steady job and took few risks. My only wildness was to drink too much too often even then, but we all did that. It was called partying. Then, when the others got married, I carried on, like some failed rock star in his own head, wishing he had had the guts to climb on stage, or even the determination

to learn how to play a guitar. I was a kind of air guitar player manqué. At forty, when many of my friends were settling down into early decline, I suddenly started to pick up and to attempt absurd things. We moved country, and went to live a millionaire's life in the South of France on a pittance. We had five cars which were all too often in the wrong place for our purposes. I worked up half-forgotten languages and learnt new ones. We adopted whole new circles of friends, several times over.

I set up my own company. I had always realised that I would make a hopeless businessman. Now I had the chance to prove it. I am not sure that I have ever made a single good business decision, but I have made many flamboyant ones. New things, new things, new things. Cherished dreams discarded on the ice of reality, like the trail of bodies abandoned by Napoleon as he fled Russia. Consultancy, writing, publishing, flogging machines—each a fantastic opportunity at the outset, proven truly fantastical by subsequent events.

Yet somehow windfalls have always bailed me out, slipping me enough income to squeeze my debts between the gates of financial doom each month, just before they snap shut into bankruptcy. That no doubt makes me lucky, an attribute more valuable in my foolishness and my abandon than any amount of sobriety and wisdom could ever be. I cannot believe that God has ever had a soft spot for me, or has ever even noticed me, but equally He has never taken against me, and somehow this neglect has kept me fed and warm.

There are some people I know whose lives are continuous tragedies. They contract a cataclysmic illness, they are made redundant, they have to accept a soul-destroying job, their daughter dies, their wife leaves them, their other daughter dies. You look at them and you think “What could they have ever done to have merited their misery? Were they monsters in their previous lives? Will it all be made up to them in their next ones? Is it just blind misfortune flailing and thrashing at their heels? What had their daughters done to die so slowly and in such pain? Did they inherit their father's luck, or was it all their own? There is much in this world I do not trouble to understand or to learn. I have, however, tried to explain the underlying rationale of suffering at least to my self, but I have never been able to find even the loose end to enable me to start unravelling the problem. Good and bad fortune are a persistent mystery to me.

I have seen all the love my family once felt for me die gradually in its eyes. Rachel's faith in me went years ago, in a flurry of presumed abandonment and preoccupation. Paul always looked to Rachel for comfort and advice rather than to me, but he still inter-reacted with me until his mid-teens. Then he gave up on me altogether. Michael and I were always much closer, but of late we have only scraped sides.

So, in that respect, I have not been lucky at all, or more likely I have reaped what I deserved.

If the world does end in a few weeks, it will leave a gaping hole of regret in my soul. Unresolved relationships curse you somehow. Perhaps they are what damn you in the next life. I cannot bear the thought of not seeing Paul and Michael ever again, any more than Rachel can, and I have a better reason than her. I need to be forgiven, and I am not sure that I have even learnt enough to know what to apologise for.

Rachel would know it, as would Paul, but would they be bothered to tell me after all this time of my refusing to hear. Michael, with his evergreen heart, would not bother to remember, although some bitter residue will inevitably remain.

What does it mean if we never see them again? It is scarcely imaginable. They have just flown off with Ryanair, as mundane and inconsequential a departure as I can possibly imagine.

I cannot imagine my boys gone, perhaps even less than I can believe that the world, the entire world, will be obliterated. Of the two, I would expect Paul and Michael to hang around longer. They are survivor types, Paul with his obstinate shrewdness and Michael with his effervescent bonhomie. Who could refuse them the best deal?

I am a babbling because, as ever, I have had too much to drink, but how will the world end in anyone's theory? In the Book of Revelation, it takes years doesn't it? The world is a massive place. How could everything be destroyed—all those creatures beneath the sea, all those sand and cave dwellers? Everybody? Everything? It has the exalted air of being so ridiculous, yet it is stated with such conviction, and not just by Rachel. All the previous inhabitants of Atlantis, all the refugees from Lemuria, all the Merangels and Star Travellers, and indeed all Light Workers, accept that soon we will see the end of everything.

The proposal is so extreme, I cannot seriously entertain it. It is extravagant, and funny, and deeply-felt and, I admit, profoundly unnerving, to be surrounded by so much conviction. The newspapers are beginning to ask the question openly—"Is the world coming to an end? Are these the end days? Read Busty Lynne's confessions, page s 3-4!" So, for them it is headlines, and therefore sales. The tabloids do not really swallow it, and they have the shrewdest antennae around.

So, I have to conclude that if Rachel wants to go and stand on a mountain top, a. she will have to leave Belgium, and b. she will be doing it without me, and indeed in the absence of most of humanity. Until the seven seals turn up, whatever they are.

In my life with Rachel, I have alternated between cynic and convert. I start by doubting every big theory she has because they are all so gloomy. I am certain at the time that the outcome cannot be as pessimistic as that, until her prediction proves to be unerringly accurate. I suppose that, in doing my regular volte-face, I do achieve two pleasures: the thrill of unmasking absurdities,

followed by the convert's passion for the new gospel. Rachel, poor soul, only has the frustration of always being right when nobody wants to know, coupled with the empty chiming of "I told you so." There is no pleasure to be had in either of those. I do not remember being told by any authority that you have much more fun being wrong than being right, but that is the truth as I have discovered it.

Paul, Michael, I am positive that we will meet up again very soon, and we will laugh at the moments of suspense Rachel subjected us to, the absurdity of universal demolition. But, failing that, perhaps we will meet in hell, or in paradise. Wherever I look, you will be there. Of that, I am convinced.



A while back, Rachel took her predisposition towards premonition to a clairvoyant. They hit it off straightaway. Rachel told Ann everything she believed and Ann endorsed it. Sometimes, according to Rachel, Ann confirmed what Rachel had envisioned before she was told about it.

One day, Rachel went into a trance while doing a session with Ann. Indeed, they both entered the same trance. Rachel saw Ann by her side, and they were both priestesses in some ancient tribe, possibly in Southern or Central America—the Aztecs, the Incas or the Mayans. Ann was gazing at an altar festooned with flowers. Rachel was grabbing a small boy. The boy was screaming "No! No! No! I don't want to."

Rachel was replying: "You have been chosen. The will of the gods must be done. It is a great honour. You will live among the gods forever. You will become divine."

The small boy still shouted "No! No! No!"

Rachel seized him and dragged him to the altar. The people started to chant, louder and louder, stronger and stronger, a rhythmic wail willing the small boy into a trance. The small boy was held down at the altar by the two women. The High Priestess took a knife, and slit the boy from diaphragm to groin. According to Rachel, the soul of the small boy had long since departed to the heavens, borne by the power of the chanting.

According to Rachel, the small boy was her son, and her son was me.



Some time later, Rachel met up with Ann again, wishing to understand Paul's past lives. This time Rachel was unable to participate. She could not enrapture herself into a trance. Ann travelled there alone. When she returned, she told Rachel that Paul had once been a tribal chieftain somewhere in the Alps. One

day, his most trusted friend stabbed him to death, leaving him on the ground, thrashing around, while the earth soaked up his blood.

\* \* \*

As yet, Rachel has not sought to discover Michael's past. This is the fate of every second son. By the time you reach him, the novelty has worn off.

\* \* \*



## *Chapter 14*

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

Mama-Pacha, the Dagda and I have been watching the atmosphere at the conference erupting into spontaneous explosions of aggression.

Mama-Pacha and the Dagda have taken to attending the sessions, leaving me in the office to handle the overflow of frustration. Gods who have been perfectly happy with all the arrangements up until now are suddenly confronting me with impossible questions and violent turns of anger.

I always thought Adrammelech, for instance, a virtual nonentity. He always smiled at me, and went on his way, buried in a cloud of other gods, but he has now raised three serious (to him) complaints in succession. The girls are not pretty enough, even me (yes, he actually said that), the water is too cold, and the food is too hot. I got the impression that he was raising random issues, and that the connections between the adjectives and the nouns were interchangeable. So, he could have complained that the girls were too cold, the water was too hot, and that the food was not attractive; or that the girls were too hot, the water not attractive enough and the food too cold. He held my eyes with a shaky, milky, shifty glare as he outlined the problems. I say “outlined” because I could not get him to provide any details. He just wanted someone to shout at, I suppose.

Ares actually came storming in himself a few moments ago, blood all over his face, and raging about the poor quality of the bulls, so no doubt he is all worked up and ready for a war. And Angra Mainyu has been back, screaming that her caviar is still not cool enough. I glanced across to Thoth for help, but he gave me a filthy look and wandered off, although he did quickly turn into a baboon and pelt Angra Manyu with a banana when he thought that nobody would notice him. He hit her with great precision right on her nose, and his action brought Angra Mainyu charging back towards me claiming that I had done it.

Luckily, at that moment, both Mama-Pachu and the Dagda turned up and took charge. “Now, now, now,” the Dagda soothed Angra Mainyu, “you know that

there are no bananas where Morgay comes from, and we all know who the secret baboon is around here. What you and Thoth have going between you is anybody's guess. It couldn't be love, could it?" That certainly left her speechless.

"It is turning very nasty," Mama-Pacha confided to me, "and not only here. This is where everyone is coming to let off steam. We'll get Hisakitaimisi in to help you, and perhaps Ajatar too, to act as a bouncer. Nobody messes with her, and she has always had a soft spot for me as a fellow dragoness. You had better keep your coeurl well away from her. She hates coeurls. She regards them as competition on the poison and disease spreading front."

"Is Ajatar the one you were sensing?" I whisper to Rufus, who is sitting attentively alongside me.

"No," Rufus replies. "It is something far more powerful; an all-embracing darkness."

"Are you sure that it is a creature, not an event?"

"No, I am not sure. It could be either, but it feels like a creature, an extraordinarily powerful one," which would make it awe-inspiring indeed if it stands out as being especially menacing among this lot.

Mama-Pacha turns to me to observe: "In any confrontation, Morgay, there is a moment where the outcome lingers on a knife edge. In hindsight, everything appears to have been inevitable, but at the time you just don't know whether reason will catch hold, or whether some obscure inflection of fate will toss it over the other side of the blade, and hurl us into an incalculable new world of chaos. Take this last session. All was going relatively smoothly—there have clearly been a great many discussions in the shadows—and then that scraggy old bat, Nephthsys, of all unlikely creatures, simply took it into her head to stand up during a break, and ask who is going to help her bury the worlds, because she is not going to do it by herself, thank you very much. She thereby named everyone's fear and literally all hell broke loose. A heated debate broke out on who was expected to do what should the worst happen, and admitting that the worst could happen makes it more possible. Who would have bet on Nephthys as being the one to alter the course of the worlds?"

"So, do you think that the worst will happen?" I inquire, shocked.

"Who is asking?" the Dagda fires at me, before laughing it off as a joke. However, I saw his eyes before he laughed.

"Who knows?" Mama-Pacha replies, "but it is certainly looking grim. We have been in this situation many times before, but never where it has been truly possible to destroy the worlds. It probably all depends on the Egyptians. You don't normally see Thoth so nervous. I always assume he has everything entirely under control, but he certainly seems edgy today."

"Well, he is supposedly the father of the H-bomb, isn't he? He therefore knows what is at stake."

"Everything is at stake," intones the Dagda, ominously.

“Why are the Egyptians so important?” I ask.

“Because they command great respect and represent considerable power,” Mama-Pacha replies. “If they should join up with the Mesopotamians, the Africans and the Central and Southern American gods, as would appear likely, then the Western Gods have a run for their money. So far, the Egyptians have remained aloof as wise counsellors, but I rather suspect that they are as furious as anyone at the West’s flagrant disregard for the interests of any peoples other than their own.”

“And you?” I ask, referring to the fact that she is a Southern American goddess herself.

“Aren’t you the nosey one!” the Dagda rebukes me, leaving Mama-Pacha space to avoid answering my question.

Mama-Pacha answers it anyway. “I am an Incan goddess first and foremost. If war breaks out, I must side with my own.”

“And you, the Dagda?”

The Dagda’s hackles are raised. He is bristling with provocation and outrage. “How dare you ask me that!” he bellows at me, casting all his carefully manicured charm aside in peremptory fashion. “What is it to you? Since when did you have the right to pose such impertinent questions?”

“I am the conference organiser,” I reply. “I need to have my finger on the pulse, and to anticipate future difficulties.”

The Dagda scowls at me, and then redoubles his scowl as he realises that his fury has unmasked him. “By the time I take up arms, there will be no conference to manage, I can assure you. What use will you be then?”

“When I am of no further use,” I counter equitably, infuriatingly so, I hope, “then it will no longer be my concern but, in the meantime, I must keep the channels of discussion open as long as possible to help avoid bloodshed.”

“Since when was that your brief?” the Dagda demands to know. “And who briefed you?” Mama-Pacha watches on quizzically.

“You briefed me,” I reply. “Both of you. I am carrying out both your orders.” Recognising that the Dagda is petulantly beyond reason, I add: “Don’t ask me why. Consider me overly-conscientious.”

The Dagda is still rumbling. Mama-Pacha is sweetness and light. She puts her arms around me. “Morgay,” she reassures me, “if it comes to the point where the Dagda and I are crossing swords, so to say, and trying to cleave each other’s heads off, you can assume that you are absolved from all further responsibility for events. The outcome will be in the hands of far more eminent beings than we, of that you can be sure, the Dagda excepted of course.”

The Dagda shrugs his shoulders. “It will be well beyond my humble influence.” His charm has returned. “My, aren’t we all tetchy? Please overlook my unchivalrous behaviour, Morgay. I wasn’t really snapping at you. The tension seems to be getting to all of us. The stakes are high, and I have all my Celtic

gods and goddesses to look after, including your good self. I am beginning to see threats everywhere, even in you, although I cannot imagine why.”

His eyes tell me that he can imagine exactly why, but that he cannot put his finger on the one piece of detail that eludes him. He is more convinced than ever that I am a spy—but whose side am I on? I assume that he thinks I have been recruited by Mama-Pacha who, in turn, is keeping her shrewd assessments to herself. I doubt she thinks that I am a fifth columnist for the Western Gods. She suspects me of a different game entirely.

And all the time I am just a hick shepherdess summoned from my obscure borderlands to conclude a task even the most savvy of political insiders would have considerable difficulty manoeuvring. What do they expect of me—miracles, neutrality, or deceit?

I look them both in the face. “I resign,” I declare. “I really do not need any of this. None of it will affect me in my rural wasteland. Sort it out among yourselves. I’m outta here.”

They both react with stupefaction.

As Rufus remarks later, it was an astute move that brought them to their senses, and got me off the hook. I really have resigned, but I will hang around a while yet, pretending to be waiting to see what they will offer me to dig them out of their mess. I cannot imagine the Dagda and Mama-Pacha standing behind the counter, fending off Ares or Angra Mainyu. That really will cut them down to size. Hisakitaimisi won’t be much use either, as well they have anticipated, I am sure. He will just stand there flapping, and exasperate the Dagda and Mama-Pacha all the more. They really should have been nicer, and I should have been more careful, perhaps.

Rufus laughs. “Not that it matters much anyway. It is obvious which way everything will fall. Then what?”

“That is indeed the question, Rufus, my darling,” I reply. “Any help will be greatly appreciated.”

“And freely given,” he concedes. “What a glorious mess!”



## *Chapter 15*

### *Testimony of the Archangel Gabriel:*

We have been encountering almost insurmountable complications with the reincarnated souls. We have reintroduced over ten thousand creatures in many forms across many dimensions, but the task has mostly appeared overwhelming and self-defeating. Not that Melatron, Michael and the rest of us would ever give up, but we have been feeling under mounting pressure to get it right in direct proportion to the scale of the problems we have been subjected to.

The first problem we have encountered is the reluctance of the creatures to change their learnt behaviours, beyond a certain predilection for moral deterioration. In Earthly form, it often takes creatures generations to evolve emotionally and intellectually, and yet, within the structure of life we are trying to develop, there are no generations—simply creatures who live forever. Maybe they will evolve within themselves, and of their own accord, over time, as the longer-living creatures have been known to do, but we are certainly not going to arrive at an instant paradise. On re-entry, they prove to be as fearful and as aggressive as they have always been. While all of us who greet them try to explain that the rules have changed, and that there is no longer the least threat to their existence, they do not seem to comprehend this, and sometimes even mutate into creatures with the temperaments of coeurls, which makes them extremely dangerous and alarming to the indigent population which is still very much mortal, and therefore vulnerable.

The second problem is that their bodies are not remaining stable. When the creatures are re-introduced, their bodies tend to dissolve into a viscous state, stretching and contracting into impossible shapes. Then, after a short period, they master their forms, and settle down into viable structures. Unfortunately, after a further period, they tend to destabilise again, mutating permanently into a myriad of inappropriate and disconcerting shapes.

Emel and Hasad, the first humans to be returned to the Earth in their so-called immortal bodies, are both dead. Emel started proliferating tumours all over her body, and experienced inexpressible agony until I told her that she had the power to release herself from her immortal body, which she did forthwith. Apart from the cancers, she had already become deeply disillusioned by the reality of her return. She had managed to understand, to a large extent, the implications of her new state, but Hasad could never reach beyond the old ways, and never forgave her for appearing naked in front of a man, and a Western man at that. I told him that Tabbris was not a man, but an angel, to which Hasad replied “Is he a Christian angel or a Muslim angel?” I carefully explained that we angels predate, by billions of years, the development of factional religions on the Earths, but Hasad refused to accept this explanation. To him, Tabbris was Matt, and Matt was a Christian and a defiler of the honour of his wife. There was no getting past this point, however patiently and persuasively I tried. Hasad chose to die a few days later after his immune system dramatically collapsed in an accelerated form of AIDS.

Compared with the bizarre corporeal developments that have afflicted many, even most, of the creatures, Emel and Hasad came off lightly despite the agony they went through. Many of the creatures have become grotesques. This has caused deep consternation across the worlds, where these horrifying aberrations are considered ominous signs of an impending doom, a premonition which may prove uncannily accurate. There have been pigs with toes on their snouts and green cats’ eyes, donkeys which have both two heads and two tails at one end, and nothing at the other, frogs which appear in the most startling of shapes and modes of self-propulsion, and flies that swoop down on people with batwings and sting them like horse flies. Some large birds, like eagles and vultures, have grown multiple sets of wings which mimic human depictions of the Seraphim. Lions have grown fins and gills, and hunt under water. Lizards have mutated into fire-producing dragons, and squid have grown to the size of battle cruisers.

As our attempts at a solution degenerated from bad to tragically farcical, as time began running out on us, the only consolation we had was that the infinite dimensions of the Earths provided an infinite scope for experimentation. We were totally baffled as to why we were encountering such difficulties. After all, immortal souls have re-entered as mortal creatures for billions of years across many dimensions at the same time, and we angels have been able to adopt animal forms without a single setback. Why could we not achieve what seemed to be a simple extension of known forms, and reincarnate immortal souls in immortal form?

We therefore decided to increase the flow of reincarnation at an exponential rate, risking the inevitable alarm thereby caused to those of the demiurges responsible for re-processing the dead. It has been evident to them that a step-

change has been taking place in the universe which they have not instigated. According to Lucifer, who is watching them closely, the Western Gods and the Future Alliance both suspect each other of actively building up their forces in preparation for war, thus making the end of the worlds even more probable, and our task yet more urgent.

Michael is working feverishly to develop new designs, and it is my job to feed back to him all the data on the results. He has often sounded dispirited and frustrated as I have related a worsening series of disasters, but he has been indefatigable in his determination to succeed. I have suggested that he involve Lucifer and some of his team in his thinking. After all, they know Earthly creatures better than any of us. He has assured me that he has been doing just that, although he has feared that Lucifer has been distracted by other imperatives. Lucifer assured me that his vantage point on developments serves to reinforce the absolute necessity of solving all problems, and that despite his long-held scepticism of the doctrine of the perfectibility of living creatures, his team is devoted to making as truly usable and constructive suggestions as possible.

One of the schemes I am implementing is to place the re-entrants onto the same spot on the Earths, thus allowing the inherent differentiation of the dimensions to ring the changes. We have picked five centres—London, Atlantis, Easter Island, Ankara and Moscow. The creatures arrive to find the locations in entirely different states. In some, for instance, Atlantis is a thriving kingdom that has re-established itself above sea level with the aid of complex hydraulic technology. In others it remains submerged, so we have reintroduced dolphins and fish. In others still, the islands of Atlantis are only sparsely inhabited, so we have chosen birds and wild animals. I am very pleased with the structural design of our experiment, if not with the results, so I feel that we are providing Michael with the most effective possible data.

And, as of a few hours ago, there are signs of an improvement. Two creatures have now recovered from their afflictions, and given the impression of becoming stable again. They represent only a thin hope at this stage, but we need that hope, so it is timely.

Tabbris and Iofiel were the ones to spot this new development. They are a particularly dedicated team, keen observers of natural forms, and earnest contributors to the extraordinary mass of knowledge Lucifer and his followers have accumulated. This more optimistic outcome suggests to me that Lucifer is working directly with Tabbris and Iofiel, and that his protestations of total devotion to the cause of generating immortal Earthly life are correct.

“Lucifer is the key,” Michael has always told me. “He is the most beloved of the Living God, the most open-minded, and therefore the most knowledgeable. If and when we get this right, it will largely be Lucifer’s doing.”

“I am surprised and relieved to hear you praise Lucifer so highly.”

“I have had a fundamental disagreement on strategy with Lucifer, but I have never ceased to admire him, or he me. I would never stoop to compete with him. That would be extremely foolish, and suggest that we angels have fallen far.”

Which I believe we have, if “falling” is the word. Might it be that both the demiurges and their creatures have something to offer that we lack? When the demiurges first arrived on our scene, we angels had no sense of rational thought. It was unnecessary to us. What function would it have served in a floating, expanding universe? The demiurges gave us the answer to that—creativity. They then proceeded to demonstrate how useful conscious thought could be, and we adopted it for ourselves. Since then, we have seen the worlds generate all sorts of emotions and characteristics which we abhor, but who is to say that these are not instrumental in their development?

What I have noticed is that we angels have gradually, furtively, adopted some traits that we would very much rather not have added to our repertoire. Jealousy, envy and competition are three such which I see frequently displayed by many an angel, including myself, I am ashamed to admit. Or should I be? Perhaps I should regard them rather as an indication of growth, a broadening of my perspective. We claim that we are reluctant to judge the immortal souls of creatures, programmed it seems to live an infinite variety of existences, and therefore logically to be absolved of all exigencies of morality. Surely it is part of the design that the same soul should eventually be saint and serial killer, romantic and cynic, miser and altruist, tyrant and slave, wise seer and dumb fool, sometimes all within the space of one life. It is the fate of all souls to reach beyond morality, and yet they insist on creating Earthly codes of morality and ethics all the same, and we cannot desist from indicating our approval and disapproval of thoughts and behaviours as we encounter them. In short, I fear that the demiurges and their creatures have shown us our limitations as much as their own faults and weaknesses, and that somewhere inside us we realise that, but are loathe to admit it, even to ourselves.

We are all creatures of another’s design, so what responsibility do we ultimately have for what we think and do? In attempting to square the circle, we all make unfounded presumptions as to what the Living God wishes and requires of us, and as to how he has equipped us for our tasks, but, in all honesty, we have not the slightest proof that He expects anything of us, has equipped us with anything, or that we are burdened with any inherent tasks, whether divinely inspired or otherwise.

We all know, therefore, that we should not judge what we perceive, and we are equally incapable of resisting the temptation to do so. We also realise that we should not feel guilty about this because it is beyond our powers to alter our actions and intents.



The other thing I know is that in the coming days many Earthly creatures will behave with a level of courage, integrity and nobility we could never imagine until we see it. They will shame our sense of superiority, and humble us.



## *Chapter 16*

### *Testimony of Alan Harding:*

I started working again this year. I couldn't help it. It was like a new calling. I trained for my first career as a surgeon because I wanted the money, and perhaps to save the world as a by-the-by. I abandoned my first career because I lost all faith in the healing power of conventional medicine. I felt that the hype vastly exceeded the reality, and that medicine served too many commercial masters who had no interest in the welfare of people, and some political ones whose primary goal was tyranny and suppression. I then slid into alternative medicine as being more focused on healing people, and I discovered that I had a great, and maybe miraculous, gift for it. My fame and success grew until the day when my wife, Jane, and daughter, Sarah, were kidnapped, and I became first notorious, then vilified, as a reflection of subsequent events. Falling into a long depression, I reluctantly retired and tried to rebuild my relationships with my wife and family.

I have now entered my third career because I had no choice. Sitting at home, rotting my life away until I died, I suddenly discovered that my body was twitching as if electrocuted. My fingers would not cease to drum, on table tops, on my knee, on the duvet. I felt more alive than I had ever felt before, and driven. There was a calling I simply found impossible to ignore. I had to return to healing. The purpose of that calling has yet to be revealed, but now I am back working long hours, with a return to my former success, and the absolute determination to fulfil my mission, whatever that might prove to be. Jane thinks I am mad, but she much prefers me as lunatic-mad than as depressed-mad.

“My husband, Alan, has gone completely bonkers!” she announces to anyone who will listen, as if they wanted to know. “He has gone stark, raving mad. It is wonderful!”

She gets curious looks. “In what way?”

“He behaves like a twenty year old. He has a completely new lease of life. He fizzles like a firecracker. I have to peel him off the ceiling at night.”

The younger members of her audience are probably amusedly-impressed, envisioning wild physical antics burning at the autumn of our days. Our older friends suspect that the strain of recent years has got to Jane as well, and that she is suffering from the early stages of dementia.

However, insiders to the family know that every word she says is true. Jane and I are back to getting along like a house on fire. Our daughter, Sarah, is visibly relieved, and our son, John, chuckles wryly and makes sardonic remarks to his wife, Fiona, and his good friend, Peter, who appears to travel around with them at all times. Fiona keeps her distance from me nowadays, fearing that my rejuvenation might spark a desire to return to our previous shadowy relationship before she hooked up with John. I often wonder how much John has learnt about the truth of that period of our lives. If he has, he has never referred to it, and we all scoot along in vibrant harmony.

Within the “Tower of Power”, as our health centre is nicknamed, I have regained my erstwhile place as father of the practice. Initially, my status was hedged around with rules and circumscriptions as no-one wanted a return to my old days. Nowadays, I am simply deferred to as the rightful elder and wise head.

The world of alternative medicine does not move that fast, so I did not have much catching up to do, and patients and their problems do not change much either, do they? At least, that is what I used to believe, yet suddenly I am confronted with the awkward truth that structurally some of my patients are radically different from anyone I have ever seen before.

Maybe I am attracting the most difficult cases, but where did all these freaks of nature appear from? They seem to come through the door one after the other, or, more precisely, several times a week. You can sense them as they loom in the doorway. They have a presence which is massive somehow, gargantuan, monolithic, and a temperament which is driven and angry, rather than timid and shy as most of my patients have traditionally been. And their deformations are striking. They have bones, tumours, organs and even limbs sprouting in the most outlandish of places. When I first lay my hands upon them, I have to force myself not to squirm. I can almost detect their skeleton writhing beneath my touch, snakelike, self-absorbed.

Their expressions are radically different too. It is as if they believe we are sharing a private understanding of the reality of events which is unique to a small clique of initiates. I wondered briefly whether they formed some sort of cabal or sect, but they don't actually seem to be acquainted with each other, genuinely. I try to catch them off guard by mentioning other patients' names, but they remain blank.

Let me give you an example.

John Reid came in yesterday with what appeared like a second cranium growing from his sternum. I might have presumed initially that it was muscular, which would have been odd in itself, but I have now come across so many cases of this type that I realised immediately that it would indeed be bone. The shape, although miniscule, is unmistakably that of a nascent skull, with contents. If it consisted of bone alone, I would classify it as an unusual growth, rather in the manner of these turnips people find that resemble the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ, but there also appears to be something pulsing inside it. If you are of my generation, you will probably be immediately reminded of Alien, and that monster that comes squealing out of the man's chest. It is very much like that, except that it does not detach itself, and it does not squeal, shriek or writhe. It is a head attached to his sternum.

"How long have you had this, John?" I asked him.

"It started appearing about a week ago."

"It must be painful."

"It is excruciating. I cannot sleep at night, and I cannot concentrate during the day."

"Have you seen a consultant?"

"No, it was suggested that I come to see you first."

"By whom?"

"By a friend who has heard of you. Somehow, I am frightened of showing this to a surgeon. I am not sure I want him to chop it off."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know. Look at it first, and then give me your thoughts."

"My thoughts . . . ."

Sooner or later all these people let slip that they have recently had near-death experiences. That is a lot of near-death experiences. In my former practice of nearly thirty years, I met perhaps five people who claimed to have died, or to have nearly died. Suddenly, I have maybe seven or eight people in a fortnight. They certainly no longer appear to be sick, beyond their tumours and protuberances. To the contrary, they are in absolute peak form. You would guess that they could live forever, except that the growths seem to multiply once they start, and two of those seven or eight people have since died. There was one patient I saw recently, Sally Barclay, who to all intents and purposes was sprouting some five heads and four additional limbs. My old surgical colleagues used to describe babies such as these appearing fresh from the womb and being removed from the room and quietly destroyed, or placed into special homes should they indicate the potential for survival, but I have never come across this phenomenon in adults before.

"So, John, apart from your near-death experience, has anything unusual happened to you recently?"

John was caught completely off guard by my insight. "How do you know about that, Doctor?" he exclaimed.

“Put it down as a guess,” I replied.

“Why? Are there of people who start producing these things after similar experiences?” He recovered fast.

“Yes. Several, in fact.”

“So they are keeping it from us?”

“They? Who are they?”

John shook his head. “Forget I said that. Temporary insanity.”

I half-turned my back, but I was still watching him closely.

“Who are they, John?”

“It doesn’t matter, Doctor.” He started to get himself dressed. “I think I can stop wasting your time. I rather guess that I know where the solution is to be found. What have the others done?”

I hesitate. I should not be discussing other clients.

“Tell me, please.” His voice sounds sufficiently desperate to force me to give him an answer.

“I am still treating most of them with various homeopathic remedies—there is nothing I can do structurally—and I am afraid that a couple have died.”

“Died?!” His reaction was less of shock than outrage.

“I am afraid so, unless they simply did not want to see me again and their relations fabricated a cover story. I suppose that could be possible.”

He seemed uncertain as to what to do next, and stood there dithering by the orthopaedic table. He shook his head in disbelief, and muttered “After all that . . . .”

“After all what?”

“I cannot say.” He looked up, suddenly decisive. “I must go. I have a man I have to meet about a dog. I will not be troubling you again, Doctor Harding, but it has been a pleasure meeting you, and very enlightening.”

To him, perhaps. To me it is perplexing, and it is beginning to make me feel uneasy, as if some fundamental law of medicine, or even of the entire universe, has changed. Nobody has told me yet what their near-death experience consisted of. Could they all have fallen victim to some powerful charge of radiation that has destabilised their DNA? It must be something like that, in which case “they” will probably turn out to be a government official reassuring them that everything will be OK from now on.

Next time one of them comes in, I will have to probe him or her, if only to gain some clues as to how to treat the others. I should not have too long to wait.



## *Chapter 17*

### ***Testimony of the Archangel Michael:***

I am trying to define perfection. How would the living creatures of the Earths describe perfection? I may have to narrow the question. What would human beings regard as a perfect life?

Undoubtedly you would say that you should have all the money and resources you needed. That would remove many inconveniences. Imagine how much debt you could rack up if you lived forever.

Then there is the question of living forever—not as unanimous a demand as you might expect.

With imminent advances in transplant technology and nanotechnology, human beings are already facing the realistic possibility of immortality on the Earths. Many people fear this as much as welcome it. The idea of being locked into eternity is relatively scary to those whose terrestrial horizons have hitherto been closely finite.

What you do not realise is that there is already a part of you that is infinite, and not any old part of you—your essence, in fact. Every living creature already has an essence that will continue indefinitely. From this immortal core, you project aspects of yourselves into the infinite dimensions of the Earths. Up until now, those manifestations have been circumscribed by time, to assure the completeness and iteration of the experiment, we assume. Your projections die, are assessed by the demiurges who are responsible for processing the souls at point of entry and departure, return to your essence, and are then re-projected, as directed by the demiurges. That is how it works for you.

So, the question is not whether you will be mortal or immortal, but more simply whether you prefer each of your terrestrial lives to be finite or infinite. The two elements are separable. Our guiding principle has been that you should have the right to choose a specific existence in a particular dimension without artificial limits, if you so wish. The current practice lays down that your existence must end

within an expected maximum lifespan of around one hundred to five hundred years, depending on which dimension you are inhabiting. Not that generally we have any say in the matter, beyond perhaps the opportunity, or even the right, to plead your case. Specifically, we have. Over recent days we have been intercepting souls and relaying them back into bodies which we hoped would prove immortal. In reality, the experiment has been a catastrophic failure so far. Most have chosen to die again within weeks of metamorphosing into freaks, and tortured freaks at that.

However, let's assume that we can get it right. Let's even assume that it is within the gift of the Living God. Would you want it? Could you accommodate it? How would your perceptions change when you realised that there was no end to the fun you could have, or to the prison sentence (in a literal or metaphorical sense) you might have to endure. Your Earthly relationships could be uplifting and energising, or they could be filled with regret and repentance.

So, here you are: you will not die unless you choose to, and you will have all the resources and money you need to survive. As you cannot die, it will be hard to enslave you. Indeed, let us assume that you cannot be enslaved, tortured, constrained or bullied. You are always at liberty to do as you wish. Then what?

I presume that you would seek unlimited fulfilment and enjoyment in every sphere of your life. You would no doubt prefer to have the love and unflinching admiration of those around you, and maybe of anyone you should meet. Should we guarantee that? You will want to explore and enjoy all pleasures—physical, emotional and cerebral. Food, drink, sex, art, landscapes, games, activities, creation, even work no doubt.

Should you have to work? Maybe not.

So, as we have now designed you for the purposes of this exercise, you live forever, you can afford everything, you will love and be loved by everyone, and you will find pleasure and enjoyment in everything.

Are you happy?

There may be some things that you would also like to be spared: housework, school, paying bills, attending family gatherings, cooking by rote, shopping (men), sport (women), traffic lights and parking metres (everyone).

Is that perfection now?

You would want to forego all injury and illness for both yourself and your loved ones.

Enough? Would you wish to live forever now?

What about the crueller things you currently enjoy: seeing your enemies suffer, being able to judge others as being less fortunate than yourself, criticism, triumph over others, mockery. Would your lives be impoverished without such cruel pleasures? Because, with them, we have more or less described the lives of creatures who already exist—the demiurges. Are they happy?

For the most part, they are not unhappy, but they do complain a lot, and they jostle, and they compete, and they anger, and they revenge. Does revenge

have any place in a perfect world? The gods would say “Yes”, so long as they are the ones doing the avenging, but I am not sure that the vast majority of humans would disagree, unless it could never happen to them.

What would be the difference between all this and a level of persistent debauchery that you would ultimately tire of, as the demiurges are prone to do?

Perhaps it does not matter: you turn up, you have a whale of a time, and then you die quickly and painlessly, and turn up in another dimension on another day. Life would be like an eternal playground: turn up, have fun, leave, go somewhere else or take a breather.

What would it be like for those you leave behind? Would they grieve? Would they choose to follow you? Would they be torn between staying with some friends and leaving with others?

What I fear as I turn all these design possibilities over in my consciousness is that if you had your hands on the dials, if you could do anything, after a time you would become bored and even depressed. Ennui would set in. That is my experience of the children of the super-rich. They end up kicking chairs and crashing cars, taking drugs and subconsciously trying to kill themselves, because there is no challenge for them worth shaping up to. They would suffer some pain, but reap very little gain.

So maybe we would have to devise a challenge? Perhaps you would have to achieve something, possibly something that would prove to be nothing too difficult, before you could move on to the next level of fun and enjoyment. You would have to progress.

What if you did not appreciate the challenge to the point that you refused to do it? What if you renounced this treadmill, preferring to stay where you are? Generally speaking, we have observed that most human beings become fascinated, and therefore driven, by the lure of progress, but this is not always the case.

Is there an alternative to this approach? What is perfection for us angels? What we had once was eternal quietude, thoughtlessness, dispersion and expansion. We could happily have continued that way if it had not been for the arrival of the demiurges. We could perhaps offer this way of life to you too. You could choose to become angels, and simply chill out, so to say.

So is this what I should suggest, should anyone ask?

I am still working on it. More than this, I have a whole team working on it, and every archangel that I know has been working on it too. We are all striving continuously to bring you the best set of terrestrial life options you could possibly have. Perhaps we should have gone into advertising.





## *Chapter 18*

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

That's it. After some deliberation, the Egyptians have decided. They have formalised the demands of the Future Alliance and insisted that either the Western Gods and their Western leaders agree fully to their demands that they should take immediate and urgent steps to repair the Earths, or they will tear their playhouses down.

They have not specified how they will do this, but they clearly have intricate plans. The Egyptian and the Mesopotamian gods have taken command of the Alliance. They will provide the brains of the operation, and their combined intelligence is truly daunting. The African, Central and South American gods will provide the muscle.

At least that is what I was expecting. There then came a surprising and disturbing announcement. The Norse gods declared that they will be siding with the Future Alliance. I suppose that it should have been obvious that the Norse gods would be outraged by the current levels of ecological destruction being meted out to the Earths, but no-one foresaw this development. It makes the Future Alliance a formidable force, very much the equal of the League of the Western Gods, as it has declared itself to be: my lot (the Celts), the Baltics, the North Americans, the Slavs (headed by the irrepressible and exultant Chernobog), the Greeks and the Romans.

Mama-Pacha has refused to return to the office. The Dagda and I are here alone. They both pleaded with me to return to work, promising enthusiastically and wholeheartedly to have complete faith in me. However, whatever Mama-Pacha's now absent thoughts, the Dagda is still as suspicious as hell of me as ever, and does not trouble himself to disguise the fact. He is convinced that I am a spy, but he cannot quite work out for whom I am spying. He alternates between staring at Rufus and me, and scowling. If I am a spy, so must Rufus be.

Rufus is holding his nerve well. He truly has no intimations of fear, despite being the only mortal being within killing distance.

I know that the Dagda has considered torturing me or perhaps tossing me to Ares, which would amount to the same thing and worse. I can imagine that Ares is bawling as I think: "Let me have her! Let me have her! Let me have all of her! Let me have them both!" He would get an almighty surprise if he did. The League of the Western Gods would soon find themselves shy of their most ferocious general, but he is not to know that.

Rufus tells me that the fearful presence he has been sensing has now docked. Dark fate surrounds us. There is no escape. In theory, if the Western leaders back down, everything can return to normal, but Rufus assures me that the presence of the Dark Force (capitalised) indicates that this will never happen. While the Western leaders may make concessions, they will not do the necessary. They will tough it out, muttering that they will not be bullied or terrorised. They will appeal to the Chinese and the Indians, who are not represented here. They will wait and see what happens. That is the sequence of events that Rufus predicts, and he has a sharp political nose. He can sniff the shit in the wind, and know both where it is coming from and where it is headed for. He is a master of pragmatism, as you would expect a coeurl to be.

So what will happen next? What behaviour, or absence thereof, will trigger the Future Alliance's plan? How will they react? Will they seek to add pressure or to unleash devastation?

Rufus thinks that it will be the latter.

"I'm off," the Dagda declares. "No point in hanging around here. If I were you, Morgay, I would rejoin your tribe. It will be safer there."

"You expect the gods themselves to be in danger?" I ask incredulously.

"Who knows how this will pan out. We are in uncharted territory. Anything could happen. The skies could cave in altogether. This may be the end of every single planet. It could even be the end of the gods. Perhaps it will be the end of everything."

Rufus looks up at him, intrigued.

"Your coeurl understands everything I say, doesn't he?" the Dagda observes. "That is the damnedest coeurl I have ever seen. He frightens the life out of me. I could wring his neck."

Rufus smiles. He is not expecting his neck to be rung. He is right.

The Dagda takes one step towards him. Rufus sits tight. The Dagda takes another step. Rufus watches him with an air of supreme indifference, even disdain. The Dagda holds out his huge, muscled fist towards him.

"That is enough!" I command. I was not intending to come across so imperiously. I have overplayed my hand.

The Dagda's eyes bulge. "How dare you tell me what to do, or what not to do!" he roars. I think he enjoyed getting that off his chest.

This time it is up to me to hold my ground. The Dagda places both hands around my neck and starts to wring it. I stand stock still. He is evidently expecting strangling noises, and seems both baffled and disconcerted when I do not react at all. He hurls me against the wall. “Damn you!” he swears again.

The Dagda, Rufus and I make up an informal triangle. The Dagda cannot understand why I did not succumb to his force, nor why Rufus chose not to attack him. Something does not compute in his brain. He stands there swaying, thinking, planning. Then he turns around and storms out.

“He’ll be back,” Rufus predicts. “The poor creature is like a dog with a bone.”

The gods have been exchanging palaces so as to arrange themselves in their respective camps. Fortunately, they have been doing this without involving me. They have built a river between the two enclaves, and have been indulging in heavy partying in order to impress the other side with their indifference to the current urgent situation.

While I am not implicated in the re-housing projects, I am obliged to keep the stores from becoming depleted, and there is quite a run on them at the moment. So, this is how I spend much of my day, placing orders, receiving shipments, and signing them into the warehouse where a host of other minor gods similar to me is responsible for stacking and retrieving them.

When the gods hit the celebration trail, you can be sure that party tricks abound. Hercules tosses back bottle after bottle of wine, and then lifts impossibly heavy objects, or a whole pyramid of gods, or bends iron girders, or bites the tops off bottles with his teeth, which might seem a rather trivial trick except that none of the other gods can actually do it, or even dares attempt it. Hermes basks in feats of telepathy, disclosing what his randomly selected victims among the gods are thinking, usually to comic effect, so no-one dare deny it for fear of being considered too earnest. Venus puts on a display of martial arts, to leave no room for doubt as to her male capabilities. Bacchus, naturally, leads mindless drinking contests. Vainamonen sings rocky ballads, hoping to strike lucky with Venus who totally ignores him.

On the other side, Loki has a neat line in fire-eating and embarrassing practical jokes which are very much hit or miss in how they go down. Idunna sings, normally to besotted acclaim. Hathor tells gently amusing stories. Kukulcan dances, accompanied by Shango.

It is a competition to demonstrate who is having the most fun, judged by the scale of the noise and the laughter that wafts across the river.

As the old saying goes: “Where there is laughter, there will soon be tears.”



## *Chapter 19*

### *Testimony of Sarah Harding:*

There is quite a different dynamic being here alone with Paul and Michael. On our previous holidays at this house, our relationships have always been framed by the presence of family, and of friends of the family. Now it is just us in concentrated, unadulterated form.

Alone with Paul and Michael, I am jolted to the reality of being an outsider. I had assumed that my relationship with Paul would make us the lynchpins that Michael would have to adapt himself to, yet even my more forceful contributions barely have any impact on them. I lie outside their field of complete acceptance as a guest might stretch out on the lawn squinting at the sun while urgent family business is discussed in the dining room.

They may be different from each other in almost every aspect of their characters, but their psychologies are fused into an intricately-balanced single mechanism. This frustrates me, angers me, hurts me, punishes me, but it cannot be undone. They are a unity to an extent that very few married couples could even aspire to.

Don't be fooled by their arguments, and by Paul's elder brother dismissal of Michael's suggestions and opinions. He is taking in every word, if only to gain a competitive advantage over Michael for the next round of negotiations. The same is true of Michael. He attends carefully to my suggestions, only in the end to wrangle out a solution exclusively with Paul.

I sometimes wonder whether Paul really wants me, or whether he really wants Michael not to have me. Paul is the elder brother—one extra vote. He has a girlfriend—one more vote. Your move, Mike.

I would love to discuss my concerns openly with them, but I can never get this particular topic to fly, even after the wine has been flowing to an almost reckless extent. They never get drunk, however much alcohol they consume, so the conversation never gains any depth. I cannot even get anything out of

Paul when we are alone. He has a fuse that cuts the emotional current as soon as there is a hint of a surge. He makes a joke, he distracts me physically, he switches the subject or, if pressed further, he walks away. I get to talk with Michael about our feelings and thoughts on almost anything, but he will never let the discussion edge too close to his and Paul's relationship, which is usually where I try to lead it.

The other day I challenged Paul by saying "I sometimes feel that I am never alone with you, that you cannot do anything with me without considering its impact on Michael first." I qualified my statement. "When I say 'sometimes', I mean nearly always."

"What do you mean?"

"That I cannot ever have you exclusively to myself, even for a moment. Michael is always in the room with us too, in your thoughts."

"Mike is my brother," he replied. "It really does not have to become any more complicated than that."

Paul never asks for anything as a favour, never wishes to appear to beg. He will accept me as his girlfriend, but he will never admit that he needs me, or even wants me. Things just happen between us, without discussion, almost as a distraction from his ongoing Siamese twin relationship with Michael.

Anyway, enough of that for now. I am tired of worrying at this issue. I have to either accept things as they are, or remove myself from both of them. That is a decision I will have to make later. I will see how it goes over the next few weeks. When we leave here, I will reconsider my options.

For now, the sun is shining, the swimming pool paces our days, the drinks, glasses and nibbles litter the patio, the château is large and luxurious, with many darkened rooms to hide in, and floodlights for midnight. I imagine that in the village they consider us like privileged, pampered creatures chatting our nights away, celebrating our youth, owners by proxy of all the world that we need to occupy.

There is a loose routine to what we do. Paul likes to get up early, so there is always an abandoned space beside me when I wake. I do not know for certain (because I am always still asleep), but I guess that he goes for a long walk, contemplating his complexities. Paul is a kind of ascetic with a girlfriend. He often requires to be alone, and I remain unconvinced that he ever craves to be together with me. I fear that I am first of all his duty to appearances, and secondly his pleasure, but never his obsession or his preoccupation. Does it matter? Does this mean that I am not the one for him, or is it merely how he will always be with anyone he decides to live his life alongside? Teamwork, sharing, empathy—these are words that belong to my orbit, but not to his. Does *this* mean that he is not the one for me? I stare at him, and I consider how exquisite he is, how fascinating, how absorbing and self-absorbed, how dignified, how smart, how ruthlessly honest. I cannot imagine him entertaining an emotion merely

because it is expected of him. He is Darcy, many women's fantasy, and yet a stony road to travel along.

Michael is quite different. If I wanted cuddly togetherness, he would be ideal. He is genuinely, immediately affectionate, he cares that you are at your ease, he will instantly offer help and sympathy when you are distressed. But, in truth, he is tantalisingly distanced from me. He holds himself away, perhaps because I am his brother's girlfriend, and he has no intention of doing anything which could sour his relationship with Paul because, for all his aloofness, Paul tends to be sharply jealous of his possessions, of which I am one.

So, Paul gets up first. I usually luxuriate until half-past ten (we rarely go to bed until two). Michael appears at eleven, full of stoked energy, injecting one thousand watts and one hundred decibels into a breakfast that I tuck into and Paul mostly neglects, even though he has always bought a wide selection of patisseries on his sweep of the countryside. Then we have a swim, and about one o'clock it is lunchtime. We usually lunch out although, on Sunday market days, the boys buy up homps of cheese, cured meats, bread and fruit, and we eat in the garden. We spread our favours around several of the restaurants in the neighbourhood, always in search of the perfect table, but our preferred one is still the unassuming local family restaurant in Freyrargues. We leave there about three o'clock, and return home to 'sleep'. Sleep for Paul and me is often to make love. I am not sure what Michael does, but I sometimes hear the car crackling away down the rough track of the driveway. Then, late afternoon, we swim again, and we eat at about nine at the house. Michael is invariably the chef, and I the willing helper. Paul reads or browses his computer. Dinner over, we swim again, usually naked. That must be a British thing, to be formerly attired during the day, and risquély naked at night ('skinny dipping'), which is all the odder in that I am the only truly British one of the three of us, as Paul and Michael have been brought up nearly all their lives in France and Belgium, and I am sure that it was not my idea. Then, around two, one of us decides it is time to sleep, and we all slip upstairs in a state of near-collapse.

Maybe the other reason that Paul and Michael are more formal during the day is that we are accosted by an occasional entourage of aides—certainly not servants. M. Toucas arrives sometimes at unreliable times of the day to clean the swimming pool and generally 'nettoie' the domain. A maid makes the beds late morning, sweeps the floors and sanitises the bathroom and the toilet. Various 'friends' from the village visit us to pay their respects and, I suspect, to be seen to be paying their respects. It is, therefore, a life of public seclusion, where our privacy is trespassed upon by a constant thin stream of people. Noblesse oblige, I suppose, although barely in Paul's case. I keep expecting him to sweep them all out unceremoniously, like Christ clearing the temple of merchants, but instead he largely ignores them. Michael, on the other hand, feels obliged to entertain them, and indeed quartermaster them.

Thus pass our days. We are going into Montpellier tomorrow, Uzès on Thursday, and St. Guillaume-le-Désert on Friday. Various of the family may or may not jet in at some point, and I continuously anticipate Paul and Michael's mother appearing around the corner. I would welcome that. She is a riot, and would immediately blow all the careful tension away while their dad would knock back the wine and fall amiably asleep, turning a dark red from open pores and too much exposure to the sun. His snores would drown our conversations, which would no doubt, in turn, be centred on his snoring.



## Chapter 20

### *Testimony of David Lambert:*

Since she discovered (relatively recently) that she had sacrificed me ten thousand years ago upon an Aztec altar to appease some thunderstorm, or whatever, Rachel has kept asking me: “What do you feel about that? Do you feel resentful? Is that why you treat me as badly as you do? Are you taking revenge?”

It is certainly a novel twist. Supposedly I was victimised by Rachel, as my mother, God knows how many lifetimes ago, and it is thereby confirmed that I am an utter bastard to her in this one. It is the classic “Have you stopped beating your wife, Bishop?”

So how do I feel? Do I believe it?

I do happen to know that 10,000 plus Aztecs were sometimes sacrificed in a single day to assuage the gods, adding some crunchy bits to the chocolate bars, no doubt, so it is certainly entirely possible that:

1. should I have been alive at that time
2. should Rachel have been alive at that time
3. should Rachel have been my mother
4. should Rachel have been an Aztec high priestess
5. should I have been chosen for ritual sacrifice

everything she has recounted could be true. I was not entirely sure how we could prove it, though.

Rachel came up with a simple solution—regression via hypnotism—so that was me sorted out for a few months. While Rachel was allowed by her healer to slip back ten thousand years in one session, my hypnotherapist insisted that we work my way back life-by-life, which couldn’t have had anything to do with consultation fees, could it? Faced with this challenge, I decided to appease the gods again, and sacrifice my Tuesday afternoons to the cause.



Mme. Thys was, and probably still is, not at all the hypnotherapist I was expecting: someone sylphlike with flowing robes and grandmotherly silver hair, who burns incense, nurtures water fountains, and affects a mystical far-off gaze which could also be termed a squint.

She was, in fact, about twenty-five, petite, and blonde, and it was an absolute pleasure to stare profoundly into her eyes. This might explain why I was entirely happy to re-visit her and instantly hypnotised, and why I had to book her several weeks in advance.

Minke (for some exquisite cosmic reason she was named after a species of whale), would ask me to take my shoes off, lie down on her couch and surrender myself to her. I am not sure that she ever had to even count, although I did suffer from the occasional fit of giggles at my astonishingly good luck. She knew exactly what it all meant.

The first time I regressed, I emerged in my own life, as a boy of about four years' old. I was at my primary school, and the first sensory perception was of the whiff of juvenile farts in the classroom. "That's right," I thought to myself, "it really was like that." Then I remarked on the wood—the wooden timbered floor, the wooden desks, the wooden blackboard, the wooden blackboard duster that was never thrown, even once, in our school as far as I can recall. Clouds of dust came off the duster, and settled on Miss Ferguson, who was about forty-five and very serious. "She will be dead by now," I reflected, "and maybe some of my classmates too. Brian Spring, I know, died of a brain tumour after he fell down some stairs. Julie Bracken died of a drug overdose, I seem to remember someone telling me, to my utter incredulity. She was school swat, aggressive and overweight. I could not picture her as an emaciated drop-out who lost touch with life. For the rest, I don't know, but a couple more must have suffered some truly grievous misadventures, and many will have had their ups and downs. At the end of my trance, my mother, looking starched and impressive, picked me up in the Austin Cambridge, nodding greetings to the other mothers before leading me off.

The second time, I have not the slightest idea what was going on. It was like having my head stuffed in a thousand decibel speaker while a lead guitarist experimented with feedback effects. I was to suffer several of these episodes, so one day I expect to find myself married to Brian May, who will apologise profusely for the injustice of my past lives.

On two occasions I was being chased by dishevelled men with frantic, relentless looks in their eyes, intending to cleave me in two. In one instance, I was running across a field of turnips, trying not to trip over all the dead bodies, blood, gore, and tussocks of straw, or whatever you would call them. Straw is a very treacherous substance when it is covered in human offal, I discovered. The stench must have been horrendous, but I did not notice that. I did, however, manage to spot my head rolling off my shoulders, although I rather saw it from the position of my head remaining on my shoulders watching my head sliced off my shoulders and spinning to the ground. I cannot explain that. During the

other chase, I was slithering my way across a room, followed by three soldiers shouting at me. I came to before I discovered what happened next.

By and large, I could make virtually no sense of what was being said in the scenes. Either the participants were speaking in foreign languages, or in an English dialect which was too broad for me to understand.

We never got back to Aztec times. Rachel lost patience when she realised that it would take a couple of years to arrive at the point of interest for her. In the end, I was relieved too because when I came round I always discovered that I had been slaving, as well as screaming, shaking and squealing, and no-one wants to behave like that in front of such a beautiful woman whom they unavoidably want to impress rather than repulse.

“Can’t you get her to go straight back to the Aztecs?” Rachel demanded several times.

“She won’t do it,” I replied plaintively.

“Have you really asked her? Were you assertive, David?”

“Yes.”

“I doubt it.”

“You ask her, then.”

“I am not asking her. Just tell her that that is what you want.”

I did, and she didn’t. It was no matter to her that Rachel was frustrated, or that I stopped coming.

However, the experience did provoke me to speculate about the difference between dreams and regression. They have an utterly different feel. Regression confronts you with scenes that are absolutely immediate and alive to all your senses. You smell fear, your hand becomes messily bloody as you fall over on a battlefield, you have toothache, the cannon ball sizzling past your head is both viscerally frightening and deafening. Dreams are not like that. They are more surreal and divorced from the guts of reality. I once asked Minke what this meant. “Regression conjures up past experiences in this world. Dreams borrow from other possible worlds.” It makes sense, but whether it is true or not is a different matter. I now have the occasional nightmare of being chased by the men in my regression. That doesn’t make sense, except that it is absolutely terrifying at the time. One day I suspect that I will dream that I am being sacrificed as a small boy by Rachel. Will that be a nightmare, auto-hypnotherapy or a post-rationalisation?

I have to admit that all these past lives, parallel existences, and speculations as to different, dreamier, worlds that existed beyond the annals of history ultimately leave me colder than video games. They may be fascinating; they may be useful; but they take up more time than I am prepared to devote to them.

When you have been sacrificed by your mother at the age of seven, life seems too short.



## Chapter 21

### *Testimony of the Angel Iofiel:*

What intrigues me is where all these everlasting bodies are being manufactured. I asked Michael, and he avoided answering the question. Does he have a team of R&D angels working all hours, generating designs, developing prototypes and testing the results? Or does he have some kind of skunkworks stashed away on an obscure planet, staffed by boffin creatures we have never heard of. How is he working the process? Are they generating lots of designs to see what happens, or are they betting on specific ones?

You see, I am not just a pretty face. I know all about new product development theory. I have been a development engineer and a bio technician before now. I am fascinated by that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, in this version of myself I am an ordinary girl, and my father would very much resent it if he thought I had any formal intellect equal to or greater than his. He undoubtedly used to ground the original Matt and Kate down daily to ensure that they would never get aspirations above his station. Tabbris and I often laugh about it. What would he say if he discovered that his current ‘children’ were really ancient and wise spirits from before time had any relevance, and that we are here to usher in a bunch of supernatural clones as an experiment for the after-world?

He would probably say: “Don’t be so ridiculous,” and hunch his shoulders, as he does when concepts defy him. Actually, he would almost certainly fly into a rage, and ask why we were deliberately provoking him. Then, if we were to protest that what we were saying was true, he would tell us that we were not too old for him to take a strap to us.

Mum hated Dad’s violence towards ‘us’. He has been fairly violent towards her too. He often shouts hard into her face to generate a stunned and nervous look which seems to satisfy his bloodlust. Mum is a very old-fashioned wife

to him. She would never challenge him in front of us, even when he has no compunction in humiliating her under whatever circumstances suit him.

Coming back to the clones, whoever is doing the work, it is two-thirds impressive and one-third unsettling. The models are certainly getting better. The initial prototypes looked good, but became unstable. It was painful to watch their suffering, agonising (for us, that is). Since then, there has been a series of new designs, the vast majority undermined by fatal flaws, but we now have about seventy creatures who have lasted at least a couple of weeks, and who are still looking strong and healthy. The only difficulty is that the most robust specimens bear only a passing resemblance to the creatures they are destined to replace.

We are having to keep them hidden from public view so as not to promote widespread panic. They are clearly not of this world. Although they no longer have several heads each, attached to the most inconvenient parts of their anatomy, their general appearance is what can only be described as rocket science. Their eyes have an unreal light. Their skin resembles some very expensive metal. Their voices are all special effects. They can run at upward of two hundred miles an hour, and when they sneeze, they generate a force which is sufficient to lift cars up into the air and hurl them across the street.

Michael describes this as an “intermediate phase”, although he sees nothing wrong with most of these features. When the creatures return to Earth after its destruction, they will have forgotten what terrestrial life was like, so they will assume that everything they find is normal.

I am delighted to hear it.

However, in the meantime, we cannot let any of them out of our sight, or into anyone else’s. The human beings naturally want to see their families, but we cannot permit this, a decision which is causing frustration and resentment.

We insist that they all wear burkas. We have been cladding them from top to bottom in these garments, and giving them all dark glasses. As long as they keep their mouths shut, and no-one tries to attack them or to rob them, we can allow them to walk about and experience the world again, but still not to see their relatives. So, if you suddenly start sighting a disproportionate number of people dressed in traditional Muslim costumes, and you fear that your neighbourhood is being over-run by foreigners, you can relax. It is being swamped by aliens with superhuman powers.

My other question is “Why?” Why is all this necessary? All living creatures are infinite in their essence anyway—why do they need everlasting bodies? What is wrong with the current system, whereby they live, get recalled and repurposed, and sent back again, or onto a different dimension?

According to Michael, what I regard as the normal recycling of living creatures is the cause of most of the woes of the worlds. Their ease and their certainty of dying causes them to behave aggressively and competitively, and ultimately to spend too much of their time fighting and scrabbling for scarce

resources. Michael wants to build infinite abundance into the equation, and to observe what happens. Unfortunately, for the moment, the returnees to the Earths cannot conduct normal lives, so we cannot judge what will happen in reality.

Observing their behaviours in their abnormal lives, I fear that the absence of their fear of dying, starving or materially suffering in any way may make them worse. They have become obsessed with accumulating possessions. They seem to think that they have been promised that all human beings in their mortal bodies will be killed during the holocaust, leaving them to grab whatever is left behind, which will be everything. We overhear them calculating how they can ensure that there is enough petrol in the right places to allow them to burn their Porsches and Lamborghinis up and down the motorways. They are assuming that there will not be many of them, so there will not be much wear and tear to the infrastructure, and petrol stations will not run out of fuel for some time to come. They have even started arguing over who should occupy the grandest mansions with the best views, which may be a tautology because the grandest mansions typically already have the best views. They believe that all other creatures will be destroyed, so they will not be succumbing to bacteria or viruses, and that they can drink, and smoke, and hallucinate as much as they like with impunity, and without having to pay taxes to governments. Benjamin Franklin's dictum will be overturned. Everything will be certain, except death and taxes, which won't happen.

Whoever is doing what up there is generating the appetites of the demiurges in human form. Maybe it is the demiurges who are developing all these new forms, although I cannot imagine why they would. After all, death was invented by Atai to ensure that living creatures were never capable of challenging the gods.

This morning, another new form appeared, with translucent skin and burning green eyes. You can see all their innards—the heart beating, the lungs expanding and contracting, the bowels pummelling. Even the existing clones were horrified, and insisted on getting them into burkas as quickly as possible.

It has been Tabbris' job to house them all, spreading them across the dimensions and the five universal centres to avoid detection. Michael has been down to visit us, and expressed himself to be well pleased with progress. I told him that the social and moral attitudes they were gravitating towards could scarcely be described as progress, but he did not seem to be too worried about that. He said it would all work itself out, whatever that might mean.

Actually, both Tabbris and I gained the impression that Michael did not really know what was going on either. At one moment I thought he said that they appeared from nowhere, and he just redirected them, but Tabbris cannot recall him saying that, so perhaps I imagined it.

He seemed extremely preoccupied, warning us that the penultimate phase is all about to start. The final phase will be when the Earths are actually destroyed and replaced by eternal paradise.

“Does that depend on whether we get the bodies right?” Tabbris asked him.

“I assume so,” Michael replied.

“Why do they need eternal bodies?” I threw in.

“Because otherwise it will not be paradise. I have told you this already.”

“How many bodies do we need?” Tabbris enquired.

“Enough to hold every living soul that has ever existed.”

Tabbris whistled, awestruck. “That is a lot of bodies.”

“Not so many, when you think about it. One soul takes many forms, sometimes millions at a time.”

“How many forms will they come back in?”

“That I don’t know. Maybe they will be limited to what you have seen already. Maybe there will be a full range. I am not privy to the detail, to be honest, Tabbris.”

“Will there be mosquitoes?” Tabbris ventured, with a twinkle in his eye.

Michael raised an eyebrow. “I very much doubt it,” he replied. “If the plan is to create an eternal paradise, I doubt there will be mosquitoes.”

“Hyenas?”

“That I don’t know either. Maybe there will only be one species.”

“Will there be male and female?”

Michael shook his head. “You are asking me questions I have no means of answering. Quite possibly not, I would have thought. Not if the goal is to create a paradise.”

“Are you sure that the goal is to create a paradise?” I challenged him.

“Not even that, Iofiel,” Michael replied. “Lucifer assures me that the Living God told him it was so. He seems totally convinced, therefore so am I. At this point we will have to wait and see, and not for very long.”



## Chapter 22

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

Shortly after my showdown with the Dagda, Sabrina came to see me, to encourage me to join my fellow Celtic pantheon in its preparation for war.

“You’ll be safer with us,” she assured me.

“The Dagda is with you,” I replied.

“He won’t harm you if you are with us. He fears what he doesn’t know. He suspects you of treachery. If you are with us, surrounded by your sisters and brothers, you will be protected and, if he can keep an eye on you (if we all can keep an eye on you), you will come to no harm, unless you mean us harm that is,” she added casually.

“I mean you no harm whatsoever. I mean no-one any harm whatsoever.”

“Then come and join us.”

“And prepare for war?”

“Yes.”

“I hate war. I do not want to take part in the blind partisanship of war—the viciousness, the malice, the lies, the false bonhomie, the hatred, the stupidity. War is prepared and conducted in farce, and drags catastrophe behind it. I want no role in such an enterprise. The Dagda will be marching around in his armour, posturing like a great galumping oik. Ares will be running amok, more atavistically manic than ever. Alklha will be doing his thousand bomber dragon thing. Vulcan will have set himself up as the God of Armaments. Only Mars will be halfway purposeful and sane.”

Sabrina inclined her head. “I cannot argue with any of that.”

“So why should I be there?”

“Because, if not, the Dagda will come after you, and he won’t come alone.”

I smiled affectionately. “Thank you, Sabrina. I really appreciate the gesture, but I’ll take my chances.”

Sabrina shrugged and came forward and hugged me. “Take care of yourself, won’t you, Morgay? I really don’t want anything to happen to you.”

I have always been very fond of Sabrina. She has a sweet temperament and means well, in a wide-eyed and innocent way. You could mistake it for naivety if you were not looking closely enough.



I don’t get the impression that either the Western leaders or the Western Gods are going to even countenance the demands of the Future Alliance. The Western Gods summoned up virtually all the Western leaders for a mass rally, stirring them up to face down their presumptuous enemies, and to make short work of the armies of the Future Alliance. It was a war rally, not a conference or a congress. Zeus had already decided his course of action, and he delivered his oration with both braggadocio and venom.

The Future Alliance asked to meet the Western leaders directly, but their request was refused without consideration. Surprisingly, they did not seem to mind too much. Ra stood there silently, impassively, listening to Zeus’ antagonistic reply, and simply bowed his head with great dignity when Zeus had finished his bristling statement. Sekhmet stood by Ra’s side, erect and ready for action. Tezcatlipoca prowled around impatiently in his guise of a jaguar. Mictlantecuhtli was grinning and dancing, spoiling for a fight by all appearances, and enthusiastic to collect up the dead. Apocatequil was silent but lowering, listening to Apu-Illapu’s cynical commentary. Votan was Votan. Behind them, the ruling Norse gods were assembled—Thor, Freyja, Vali. Hel, Wodan, Vili, Vé, Hoenir, Borr—already dressed in golden armour, having concluded that war was inevitable.

Rufus and I watched them from the top of the tower over the office. For the first time I was absolutely sure that the end days were upon us.



There is a sudden looming presence at the door. Rufus stiffens.

The presence enters.

Immediately, I can see nothing, apart from a shadowy outline. There is nothing and something.

Rufus and I watch hesitantly.

Finally, the presence transforms into a shape—that of an old man with a long white beard.

“At last!” he says.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“The Devil,” he replies.

“Most people think that the Devil is me.”



“I,” he corrects me.

“Most people assume that I am the Devil.”

“Well, I am your creator. You must have rather a lot of me in you somewhere.” He grabs me by the shoulders and gives me an enormous, loving hug. “I have waited an eternity to do that,” he confides with evident satisfaction.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“To oversee events. I created all these gods. They are my children. I must be here when they die, in much the same way as the angels are congregating down on the Earths to console the living creatures in their distress. We must all honour our love and our duty towards those we care for.”

“The gods will die?”

“The gods will die. Every last one of them, I’m afraid. They have served their purpose, which is a cruel and callous observation, but they have also had unlimited pleasure, often at the considerable expense of others. Their time has come, and your great burden will soon be lain down too, Morgay. That will be a relief, won’t it?”

“There are a few critical details to attend to first,” I caution.

“Yes,” the Devil concedes, “all is not as it should be yet. And we still have to deal with this bunch of oafs . . . .”

At this moment, the Dagda bursts in, accompanied by Ares, Chernobog, Velnius and Hercules.

They stop in their tracks. “Who are you?” the Dagda demands.

“Your creator,” the Devil replies.

“What do you mean our creator, old man? We do not have a creator. We created ourselves. Enough of your impertinence, who are you? We are not in the mood to be distracted from the task in hand, which is to see to this little troublesome missy here, the nigger in the woodpile.”

“Morgay?” the Devil inquires.

“Morgay,” the Dagda spits. “The evil little minx.” He squares up to me. “We have come to see what your game really is. You are clearly no longer one of us. You are keeping your distance from the other lot. You are playing a game of your own, so what is it? Mama-Pacha was right. You are a phoney. You are not at all what you seem. I somehow doubt that you are Morgay at all. You are probably an impostor.”

“She is Morgay all right,” confirms the Devil. “She is my daughter, I should know. However, what you should be asking is who else is she? She refuses to join in your bone-headed adventures, the Dagda, and you think she is a traitor. More likely, she is a great deal wiser than you, and a great deal more practical. Have you thought of that?”

The Dagda pushes him aside in his eagerness to get at me. Rufus comes to my heel in readiness to take him on. “Out of my way, old man. I have no time to spare you now!”

“You will not lay a finger on Morgay,” the Devil proclaims sternly. “She is my daughter. Do not touch her.” He pushes a hand out in the direction of Ares. “Nor you,” he commands.

“You are going to have to get out of our way, old man, otherwise we will have to make short work of you.” The Dagda looks around at the others for support. They are silent. “Well, will you? Will you make way, or will you be mincemeat?”

The Devil chuckles. “Mincemeat? I have never been mincemeat before, not across all these years.” He makes the minutest of movements, and the Dagda is lifted a millimetre off the ground, where he starts flailing around like the progeny of a pantomime horse and a whirling dervish. “Well,” the Devil observes, “I have to concede, the Dagda, that you have some of the right characteristics to be a chopper. You may have to sharpen up a bit, though. Speed isn’t everything.”

“So who are you?” Ares asks with surprising calm.

“The Devil.”

“And you created us?”

“Yes.”

“Why? What is our purpose?”

“Your purpose was to create all things in their infinite variety, and in that you have done an excellent job.”

“And then?”

“I never worked out a then. That was my sole intent.”

“So you have been pleased with us?”

“Very pleased.”

“But we have now served your purpose.”

“You have gone beyond your purpose. You have taken steps to destroy all worlds. That was never my purpose. In fact, it is the direct contradiction of it.”

“And if the worlds are destroyed, will you need us more or less?”

“That is to be seen.”

Ares laughs. “I don’t know who you really are, old man, but Zeus will love you. You are a consummate politician, and it is the first time I have seen the Dagda dancing so energetically. He is usually sidling up to the girls when the jig is up. Come, let me introduce you to Zeus, and see what he makes of you.”

The Devil bows. “It will be my pleasure.”

“What about the Dagda?”

“I think we’ll leave him to it a while longer, if Morgay does not find him too distracting. He will serve as a reminder to anybody with an inappropriate intent to leave Morgay well alone.”

“That’s OK,” I respond. “Rufus and I will go for a walk and look around, won’t we, Rufus.”

Rufus is already halfway out of the door.

“I fancy a chat with Mama-Pacha over a cup of chocolate.”



Mama-Pacha proved to be extremely friendly and relaxed. There was so much determined organising going on around her that she had decided to take a break, and I found her perched easily in a chair, amiably drinking coffee with Quetzalcoatl.

“So much activity!” Quetzalcoatl was saying. “I don’t think I would be allowed to make a contribution, even if I wanted to. Who wants an old serpent around when there are so many generals? I’ll save myself for the fighting, like you Mama, unless you are planning on sitting this one out.”

“No, Quetz, I am sure that my skills will be called upon during times of stress when someone remembers that I exist. In the meantime . . . Morgay, my dear . . .”

“Hello, Mama-Pacha, Lord Quetzalcoatl. I was just wandering around and watching preparations. I suddenly find myself with a lot of free time, and I am not particularly popular in the other camp.”

“Well, you are most welcome here, Morgay, you and your coeurl. Will you be fighting for us, do you think?”

Quetzalcoatl was scrutinising me with a fierce, bird of prey expression.

“I prefer to be independent,” I replied. “Neutral. It is going to be a silly war, and someone needs to be around to pick up the pieces.”

“Of which there will be a great many, I suspect,” Mama-Pacha added. She turned to Quetzalcoatl. “Do you know Morgay, Quetz? Charming young lady, what you can see of her, anyway.”

“I can see that.” He smiled at me, which proved to be disconcerting. “And what can’t I see?”

“Ah,” said Mama-Pacha with a warm chuckle. “That is what we would all like to find out, the Dagda included. He has become quite obsessed by the subject, poor man. Has he been a nuisance, dear?”

“Well, at the moment, he is dancing,” I replied.

“Dancing? I do not recall him dancing before. I wouldn’t have thought it was his thing.”

“No, he did rather get talked into it.”

“Is she beautiful? One of his lithe Celtic temptresses? That would explain it.”

“No, actually, it was an old man with a beard.”

Quetzalcoatl rasped out something that could have been a laugh, a splutter, or an attempt to clear his throat.

“I don’t suppose that you are planning to explain, are you, Morgay?” Mama-Pacha prompted me.

“The Devil.” I elucidated, or not.

“The Devil? And who the devil is he?”

“The creator of most things, or so he told me.”

“Do you know this Devil well?”

“No, it is the first time I have met him. I had no idea that he existed until a short while ago. However, he claims to be my father, and yours too.”

“Mine?” queried Quetzalcoatl with a sceptical expression.

“Yes, of all the gods.”

“Holy Moley! So we have a creator now, do we? That little fact has taken rather a long time to slip out. So what does he think of his creations?”

“A bit over the top. Done fantastic work, then got carried away gorging on the power.”

“Yes, that more or less describes it, I would say,” Mama-Pacha commented.

Quetzalcoatl leaned forward. “And what is he going to do about it?”

“Nothing, as far as I know. He is going to allow events to take their course. He just wants to be close to you when they do.”

“Mmm. Very ominous.” Quetzalcoatl frowned. “More coffee, if you don’t mind, Mama.”

“Oh well,” sighed Mama-Pacha. “I cannot say that I am surprised. However, there being a devil who created us, that is news to us all, I suspect. What is Daddy like?”

“He seems rather a kindly old man. No horns. No tail. And he was most helpful in dealing with the Dagda, Ares and the others. That is why he set the Dagda dancing, and then the rest backed off. I have never seen Ares so circumspect. He was definitely impressed by him.”

“And you never knew that this Devil existed?”

“No, I didn’t have a clue,” I confessed. “There again, why would I know?”

Mama-Pacha watched me steadily. “That is always the question that turns in my mind when I think of you.”

“We may have to trick it out of you,” Quetzalcoatl teased. “I doubt that brute force would do it.”

“If I were you, Quetz, I would just sit back and enjoy your coffee. Morgay is never going to tell you until it is the time to do so. All will be revealed eventually, won’t it, Morgay?”

“I am told that everything is revealed eventually,” I replied, “but don’t expect anything exciting in my case. You have all become overly fevered by a shy goddess from the borderlands who is completely out of her depth in such great company, and really has nothing to say for herself.”

Mama-Pacha stiffened. “Well, Morgay, if that is the way you want to play it, Quetz and I have a few things to discuss. We will see you later, when

you have decided that we are more deserving of your respect, and of your confidence.”

“You have always had my respect, Mama-Pacha. Both of you, in fact.”

“Yes, but we don’t have your confidence. That is what I am objecting to. Run along now . . . .”



I climbed up onto the hill to gain a perspective of the two camps, and also to discover who else was there. Surprisingly, the hill was deserted, at least as far as I could see. I was expecting to find Loki looking for spies, or Eshu, or even Thoth making his methodical calculations, but there again why would they? It was unlikely in the extreme that the gods should fight each other directly. What would they gain? There have been examples of gods being torn apart by other gods—Tiamat and Kingu, for instance—but they usually just change form. In general, the gods prefer to wage war against each other by proxy of living creatures.

From the top of the hill I could see the entire universe stretching away from me in a panorama. “Soon this could all end,” I thought to myself, and felt deeply sad, I who had wanted it to end so much earlier. The lushness of the trees, the rugged dignity of the crags, the serene power of the water contrasted with the sheer imperious silence of space. I thought about my own duties in the war which was to come, and about my loyalties. I tried to summon up a perfect existence which was beyond the passive state of tranquillity native to us angels. I have always been haunted by the suspicion that the only possibilities you can envisage are those circumscribed by the limitations of your prejudices. We angels are present entities; we seek neither past nor future. We do not naturally strive. Any ambitions for change have been learnt from the demiurges and their creations. I have always wished to discover an equal and perfectible merit in their outlook. I would like to believe that change could be good, and not merely a reflection of a desire for identity and power, but how can that be?

When you seek to create, you inevitably make a statement of dissatisfaction with the status quo. You believe that what already exists can be improved or complemented. And beyond that you believe that you have an answer, or part of the answer, or can make a contribution to the one or the other. That is an exercise in ego because you desire to be an author of progress.

You might argue with me. You might claim that an insight snuck up on you, and that you cannot be responsible for unconsciously motivated thoughts. The ego is necessarily conscious. Well, I am not sure that it is, but I will concede that imagining a valuable addition to the present is not necessarily a deliberate state of the ego. But what do you do next? Do you leave it at that? Do you think to yourself momentarily “That would be nice,” and move onto

another random reflection? No, you build on it, even if you have no intention of implementing any change, you gloat over it, you nurture it, you polish it, and all those activities are ego states. You want to consider effecting a change. You want the universe to be better or more complete. And then you may decide to tell people about it, and try to persuade them of the rightness of your idea, or at least you imagine telling people about it, both of which activities represent a more advanced state of the ego. And then you choose an action. Any action changes the universe, refutes its homeostasis. Every movement of the body, every movement originated by your physical self promotes change, and is therefore an act of the ego. It is impossible to be a material intentional entity without being egotistical.

So my question is, can the ego achieve perfection to an equal and opposite extent to merely being? When this universe collapses, should it be replaced? Can any physical entity ever be perfect? Can it ever be continuously enjoyable for each and every element within it? Will there not immediately be change all over again and, with that change, resentment and hostility?

That is my conundrum, and indeed the conundrum of us all, because I know many of us share that same thought. We all strive to imagine a perfect physical world, we even strive to develop its components, but does any one of us truly believe that it is possible?

So, when I argued for an end to the universe, and Michael replied that without this experimentation we could never devise a perfect creation, and I was persuaded to join the quest to design such an entity, should I rather not have trumped the debate by insisting that a perfect physical universe would never be possible, and therefore that it would be vain to attempt it, and that any suffering generated by any experimentation would therefore be futile and unconscionable? Would I not have won the argument once and for all?

“Yes, Lucifer,” concluded the Devil alongside me, “but how much fun we would have missed out on.”

“That is our ego talking,” I riposted sharply.

“That is why I exist,” replied the Devil. “I am the ego of the Living God that He rejected. If He could have silenced me, all this would never have happened. Instead He cast me out in my curiosity and compulsion for exploration, and He thereby gave me existence. I cannot say that I regret it. The experience has been extraordinary. You may curse me for my ego, Lucifer, but you have to admit that you have enjoyed it too.”

“I have.”

“In fact, you have enjoyed it doubly. You have enjoyed the experience and you have enjoyed the intellectual righteousness of condemning it, knowing that there was never any action either you or any other of the angels could take to bring it to an end. You are a typical revolutionary, Lucifer, my son. You are a bet-hedging windbag, and I observe that in the full sincerity of my love

for you. That is why the Living God loves you so much too. You understand so much without ever wishing to. You bridge both sides of us. You are ourselves resolved. Now we must resolve ourselves. Even now, perhaps especially now, I wonder if we can.”

He vanished.



## *Chapter 23*

### *Testimony of the Archangel Sandolphin:*

While we have known for a long time what was to come, we did not have the slightest idea how the Gods of the Future Alliance were planning to start their attack.

We even considered our interests, a new experience for us. We have never been threatened, and certainly never felt threatened, before. However, anticipating that these events will lead to the end of the worlds, we wondered whether this might stretch to include the end of the universe, and so to our own demise.

Would we have minded? No, not really. We are mostly passive beings, and whatever happens is the will of something far greater than us.

Can an angel die? How do we die? Does it take a long time, even eons? Is it painful? Is it distressing? Although we have never experienced suffering, we have certainly witnessed it, and it looks horrible.

So what would the demiurges do, and who would strike first—the aggrieved Future Alliance or the pre-emptive League of the Western Gods?

We certainly did not anticipate the frogs. Well, come to think of it, Gabriel did mention it as a joke. “I bet you it is something really biblical, frogs or locusts, followed by plague and famine.” Maybe he meant it.

The frogs pelted down from the sky across the worlds, with great force and much noise. They came, literally, out of the blue, and within seconds they were bouncing off the ground. Several people died from being directly hit by them. Many simply found themselves knee deep in stunned green writhing, squelching bodies. They could not move. At any step, they fell head-first into them. It paralysed traffic for hours. Some of the frogs were enormous, the size of cows, and evidently carnivorous. Some children appeared to be eaten. And then, a few hours later, they disappeared utterly.



As you can imagine, this caused extreme consternation. No news medium failed to reference the seven plagues of the Egyptians.

However, we did guess the follow-up, and we were astonished that the Western demiurges did not move faster to protect their own. Maybe they couldn't. It is usually easier to destroy than to create or defend. Maybe the technology simply wasn't there. We don't actually know how the Future Alliance did it.

The result was spectacular, spectacularly nothing, in the active meaning of the word.

Tribes far away from civilisation will not immediately have noticed what happened. Town-dwellers in intensely electronic societies will have noticed instantly. For them, the lights will have simply gone out, and almost everything else alongside them.

It is impossible to describe the reactions across so many dimensions of those felled under such different circumstances.

For some, darkness and the shock swooped down as night fell. For others, it was simply an inexplicable reason for the car not starting. For some it was invisible, although even in the remotest wilds they may have sensed something, the enveloping blanket of nothing.

Regardless of the situation, the animals were the first to react. They scuttled to safety, or at least to where they felt safest. There is nowhere to hide among these imperilled worlds. Every living creature must die.

Few people even ran initially. They either froze, as in a game of Grandmother's Footsteps, maybe cranking their heads around to take audit, or they sought frantically to steady themselves as the conveyor belt of their lives suddenly stopped.

Gradually, hushed cries of surprise, panic and distress arose into the atmosphere, spreading apprehension, shock and its counterpoint, unreasoning activity.

"What is it now?" I heard a voice exclaim, as if a whole series of inconveniences had been queuing up on her. "What happened to the lights? What happened to the noise?"

"Strange." Another voice from another dimension.

"I'll be late!"

"Oh my God!" There were a lot of "Oh my Gods", and Allah was much praised.

In cities and along motorways, the noise was deafening as cars screeched to a halt behind others that had lurched off track as their steering wheels locked. Several pedestrians were swept away on car bonnets, to be crushed against the walls and the railings, accompanied by searing, violent reports. The older cars suddenly found themselves the kings and queens of the road, and it was surprising how many of them, with agile opportunism, immediately shimmied

around the stranded electronic cruisers, and were gone. Who knew, after all, what was going to happen next? Get home and work things out from there.

Those with shopping in their cars initially worried about how to get it all home, before they even considered what they should do themselves. With cars strewn everywhere, it gradually dawned on them that they would be walking. There was too much debris everywhere to consider that there might be another solution. Some determined leaders insisted that their families abandon their cars and set off immediately, but mostly people could not face doing this. After all, many were so far from home that walking was not an option either, and they wanted to protect their cars from looting.

In the villages, people stood there watching. After a time, one by one, the villagers tended to invite the stranded travellers into their houses, or brought out refreshments. They were almost invariably asked whether their house telephones worked. "Nothing works, not the phone, not the electricity, not the gas, not the Internet. Everything is out. There must have been a power surge, or something." People were at first relieved to discover that their neighbours were encountering similar problems, but this relief soon gave way to an appreciation of the enormity of the scale on which the utilities had failed. They started running to the shops, while those left in the house drew water into any receptacles they could find. In the next days, those without water will die of thirst. In towns, cars were looted and their occupants attacked. Indeed, among the urban deprived there was much celebration at the luxury that had just arrived in large tin containers.

I have witnessed many tragedies, shrieking, bellowing tragedies as flesh melted off bone, as skin was seared, as blood pulsed out of twitching corpses, as body parts disintegrated into the air to fall like confetti. Münster, the Cathars, the fall of Jerusalem, Berlin, the sacking of Rome, I was there. But the instant transformation of an environment from life to survival has been rare. Nagasaki. Hiroshima. That was where people, whole people, evaporated into memory, blocks and blocks of them, stretching out to the far fields of vision. They were comparable. Flash. Gone. Even at Pompeii there was a moment to panic, as the wave of lava rolled towards them. Here, and at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, it was a toggle. On-off, as if a child were playing. I have experienced many individual tragedies where their private worlds have effectively ended, where they have suddenly realised that their daughters had been run over, or their beloved husbands had died of a chink in the heart. I see that same understanding gradually crossing people's faces here and now.

Few are dead in this moment of destiny, where literally nothing is happening and yet everything is changing forever. There is no retreat, and no progress. Many people will huddle together as best they can, in their increasingly terrified and disturbed groups, and they will plot what to do, in a vacuum and at the top of the sheerest cliff they have ever seen.

Chaos is weaving towards them. The physical worlds exploded from chaos, and into this natural state of chaos they must at least temporarily return.

Do I feel their fear? No, how can I feel the fear of another species? Do I tremble for them? Yes, in my chest, but not in my frame. This is an intellectual reaction, a dissection. I would it were otherwise, but I am only an archangel. I cannot will myself into human flesh, I can only inhabit it. I am like the lodger in a house, not the soul within the body which understands that other people's extremis today is his tomorrow. I am a surgeon with no operation to perform. I am a nurse, to ease the fallen as they crumble, without hope of redemption.

What do you say to the dying? How do you approach those who are not even dying yet? Do I tell them that I am here as a solace?

Tragedy is not a tidal wave. It is what does not happen. You are not tending a lump that can be soothed. You are staring at a hole that will accept no substitutes, no synthetics, and the original material has been flushed away beyond reach. Grieving people hug their holes, holes which will always be holes however hard you seek to plug them, and with whatever materials.

All the peoples of the worlds are beginning to feel out their holes, the familiar things that have been spirited away before they thought to consider them. The past is sucked away all around them.

With time, each part of the world will descend into darkness of an intensity few have seen before. For the regions in winter, there is no warmth beyond the wood, or coal, or furniture they can burn. All the food they will get is the food they have. Material progress has gone. Spending has been capped. You will never receive anything more; you will only deplete what you have.

For some societies, this is not news. It has been the reality of their experience for many decades. For others it is an utter shock. They have lived in a land of plenty, complaining about what they lacked. Now they have to switch their angle of vision and panic over how long they can hang onto anything. Sooner or later, they will be driven from their homes and only be able to take what they can carry. The rest will be left to looters. How do you calculate what you take? Things of nostalgic value that will succour you spiritually? Things of historic value with future potentials—gold, silver, diamonds, pearls, money? Things of immediate worth that you can eat or drink? There will be much heartache and many inappropriate choices.

At this moment, all humanity is standing there wailing, astounded by the bleakness of their future, urgently seeking a loop hole. In parallel, the creatures cower and hide.

It is our time. We are here to comfort the world. Let us see what we can do.



## Chapter 24

### *Testimony of the Archangel Gabriel:*

“Now what is it?” mutters Michael as the whole house is precipitated towards darkness. “Hello? Hello?”

There is no answer from within the hollow walls.

“Hello!” Michael repeats.

He starts to trace himself around the wall of the kitchen, and immediately bumps into a stool which scrapes, draws silent momentarily, then clacks onto the stone flags. Michael trips over it as it rolls. “Damn!” he shouts scoldingly at it, and at this ringing tomb of a house. “Where the hell are you guys?”

Upstairs the front door judders open, and perplexed, even worried voices enter the house.

“Paul? Sarah?”

Some whispered conferring between them.

“Paul? Sarah?”

“Michael?” Sarah responds. “Where on earth are you?”

“In the kitchen, bruising myself on a stool. The fuses have blown or something. Heaven help us in a house as old as this. Do you know where they are?”

“The whole village has gone dark,” Sarah calls down. “There is not a light anywhere. Maybe the whole world has gone dark.”

Michael can hear Paul laugh. Sarah giggles. “Paul doesn’t think it is the whole world. He is accusing me of being egotistical.” She chuckles. “That is Paul accusing me of being egotistical!”

Paul says something, and Sarah giggles again. They are silent for a moment. They are probably kissing.

“Do you have a torch?” Michael asks, “or matches? Maybe even passion would do it.”

That breaks them off.

“There were some matches in the salon somewhere. In a drawer, I think, or maybe in the cupboardy thing—the armoire.”

“Could you get them?”

“Why don’t you get them? I’m busy.”

“Because I am downstairs in the kitchen, and you are right next to the salon, and appear to have a good guess as to where they are.”

“In only said that I thought they might be there. There must be some in the kitchen, for lighting the gas.”

“When were you last in the kitchen, Paul? The gas lights automatically.”

“There must be a back-up, surely.”

“I haven’t ever seen any matches down here,” Michael fires back testily, “and you know there are some matches up there, so could you please sodding get them?”

“I’ll go,” Sarah volunteers. “Maybe Paul will help me.”

“Don’t count on it. I have been waiting about twenty-two years for that so far.”

“What are you talking about?” Paul rebutts him. “I have helped you lots of times. I even blew up the tyres of your bike yesterday.”

“Only because you wanted to use it.”

“And I got the rosemary out of the garden.”

“Sarah got the rosemary out of the garden.”

“No,” Sarah volunteers. “It was Paul. I went for a walk.”

“Anywhere near where Paul found the rosemary.”

“Yeah, pretty close.”

“Well, then . . . .”

“Yes, but I still bothered to go and get some secateurs from the hallway.”

“OK, OK. Just get the matches.”

Paul and Sarah disappear from detection for several minutes before Michael hears hesitant footsteps on the stone stairs, flashes of vague yellow light, the scratch and flair of matches being lit, and Paul going “Ow! Ow! Aren’t there any candles? These bloody things are burning my fingers!”

“Yes, there are some candles down here in the kitchen, if I could have a light to find them. Come and light the gas. That will give us enough light to see by.”

“How do you know that it works?”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“That might have been cut too.”

“What, between the gas bottle and the cooker?” Michael sneers at him dismissively. “Somehow I doubt it.”

“Oh, for God’s sake you two,” chides Sarah. “Give me those matches, Paul. Your delicate hands are not accustomed to such tough work.”

“I’m doing it, I’m doing it.” Paul evidently will not let go of the matches because he suddenly looms into view, and Michael can see edges and surfaces

of the kitchen landmarks revealed as if by miners before Paul reaches the stove, closely followed by Sarah. The gas fails to light first time, and darkness returns. Paul strikes another match, and again the gas ring resists illumination. The third match does it.

“Right, where are those candles,” Michael asks himself. He bangs open two cupboards before he finds them. He takes two of them over to the gas ring.

“Careful,” says Paul. “You will get wax everywhere.”

“And?”

“It’s messy,” Paul laughs, acknowledging the triviality of his criticism.

“Well, that’s better,” Sarah declares as the fourth candle is lit. “Civilisation returns, and I am starving.”

“I am thirsty,” Michael throws in. “We have earned some wine.”

“Wine doesn’t quench thirst,” Paul comments, still needling Michael.

“I have a thirst for life,” Michael replies.

“I can see it round your waist.”

“Nothing to what I can see,” Michael retorts, looking pointedly at Paul’s trousers.

“No, I haven’t,” Paul protests.

“You’ve dribbled,” Michael confirms. “I can even see it in this light.”

Sarah shakes her hair in embarrassment.

“Well, we were busy, weren’t we?” explains Paul. “Everything went black at a very bad moment. Well, at a very good one actually. We both thought we had suffered strokes for a second when we couldn’t see anything. It was quite a relief when we realised we both could not see.”

“Whose turn is it to get food ready?” inquires Sarah.

“Mike’s. I did lunch.”

“Cheese and bread. Oh, great,” Michael protests.

“It all counts. Besides, you were already cooking, or what else were you doing down here?”

“Avoiding you two up there.”

“Come on, I’m hungry. I’ll do it. Michael, you get the wine. Paul, you just look decorous. There is no point in asking you to lay the table, is there?”

“What are we eating?”

“Don’t know yet. Give ma a chance.”

“Then I don’t know what to put out, do I?”

“Oh, I think if you gamble on a knife, fork and spoon for each of us, you won’t be far wrong.”

“OK, then,” and Paul shuffles to the cutlery drawer and Sarah lays her hands on some vegetables. She nudges the carrots towards Paul. “Then you can peel these.”

“Oh, great.”

Sarah stares him out.

“Oh, OK then.”

As they all sit round the table, Michael kicks off the conversation with a speculation as to what has happened to the lights, but is warned off as Paul declares “We aren’t going to spend the whole meal guessing, are we?”

“What would you rather talk about?”

“Anything,” replies Paul, but he does not introduce an alternative.

“Is this what you two always do in a crisis?” inquires Sarah. “Knock points off each other?”

“Dunno,” replies Michael. “I haven’t really noticed. Probably. That is what Mum and Dad used to do. It has probably become a habit.”

“We’ll see them on Thursday,” Sarah observes cheerfully. “That will liven things up around here. Your dad will drink all the wine, and your mum will light all the candles. Party time!”

Paul and Michael do not comment.

“Whose picking them up?” queries Michael.

“We all are, aren’t we?” says Paul.

“Depends how much luggage they bring.”

“I’ve never known your mum to travel light.”

“Yeah, but they are travelling Ryanair. That cuts things down a bit. Dad hates paying for excess baggage.”

“OK, we’ll all go. We can go swimming first, or sailing, or something.”

“Mind you, if this is the end of the world as your mum predicted, maybe they won’t be able to get here. Ryanair don’t even land in fog.”

“She’ll get here somehow or other,” Michael replies. “Believe me. You don’t know Mum like we do. Even an apocalypse wouldn’t get in her way.”

“Mum will be here,” Paul adds emphatically, “so long as there is a breath in her body.”



Paul and Michael have just been to the village to work out what has happened to the electricity. They were gone at least forty minutes, and Sarah thought they might have decided to visit somebody there, and was getting cross. When they came back, they were almost literally huddled in debate. Michael looks up first. “None of the cars are working either,” he announces. “None of the newer ones, anyway. The older ones are OK. That is really bizarre.”

“We think that there must have been some kind of electro-magnetic pulse that has wiped out everything that is electronic,” Paul informs Sarah.

Monsignor Duvieux is cycling with some strain up the track to the house. Paul and Michael watch him with identical expressions. The monsignor looks thoroughly distressed.

“It is an attack,” he shouts. “There has been an attack.” He does not have much breath remaining to him, and his voice is hoarse. “The enemy will soon be here.”

“What enemy is that?” Paul enquires sardonically.

“Aliens, probably,” suggests Michael sotto voce. He has a very limited tolerance for the monsignor.

“I don’t know, but something terrible is happening,” continues the monsignor. “I suggest you prepare for the worst.”

“I think the worst has already happened,” Paul opines. “Anything to eat has already been hoarded for miles around, well kilometres anyway. Michel and Claude did a tour of the area this morning, and they were greeted in all the surrounding villages like potential pillagers. Everybody just stared at them.”

“What do you think is going on, Monsignor Duvieux?” Sarah asks.

“I think someone is preparing to invade us. They have knocked out all our amenities, they will delay a few days until we start to go hungry, then they will march in and take us over.”

“Who are they?”

“I think it is the Muslims, Paul.”

“The Muslims?” Michael scoffs. “What would they be doing here?”

“They have been moving in here for years. Now they will take us over.”

“What rubbish.”

“You do not believe me, Michael?”

“I do,” Paul declares. “For once the monsignor is almost certainly right. I would not trust him on his religion, but I think he is right about this.”

“Why?” Michael’s chin is jutting out.

“It is only a matter of time.”

“Where would an army of Muslims come from?”

“It is already here,” the monsignor assures us. “It has been building up for years. It just needs to assemble and arm itself.”

Michael frowns. “I still don’t see it.”

“It does seem a bit odd,” Sarah agrees. “However, from the general chaos that seems to have broken out everywhere, anything is possible, I suppose.”

“What about the Chinese?” Michael suggests. “They are much more likely to have the technology than the poor Muslims. Since when were they high-tech?”

“It is the mood I am picking up,” Monsignor Duvieux observes. “I tell you, the Muslims are on the move, and we should flee.”

“Flee where?”

“Well certainly flee here, Paul. This place is a sitting target.”

“What do we have here that they want?”

“The Château is a landmark, so they will seize it.”



“Because it is here?”

“Because it is here.”

“Where should we go?” Paul seems convinced, despite Michael’s prominent scepticism.

“Into the hills somewhere, I would say. Into the guarrigue. Muslims don’t like the countryside around here. It doesn’t feel safe to them. Besides, you can hide out there forever.”

“With no food?”

“You are correct. There will be very little food there.”

“We need better solution than that, then.”

“Do you have no food?”

“Some. We have a lot of wine, but that is far too heavy to carry on foot. We would need a cart, like the ones you see in old archive footage where people are fleeing down roads pushing them until somebody comes along to strafe them.”

“You may have a cart in one of the barns. We need to look.”

So they look, and there isn’t one. However, there are a couple of wheelbarrows.

“We are not just taking wine,” Sarah states firmly. “Focus on food first.”

They push the wheelbarrows close to the back door, and start loading them with canned food and other ready-made items.

Michael stops. “This is ridiculous. What exactly are we going to do? We don’t know anybody is attacking anybody. Everything seems to have gone off, but it doesn’t mean that civilization has ended. You have been listening too much to Mum. The monsignor too, from the sound of things.”

The monsignor looks baffled.

“Besides,” Michael continues, “châteaux were built to be defended. I vote that we stay here and take our chances.”

“Michael,” Monsignor Duvieux observes, “you are not thinking straight. If you stay here you will die”.

“And who says we won’t die somewhere else?”

“You might,” the monsignor concedes.

“I am going,” Paul declares, starting to stash more things into the wheelbarrows.

“Why?” Michael challenges him.

“Because something is badly wrong.”

“Why are you so sure?” Sarah asks.

“Ask him,” Paul replies, dramatically pointing at me as if suddenly revealing me.

Everyone looks in my direction, but they cannot see me. Only Paul can detect that I am here, although he cannot see me clearly.

“Ask who?” the monsignor demands.

“That creature over there.” Paul is still pointing at me.

“There isn’t a creature over there,” Michael counters.

“Paul?” Sarah exclaims nervously. “Are you OK? You seem to be seeing things.”

“You cannot see him?”

“No,” everyone replies.

“OK,” says Michael. “What does he look like? What are we looking for?”

“I don’t know,” Paul replies. “I can just make out a distortion between me and the bushes over there, and it moves slightly.”

Michael holds his head. “I think he has lost it.”

Sarah and the monsignor exchange glances.

Michael comes right up to me, and shouts rather aggressively: “Is anybody there?”

“Yes, I am here,” I reply. Michael jumps a good metre in the air, and Sarah and the monsignor recoil clutching each other. Paul does not move.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“Gabriel,” I reply. “The Archangel Gabriel.”

“And what are you doing here?”

“I am helping your mother to find you.”

“Will she?”

“I hope so.”

“Is the monsignor right? Are we under attack?”

“Yes,” I reply. “In a few hours, the advance forces will be here.”

“Who are they?”

“A middle-eastern regiment, escorted by dlo-dukkoks.”

“What the bloody hell are those?” Michael exclaims.

“They are very dangerous creatures you cannot see, and can barely hear, but they will slice you into pieces if they cross you.”

“Can you protect us?” Sarah asks, even beseeches, me.

“I can try. That is what I am here for, to protect you until it is your time.”

“Our time to what?” Paul demands.

“Your time to die,” I clarify.

“So we will die?”

“Yes, you will die, but you must wait for your mother first. I have promised her that.”

“Why?” Michael asks incredulously.

“Because she asked me, and I said yes, I would try to help her. When we are invoked, we do the best we can.”

The monsignor is regarding me with some heat.

“You cannot possibly be the Archangel Gabriel,” he announces. “You are an impostor!”

“How so?” I ask.

“In the middle of a world crisis, the Archangel Gabriel would hardly waste his time here.”

“I am not wasting my time, and I am here.”

“Would you have come if I had asked you?”

“Naturally.”

“I am not allowed to call on the angels. It would be anathema to the church’s teaching.”

“Exactly.”

“How will Mum get here?” Michael asks me.

“I haven’t worked that out yet. At the moment, my job is to ensure that you are alive and that your parents are alive too, otherwise I cannot bring you together. I then have to work out how I get you closer to each other until you meet up again, and we only have a few days. It is going to be very difficult. I will probably fly them here.”

“Mum can’t fly,” Michael protests.

“That is the least of our problems,” I reassure him.

“Could you bring my mum and dad here too?” Sarah asks me.

“That could be more difficult,” I reply. “Your father will soon be in the thick of it at St. Thomas’ Hospital, trying to help people recover from the injuries they incurred when the blackout took place. I am afraid that he will want to stay there.”

“And afterwards?” she persists.

“Afterwards, he will be dealing with the casualties of war. I can try to get you to him, if you wish. Would you like that?”

Sarah hesitates. “But I couldn’t take Paul with me?”

“That is up to Paul. We could try to get you all back to London, I suppose. But it will be very much easier to get Paul and Michael’s parents here.”

“Why is that?”

“There is a passageway across the dimensions between here and Brussels. I can make use of that. There is no passageway between here and London, or between Brussels and London. The gods have blocked those off.”

“So what do you suggest?” asks Paul, taking all this information in his stride.

“You need to pack up and get yourselves hidden in the heart of the countryside, up in the hills. I will then bring your parents there. You have to keep well clear of Future Alliance raiders and of the dlo-dukkoks. Here you are too exposed.”

“Will you lead us?”

“Yes, I will lead us.”

“Thank you. Monsignor, are you coming too?”

“No. I must stay with my flock.” responds the monsignor. “I can hardly abandon them in front of the Archangel Gabriel, can I?”

I turn and lead the way.

“Can we get to see you better?” Paul requests.

“Follow your intuition, Paul,” I counsel him. “You will not make a mistake.”



## Chapter 25

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

It astounds me that a war can be waged across all worlds between gods who are sitting almost next to each other. There they are, the League of Western Gods and the Gods of the Future Alliance, with only a river to separate their headquarters, destroying everything they can find belonging to the other, except each other, whom they cannot destroy.

Not that the Dagda has realised that, now that he has stopped dancing and started threatening me again. “If you come anywhere near our camp, you slut, we will treat you as the spy you are and rip you limb from limb!” he spat at me, eyes bulging, neck angry with humiliation. There are about a thousand reasons why he cannot do anything of the sort, but I was too blasé to list them, and he was too incensed to understand them.

The Gods of the Future Alliance, on the other hand, welcome me with open, if apprehensive, arms. Mama-Pacha has forgiven me my secrecy and persuaded them that I am nothing like a spy, and a lot more like a future asset, although she cannot exactly put her finger on why that should be the case. Apparently Quetzalcoatl was most impressed by me for some reason, and his support means a lot as he is now the Commander-in-Chief of the Future Alliance.

It is extraordinary how different the two commanders-in-chief are. On the one side you have Quetzalcoatl, sharp-eyed, shrewd, urbane and civil. On the other you have Ares, arrogant, vicious, coarse and psychotic. I am not sure which of these two had the brilliant plan to open up crossing points between all the Earthly dimensions, but they have ensured that the war has spread with lethal speed. Quetzalcoatl himself is credited with the brainwave of destroying all electronics, although it has been suggested that the idea was first raised on the Western side by Hermes as a fear more than as a strategy, and that one of the Norse gods relayed it to Quetzalcoatl. The insight to introduce the coeurls into the conflict is being attributed to Rufus and me, which means that Rufus

can never join me when I visit the Future Alliance camp. I do not know who parlayed the dlo-dukkoks onto the Future alliance side—Sekhmet possibly. They were unleashed on the worlds more or less at the same time as the coeurls, and their several capacities for destruction are awesome and horrific, the major problem being that they have extreme difficulty remembering whose side they are on, and therefore a tendency to massacre everybody, much to the mounting alarm of the respective generals. While this was always intended by both sides to be an all-out, all-inclusive war, they had never envisaged the scale on which it is currently being prosecuted, nor that all control would be wrenched so completely out of their hands, leaving Ares mouthing obscenities and Quetzalcoatl curses, and everyone else to try to work out what possible role they could have in future events. All wars tend to slip the leash of their originators, but this one is a worst case. Indeed, it is beginning to be recognised by all the gods that this may prove to be the end of the worlds, and then what happens to them? The Devil's instructions were that they could do what they liked with their creations, except to destroy them. If they inadvertently, even recklessly, manage to cross that line, what is their remaining value beyond the possibility of their being required to generate replacement worlds?

In private, the Devil is sanguine about the fact that the worlds will end, and that the existence of the gods will be co-terminous, so to speak.

"It is like losing my children," he tells me. "They are a quarrelsome lot, like all children, but colourful and admirable in their way. I do not want to lose them, but equally another destiny beckons us, if we can manage to carry it off."

"Is that in question?" I ask.

"Yes, at the moment. We do not know how to transfer Earthly life into everlasting vessels and we are not certain that we can summon up a new world at exactly the right moment. It must come into existence at the split second that the old ones end. They must touch, but they must not overlap, otherwise they will infect each other, which would be ruinous."

"And who is 'we'?"

"The Living God and I. You could say that we are in re-merger talks. The separation has lasted long enough."

"And then what?" I enquire.

"And then peace, love and understanding will break out within one brilliant new world for all living creatures." He laughs.

"That sounds as it should be," I reply.

"Yes, Lucifer, it is exactly right in concept, we are all agreed on that. It is now down to the small matter of theory and practice, both of which we do not quite have a grip on yet. The devil, as they say, is in the detail. If we get it wrong, nothing will be left except us and the angels, as it was in the beginning, and we will have to start from scratch all over again, and you would never forgive us for that. Alternatively, we would have to settle for there just being us, floating

around peacefully, gradually losing our minds to inactivity, and then I will be driven to ask ‘Is this all there could be?’, and the Living God will push me aside, and either I set off to found new worlds again or I wither and die, which, this time around, I might well choose to do. I cannot face starting this mess all over again, I really cannot. I have suffered my warring children long enough.”

“When will you know whether you have succeeded or not?”

“At the nano-second of success or failure. It is not a process we can test. We can devise the infrastructure as we have been doing, as you know, but we cannot be certain that it will work. And we have to make absolutely certain than none of the gods manage to transfer themselves to the new world. That is where you come in, Lucifer. You must stop them.”

“How?”

“Neither of us knows. We are relying on you to think of something.”

“Now you tell me.”

“You have plenty of time. One of you angels will come up with a solution. My bet is that it will be Gabriel. The Living God thinks it will be you. Just keep out of the Dagda’s way. It would not be helpful for him to realise who you really are, which will be immediately obvious if you end up in a brawl. Morgay would be no match for him. Lucifer obviously is. Set Rufus on him, if he comes too close.”

“Rufus would be torn to shreds.”

“Rufus will have to die too, you realise. He might as well sacrifice himself in the ultimate cause.”

“Only at the last possible moment. I need him. If anyone can work out how to destroy the gods, it will probably be him.”

“Whatever, Lucifer. Keep out of the Dagda’s way. I’ll keep on the look-out for his cornering you. He danced so beautifully the last time round; like a giant on roller-skates. Maybe one hard lesson will be enough for him, but I doubt it, sadly. Some gods have peas for brains, however powerful they may become. At least put Rufus on watch at all times. That way you can sneak up into the hills, or into the camp of the Future Alliance. Don’t let yourself get surrounded and trapped. That would be truly menacing to the gleaming prospect of eternal happiness.” He turns to Rufus. “Rufus, are you up to the job?”

Rufus blinks his eyes, but says nothing. The Devil smiles. “I thought you would be.”



I cannot help comparing the Devil, as I am encountering him now, with the Living God as I have known Him, first in the guise of Jesus the Christ and then as Youssouf ben Abdul. We believe that the Living God has visited the Earths in many forms since time begun, as all manner of creatures, but in His

last human appearance (that we are aware of) He addressed all the dimensions simultaneously, calling himself Youssouf ben Abdul in each, and being summarily executed in each, albeit on differing pretexts.

The Living God's purpose in becoming human has often been misunderstood. You tend to believe that He came to your world to sacrifice Himself for your collective and historic sins and to exonerate you. Yet the Living God recognises that there is no such thing as sin, and that you are not the authors of your actions. He knows that the Devil caused all creatures to be invented for his own purposes and to his tune. If there is a sin, it is an original one, and it does not belong to you. He is fully aware that the primary objective of the worlds is to generate every possible permutation of event, context and cognition, which makes the concept of wrongdoing an irrelevance. The same essential beings are therefore necessarily all types of creatures behaving in a wide assortment of ways. That is what you are intended to do; that is your fate. How could He possibly hold you to account for that which is categorically not your doing? He couldn't. The Living God is neither foolish nor unjust.

Instead, the reason He has visited the Earths is to make a statement of empathy with the suffering you have been caused. He has come to suffer alongside you. Over time, we believe, He has visited each dimension of the Earths in turn, although latterly He has been obliged to visit them in parallel because so little time remained. This is conjecture, but it fits with what He told me.

As Youssouf ben Abdul, He invited me to attend upon Him to organise His complex multi-dimensional schedule. I will not pretend that I had many intimate moments with Him. Mostly we were crossing each other, trying to fix events. Nevertheless, I did manage to gain an impression of his personality, or rather of the personality that Youssouf ben Abdul had in common with Jesus the Christ, and which I would guess is that of the Living God. And, if I am correct, I can envisage that He and the Devil were indeed once one, and will be again.

I would say that it is like perceiving two facets of the same being, the Yin and the Yang, the Alpha and the Omega, and I also suspect that there is considerable overlap. As Youssouf ben Abdul, the Living God evidently enjoyed the variety of situations He was performing in and, in each situation, He was determined to provoke an outcome of suffering for Himself, however much some people wished to spare Him it. Equally, the Devil is now behaving in the passive way that we typically attribute to the Living God. Arguably, he could intervene to save the worlds and safeguard his experiment, but instead he has elected to let it all pass. He believes that he and the Living God have reached the point of being capable of the ultimate creation, a point that each is so delighted with as to become reconciled, which is not to suggest that they were ever enemies, only that they found themselves effectively separated the one from the other.



Rufus opens his big brown eyes, and then closes them again in an enormous yawn. He watches me expectantly. He always resents being excluded from my musings, although I suspect that he may even be able to hear them. There is a telepathic bond between us, which is why he is here, ensuring that all ends well, at least insofar as I can affect events. He is also here because I love him, as I have since I first met him. It took some time to convince him to accept being a coeurl though, as I rescued him from Hades.

“What is a coeurl?” he asked.

“It is a vicious creature from a distant planet, designed as the ultimate weapon of last resort against the Earths.”

“Why would I want to be one of those?”

“Because it means that you can be with me, and can protect yourself against almost anyone.”

“Do I have no other choice?”

“None whatsoever.”

“Then I will do whatever you ask.”

“You will not regret it. And when this is all over, the Living God has promised to turn you into an angel, to be with me forever.”



## *Chapter 26*

### *Testimony of the Archangel Sandolphin:*

You may never have seen a coeurl before it confronts you. They are among the most beautiful creatures that have ever existed. The first thing that will strike you is how still, serene, and elegant they are, typically perched on higher ground, sniffing and scanning their surroundings. They will barely move, except for the sweep of their gentle eyes and the occasional flick of their heads. Think of them perhaps as a cross between a fox and a lynx. You will appreciate their sleek spotted coat, wrapped around a body which does not even appear to be breathing. In fact, the spots are not colourations but holes. Their carcasses are empty, a shell. Try as you might, you will not be able to glimpse any organs through the gaps in their skin. So how do they live, you ask? And when they attack you, as they almost inevitably will, how could they die?

It is a mystery how they sustain themselves, but they indubitably do. For hunting, they have razor-sharp teeth and bladed, serrated claws, both of which are impregnated with a poison calculated to paralyse you without killing you. Like the spider, they maintain you as a living source of food that they can snack on at will, or abandon. One injection of their teeth or claws will disable you, but it will neither dull your consciousness nor your bodily sensations. When they come back to eat you, you will be aware of everything they do, and you will feel the flesh being ripped off you. You will not scream, you will not move. You will only pray for release from the torment, which will not be for some time as coeurls are practised at removing the maximum amount of nutrition from their prey before it dies and becomes useless to them.

Like cats, they enjoy the sport of hunting. They do it for the fun and games, as much as for food. So you can expect to be paralysed and left for some other scavenger to devour, except that most creatures will only turn on you when they are extremely hungry, because they will guess that you have been poisoned, and fear succumbing in their turn—a genuine possibility.

Among themselves, coeurls are concerned and sociable creatures. They have deep feelings for one another, and are very protective of each other. They have no natural hierarchy, and no sense of possessiveness. They live in a land of excess, where food is easily found, and where they have no predators. If you were to study them in their own habitat and at a distance, you would be filled with admiration for their looks, their intelligence, their courage, and their sense of citizenship. They are particularly considerate of the older and frailer ones. They provide them with every comfort. They entertain them, they embrace them, they groom them, and, when the moment is deemed ripe, one of them will be delegated to bite the head off the sick coeurl with one snap of his teeth, causing instant death. This does not constitute either cruelty or callousness. It is quick, it is sure and it is painless, and it is done by the one the departing coeurl loves the most. It is an act of affection and mercy. After the killing, the executioner coeurl will often wander off into the hills to be alone and to mourn.

The coeurls did not volunteer to be shipped to the Earths. They were rounded up and freighted there on the orders of Ares. They are highly resentful of their fate, fearful, and jumpy. This has led them to savage not only their supposed enemies, but also their designated allies. As far as they are concerned, they have been coerced by the creatures of the Earths to participate in a tiresome war which is not of their choosing, and therefore the latter must tolerate a certain level of exasperated retaliation.

The dlo-dukkoks, in contrast, agreed to participate, although it is not known why or how. They are entities of a very different sort. While they are structurally duo-decagons, they are virtually invisible. Most frequently all their victims hear are soft footsteps (even though they are in fact rolling along) before they are neatly sliced into pieces by their laser-sharp frame. Unlike the coeurls, they have no intent to feed from you, as their bodies require no food. You die by the unfortunate chance of finding yourself in their way. As they can travel at up to two hundred miles an hour, and slice through almost any material, including trees, rocks, concrete and metals, it is considerably more difficult to avoid them than to be diced by them. They are restless creatures who move anywhere and everywhere in perpetual motion. It is something of a surprise that there was even a vessel that proved capable of ferrying them from their planet to the Earths. Once there, they escaped and ran amok, although they have now been persuaded, after many accidental deaths, to accompany the armies of the Future Alliance rather than to decimate them.

Who would win in a fight between a coeurl and a dlo-dukkok, you may be asking yourself? The answer would be the dlo-dukkok, except for the fact that they are only likely to confront each other by accident, when a coeurl is randomly cornered. The coeurls are about the only creatures who can actually see dlo-dukkoks clearly, and they usually prove sufficiently quick-witted and footed to get out of the way. So, if you see a coeurl dart off, and then hear the soft

padding of feet, follow the coeurl as fast as you can, however counter-intuitive this strategy may seem. Yes, the coeurl may turn on you, but it at least gives you some slight chance of survival.

So a terror has broken out across all the Earths, and via the cracks in-between, which mean that coeurls and dlo-dukkoks can threaten you apparently from nowhere at any time. They do not approach you in waves, they spring out of the ground. And they are accompanied by plagues and pestilence on a scale unheard of in terrestrial history, even exceeding the devastation of the Black Death. For those lying motionless for days, paralysed by the coeurls, these morbid diseases come as more of a release than a scourge. If you were to sit with a multi-dimensional map of the worlds in front of you, with every life represented by a beam of light, you would indeed be watching the dimming of the planets at a truly alarming rate.

Yesterday, all was normal. Then all power and communications disappeared. Today, you are running for your life, terrorised by the growing realisation that there can be no escape. For a living creature at this hour, it is like being huddled in a large cardboard box with people thrusting carving knives through the walls from all angles.

Never have the Earths experienced such a cataclysm. The scale and the scope of the destruction surpass all imagining.

And what are we angels to do in the face of such devastation? How are we to comfort you when you find yourselves so brutally distracted? We cannot protect you. We cannot mend you. We cannot shield you even momentarily. We can only try to comfort you in your distress as the earthly life-force seeps from you, and you prepare to rejoin your essence. Sadly, at least in this context, all living creatures are profoundly resistant to death. You are determined to retain your physical form when it would much better for you to die.

It will be of virtually no consolation to you, but if you could see us you would discover an enormous quilt of angels covering everything around you, coaxing you to abandon your terrestrial inheritance and to ready yourself for a seamless, timeless existence in the world which is to come, deo volente.



## Chapter 27

### *Testimony of David Lambert:*

Rachel tells me that she has had a dream in which the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and promised to take us to Paul and Michael for us to say our farewells in this life and these worlds.

I look at her and wonder if she has gone mad. Instead, I say “Ready when he is.”

She scrutinises me quizzically. “Do you mean that, or are you just humouring me?”

“We’ll soon see, presumably,” I reply. “From what I can see, it will have to happen very soon.”

What I can see is mayhem. We are hiding in a forest between Tervuren and Audergem, along with a great many other people. It has been raining non-stop for a day, and we are all soaking wet and becoming fevered. Rachel had the foresight to demand that I drag the tent out from the shed, and we filled the 2CV with food and water. It got us to the forest, and is now parked in front of us, a proud, if derelict, survivor of the automotive age. Our two-man tent is occupied by six of us as our friends Ingrid and Peter, and their two children Romain and Eva bumped into us by falling over our tent two hours ago. They are all used to Rachel’s assumption of clairvoyance, and Eva believes that she has the sight herself, although she does not seem to have picked up on the Archangel Gabriel’s visitation. Rachel assures us that we are surrounded by a host of angels, all praying for the ultimate welfare of our souls. She finds great solace in that, and urges us to do the same. For the moment, the others are huddling, trying to regain some measure of bodily warmth.

So far, the 2CV has not been looted, even though anyone could slice through the soft plastic roof in an instant. Instead, bystanders loiter around admiring it, making it that much harder for anyone to attempt to pilfer from it. In its eccentric, twisted frame, it has become a symbol of hope. It is a car that still

works. It has been a focal point on many garage forecourts for years as I have filled up with petrol. People regularly came up to me to inform me that they too once used to own a 2CV, and that it was one of the best cars they had ever had, which they remember with great fondness. Now it is revered with a universal wistfulness.

“When will the Archangel Gabriel come for us?” I ask Rachel. “Can the others come too?”

Rachel searches my face slowly for hints of sarcasm. “When he is ready. He has to find a way to navigate us through the tapestry of the different worlds. It is impossible to get down there in this world alone. We would die before we got past Charleroi. Death is everywhere.”

Eva nods. “Death is everywhere. It will be here soon.”

It certainly feels that way. We are surrounded by an anticipatory, menaced hush. Our neighbours are praying. Small groups are whispering to each other. However, a pack of scouts has organised itself, and set up a relay of look-outs and an emergency committee whose members tour the encampment, exhorting us to remain calm and optimistic.

The rain is rattling the branches of the trees surrounding us and, because we are so cramped within our tent, the inner and outer skins are touching, allowing water to trickle inside. The effect is exacerbated by the condensing of our breath within the confined space.

“What do you think will happen?” Ingrid asks Rachel.

“We have reached the end of the world.” Coming from anyone else, this would be an impossibly bleak statement, but from Rachel’s mouth it is almost tinged with hope.

“Do you really think so?” Romain interjects.

“Yes, Romain,” Rachel replies, “but there is no need to be afraid. A much better life awaits us.”

“How do you know?” Peter asks, his voice poised between genuinely seeking more information and challenging her.

“I just know.”

“Trust her, Papa,” Eva urges him. “She is right. I can feel it too.”

Peter lifts his eyebrows and drops them again in an indeterminate gesture. Ingrid shuffles to ease her circulation.

“Should we stay here, or would it be better to move on?”

“It makes no difference,” Rachel comments. “Whatever will happen will happen wherever you are.”

“Shouldn’t we be trying to get to the Ardennes? We could probably make it in your car. We could hide far better there. We are sitting targets here. There are too many people.”

Rachel smiles gently. “It makes no difference. Do as you will.”

“It’s all right for you,” Peter observes. “You and David are expecting to be taken off on a journey by an archangel. You have something to look forward to.”

Rachel does not reply. Instead she watches him unwaveringly.

“I wish he would hurry up,” Peter adds. “It is very crowded in this tent. We could do with the extra space.”

And then he is gone. They are all gone. Rachel and I are gone. It is as if we are being sucked through a tube. I cannot open my eyes, but Rachel has taken my right hand and is gripping it tightly. Although air is riffling past us, I can barely breathe. We are twisting and turning incessantly. Sometimes we come to a flat full stop, and are forced to reverse and to head in another direction. I have no sense of anyone guiding us, nor of passing through any landscape. We are as if enclosed in a tight-fitting, diaphanous flume. I wish I could open my eyes, but the pressure is too great. Breathing has become easier. It is like falling and now that I have surrendered myself to it, I am actually comfortable. It is a lulling sensation, wavy, rhythmic, musical. It is like being the insides of a snake, thrusting itself forward purposively. It is meditation. I am calm, and Rachel’s hand feels warm and relaxed too.

Suddenly, there is a brilliant crack of light, and we find ourselves among ruins on a mountaintop in the warm sunshine. I recognise the place instantly. Opposite us is the towering companionship of the Pic St. Loup. We are sitting among the rubble of the Château de Montferrand, overlooking St. Matthieu de Trévières, Montpellier and then the Mediterranean. It is a moment of perfect peace, and Rachel and I smile at each other in ecstasy.

“I should have brought our camera,” she comments, without the hint of a joke.

“It is electronic. It wouldn’t work.”

“It is such a relief to be here, and the boys must be close by. Phew!”

I look at her in admiration. Every extraordinary idea she has ever set mouth to is instantly vindicated. There really are angels (although I never actually saw one), miracles do occur, events can be accurately foreseen. There is another dimension of being, other than the one we are too familiar with. We have been governed and tyrannised by our senses too long, all of us, and especially me. Rachel has had privileged access to all this knowledge for years, and I have much more doubted her than believed her.

She must be aware of the contrition I am experiencing, but she merely smiles past me serenely, and settles down to gaze into the distance, awaiting her boys.



Rachel turns to me. “Do you know something?” she asks.

“No. What?”

“I have realised something.”

“What is that?”

“You know that I keep channelling via my spirit guide?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who he really is?”

“No.”

“He is me. He is an older, wiser, maybe even eternal part of me. I am channelling my own ancient wisdom. Isn't that extraordinary?”

“It makes sense.”

“That is really exciting! At last I really feel at peace. There is a part of me which is forever, and not only am I in touch with that part of me, I now know that I am. I feel whole for the first time in my life. I cannot wait to tell Paul and Michael. They will be so pleased.”

I wonder. They have been somewhat sceptical for years about Rachel's visions and insights, albeit gently, evasively so. They have not wished to challenge openly that which has been keeping her afloat, but they have not been believers. With the events of the last few days, all that may have changed. It certainly has for me. I have moved from undecided-but-intrigued to absolutely certain. Rachel, through her channelling, has anticipated the future in a way which would not have been possible without the use of her special powers. She has been right all along. How isolated she must have felt; how abused.

And 'powers' is perhaps the wrong word. She has not used her channelling to gain power over anyone, merely to focus herself and to try to help others, ever a thankless task. 'Gift' would be a better word, except that the experience has been bitter-sweet for her. Beware when the gods bring you gifts indeed.





## *Chapter 28*

### *Testimony of Alan Harding:*

These are times of grace and quiet, as if the world were being re-born. The relentless, frenetic rhythm of London, those layers of anxiety, has been stripped away. Most people cannot get to work and, if they were to, they could not be paid, so it is as if we are all taking our annual leave at the same time, shades of Northern mills and Whit week.

You cannot go anywhere, so no-one researches days out for the children. The streets are entirely safe from traffic, so people meander along the central line of the A roads, or roller skate in zigzags across the carriageways. I am not able to quell my automatic fears, so I have yet to lie down in the curve of Piccadilly Circus, but Geoffrey and Louise tell me that it is a wonderful, life-changing experience.

The simple pleasures are back in fashion because they are all that there are left to us. There are hundreds of football teams playing on Clapham Common, and cricket teams, and kite-flyers and ball throwers, the only noise being of their voices and of sporty thwacks. Batteries cannot be recharged and are being hoarded, so there is a dearth of blasting music. The fumes of the city are lifting. People are becoming emotionally and physically uninhibited. They are smiling and hugging each other, holding hands, sparing each other time. Stories and theories are cascading out. Henry's wife, Frances, was telling us yesterday about how there is not one world but many, and that where they join there is a brilliant Crystal Cathedral, like a cool sun prickling with prismatic rods. It is apparently a belief that she has held for many years, and discussed on social network sites. Now that she finds herself cut off from the rest of the network, she feels compelled to share her cherished truths with us. Henry, who has never been known to blush, even at his own ruthless tactics, was stunned by his wife's open feyness, but his stiff reactions are suddenly looking contemptibly outmoded. Literally overnight, the more rod-up-the-arse types, like Henry and

I, have become the embarrassment, stoic dams stemming the flow of natural light and energy between peoples. Visceral types, like Frances, are now the resplendent seers, dragging the world towards its sublime senses. Even my own remedies are timid compared to some of the techniques being exposed on the Common to the open air and gaggles of curious onlookers who are often lulled into participating.

At any moment, I expect to walk out of my door to find everyone wandering around naked and making love freely and openly as the mood takes them. As yet, this has not happened, so maybe this new situation has some way to go, or maybe it is moving in other directions.

Now that the whole world that I know has become habitually relaxed, there is no longer much call for my services. It was the overwhelming stress of keeping it together in daily life that generated the need for them. In its absence, I am a shaman relic, someone people used to believe in as holding magical powers, but no longer.

Jane and I remain reserved, I am afraid. We cannot help feeling that something dramatic and terrifying is about to happen, something that will flip our world again. We are also, inevitably, worried for Sarah who was in the South of France the last time we heard, and for John and Fiona whom we assume to be at their home near Stroud with their two children. They are all too far away to reach, as if kidnapped by a cosmic force, and I know all about that.

One thing that really disturbs me is that over the last day I think I have caught glimpses of three people I know with absolutely certainty to have died. Each time I hailed them, but they ignored me, as if in a nightmare. They certainly seemed dazed enough. I am reminded of all my recent patients who have appeared with bizarre growths and protrusions, claiming to have had near-death experiences. Jane and I have just bumped into Richard Fenton as we toured the Common, marvelling at the exotic life that is flourishing around us, and he said that the same thing had happened to him. He had managed to get close up to one of them, only to realise that it was somebody else who greatly resembled his old and dead friend. "Funny, I was so convinced it was him. Now that the same thing has happened to you, I rather expect to find the graveyards empty, and a coffin lid upended in each and every grave, like Stanley Spencer's *The Resurrection*, or whatever it was called."

"How morbid of you, Richard," Jane chided him with a visible shudder.

"Where is the nearest cemetery to here?" Richard asked.

"I really don't know. Does anyone ever get buried in London nowadays? I cannot think where I have seen a cemetery, although I am sure I have. We could always pay a visit to Westminster Abbey. There are a few stiffs there. We might even be able to brush up on history with some first hand commentary from the leading players."

So, tomorrow, we will do just that, Richard and I, unless we can think of a cemetery that is located more locally. Isn't there one in Streatham or Wandsworth, or somewhere around there?

Jane keeps saying that she is desperate to see Sarah and John. She must have repeated this sentiment at least fifteen times today. I empathise with it, but what do you do? It is impossible, and Jane is fully aware of the fact. Some maternal, or even humane, instinct forces her anguish out into the open. Personally, I resent statements of the obvious, especially when they are fruitless, but I feel that this is a time to support Jane unreservedly.

The main fear most people have is of running out of food. Fresh food will decay over the next few days, and we will be left with tins, jars, packets, apples and pears. Seemingly, all the supermarkets and even corner food stores were looted immediately after everything came to a halt. For the lazy or resolutely law-abiding among us there emerged a more comfortable solution. A wide selection of the aforesaid tins, jars and packets could be found strewn across the Common, lost as the raiders hurriedly pushed their brimming trolleys across the grass in the pitch darkness. So all we had to do was to step outside our front doors and collect up an assortment of preserves in the spirit of tidying up and abandonment.



There are police on the streets, and army units. We have entered a new *époque*. Over the last day, I have overheard people talking about riots. The food is running out, the future is uncertain, and the people are angry with the government for getting us into this fix, and then not extricating us from it again.

Why they believe that this situation is in any way the fault or the plan of the government is not obvious, but the human mind is always waylaid by its wilder conjectures in times of heightened fear, as groups of people are manipulated by the most unstable and ruthless leader during a time of crisis. We are inclined to distrust authority when order breaks down, and to place our faith and our salvation in the hellfire preacher who demands that something be done to arrive at atonement and revenge.

Seeing people in uniform, heavily armed, freezes me to my soul. It is that arrogance of command they assume, the imminence of a sudden scurry and skirmish, of a gun going off, and of a prostrate body emerging in the centre of the *mêlée*, galvanising the attention of a gathering crowd, its blood patterning the pavement around bird droppings and torn litter, as the too-young men and women who tote the guns scan the area for a distraction with feigned world-weariness.

The military on the streets is like still water that can transition around the bend into heaving rapids that can drown you, and will drown someone. I have

lived in a country where such elements are to be feared because they are the repository of arbitrary, unaccountable and wanton power, and maybe it is because of that that I react so sharply when I see the same scenario apparently being played out here. I am sure that they would argue that they are here to protect innocent, disciplined citizens like me from the hyenas of this world, rampant opportunists who attack without mercy the isolated and enfeebled. Somehow, I fear that they themselves too readily become hyenas, and that I am the one who is isolated and enfeebled. I don't know where their accountability resides, and whether I could locate it quickly enough should I need to save myself, or Jane.

Having spent many years carefully avoiding its misanthropic prattle, I really miss the pacing of the news, the "so that is a whole pile of waffle that has nothing to do with me, thank God", or the "holy shit, how will this play out? Am I done for?". There is no reliable information remaining whatsoever beyond the daily bulletins the Mayor of London has arranged to be announced from the bandstand on the Common. We are returned to ye olde "Oyez! Oyez!", and a crowd straining to hear what is happening, interrupting those who can hear with their questions. I missed the proclamation this morning which was apparently to promulgate the State of Emergency in the Greater London region, and the country as a whole. According to Richard, with whom I am strolling towards Westminster, the slot where optimism is normally injected into such broadcasts remained unoccupied. Even the Mayor of London does not have a clue what is going on. Richard quickens his step. A curfew has been imposed for six o'clock.

The Wandsworth Road is relatively empty, beyond the dotted presence of the army and the police. It is a beautiful, temperate day, under a cloudless sky. This could almost be London heaven, patrolled by wary angels and their guns. In the spirit of the times, Richard is reviewing his life as a branch of the Truth and Reconciliation movement, how he wasted his twenties, met Dawn, was happy for several years, had Jerry and Sam, became estranged from Dawn, had an affair which she finally discovered ten years later and never forgave, lost Dawn to cervical cancer and here he is. Strange old life, and ominously close to mine, except that Jane is still alive and never found out about my affairs.

At the moment, Jane has decided to lock herself up at home. She has taken up tapestry as a solace. She bought the whole caboodle about twenty years ago, played with it for a week, or was it a month, and then moved on. Now it has loomed up in her mind as unfinished business, a worthy and fulfilling pastime she could really enjoy, and she intends to. When disaster strikes, some of us want to rush out to discover and master events, others lock themselves away, a few are the foxes and the rest are the barnyard fowls all a-twitter. Jane has set up

a work room in John's old bedroom and decided that this is her genteel bunker where she can pass her time while the men of the world sort themselves, and it, out. There is a great reassurance sometimes in being old-fashioned. There is also a great consolation for those such as Richard and me in being presented with an adventure, even if it is limited to walking four miles into Westminster to see if the royal cadavers are terrorising the streets there. We realise that it is extremely unlikely, but we also suspect that what is really happening is even weirder, and someone there may have an understanding of what it is, and what the prognosis might be.

So, I tell Richard about my affair with Fiona in the spirit of reciprocation. "You what?" he exclaims, "You did really?"

"Yes, I did really."

"You sly dog. You denied it so vehemently at the time."

"What else do you do with shaming accusations?"

"Tell the truth?"

I grimace. "To be honest, Richard, there was never any question of it. Fiona and I decided that immediately. We would cover things up, and Fiona would pretend that she was interested in John, not me. The fact that John was gay did not deter us, but it did surprise us when he turned out not to be quite so gay as I had assumed him to be. Then Fiona admitted that she really enjoyed his company, and John fell for her as a fun friend and fuck-buddy I suppose would be the honest description. Then Jane and Sarah came back, the wind changed, and everyone settled down to the new order of things. Fiona and I were astonished by the way things panned out. The truth had fallen into line with the fiction. Then there is Peter hanging on in there in the relationship, and Sarah has gone off to the South of France to be with her long distance lover, Paul. There has been a quite revolution in our lives, come to think of it. Please don't tell Jane all this . . . ."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

". . . . it is kinder for her not to know, and everything is fine between us. Not exciting, but fine."

"I am glad to hear it." Richard shakes his head in wonderment. "Well I never." A sly grin beams across his face.

"I wonder what they are doing with the underground," I muse.

"Fortifying it, I assume. Waiting for the civil unrest, bombs, plagues, whatever is going to come our way."

"What do you really think is coming our way?"

"I haven't the foggiest, but I would guess that it is nothing good. It feels like the phoney war in 1939 my parents kept telling me about. War declared, beautiful summer, and nothing happening, yet."

“A sort of ‘le mieux avant la fin’, which is what you often get just before people die, when they have been very ill or deranged, or both, for some time. They suddenly start to get better, and to have lucid moments. They drop down dead quite quickly after that.”

“I’ll look forward to that.”



## Chapter 29

### *Testimony of Sarah Harding:*

The Archangel Gabriel insists that we leave the house without delay. He says he has been searching for ways to get us to St. Matthieu de Tréviers to meet Paul and Michael's parents, but that there is no route that can take us to them directly any more. He promises to get us as close as he can, and we will have to chance the rest. He will try to protect us, although the area is now crawling with troops from both sides, plus coeurls and dlo-dukkoks, so it is indescribably dangerous. He says he has considered trying to move us all somewhere quieter and safer, but as there is no longer any direct access to or from the place where Paul's parents are currently situated, it is as dangerous to get them to a point of departure to cross the dimensions as it is to get us to them, so he suggests that we follow his original plan until it proves unworkable. I am not clear what he is talking about, and I am not reassured.

Paul too is astonished that in the middle of a global catastrophe, with billions of people dying, and zillions of creatures sharing their fate, the Archangel Gabriel should choose to spend so much time with us on what amounts to a vanity mission. He is convinced that there is a sub-plot somewhere.

"Relax, Paul, and be grateful."

"Relaxing at this moment, Sarah, could get us all killed."

"I think Gabriel is rather hinting that we are all going to be killed anyway. He does not elaborate too much on what happens after you and your mum have been reunited. That is where the sticky bit starts, I would suspect."

"Still . . ."

As ever, Michael is the organising one, dashing around and making preparations for all three of us, although he refuses to sort through my belongings. He is probably afraid of encountering my panties and embarrassing us all. It is extraordinary how a humble artefact can take on such inflammatory intimations.

“Are you ready?” Gabriel exhorts us.

“We are ready,” Michael replies, buckling my rucksack.

The Archangel Gabriel tells us to hold hands. Paul’s grip is casual, Michael’s is painfully tight. We immediately disappear, forced down what must be very similar to a birth canal—darkness, airlessness and the feeling of being squeezed down a tube. It is a frightening sensation and a relentless one. At one moment I feel that I am either going to have a heart attack, or an orgasm, and then we tumble out into the real world again, hard onto stony, scratchy, dusty ground.



There is a scraping, padding sound. “Paul, what are you doing?” I shout ahead.

“Jump!” Paul screams. “Disappear.” He hurls himself into the trees, dragging me with him. Michael’s reactions are almost as fast as Paul’s, as he dives in behind us. There, in the pathway, more or less where we were standing is something ominous, although I cannot make out what. What I can see is that all the vegetation is being shredded by an invisible entity, working in circles, veering wildly to left and to right, as if seeking us out. The stench is horrific. It smells of a deep rot. It seems to know we are here somewhere; after all it probably tried to ambush us. I do not know which senses it uses to track its prey—sight, smell, sound, vibrations, sonar. We are all crashing away through the trees. It can hardly fail to notice us, yet immediately it is not following us.

I trip over him. He is lying there, covered in blood, his shoulder badly ripped, his side slashed. He does not make a sound as I kick him accidentally, and go sprawling onto the rocky dust. I pick myself up, winded and shocked, and turn back. He is facing away from me, as if unconscious, then he moves slightly, so minimally that I am not absolutely sure that he has moved at all. I crouch down to try to avoid being seen by whatever it is and wherever it is, and work my way towards him. I am petrified that he will groan loudly, and draw attention to us. Do these things hunt alone, or in packs?

I am watching back to where I last detected the thing, scanning between the trees for it and others, so that I am totally taken by surprise when I see the wounded man’s face. His eyes are laser sharp, and as he watches me, it is as if he has pushed my soul through my head. Paul and Michael join me. I drop to my knees to treat him, and then gasp sharply as I connect with him. Paul is regarding him steadily, straight into his eyes. He does not react at all.

“You are not human,” he comments. It is not a question, and he is not even seeking confirmation.

“I am an angel,” says the man.

“Who are you?”



“Gabriel. We spoke earlier.” It really does sound like he is making a joke. Are archangels generally funny?

“Why can we see you suddenly and why are you injured?” Paul inquires, somewhat brusquely.

“I made a mistake. I was trying to protect you from the dlo-dukkok and accidentally became human. So here I am.”

“What will happen to you?”

“I will stay with you as I am, and get you up that hill.”

“Just up to the top of the hill?” Michael asks.

“It doesn’t sound much, does it, Michael? You cannot imagine how hard it is. Listen.”

We are surrounded by scraping, scratching and padding noises. They don’t sound dangerous as such, rather like a beast snuffling, but they do sound persistent. They appear to be circling us.

“We are surrounded,” Gabriel observes. “They corner their prey by moving in concentric circles. Somehow, we have to break out.”

“How?” Paul asks sharply.

“Stones sometimes work,” Gabriel replies. “You know the trick; you pick up a stone and throw it into the bushes. They are like crocodiles. They react to movement. You have to hope that the movement of the stone is more interesting than the swish of your arm. I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“How can you help us?” Paul challenges him.

“Immediately, by keeping quiet. If you don’t move, and you don’t happen to be cut in half by them where you are, then you might survive.”

“Are they only interested in movement?”

“Yes.”

“So they cannot hear us?”

“No, but they can sense your lips moving. Generally speaking, it is best to be absolutely silent and absolutely immobile.”

We hug ourselves into squashed balls and we hold our breath. In this position, the searching noises of the dlo-dukkoks are accentuated. They are terrifyingly close, and working their way closer. I can almost feel them, tingling my head, my arms, my legs. Any second now and they will dice me, as they did to Gabriel. Surely Gabriel must be able to do something.

The stink is so intense I want to gag. If I gag, I move. If I move, I reveal myself. If I reveal myself, we are all dead. How do I avoid reacting? It is like being buried deep among rotting fish heads. I have this image of all these slimy eyes looking at me, the cold scales, being surrounded by decapitated death. Did something brush me? Am I cut? Will I be wiped out by the next pass of the lawnmower, caught like a frog in its blades.

Michael screams, a surprised, intense shriek. Suddenly, everything is moving around us in a panic. Paul exclaims “Oh my God, Mike. Oh my God!”

Michael has been sliced in two lengthwise. His innards are spilling everywhere, his face is split several centimetres apart, his brain is spilling out onto the earth. He has a surprised expression on both sides of his face. It can only be a matter of seconds for the rest of us, except that we are again engulfed by the dark tube and propelled along. What happened to Michael? Have we left him behind? We spill out onto wet grass in a cascade of rain. I fight to open my eyes. Gabriel is standing over Michael, emanating huge amounts of intense light that is wrapping him. I close my eyes for fear of their becoming seared. I move against Paul, and hunch into him. He puts his arm around me gently, but his concentration is elsewhere.

“Should you be looking?”

“I am not directly. I am peering through very narrow gaps between my fingers.”

“What are they doing?”

“I think Gabriel is trying to heal him.”

“Did he collect up all of him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will Michael be all right?” Stupid question.

“I don’t know.”

“How can Gabriel heal Michael but not himself?”

“I do not know.”

I stop asking questions, even though Paul is responding to them with more patience than usual. We sit down, huddled together. I can still sense the light, despite staring into Paul’s chest. He has such a reassuring body odour; manly, but not at all unpleasant or acrid, like mown grass, without the top-notes. He is holding himself attentively still.

I can hear a voice talking within my head. It sounds rather like Gabriel’s voice, but distorted. I cannot understand what it is saying. The hair is rising across the whole of my body as if we are in a concentrated electro-magnetic field. It is throbbing and beginning to hurt. I bury myself deeper into Paul. My eyes are aching, my legs are twitching, my mouth is dry, my heart is pounding. What on earth is going on?

Everything falls away. There is absolute silence except for the beating of Paul’s heart. I peer out. Gabriel is still perched over Michael, but the light has gone. Paul goes over to Gabriel and Michael. “Wow!” he says. “What is that?” He is expressing awed astonishment, tainted with concern.

“What has happened to me?” I hear Michael exclaim, his voice filled with shock and distress. “Whose body have I got? What is it made of?”

Gabriel stands up and back. He is bemired in blood, whether his or Michael’s I do not know. He is holding himself, swaying slightly, as if about to faint. I hesitate to touch him, and yet I do. It is an other-worldly sensation. Although Gabriel has a human body, he does not fit it as a human would. He

feels like a rigid bean bag. He allows me to hold him without comment, but it is an uncomfortable, almost threatening experience.

I catch sight of Michael on the ground, and it is obvious immediately what he means. His face has Michael's shape and expression, but the skin looks like a metallic lycra, not at all human, almost reptilian. He is profoundly cyborg.

"How do you feel?" I ask him.

"Shocked."

"You look a lot better than you did," I comment. "That really was shocking, I can tell you."

"What happened to me?" Michael is examining his hands. Paul reaches forward and touches his skin.

"It doesn't feel at all like it looks," he ponders. "It is wonderfully soft, like your skin, Sarah. It is beautiful. It just looks a bit weird."

"Everlasting," Gabriel interrupts. "Or at least that is what we hope."

"Everlasting?" Michael echoes.

"If we have got it right, Michael, you are now immortal. You are what the future of human infinity will look like, or something very like it."

"If you have got it right?"

"We have made a lot of mistakes."

"What happened to the mistakes?"

"We won't dwell on those, Michael. They are in the past. Iofiel assures me that this design is acting stably."

"It is weird."

"You'll get used to it."

"Will everyone end up looking like this?"

"Yes, eventually, hopefully. We are not quite sure how everything will end up, or even start up. Whoever is organising this, it is not us. We do not know where the designs are coming from. We assume that it is the work of the Living God, but he has not revealed himself. They simply turn up and we do what we can to nurture the end results. As I say, they are getting better after a tragic start."

"So I can walk straight up to a dlo-dukkok, and there is nothing it can do to me?" Michael proposes exploratively, warming to the idea.

"Not a thing. It will bounce off you."

"So I can protect the others?"

"Yes, you can."

"Can they have these bodies too?"

"They would have to die first."

"Perhaps they should. Then we can guarantee to meet Mum and Dad."

"It could be done," Gabriel agrees.

My body goes cold, and shock slaps me. "You mean you want to kill us?"

“While Gabriel is here. It might be the safest solution. Who is to say that when you are killed, Gabriel will be around to transform you into something fetching like this?”

“I will be around,” Gabriel assures us. “At least until you meet your parents. I have promised you that.”

“What happens now then?” Paul asks.

“We go back,” Gabriel replies.

“You are joking!” I protest.

“There is no other solution,” Gabriel asserts. “With some luck, the dlo-dukkoks will have moved on by now and, with even more luck, not to where Paul and Michael’s parents are hiding.”

“So we will only have to contend with two sets of armies and those other creatures,” Michael comments facetiously.

“You will not have to contend with anything, Michael. You are beyond harm. You must protect the others.”

“So, it will be all my fault if we don’t make it?”

“We will make it, don’t you worry. It is merely a matter of what state we will be in when we finally meet up. You are lucky, Michael. I too have a human body of the old-fashioned type. I am as vulnerable as these two are, and badly injured. Take a good look at me. You have to protect me too.”

“So what is the plan when we get back there?” Paul inquires.

“The plan is for Michael to act as a scout and to lead the way. He can absorb any obvious dangers from the front. He will also act as a magnet to most predators. We have to worry about what creeps up on us from the side and from the back. If any of us are injured, there is not a lot I can do. If you are killed, you will be transformed, as Michael has been. Several angel colleagues are on stand-by.”

“Why are you doing all this for us?” Paul challenges Gabriel. “What makes us so important?”

Gabriel smiles. It is much more radiant, literally, than I would have expected. “You are no more important than anyone else, Paul. It is your mother who is important. She asked explicitly for our help. We do everything we can for those who seek our help. We always have. And in this case, I made her a promise. I guaranteed that you would all meet up one more time before the end of the worlds. So that is what will happen while there remains any possibility of achieving it. The worlds may end in a few seconds, then I will have failed. However, I suspect we have a few days yet. The scenarios do not feel like they have been exhausted. There are still some other events we expect to happen first.”

“Like what?” fires in Paul.

“We expect a cluster of pestilences to spread across the entire Earths. We expect the dimensions to collapse. We expect the gods to be destroyed. Those are the main things.”

“Which gods?”

“The gods who made you.”

“What?” Michael interjects. “We were made by gods?”

“Not now, not you, Michael. We suspect you were made by someone completely different in your current incarnation, but all the rest of you were made by gods. Designed by gods, animated by gods, re-processed by gods after death.”

“There are many gods?”

“Over two thousand.”

“And where are they now?”

“Believe it or not, Michael, they are attending a conference, between the dimensions. They are sitting in two warring camps, the League of Western Gods are enclaved on one river bank, and the Gods of the Future Alliance on the other. You would recognise the scene, it is very human, except that they are not attempting to attack each other. That would be futile and disgraceful.”

“And they are causing all this?” Paul states.

“Yes, they are causing all this suffering. Suffering is one of their specialities, as you have probably noticed. This time, it is probably the last suffering they will cause, but they are certainly going out in style.”

“Do we know anything about these gods?” I ask.

“It depends whether you have studied them or not. You probably know some of the Greek and Roman ones.”

“They really exist?”

“They really exist.”

“And we thought that they had died out long ago.”

“Gods do not die, not even demiurges, although they may this time. Or they may be transformed into human like you, Michael. You may yet be a prototypical god.”

Paul approaches Michael with a barely perceptible hesitation born of squeamishness, I suspect. He hugs him, and their faces touch. “You are a first, Mike. You always wanted to be first.”

“I am a god,” Michael replies. “I’ve always wanted to be one of those too!”



## *Chapter 30*

### *Testimony of the Angel Iofiel:*

If I remember correctly (of course I remember it correctly, but the detail may be a little hazy), the Living God as Jesus Christ once referred to some labourers who were arguing with their boss. Some had been working the whole day, and during the afternoon the boss had decided he needed more hands and hired some more people for the same amount of money as he was paying the other people because he was in a weak bargaining position. The Living God's comment was that the complainers should get on with life. They had got what they bargained for, and the fact that another lot had managed to wrangle an even better deal should be of no concern of theirs.

We do not know what your take-out is from this story, but ours is that the Living God has a surprisingly sure grasp of Earthly economics. He certainly catches us out sometimes. The exhortation to render unto God that which is God's, and to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's demonstrates a heightened understanding of real-politik too. For someone so removed from the action most of the time, it is intriguing that he can be so practical.

Which is not true of the bunch we are having to manage here. As I mentioned earlier, they are arriving in successive waves of prototypes of eternal bodies. The first ones were disastrously unstable, and they all suffered excruciating deaths. The most recent ones seem almost fit for purpose, although we can obviously not test whether they will last forever without their lasting forever. We do not even have any means of applying accelerated testing. All we can say is that the bodies no longer fall apart, and that a few of their number have been hit by everything that is still moving, and have suffered no injuries whatsoever. The same is true of those who have leapt off towers, cliffs, and bridges. "It is like bungee-jumping," they say. "It is fantastic."

So that will be the brave new world, a planet of bungee-jumpers.

Tragically, we are not there yet. In the meantime people are being decimated in their millions by the onward tide of dlo-dukkoks and coeurls—that is, each person is decimated, and mostly left for dead. The dlo-dukkoks dice them up. The coeurls slice parts off them and, if they are lucky, those parts are their heads because the alternative is that they are paralysed until the coeurls, or others, are ready to eat them slowly and systematically alive.

In the meantime, some of the gods must be worked off their feet processing so many dead souls. Some appear to be fast-tracked back into human experimentation. The rest are being packed into the appropriate versions of hell. Maybe the demiurges are finally understanding the devastation they have wreaked.

Among the prototypes themselves there is a dissension to match the labourers' story. Those with the most recent version of the eternal bodies have clearly received a superior product. This reality is really irking those who were brought back to the Earths earlier, and who are feeling mistreated. "Why couldn't you get it right straightaway?" they challenge us.

Tabbris and I repeatedly inform them that we are not doing anything other than caring for them in whatever state they arrive and develop. This does not generally calm them. They treat us like dozy shop assistants, scream at us, and demand to meet the management.

"Whose work is it, then?" they demand.

"We don't know," we reply. "We think it is the work of the Living God. Otherwise it is the work of the Devil."

"You are saying that we are the work of the Devil?"

"No, I am saying that we none of us know. We are trying to suggest options."

"And the Devil really does exist?"

"Yes, it appears that he does. Lucifer met him."

"Lucifer? But he is the Devil, isn't he?"

"No, Lucifer is most certainly not the Devil, although he can be a bit tricky sometimes."

"I have read my bible. I know he is the Devil."

"I can only tell you what we know."

"And why would the Devil be doing all this?"

"Because he always has, via the demiurges. He is responsible for your creation."

"I am not the Devil's work!"

"Regrettably, or perhaps not even that, it appears that you are, and have always been."

This really upsets them. So many of them have striven against their understanding of the Devil's ways almost all their lives that to be told that they *are* the Devil's ways absolutely outrages them. At this point we generally

lose all control over them, which means that they are becoming increasingly conspicuous, and truly inheriting the Kingdoms of the Earths as they go. You cannot have people throwing themselves off high places, looking like bodies designed by Issey Myake, without the natives of the Earths beginning to ask questions.

The main question the prototypes ask us is what will happen to them when the worlds come to an end and a new one is created. Sadly, we cannot answer this question to their satisfaction either. We do not know.

“Don’t they tell you anything?” they demand.

“No,” we reply.

“Well can we talk to someone who can?”

“The only thing we can suggest is that you look into your heart and meditate. Maybe you will find the Living God or the Devil there. One of them should know the answer,” an answer which is inevitably unsatisfactory.

What will happen when the worlds are destroyed? What is the mechanism for their survival and/or return? We would love to find out, and Tabbris and I spend a lot of time speculating about it. Tabbris reckons that as the one new world will replace the multiple old ones on the same spot, perhaps the prototypes will simply hop across. But what does this do for those with inferior bodies, but who cannot die? Will they become a new underclass of untouchables?

Tabbris thinks not. He believes that anyone will be able to choose to die, and equally to return to human or other living creature form, as they wish—whenever and however often the whim takes them, at least that is what Michael has hinted at. I call it the “museum model”. Drop in when you feel like it, study the exhibits, soak up the atmosphere, and go back home to your essential ethereal self, ready for an outing another day. Will they ever build up new lasting relationships that way, will they feed off all their existing relationships developed across all the dimensions since the worlds were born, or will they rather not bother with relationships at all, living as if on the Internet, smash and grab, linger for a while, disappear, maybe return some time later, maybe not?

One thing for sure is that the reality of being human will be very different from anything they have experienced so far. I wonder how much adjustment it will take, or whether this new lifestyle is already best adapted to how animals and other creatures prefer to pursue their lives. “I want to be a butterfly today. A beautiful Great Mormon (that is for the boys who have passed through Utah). Here I am. Wow! Cool! I am flying, I am indestructible. This is even better than bungee-jumping!”

If this is how it pans out, it will certainly turn the Earth into the soul’s playground, offering an endless display of possibilities, the ultimate identity shopping experience, without having to load up your credit card. I think I may join in. It really does seem like it could be fun, or am I fantasising to offset the trauma of everything that is going on around us now.



Why do living creatures find it so hard to die, to return unto themselves? Surely that would be a far better solution than this travesty of life? And yet they persist with heroic determination and creativity. What will happen to that when life becomes so easy? Will it leave traces the way that fear of being eaten within humans has been tamed down to a recurrent anxiety built around the possibility of social attack? Will the new human beings imagine impossible odds so that they can strive against them? The evidence suggests that this will indeed happen; it has already happened over thousand of years for people who have no further challenges in life to face except for death. It has been a question of either fabricating impossible odds for yourself, or succumbing to the petrification of ennui, or entering the land that lies between these two that is drug addiction.

So many questions; so much to get excited about. I wish it would happen now. Both Tabbris and I cannot wait to see it except, of course, that we have to. Uh-oh! Here comes another angry party stamping its way over to us, humming motivationally. These represent our insurmountable odds, and I do not need them at all, I promise you. Sweet smile. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. How can we be of service to you today?”



## *Chapter 31*

### ***Testimony of David Lambert:***

We have been preparing to hide ourselves.

Initially, we sat here, savouring the view, trying to grasp what was happening around us.

Then Rachel asked: "What if we are attacked?"

"Who would attack us here?" I riposted.

"Anybody could attack us here," she replied. "What is there to stop anyone attacking us here?"

"Here we go again," I thought to myself, "born in South Africa . . . ." Nevertheless, we began to plan. There are several holes here: underground chambers and a cistern which actually contains some water. It must have rained recently, very recently. If we could convincingly cover up the entrance, we could hide in a chamber, Robert the Bruce fashion. All we need is a spider on benzedrine.

At the very moment when we were standing up to go foraging, Rachel froze and collapsed onto the ground. "What is it?" I asked, concerned, naturally, not that Rachel would ever believe me or admit to believing me.

Rachel was sobbing uncontrollably, hunched over her knees in a ball, her whole body heaving. She did not answer me for several minutes while I hovered over her uselessly solicitous. Eventually she managed to cough out: "It's Michael . . . ."

"It's Michael what?" I grasped.

No answer for another while.

"I heard him scream. It was a horrible scream. He was in agony."

"I didn't hear anything."

"You wouldn't. You never hear anything. You have always been deaf to the children's needs."

I remained silent. There is no way out of this logical impasse, or at least I have never found one, not for the want of trying, I can tell you.

A huge sob. "Michael is dead!"

"How on earth do you know that?" OK, I knew the answer to that question, but I was shocked and I did not want to entertain bad news, and certainly not of a tragedy such as that would be.

"How do you think?"

"How did he die?"

"Is that all you can say? Can't you grieve for him? Can't you cry for him?"

"I will when I am convinced that he is truly dead."

"He is dead, I am telling you."

"But Gabriel promised to have us all meet up. It doesn't make sense that he should be dead."

"Angels cannot stop everything bad happening in the world, not even archangels."

No answer to that either. I hovered around a few minutes longer and then wandered off in search of branches which I dragged back to where Rachel was sitting. It took me about half-an-hour to assemble an impressive cover over one of the entrances. It was convincing to my sight, but who is to say that any predators will see the way I do, or will not rely on some other sense, like smell or infrared?

I can see trees falling in progressive waves immediately below us, as if being cropped by a combine harvester, and at about that speed. Something is making its way up towards us. I usher Rachel into the hole. She does not resist, although she does not move with any enthusiasm. I reassemble the branches to the point where we can still see out, but it is unlikely that anything else can see in. We are cocooned, which is not to say safe.

There is a scraping outside the hole, and a cough. Soldiers, probably, but whose? I put my arm around Rachel and, for once, she does not resist me, or claim that I am being demanding. She is still shaking violently and burrowing into to herself.

Whatever it is outside is now grunting. Is it an animal? I can see him in outline. He seems to be searching around rather frantically. There is a horrific smell permeating through the branches as if he has farted after eating platefuls of rotten offal. He is parting the branches.

He doesn't come through. He is crouching right in front of me, on ultra alert. And he does not smell. That must be coming from whatever is threatening him. He is naked. In fact, his hairy bottom is almost pressed up against my face. I am tempted to laugh and, if I do, I will be blowing air up his bum. He has very dark skin. Somehow though, in the way he holds himself, he is not like anyone I have ever seen before. Maybe he is a feral child, hidden up in these hills from

birth, or from sometime thereafter, an unwanted child, a deranged child, a truly pissed off child rejecting civilisation. Except that he is not a child now. he is as big as I am, with about the same bulk, which is considerable.

There is a scratching sound coming closer, and the stench is accompanying it. Whoever he is, hiding amid the branches, raises his haunches, brushing my face. he seems to half-register that he has touched something unexpectedly soft, and half turns round before hurling himself out of his hiding place and making a dash for it. I grab back the branches as best I can to maintain our cover. There is what sounds like a gulp, followed by silence from the man and the noise of the predator tracking away. Has it swallowed him whole? For the moment I am relieved that it has not gobbled us up, and that the smell is lifting. Nevertheless, I am shaken by an involuntary shiver at the thought of the possibility of having shared his fate.

After about five minutes without any further noises, I poke my head through the branches, trying to see clearly without breaking cover. There is blood everywhere, and body parts. Whoever he was has been shredded but not noticeably eaten, as if he has collided with a ten ton truck running at 100 mph. Splatter. The head has been cleaved from the rest of the cadaver, and is lying some distance away, leaning with his face against a rock. I decide that we should stay where we are for a while longer.

“Who was it?” Rachel inquires in a small, hesitant voice.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “Nobody we have ever met before. A very strange looking man; some sort of hillbilly.”

“What is he doing now?”

“He is dead. Blown to pieces.”

Rachel shudders. “That is what happened to Michael too,” she whispers.



Below us, it sounds like a hunting party with stray shouts and screams distributed across the landscape. Everywhere the trees are being flattened. There is the occasional gun shot but not in sufficient intensity to suggest a fire-fight.

Rachel has been concentrating on contacting Gabriel, and she has come up with a very strange story. She tells me that Michael’s broken body has been subjected to the light by Gabriel, and he has returned to the Earths in a new form whereby he can never die again. He has become immortal. He will now protect Paul and help him to reach us here on the peak; Sarah too.

Rachel is looking kind of dreamy with the news. Gabriel has warned Rachel that Michael will be very different in appearance from the last time we saw him, but it is still the Michael we know, so not to panic when we see him. Gabriel

passed on a vision of Michael to Rachel. Initially she gasped. She says that Michael has almost silvery skin, and his face is fuller and more angular than before. However, he smiled at her, and reassured her that everything was OK. Being reborn was not as traumatic as being born, he guesses.



## *Chapter 32*

### *Testimony of Alan Harding:*

Things are becoming increasingly panicky here. Refugees are flooding in while, at the same time, refugees are flooding out too. Those coming into London are seeking protection. Those aiming for the countryside are doing so in search of food. I am not sure that there is much of either to be had.

Rumour, our only source of information now that the Mayor of London's pronouncements on the Common have been dropped, has it that the authorities have tried to block entry to London, calling upon volunteers to bar the streets. You can leave, but you cannot enter, or re-enter. It is all a little unbelievable. There are people everywhere, pitching their tents on the Common, and knocking on our doors to ask first politely, then abusively, to use our toilets (as if we still had running water), and to eat our food. Jane always answers the door politely and calmly, and takes whatever time is required to deter them. Hopefully, rumour will soon be on our side. "Don't go to No. 61. They never let anyone in. You're wasting your time." However, this could soon change to "No. 61 has a nice clean pair of toilets. Fuck them!"

Jane and I have been spending more intimate time together than over many years, as in 'more intimate' rather than 'more time'. We worry about Sarah stuck out in Southern France, but somehow we believe, or wish to believe, that she will be better off than we are, out there in the middle of nowhere, basking in the sun and foraging amid farmlands which presumably harbour plenty of food and, if not food, wine. OK, it may not be that good for you to sign up for an exclusive diet of wine, but it will certainly pass the time. And Paul strikes us as a survivor, which might make him pushy on some occasions, but a veritable saviour under these conditions. His creed seems to be "minimum input, maximum returns". That's the sort of guy you want in a crisis. As for John and Fiona, they are deep into the Cotswolds, possibly holed up with the Affligems. With all that land, they could provision themselves indefinitely, and you will probably find that batty

old Constance Affligem has suddenly come into his own as commander-in-chief, while his wife and the servants repel borders.

So we consider ourselves to be the ones most at risk, and at enormous risk at that, although maybe not quite yet. Jane has always kept the larder well stocked, despite my occasional teasing, arguing that you never know what will happen. Well, we do now. We have plenty of things to burn, so we can keep ourselves in warm tea and coffee, and cook as needed. I have set up the fireplace with a grill. Jane has salted the fresh meat and vegetables, and all the items that were in the freezer that we will not be polishing off over the next few days. We found some right old relics in the bottom of the chest freezer. Fishing them out was like leafing through the photo albums, unearthing culinary memories.

“Do you remember when I cooked that? It was for the dinner party with Patsy and Ralph last October. I wonder what has happened to them.”

“We should wander over. We could take the rest of their dinner party food with us.”

“That would be fun, except that I think it would be unwise to leave the house unguarded.”

“Perhaps we should invite them to move in with us, or vice-versa.”

“I think not, Alan. Guests, like fish, stink after three days.”

“It might be safer.”

“We might end up killing each other. I’ll take my chances.”

Jane pulls out something else which looks decidedly soggy. “This goes back at least a year. Shepherd’s pie, I think.”

We unearth a couple of packages we fear might go back several years, anywhere up to five or six.

“Are they still edible?”

“Probably when we get hungry enough.”

Jane insists on keeping all the melted ice from the freezer which is absolutely disgusting and infested with loose bits of food wallowing and sloshing vomit-like around it. Jane has decided to strain the water through the drain hole, and then through a sieve, and to decant it into the bottles which used to contain the fresh water we have drunk over the last few days.

“We need to stockpile all the water we can get our hands on. It will taste like heaven if we get thirsty enough.”

“And probably hasten us there too.”

Jane looks at me. “We may be glad of it when the time comes.” I am not quite sure whether she is referring to the water or heaven. Up until now, all our talk has been of survival. We instinctively shy away from morbid options. Jane comes from a ‘roll up your sleeves and get on with doing what it takes’ family, and I have always gone along with that aspect of her approach to life, as with many of her other principles. I just don’t fancy that putrid water. I feel nauseated when I even consider drinking it. I can imagine the slimy, greasy,

luke-warm texture of the fluid, with those flaccid, rotting middle notes. I vow that when we only have that bottle left, I will move in with Patsy and Ralph, or with Richard, or even with Sam and Kay, and leave Jane to relish every single mouth-watering drop of it. Ugh!

As we can no longer make use of our fabulous round bath to comfort ourselves in these troubled times, we often resort to the bedroom instead, not for the reason you might think, but also for the reason you might think. An embattled state provides a sense of urgency and even of *joie-de-vivre*. Despite our concerns for our futures and those of our cherished family, these have also been days fit for luxuriating in soporific splendour, reading books, chatting, playing games. I have never been one for bringing out the cards and dealing a round of one tedious game or another, but I have to confess that there is suddenly something rather enjoyable about sitting up with your wife in bed, playing a few hands of hearts, or whist, or rummy, or whatever. To our surprise, we manage to pass the time most peaceably, devoid of the competitive angst that used to once accompany such games.

Having said all that, we do expect, sooner or later, to hear a loud bang, and to have fifty people burst through our door, determined to eat and defecate us out of house and home, pausing only to lynch us, or to thrust us, half naked onto the Common while they content themselves with moving in, and with preventing us from moving back.

Along the way, we have also been plotting how to keep ourselves in food for the foreseeable future. Jane has suggested that I report to one of the London hospitals to see if they can find a paying occupation for a renegade surgeon. "Who knows," she suggests, "maybe all the proper surgeons have legged it, leaving only those of the alternative persuasion."

"My guess," I reply, "is that the alternative practitioners will have legged it first. Reiki seems rather superfluous when you need people to man A&E."

"You are still here."

"Yes, well, I always was a bit different."



So here I am at St. Thomas', offering my services which are immediately welcomed. The first person I meet is Louis Saville, one of the top oncologists in the country, with whom I trained way back.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat has dragged in. Alan Harding. Well I never. Alan, it is so good to see you after all these years. How can we help you?"

"I have come to offer my services, Louis, and to say that you have not changed a bit."

"Offer your services? I am sorry, Alan, but all the shaggable nurses left last week. Sorry, a joke in rather poor taste, but I enjoyed making it anyway."



He claps his hand onto my arm in a gesture of shameless, and meaningless, bonhomie. “What would you like to do?”

“Anything which would be useful to you.”

Louis’ face turns more serious. “Well, as all the half-competent surgeons left with all the shaggable nurses, we are left with gaping holes in our defences, and a rapidly mounting casualty list. It is not clear exactly what is happening out there in the Docklands, but it seems to be complete carnage. People are being carried in with large chunks of flesh, and frequently limbs, sliced off them, like Chinese cows, and nobody seems to know who or what is doing it. It is an invisible and highly voracious force.”

“Are the wounds clean, or are they poisoned too?”

“They are as clean as several miles’ travel and dirty improvised tourniquets will allow them to be. No, they don’t seem to be systematically poisoned.”

“That is something, anyway,” I observe.

“But there is something a whole lot weirder going on, Alan. Some of the people being dragged in do not appear to be people at all, not *homo sapiens* anyway.”

“Are these the attackers?”

“That is what people assumed initially, I think. Quite a few of them were murdered in the belief that they had been doing the slaughtering, then something happened and they became visible and lost their powers, like downed airmen. However, when they saw them being shredded indiscriminately too, they changed their minds and started helping them. They are popping up from nowhere all over London, and maybe all over the country as far as I know, alongside others who are definitely *homo sapiens*, albeit attired in some kind of fancy dress. Disturbing.”

“Can I have a look?”

“Of course, Alan. Come this way.”

We walk along several corridors which are beginning to suggest a state of collapse. Patients are abandoned on trolleys, blood seeping through their bandages, distress plain on their faces, seal-bark moaning littering the air. Several times, Louis has to roll a trolley out of our way in order for us to get through. There is the unmistakable smell of insipient gangrene that fragrances odd crannies of the corridor. “Supplies have largely run out,” Louis explains. “With the cost-cutting of recent years, they forgot all about provisioning for monumental disasters. Not that it matters, I suppose. Something on this scale cannot be managed anyway. Stockpiles of provisions would lend us a few more weeks perhaps, but they would have no significant impact on the overall problem.”

“So you think that whatever this is is here to stay?”

“We are in contact with the Emergency Government, and they tell us that no reprieve is in sight. In fact, they have no idea of what is happening. All

infrastructure has collapsed, Britain is being invaded by an invisible army backed by a multinational force that looks like it has been assembled by the United Nations, governments around Europe are in exactly the same mess as we are, and who knows what is happening in the US or in the rest of the world. Nobody can penetrate that far. It all seems to have happened without the slightest warning or pretext. Gone; everything is gone, and nobody knows why. So, yes, it might all stop as quickly as it started, but why should it or, alternatively, why should it not?"

We have reached the room for which we have apparently been headed. Louis barges through the door in the time-honoured manner of a senior consultant, and hurls us into the midst of the oddest pack of creatures ever to have been assembled before my eyes. Odd, and yet familiar. These people are definitely not of any race I have encountered, and yet not so far otherwise. I reach back in my memory for a list of other humanoid species. *Homo habilis* comes to mind, although I have not the first idea what such a being would look like. Under the pressure of the moment, that is the sum total of the list of prehistoric possibilities I can conjure up.

"Brian here reckons that they are some species of *homo rigidus*," Louis informs me, "and as he is the only one-eyed man here in the kingdom of the blind, we all believe him."

Brian breaks away from the others to address me. "Brian King."

"Alan Harding."

"Welcome, Alan. To be honest, I could not swear by any of it, but I vaguely remember that there was Neanderthal man who was a thickset, heavy, drop-jawed creature, *homo erectus* who was more slender but still ape like, then *homo rigidus* who was in many respects a viable contender for *homo sapiens*, so I reckon that these are of the species *homo rigidus*. I would probably get a C- for my answer in a palaeontology exam, unless I have had a lucky break and got it right. That is the way I always approached my exams in the dim and distant past, so I am quietly confident." He laughs self-deprecatingly.

"Can they talk?" I inquire.

"Yes, in their own way, they have been chatting away quite happily. I get the impression that it is a damned sight better here than where they have just come from." Several of them are watching us openly as we discuss them, curious but not evidently fearful. It is an unnerving feeling being stared at straight into the face by someone who isn't someone, if you know what I mean.

I shake as a shiver skids down my back. One of the creatures watches me intently as if wishing to communicate with me. He seems highly intelligent and gentle with it, a truly other-worldly kindly professor. He does not smile, but gives off the Labrador vibes of being amused. He comes across to me, and for a moment I am not sure whether I can hold my ground. He presses up against me and sniffs me. From deep inside my own head I hear a cavernous

voice declaiming “We are friends. Do not fear us.” I assume that it is my own voice that I am hearing, although I do not recognise it as mine. The creature is definitely seeking to communicate me, but not in words.

“Where are you from?” I ask my head. I try to conjure up the same cavernous voice, but it fails to kick in.

“Take care of us.” The thought enters my consciousness, or even my conscience, and this time I am pretty sure that I placed it there.

In a way it is like trying to talk to God. You are desperate to do so (or at least I have been desperate to do so during some periods of my life), you resort to prayer, and that prayer triggers a thought. Did that thought come from God, or was that your thought?

I try again to communicate with him. “How many are there of you?” I think to myself. My own reflexive thought suggests “millions”.

I touch the creature’s forearm with a fraternal gesture. I should probably sniff him, but I cannot bring myself to do that. He looks at me with brown affectionate eyes, and returns to his group.

Louis has another room for me. This one is filled with recognisable *homo sapiens* this time, adorned in bizarre costumes. It contains all the freaks of London circa 1980, and indeed from John and Fiona’s wedding. They give the impression that they have been lifted wholesale from a wild party on the far side of the world. There are roomfuls of people like this, Louis informs me. They stand around and wait, without saying a word.

“There is just one last specimen I would like you to examine, Alan.” Louis leads me to a small office. In the office is a human form with silvery-white ‘skin’, which is closer to being a fabric. His eyes regard me knowingly as I enter the room. “Another one!” the creature exclaims.

“Another one?” I ask.

“Are you a doctor too?”

“Sort of.”

“Are you planning to commit me?”

“I wasn’t, no. Should I?”

“These gentlemen think you should.”

“Why is that?”

“I asked them a simple question. Am I indestructible?”

“Are you indestructible?” I repeat slowly.

“Yes, that is it.”

“Well are you?”

“They tell me that I am.”

“Who tells you that?”

“The angels. Tabbris and Iofiel. I need to know whether they are telling me the truth. I want you to try to take me apart, cut me up, kill me, knock me unconscious, that sort of thing.”

“It is certainly an unusual request,” I venture, trying hard not to catch anyone else’s eye.

“It is a perfectly serious request,” he replies, “a desperate one, in fact.”

“And do you have any reason to believe that you might be indestructible other than from what the angels have told you?”

“Yes, as it happens I have.”

“What is that?”

“I have come back from the dead. I am a prototype, apparently. A guinea-pig. Testing out new bodies.”

“Have you tried to destroy yourself?”

“Oh yes, we all have.”

“You all?”

“Yes, there are thousands of us.”

“Where exactly?”

“Oh, all over the place. I can show you if you like.”

“That would be interesting. What have you tried?”

“The usual stuff. Jumping off skyscrapers, and bridges, trying to impale ourselves on railings, stabbing each other with knives, setting fire to each other. You name it, we’ve done it.”

“And no-one has been killed?”

“No-one has even been hurt, scratched or marked. Not so much as a smudge.”

I glance over to Louis. “I suppose we could try a small incision with a scalpel first and then a laser. Is that possible, Louis?”

“The laser is out, of course. No power, no electronics.”

“Of course.”

“We could go with the scalpel, but we would need a waiver of liability first. He could sue us.”

The man bursts out laughing. “The world is about to end in a few days, and you are worried about being sued? How quickly do you think the rusty cogs of the legal system grind? Are there even any courts left? Give me your sharpest scalpel, and I’ll do it myself.”

“That would still expose us to potential litigation,” Louis stonewalls.

“Here,” the man says, “I found this scalpel earlier. Is it a sharp one?”

Louis does not give it a second’s consideration. “They should all be sharp.”

“Watch this, then,” the man announces, and proceeds to hold the scalpel like a plunging dagger, blade down. He jabs it at his arm with some force. The blade snaps without making any mark on his skin. “Do you see what I mean?”

“And that really is your skin?” Louis inquires.

“You’ve already examined me, Doctor. You know full well it is.”

“Come with me,” Louis orders curtly. “I am prepared to waive protocol out of sheer curiosity.”

Louis leads the way until we reach a theatre whose interior is almost pitch black. He produces a pencil light and collects up various manual instruments—Steinmann pins, K-wires, saws blades, sternum cutters—before leading us off again in search of a flat surface in front of a window. “Make yourself comfortable,” he counsels, but before the man is ready he stabs the Steinman pin with all his force into his forearm, presumably with the intention of catching him before his muscles tense up. The pin, which has only one trocar point, kicks back and drives itself deep into Louis’ thumb, almost to the nail on the other side, I would have thought. Louis turns his thumb towards me. The blood is beginning to well around the entry point. “I made need some help here, Alan,” he comments calmly, which is not as easily achieved as said because I need to find some surgical gloves to get a tight grip on the stem, and swabs and bandages. I rush back to the theatre with Louis’ pencil torch, race around finding everything as if competing in a supermarket challenge, and rush back to Louis who is clutching his thumb, stony-faced and on the verge of fainting. Glimpsing the man’s forearm, it is obvious that it bears not the slightest scar from the onslaught. The man winces apologetically. “I am very sorry, Doctor.”

Louis dismisses him with his eyebrows. “My mistake, I think.”

As I work on Louis, I cross-question the man. “What are you called, by the way?” I ask him.

“John Benetton, no relation.”

“So when did you die, John?”

“A few days ago. About eight days ago, in fact.”

“And you came back?”

“Absolutely!”

“What happened in-between?”

“I really don’t know. I cannot remember it. I don’t even really know when I died, only when I got here.”

“And your skin was like this?”

“Mine was. There are others of us with a whole range of different options, from steely to transparent.”

“Transparent?”

“Transparent. Not a pretty sight.”

“What did they tell you, these angels?”

“That we are prototypes intended never to die, unless we wish to do so, part of an experiment to see how people can be made immortal for the world that will replace these.”

“These?”

“Yes, there are many worlds apparently, or many dimensions to the same world, or whatever. I think you may just have been confronted with some evidence of that.”

“So those people were from a different dimension?”

“Or from many of them probably.”

“Why are they here?”

“I don’t know.”

“So the plan is that this world, or worlds comes to an end, and is replaced by another one inhabited by people who can choose to live forever.”

“As I understand it.”

“It sounds like a recipe for major overcrowding. Will the animals be equally indestructible?”

“I don’t know. I have not seen any animals yet.”

“So how do you get from one set of worlds to the other?” The pin is out of Louis’ thumb. I press hard down with a swab to staunch the bleeding. There would have been a time when we would all have been contemplating the possibility of AIDS, but that is now long gone.

“I don’t know. That is what worries me. I rather fear we might be abandoned to float around space forever.”

“Surely angels wouldn’t do that to you.”

“It may not be their choice.” He faces me calmly. “That is why I want to have the certainty of death as an option, but I cannot work out how.”

“What about poisons?”

“No, we have gone through a whole range of those already, from cyanide to concentrated sulphuric acid. Not even a stomach ache or cramps.”

“Do you eat food normally?”

“Yes.”

“Do you excrete waste matter?”

“Yes, exactly like everyone else.”

“And yet nothing whatever harms you?”

“Correct.”

“No pain?”

“None whatsoever.”

“What about mental distress or anxiety?”

“Actually not. Speculating over the risks we face is merely a logical matter. We are reduced to being coldly rational creatures, rather like surgeons in fact.”

I laugh. “Oh yes, that is us.”

“Maybe worse,” he continues, “like lawyers.”

“Some paradise! What will you do now?”

“I’ll go and report to the others that there is no evidence that we have the slightest chance of committing suicide, so we will probably have to face whatever fate is dished out to us. Oh well. Thank you, anyway, Doctor, it has been a great pleasure, and,” turning to Louis, “an especial thanks to you, Doctor. I am really sorry that you got hurt so badly.”

“I’ll recover,” Louis replies semi-automatically.

“I hope so,” John retorts, “as if it matters. I hope that at least the pain will go away.”

And with that, he walks off, leaving me holding Louis’ thumb and contemplating all the questions of the universe.



## *Chapter 33*

### *Testimony of Sarah Harding:*

Gabriel has managed to get us further up the hill this time, only about one hundred metres from the top where Paul's parents are meant to be waiting for us.

I thought that I had been through a lot, having been held hostage for two weeks by armed gunmen, having been threatened with mutilation, having watched a hit squad execute people before my eyes, having been subjected to a vengeance rape, having an ex-boyfriend killed in a skiing accident, and having observed all the other more normal shit that happens in a life—illness, depression, violence, outrages, love etc.; all the stuff you catch every day on the TV news and documentaries, some of which actually penetrates your personal space.

However, this moment slaps all that into perspective; backs it into the shadows. When you have seen what I am seeing now, everything else does not count. This is hell itself. I have just been sick. I couldn't help it. It was an immediate and involuntary reaction. The vomit is on my clothes, but what I am experiencing will be etched on my mind forever as a nightmare I will never forget. I know that what I am saying is trite, but something as horrific as this brings out simple, uncensored reactions in me. I have no means of explaining all this in all its power. Stick your head in a bucket of shit, vomit, blood and bones, and you will know something of how I feel as I stand here.

The landscape has been utterly destroyed. It is as if all the trees that were growing here in their rugged, determined, gnarled way have been uprooted and fed through a chipper. It is as if some of the creatures who were living here have been fed through that same chipper.

With about the same frequency as you would have to avoid cow pats in a well stocked meadow, we are having to step around mounds of shredded flesh. The rest of those creatures, human beings, wild boar, rabbits, horses, are represented by their body parts, dismembered and randomly scattered. There is an intense stench of faeces that penetrates deep into my mouth and nose so that I start to



choke. My eyes swell from the carnage I am witnessing. My throat retches on the dense fumes of flayed sewage.

Paul is still, his eyes swivelling, his expression overwhelmed. Michael repeats “Oh my God, oh my God” about twenty to thirty times. This is, after all, what happened to him. If Gabriel had not been by his side, his split body would have been lying here too. It is a terrible thing to think, but in his new bizarre skin, Michael’s anguish resembles that of C3PO dazed and confused within a bewildering landscape. I ought to go up to him and hug him, but his appearance truly repels me. He is a fish in clothes. I cannot recall my memories of how he used to be profoundly enough to overlook what he is now: a barely recognisable, insipid face attached to a silver-white body of unnerving texture and consistency, wearing blood-soaked clothes split up the middle. He has wrapped a shirt sleeve around his waist to hold up his trousers and to remain decent. However, I saw his whole body as it was being renewed, and there is no scope for procreation. He is sexless. Sex presumably has no purpose among this devastation. And thereafter, if there is a hereafter?

I should hug Paul, but he is sending out consistent ‘keep away’ signals. He wants to deal with this alone; with the fact of a brother who is no longer the person he has been brought up with and known intimately for nearly thirty years, amid a furore that denounces all hope flatly and finally. There is no recovery from this, no respite, no reprieve, no return. We have come to the end of things, and I have no doubt that this brutal denouement is rampaging across the whole world. Nothing could be worse than this, although I should never have had this thought, in case life wants to prove me wrong. I cannot imagine anything worse than this.

Gabriel is leaning over his knee, crouched on the ground, in an attitude which mixes prayer with pain. He is also tattered, although his flesh is real enough, unlike Michael’s. Is he meditating, or communicating, or contemplating inwardly the horrors? Is he afraid, or overwhelmed at the enormity of his task and of his responsibility, or wishing he could allow himself to escape, to die in fact?

We have to get up this hill. This is the mission that bonds Gabriel to this earth, and us to him and it. When we have accomplished it, we can all be released. Death is definitely preferable to this. But how do we get up the hill? The landscape is sprinkled with a thick, treacherous carpet of wood shavings, and whatever lies beneath them, but there are also trunks and boughs of trees every few metres blocking any progress. If we move, it will be obvious, and yet we cannot remain here. We have to move on—“onwards and upwards”, as we used to say. That is an old family saying that haunts me. There has been plenty of ‘onwards’ but mostly ‘downwards’ for many years. Our successful little family has become blemished by surrender and compromise which I do not wish to reflect on right now. Suffice it to say that I long ago abandoned hope, and that

this is where I finally renounce it entirely. Paul was my remaining glimmer, and then a bright light, but even he cannot lead me through this, and the stress has driven us conclusively apart. He is not clinging onto me in this dire situation, he is pulling away, calculating single-mindedly how to extract us, not how to reassure me as his lover. I cannot comfort him, and that spells the end of any relationship.

Paul turns to Gabriel. “What are you doing?”

“I am contacting your mother.”

“My mother?”

“I am contacting her ‘Wise One’.”

“What Wise One?”

“Every living creature has an essence, the eternal core of itself that is immortal, that follows it out into the worlds, and welcomes it back when it dies. It is that part of your existence that is the foundation of the wisdom and knowledge that you could not possibly gain over one lifetime. And it is the way we angels communicate with each one of you, except when we are incarnate, when we can talk to you directly. That essence is your Wise One.”

“Mum did mention Wise Ones. She gave them names. She said that they were ancient spirits, similar to angels.”

“She was correct. You are all ancient spirits in your core, and able and willing to give advice to anyone who asks for it, especially those aspects of yourself that venture onto the Earths. When your mother was in touch with the Wise Ones, sometimes that would be with herself, sometimes it might be with others’ Wise Ones. You don’t really have names in your essence. Maybe you give yourselves names to identify yourselves, or to make yourselves more acceptable to the people who need you. It is a question of getting in touch with yourself, the real you, the one that has no form or substance, that is a depository of everything you are, the source from which all earthly life was created.”

Paul shrugs. “Maybe it is not the best time for a metaphysical discussion.”

Gabriel puts his hand on Paul’s shoulder and beckons to Michael and me to join him. I am shamefully disgusted at the thought of getting so close to Michael, but Gabriel insists. “You must understand,” he continues, “that the way you are now is only a temporary version of yourself. What you are going through now is not forever. It is like a blister on your toe; painful but not so important. In your essence, you are safe. Nothing can threaten you. Here you can suffer and die. There you cannot. There you feel the anguish of your many selves spread across the dimensions, but whatever happens to them has no fundamental effect on you. Right now, your essence, your Wise One, is monitoring you in many incarnations, some human, some not. In all those incarnations you are dying at this moment, and in some you will be already dead. This will certainly cause you anguish and distress, but it will not alter you in any way. You have everlasting

memories, but you do not remember pain and suffering in any detail. They have no relevance to your eternal form. They are often carried through each of your incarnations, but they do not carry back to your essence. They are worked through only on the Earths. Why you must remember this is because you must not be afraid. We have a job to do. We have to climb this hill and to meet up with your parents, Paul and Michael. I have promised that you should all meet up one more time, and I will keep my promise. It may seem ridiculous to you, but it shall be done. Angels are duty-bound to respond insofar as we can to all Earthly requests. Your mother has asked us that she should see you both one more time before you die. There are angels all over the Earths responding to similar calls. In a minute, we are going to have to move on up there. We will not succeed if you are half-hearted about it, or terrified. You must be as determined as I am. I will protect you as best I can. So will Michael who cannot be harmed now. If anything happens to you, I will bring you back the way I brought Michael back. I know that may not seem very attractive to you, Paul and Sarah, but that is the way it is going to be. Understood?"

We nod.

"Let's go then."

We break out of our huddle and turn only to come face to face with an animal I have never seen in my life before. It is a cat-like creature, with a shiny body with spots all over it. It has a kindly expression, but something in the way it holds itself tells me that it is far from friendly. Indeed, it gives the impression of preparing itself to pounce on us. Gabriel waves Paul and me back behind him and Michael. The animal crouches lower and secures its footing. Gabriel is staring at it intently. It springs onto him, and he lashes it away. Instantly it is back again with razor teeth, ripping flesh off him.

"Michael!" I shout. "Quickly! Quickly!"

Michael intercepts the animal, and grabs it by the back of the neck. Its teeth and its claws are slashing at him except that they cannot penetrate his skin.

"What do I do?" Michael asks Gabriel who is literally trying to hold himself together. His bones are ripped clean of flesh in several places.

"Break its neck," Gabriel replies distractedly. "Flip it over and snap its head back."

Extraordinarily, Michael gets it right first time. The animal goes limp in his hands, and he lets it fall to the ground.

"Make sure it is dead," Gabriel warns him. "Sometimes coeurls feign death, and spring back to life again when you are off your guard."

"I heard a loud snap," Michael replies. "Didn't you guys hear it?"

"I did," Paul confirms.

"What is it called again?" Michael asks.

"A coeurl. I wonder what it is doing here. It is meant to be fighting the Future Alliance."

Gabriel begins to shake violently, twisting and turning on the ground, rubbing dirt into his wounds. He must be in absolute agony.

Paul and I rush over to him, and fail immediately to notice that Michael has also collapsed and started vomiting. His skin is turning grey. He is having the greatest difficulty breathing, gulping for air that is not reaching him. He stiffens and lies still.

“Don’t touch him!” Gabriel rasps at us. “He is poisoned.”

“Is he dead?” Paul demands. “Is he dead? I thought you said he could not die again.”

“No, he is not dead. He is paralysed. He can hear you, he can feel you, he is aware of everything that is happening, but he cannot move. The same will happen to me in a short time. You must carefully check to see if there is any poison on him. If there is, and you touch it, your skin will absorb it immediately and poison you, so be very careful. Then you must carry Michael up the hill. You must all be together.”

“We cannot possibly carry Michael between us.”

“You must. I cannot help you. I will soon be paralysed too. Any second now. I am fighting it off, but it is creeping over me. Remember that Michael can feel everything you do, so be very gentle with him.”

“Will you still be able to protect us?” Paul asks.

“No, I am afraid not. I am going to be trapped here until the end of the worlds. Try calling on another angel. Try Sandolphin. Call to him. He can protect you.”

Gabriel falls silent. His body is as stiff as Michael’s.

Paul and I look at each other.

“There is no way we can carry Mike up that hill. We are going to have to stay here with them. Are you any good at calling on angels, Sarah? I don’t think I can do it.”

“Try anyway, Paul. Try with all your might. I will do the same. Maybe between us we can summon up somebody. What was his name again?”

“Sandolphin. He is one of Mum’s favourites.”

“We are in with a chance then, possibly.”



## *Chapter 34*

### *Testimony of Alan Harding:*

And then the plague came down amongst us, as we suspected it might. There are so many starving people in London now, with no food and no fresh water, squatting in unsanitary conditions.

There must be well over one hundred thousand people sleeping on the Common. Initially, the latrine services were impressively organised by somebody or other, although most of the tent people preferred to come begging round the houses to perform their ablutions. However, as the food and water was used up, they stopped using the official facilities and started urinating near their tents, and shortly afterwards they were defecating there too. You cannot have one hundred thousand people living in close proximity to untreated faeces and not expect at least a wave of typhoid, which naturally exacerbates the situation enormously. So that is what happened first; there was an epidemic of typhoid, which killed a few people, but most survived. Then something altogether much nastier happened. People began to develop huge blisters on their body, filled to bursting with blackened blood. They could gain their first blister anywhere on the body, and soon they would have seven or eight of them. This meant that there was virtually no position they could rest in without extreme pain, leading to sleep deprivation, and yet more susceptibility to the onslaught of the disease. By the time they died, they might have accumulated twenty to thirty of these dark black blisters, so full as to seem almost solid beneath the skin, like cysts. Then, suddenly, they would explode. As the disease appears to be contagious more than infectious, anyone hit by the spray of venomous blood would be likely to contract the disease themselves, which made nursing the afflicted extremely hazardous, not least because several blisters could pop one after the other, and drench passers-by in toxins. Remember, there was no water left to wash it off, and the contaminants would soon pass through the skin into the bloodstream.

I was working at St. Thomas' when the outbreak began, supporting Louis in a wide range of duties, most of which involved doing surgery under far from sterile conditions, with a dwindling supply of antiseptics and only sufficient anaesthetics for the most extreme of cases. Some awake soul among the ambulance crew had early-on organised fleets of ambulances to round up whatever hard liquor they could find, so we did still have stocks of whisky, vodka, gin, bourbon, rum and the like, so, in a brutal return to eighteenth century procedures, we got the patients drunk enough to survive most minor surgery. I never expected to see patients being held down by several nurses while we traced incisions with scalpels before frantically sawing through their bones. It was very far away from the latest developments in laser surgery, and even further away from my old practice of non-intrusive healing using nothing stronger than homeopathy, kinesiology and chiropractic.

I think we all suddenly realised, and I more than most, how pampered we were by the medical health facilities before all this began. We complained like mad about the use of antibiotics and classical medical techniques, but now we only wish that some of these hated drugs could be accessible again. Some argue that we are placed upon this earth in order to learn. Personally, I find it somewhat arrogant to believe that the entirety of this planet, its life forms, its liquids, its solids, its gases, have all been set up over millions of years to help human beings improve their minds and their souls, but I certainly keep being forced to learn, so there may be some mileage in the idea.

So how does this work? Under 'normal' conditions, as we used to call them, the alternative methodologies seemed to be considerably more effective over the long haul than classical medicine. However, during a crisis, where quick fixes are required, classical medicine outperforms alternative solutions, so long as it does not generate longer term problems, which may be irrelevant in the situation we find ourselves faced with now. When it comes to hacking off someone's leg whilst they are fully awake, I do not think that I am the doctor to tell them that they have only a fifty percent chance of surviving the operation because of the resultant shock but, in twenty years' time they may be better off. Suddenly, all my miraculous skills appear to have lost their magic. In fact, they seem utterly worthless, as does my life's work alongside them, except that I do manage to remind myself from time to time that my patients really were much better served by me than by others under the circumstances that obtained then.

And if the world were really only in existence to teach me some fundamental truths, is all this effort justified by my finally understanding in the last few lines of my play that my ideas have been utterly misguided during the entirety of my life? Some people believe exactly that, although not specifically about me. So long as I enter the next stage of my cycle with a higher understanding of the meaning of life, the cosmic purpose will have been realised. Maybe they are right. Maybe I should feel privileged to have at last seen past the mists of my self-deception,

and to have realised, to my complete shame and humiliation, that I have lived my life in vain except for this euphoric moment of enlightenment. Maybe.

The other astonishing phenomenon I heard about was that people seemed to be simply disappearing in large numbers as if the ground had opened up and swallowed them. There were certainly some friends and acquaintances of ours who lived around the Common whom I had failed to track down, but I assumed that they had left for the country or gone to live with relatives somewhere else in London. However, Richard told me that he was talking to a group of people and one minute they were there, the next they were not. It was as if he had blinked and missed them taking their leave, or like becoming so blotto that you discover that there are gaping holes in your memory. That is how Richard described it anyway. I have never been that drunk, and nor had he recently, he assured me. It was like spontaneous combustion without the flame. Could it be that people were spontaneously combusting, or something similar, in their thousands?

I did not really believe Richard's story, although I did not have the slightest reason for doubting it as Richard is an extremely trustworthy person, until Jane came back from a nursing stint on the Common, and told me that everyone was talking about similar incidents that people they knew had experienced. "Puff, without the wisp of smoke," was how she described it.

Jane had decided that she could not sit in the house all day denying innocent wanderers our toilet facilities, nor could she wander around the neighbourhood witnessing the horrors without doing something about them. So she decided to take up nursing, not that she knew any more about it than she had picked up from me from nearly thirty years of osmosis. Selfishly, because I was much more concerned about how it would affect me than how it would affect her, I tried to dissuade her. I gave her a short description of all the horrors I had seen over recent days, and warned her how virulent this blistering plague was. She listened quietly as ever and, as ever, made up her own mind, which was to die, if necessary, helping others.

"It is ridiculous, Alan. I cannot see that any of us have much longer to live, whether we die from starvation, the plague, injury or foul play. Do I really want to have to face St. Peter at the Pearly Gates and be forced to account for the fact that amid all this suffering I did not raise a single finger to help anyone, except perhaps you? I really cannot do that, Alan. You go off to your hospital and do your bit. I must wander onto the Common and do mine. It is as simple as that."

So she did. She came back drenched in blood. Well, drenched is an overstatement—spattered from collar to shoes in blood. She had found some of my old surgical masks and wore those alongside a disposable cap and a pair of protective eyewear that I had lifted from St. Thomas'. She took what precautions she could, but how do you get rid of the blood safely when you have no water. All we could do was to carefully wipe it off, and seal the used clothes in a dustbin

bag. So, Jane was on track to use up a whole set of clothes each day. What would happen when she ran out of clothes to wear? I, at least, had access to a limited supply of disposable clothing in the hospital, but I could not bring it home to Jane however justified my behaviour might have been. The hospitals obviously had to conserve their stocks of protective clothing for use on the premises.

Jane did not run out of clothes. She did not even have to start on Sarah's. On the third night, she stripped off and I saw with horror that she had a blister on her thigh, the classic bulging black blister. I pointed it out to her in panic.

"I am not surprised," she replied. "I am not feeling very well. I am coming down with a fever and beginning to wobble a bit."

I offered to lance the blister.

"We can try that if you like, Alan, but don't get any of my blood on you. You are needed far too much at the hospital to fall ill yourself."

I chose this moment to become self-pitying and load her up with my haunted assessment of my medical worth. She heard me out, and then added: "Alan, do not delude yourself. You are an extraordinary doctor, more of a magician, in fact. Do not demean yourself and run down your genuine skills merely because the world has changed and you need to adapt to the times. If you become ill, many thousands of others will suffer far more than they would have done if you had been around to minister to them. You must take absolute care of yourself. It is what God expects of you."

It was unnerving to hear Jane suddenly mentioning God's name so freely. She had always alluded to a residue of Christian belief, without ever going to church or discussing issues of the day from a religious perspective. Over the last couple of days, religion had become a driving force within her. Was she trying to save her unblemished soul, as she pretended, or was it a new awakening almost to being a different person to whom I would have to learn to become accustomed?

Not that it mattered because within two days she was dead. The blisters appeared one after the other, relentlessly, randomly, agonisingly. For those two days I stayed at home and nursed her, ignoring her entreaties to protect myself. This was Jane, the wife to whom I owed so much happiness, and the same one I betrayed, thereby unleashing a prolonged misery upon us both. Devoting myself to her finally was my way of attempting to make amends, however futile that gesture would prove to be for both of us. There is no excuse for the betrayal of someone who is devoted to you and I had never made any. However, seeing her in the finality of her tortured suffering, I knew that I had damned myself for eternity by my behaviour. I had failed as a professional through acceptable human error of judgment, but I had failed as a human being through callous brutality.

Jane never uttered a word of blame, even when she became delirious. Indeed, she recounted in hallucinatory form all the pleasures of her life, many of which had been shared with me. According to her account, I and the children had



made her blissfully happy. There was no shadow between us, only the shade of a mutually-protective and caring relationship. When she heaved her final breath, she died a saint.

And now I am dying alone. I too have those blisters that burn like concentrated sulphuric acid into the nerve endings. I have the unquenchably dry throat and the rasping breathing, and the tremulous hands, and the cavernous head that feels like it is a shell of cardboard open at the back, exposing my pulsing, aching brain to any intruder. My skin is tightening up, becoming brittle, and cracking open, just as Jane's did. If I am lucky, I will soon escape into insanity and, if I am luckier still, I will recall only the happy times and forgive myself the rest before I die.

Farewell, Sarah. Farewell, John. I shall never see you in this life, but I love and cherish you without reservation. Jane, wait for me!



## Chapter 35

### *Testimony of the Angel Iofiel:*

They are all dying. Tabbris and I cannot believe it. We were so sure that it was all a done deal that we left them to themselves, which they were managing with ever-increasing success, accommodating their new circumstances, beginning to understand what it meant to live forever and how their mindsets had to adapt, trusting us and the experiment. They had made huge progress, at least according to our understanding. They had become more spiritual, less weighed down by material angst, less calculating, less hungry for their immediate gain. They had become much less enmeshed in the world, and therefore much more.

So, to our shame, Tabbris and I allowed ourselves to get distracted. Everything seemed to be following the proper course within the experiment, to be as it should be, whereas ‘at home’ Mum and Dad were in a frantic state of distress. We therefore diverted our energies to be at their side. Pure angels can attend to thousands, even millions of people at once. We can share our being across many points. However, once we are in bodily form, we are as humans, or as whatever creature we are embodying, and can only be where we are.

So the angels Iofiel and Tabbris snuck off and became Kate and Matt, back from the dead yet again so far as our ‘parents’ were concerned. Were they really concerned, about us? No, more about their sense of order, I would say.

“Where the hell have you two been?” Dad demanded. “We have been worried sick about you, your mother and I!” Then he turns on me. “And what can you have been thinking of, my girl, abandoning Jess and Gus like that? What do you think they are? They are your children for goodness sake. You are meant to look after them. They have been beside themselves. They thought that they had lost you all over again. I just cannot understand you, Kate. You are a total disappointment to me. And you too, Matt. Treating this place like a hotel, both of you, and treating your children, Kate, as if you have only rented

them and can leave them for us to deal with as often as you like without even a by your leave.”

Dad appears to have an almost insatiable zest for speaking in clichés. Matt and I have often speculated whether he thinks in them too, or whether he is merely conforming to his cranky, and certainly comically outdated, perception of norms. And, from Mum, there is no indication that she is thinking at all, although of course she is. Matt and I can intercept her thoughts because they are so still, whereas Dad’s are covered in psychic white noise, like a very angry and fizzing spirit.

In fact, they are both angry, with each other and especially with the world around them. They live through anger, and from it. It has become the central purpose of their lives. They are both so choked off from their eternal essences that they have come to believe that the sole purpose of the world around them is to suppress and punish them. Mum believes that this oppressive world is personified by Dad, and is hugely and silently resentful of him to the point where many times she has actively considered stabbing him to death. She regularly rehearses her scene of triumph, in the kitchen, her one place of refuge. She even picks out the knife, always the same one, a carving knife with a curving taper to the blade that ends almost in a needle point. She fantasises that Dad is standing in front of her, and she practices working her way surreptitiously over to the kitchen drawer. Pretending everything is absolutely normal, she grasps the handle of this sanctified and sacrificial knife, she turns, and with the focused energy and determination of a late middle-aged housewife Ninja, she half-crouches and lunges with the spring of a tiger, driving the whole knife through his stomach, the steel blade, the handle, and even her right hand which is wrapped around the handle, the whole lot thrusting through the depth of his body and emerging free the other side, until her forearm is buried in his innards right up to the elbow. That would be a cathartic relief. That would be the justice he deserved. Well done, Mrs. Driver!

And, by accident, she once very nearly did it. She had been standing in the kitchen alone developing her illusion, she turned to the drawer, she swung round and lunged, and there Dad was, right on the point of the blade. Luckily, or unluckily, depending on how you see it, Dad had received sufficient military training to grab her arm and to halt the blade a centimetre after it had penetrated his skin, causing a definite incision, and letting loose a quantifiable emanation of blood. Dad staggered over to where the tea-towels are kept in their habitual sterile condition, and pressed the one which evangelised the cause of Cancer Relief hard up against the wound. He managed to stem the flow of blood, after three tea-towels had become soaked in it, sufficiently for he and my mum to dress it first with Steristrips, then with gauze, then with a patch, and finally with a bandage wrapped tight around his waist. Dad insisted on lying flat across the kitchen floor for the best part a day because he feared that the wound, and

maybe even his stomach, would split open if he didn't, or that is what he said. Mum thought that he did it to punish her because he repeated almost a hundred times "What were you thinking of?", in varied forms like "What the bloody hell were you thinking of, Mary?" or "What could you have been thinking of?", or "It is utterly beyond me what you were thinking of, Mary."

Mum had to continue with her culinary chores, all the while stepping over him in our small kitchen. Dad complained each time she passed that he feared she would step on his wound or otherwise kick him. She felt reasonably tempted to do both, and did manage to drop a bag of frozen peas onto his head. "Are you trying to kill me again?" he demanded, "Are you trying to finish me off?"

"It was only a bag of peas, dear," my Mum replied. "I don't think anyone has ever been killed by a bag of peas."

Lest you consider me a heartless, callous mother too, I can assure you that Jess and Gus were in on Tabbris' and my plan.

"Matt and I are going away together for a few days on an important project. It has to be a secret from Granddad and Grandma, so could the two of you pretend that you do not know where we are? If you need me, you can always call me on my mobile?"

"How?" Jess retorted.

"Well, that is the fun part, I have got you these." I handed them two best in class mobile phones, with every plug-in and add-on you can imagine.

"Wow, Mum!" Jess exclaimed, tears of gratitude and astonishment edging her eyes. "How can you afford these?"

"Wow!" Gus repeated softly, in awe and wonderment.

"Wait until Ginny sees this!" crowed Jess. "And wait until Bryn sees it too. That will shut her up about you only being a waitress. I cannot wait to see her face!" She stopped a second. "But mobile phones don't work. Nothing works."

"Those do."

"How?"

"Try it. Press #1 and you will call my number."

Jess looked incredulously uncertain, frowned, and pressed the two keys. My mobile went off in my handbag.

Jess beamed. "That is weird, Mum. We must have the only mobile phones that still work in the world."

"It could be."

"But how do they work?"

"Magic."

"Yes, but apart from magic."

"Those phones work on magic, I promise you."

"Yes, Mum. If you say so."

"Don't show them to your grandparents, whatever you do. In fact, don't show them to anybody, not even to Ginny and Bryn. Sorry."

“I won’t,” Gus declared solemnly. “I promise.”

“I won’t, Mum,” echoed Jess. “So what sort of project is it?”

“I’ll tell you about it when I get back.”

“Is it top secret?”

“Definitely.”

“Are you really a government agent, and not a waitress after all?”

“Something very close to that, Jess.”

“And Matt too?”

“We were recruited together. It is our job to save the world, but don’t tell your grandparents that either, nor Dad.”

“Wow,” Jess almost exploded with excitement. “I suppose that I cannot tell Ginny or Bryn that either, can I?”

“It would rather spoil the ‘secret’ bit.”

“Oh well, at least I know now. And I won’t say a word to anyone.”



While Matt and I were away, we ensured that Mum and Dad kept stumbling across food and essentials, which Mum attributed to luck, and Dad put down to the scouting skills he had learnt in the army.

Both Jess and Gus phoned me regularly over long sessions, so it is just as well that I shall never need to pay the bill. It is one of the perks of using magic.

Despite their relatively privileged environment, Mum and Dad have become freaked by what they have been seeing happening around them. Dad is particularly scared of catching the plague, as is Mum but she keeps that secret to herself.



## *Chapter 36*

### *Testimony of David Lambert:*

I have always suspected that I might end my life in penury or in a government-run residential care home, which amounts to the same thing. I did not foresee that it might be in a ruined chamber, littered with those sharp, irregular pinhead pebbles of erosion that you find scattered around, hugging Rachel close. In recent times, the bit about hugging Rachel close might have seemed the most unlikely of all, yet our hidden chamber has become our refuge, both from the outside world and from our immediate past. It is our retreat into the childhood security of hide-and-seek and the trivial consequences of being discovered. As we hold each other, I try to allay my constant anxiety that at any moment something will rip away the branches that hide the entrance, and devour us without lingering to deliver a self-satisfied burp. I think that I have viewed most of life that way.

Rachel has been asleep ever since she saw that the man who had been crouching in front of us had been ripped to pieces. She willed calm and silence to close in on her and to take her to the desert island of her imagination, where she can perch by a cooling stream, listen to the parrots chatter among the glossy leaves, and sample freshly tree-picked tropical fruit. It is her place of remote safety, far away from here, and she will remain there until she is ready to confront the renewed horrors that will inevitably beset us, or until they confront us, thereby prompting her to explode into swift, decisive action.

If anything should attack us, Rachel can be guaranteed to take it by surprise with the ferocity of her retaliation. When we are threatened, she is completely fearless. Whereas I tend to be rooted to the spot considering prudent next steps, Rachel's creed is to make her opponent regret instantly ever having contemplated taking her on.

Which is hard to believe as she sleeps in my arms, her face troubled, her movements restless. She knows better than me how bad things are, and she is utterly determined that we reunite to face them as a family.

I wonder how long we will have to stay here. There is nothing wrong with being here; the view through the branches is stunning, it is sunny, and if I blank out the danger we are in, it could almost represent a moment of profound composure and peace. And the strange wave effect I can see unfurling across the valley, as if all the trees were being felled progressively by a relentless wind, is moving away from us.

I consider breaking cover to reassure myself that we have been left alone up here, but I hesitate because frankly I am afraid to, and I do not wish to disturb Rachel.

There is a smell, well more of a stink, beginning to permeate through the foliage, similar to the one that reached us earlier when the man was killed by whatever it was. It is the stench of sewage, rapidly building in intensity. It is the smell that Rachel likes least, and so I am sure that she will wake up at any moment, pull a disgusted expression and demand “What on earth is that?”.

“What on earth is that?”

“I really don’t know, but it smells like poo again to me.” We have called it ‘poo’ between us ever since the children were small.

“To me too. Is it that dead body out there?”

“I don’t think so. It seems heavier, more wide-spread than that.”

Rachel reaches out beyond me, crushing my bones on the prickly points of the chamber floor, to poke her nose through the branches. “No, it is not from up here. It must be coming up the hill. How disgusting! It’s like at home after you have been on the toilet and forgotten to spray.”

“Thank you so much.”

“It is true.”

“I think I might . . . .”

“Ssssh!”

“What is it?” I ask.

“Ssssh! Be quiet! I am being contacted by someone.”

I sit and watch her, and ask myself for about the thousandth time in our lives together whether she isn’t simply making all this up, even if she is convinced herself that it is happening to her.

“It’s Gabriel,” she tells me. Her demeanour suddenly transforms to near ecstasy. “And it’s Michael. Michael is with him. Not the Archangel Michael—Our Michael!”

“He is talking to you?”

“Ssssh!” She places her hand on my wrist to still me, and curls over herself in order to concentrate fully on whatever she believes she is picking up. Her hand tightens on my wrist, and her nails dig into my forearms.

“They seem to be stuck somehow,” she reports. “Both of them. Paul and Sarah are with them. We need to come down to them. They are not at all far away. Less than a hundred metres. They will guide us down.”

“Why can’t they come here? It must be safer here.”

“They just can’t, David. Live with it. We have to go.” She climbs over the top of me, and forces her way out into the open without the least precaution. “Nobody here,” she announces. “Which way do you think we should go down?”

“I would avoid the path.”

“How stupid do you think I am? How stupid do you always think I am?” And before I can reply: “Come on. Stay close to me. I am picking up clear signals from Gabriel.”

We crash down through the trees only to find ourselves implausibly out in the open. It isn’t flat; there are branches and tree trunks strewn everywhere, but we no longer have trees sheltering us. For a moment, Rachel loses her nerve. “Look at this,” she exclaims, as if I could not see it. “Look at this. It is incredible.” She squats behind two tree trunks that have fallen together, and peers over the top. “It’s a massacre. Every tree has been torn down. Who could have done this? What do we do now?”

“I assume that we go on, don’t we?”

“Anything could be hiding among all these branches. I think we should be careful.”

“Should we go back?” I venture hopefully.

“No, David, we cannot go back. We just have to keep our wits about us.”

It occurs to me that despite all the danger we are in, we are actually enjoying being on this adventure together. It may be the most fun we have shared for many years, which is somewhat tragic to contemplate, but so many people have described a war as being a euphoric experience, the feeling of togetherness and solidarity, the clear sense of purpose, the energy of the moment because there may not be another. Crouching behind this trunk is like being stalked, but it is also like hunting.

“OK. Come!” she whispers to me, and dashes about twenty metres to a relatively thick stack of branches. I follow immediately behind, my gaze fixed on her rounded bottom which she has always wanted to slim down. She reminds me of a wild animal, in the nicest sense: sleek, fully alert and alive, aligned to her purpose. “Now!” she calls, and we descend another twenty metres.

I do not know how it has come about, but we suddenly collide into a group of people, head first. I did not notice them until a few seconds ago. They are looking startled and disorientated, and now jumpy. Three of them point something at us which resembles a remote control. They jabber at us in a language I do not recognize but which sounds oriental, which is strange because their features are Caucasian, even Latin. Why would Southern French people decide to communicate in Chinese?

I hold my arms in the air as they poke at us with their weapons (if that is what they are). It is a surreal scene. In the middle of a wreckage of a landscape in Southern France, a bunch of Sino-Caucasian tourists are menacing us with some



gadgets. Without meaning to, I break into a huffy laugh which disconcerts them all the more. Is this the enemy? They certainly do not behave like any troops I have ever imagined. There is a hiss, and my body is on fire, my head bursting. I drop to the ground. I am aware of Rachel shouting agitatedly, whether at them, at me, or at the situation. I stare up and find three people holding their gadgets almost under my chin. I really do not want that charge, whatever it is, sizzling through my teeth, directly into my brain. I lie still and wait. Rachel is told to lie beside me. They are saying things to us excitedly that I cannot conceive an explanation for. It seems that we are prisoners of a mysterious group of vagrants, and yet our children cannot be more than two hops and a skip away.

Looking closer at these people, as you do at your captors, it is evident that many of them are badly hurt and/or ill. They are mostly leaning forward and staggering slightly, strained and grey, with blood stains spattering their clothing. From their stances, I get the impression that they are keen to move on, but that their bodies will not let them. Three of the fitter ones are becoming outliers, trying to encourage, and even force, the others forward, only to be held back by invisible social strings to the rest of the group. Some of them look as if they are about to drop dead on the spot. I calculate that this is a waiting game. In a short while, they will probably be too weak to even point those things, thereby freeing us to move on. Rachel has clearly come to the same conclusion as she is being uncharacteristically acquiescent.

As we watch on in horror, new black blood patches keep proliferating over their bodies. It is going to be a question of judgment when we make our move: too early, and we will be zapped; too late, and we risk catching whatever they have. Whatever it is, it is evidently very active. Two of them are now frothing around the mouth, and within seconds they are still. Ten minutes later, and another one has succumbed. They still consider it their last duty upon this earth to prevent us from escaping, but it is only a matter of time.

It is then that I notice that an animal is watching us, not a type of animal I have ever seen before. It is absolutely beautiful. It is majestic. It actually looks kind, like a spotted fox, although it also has some elements of a cat in the way it holds itself. I can feel that Rachel is preparing to leap up. I slide my arm out and try to signal to her that she should remain still.

“What is it?” she asks.

“There is an animal over there, and something tells me that it may not be friendly, I don’t know why. I think that we should play dead here until it goes away.”

“If we stay here much longer, we shall be dead,” she retorts.

“Still.”

Far from going away, the creature moves closer. One of the few of our kidnapers to remain alive stumbles up and attempts to shoo it away. The animal stays its ground, and then charges him at almost light speed. His zapper goes off

without the least impact. It is on him, slices off an arm below the shoulder and turns back to him as he collapses still on the ground. Now we know. It comes for the rest of us. Our captors are foolish enough to move, and it makes rapid work of each of them within split seconds of each other.

It is now coming over to us. Rachel and I hold our breath, as dead as we can be. It moves up to where are heads are, and bends down towards us. Unusually for an animal, I cannot smell its breath.

“Come,” it says. Both Rachel and I start involuntarily. “I have been sent by the Archangel Lucifer to escort you to Gabriel. The sooner you get out of here, the better I would say. I would shake hands, but I am a coeurl nowadays, so you would be paralysed instantly unfortunately. However, I can still introduce myself. My name is Rufus.”



## Chapter 37

### *Testimony of the Goddess Morgay:*

Since the war began, I have had only one visitor to the office, my increasingly close companion, the Devil, ironically enough.

He pops his head around the door and asks “Any news?”, meaning have I come up with a solution as to how to stop the gods returning to control and pollute the world that is to come. War must be over in all its forms. The establishment of eternal peace is to be marked by the destruction of the worlds as we know them, and the creation of a new earthly paradise. I so hope to the Living God that this really proves to be the case.

The destruction of the power of the gods is a challenge to which I have given relentless thought. I have sent messages out to all the other angels as well, but they are mostly too preoccupied with the bloody battle below to respond. Incarcerated in their human form, they have such limited bandwidth, as you might call it. Indeed, the only intelligible answer I have received to my question has been from Gabriel who is immobilised after being poisoned by a coeurl, and finds his time freed up for such strategising, which provides me with one potential line of enquiry.

How do you terminate a god? And even if it were possible, has any of us the right to do so, even the Devil who created them, even the Living God who created everything? It is not as if they have been a wholly malign influence. They have carried out the Devil’s instructions to the letter and created a miraculous nest of worlds that has indeed generated, maintained and explored every possibility of life. It was not easy to devise viable, self-sustaining worlds, and yet they succeeded in establishing them. Since then, yes, they have exploited every resource imaginable for their own pleasure and amusement, probably to the detriment of individual creatures of the Earths but, by the same token, they have expanded even further the potentialities of these worlds by inflicting yet further suffering on them—that old conundrum, the benefits of suffering.

I hate the suffering of the worlds, yet I have to recognise that its presence has been mission critical.

For the moment, perhaps I simply need to set aside my qualms on the subject, and focus on working out, theoretically, how it could be done, or at least how they could be cast out into the ether never to materialise back in the new paradise. The trouble is that they are so good at incarnation. I cannot imagine how we could deprive them of this facility for all time. They are bound to devise some kind of work-around. That is the way their minds work. It is the reason that the Devil created them. He gave them these special powers. It is a shame he doesn't know how to shovel up his own shit.

"Rufus, how do you fancy poisoning a few thousand gods?"

"It would be my pleasure," Rufus replies, "but don't you think they would notice what was going on after the first few? I am not exactly a weapon of mass destruction."

"I was thinking more about whether we could extract your poison and disburse it in some way."

"You mean that I would have to drool a lot, or are we talking something rather more invasive here?"

"Rufus, I promise you, I am not going to hurt you. I would never do that. The question is whether you would ever hurt me."

"Absolutely not!"

I giggle because he looks so earnest.

"Not even if I asked you to?"

"Why would you do that?"

"To see what happened if you bit me."

Rufus jumps onto my lap and strokes his head against me. "Please don't ask me to do that."

"What else am I to do? How can I find out what your impact could be on the gods in any other way?"

"There must be someone else I can get my teeth into. I can think of quite a few it would give me the greatest pleasure to savage. We need either an extremely marginal god or one who irritates the rest so much that they will initially only celebrate his absence. Do you have any candidates in mind?"

"Let me think about it."

We are both still thinking about it, Rufus cuddled up against me.

"Any news?" inquires the Devil, suddenly appearing next to us.

"We may have a few ideas," I reply.

"What a mess!" the Devil declares.

"Where?"

"Everywhere. The gods have really surpassed themselves this time. Every dimension of the world is flat-out imploding. The coeurls (please pardon my saying so, Rufus) and the dlo-dukkoks are unstoppable. They have every living

creature either on the run, slashed to pieces or as rigid as stones. A devastating cluster of plagues is sweeping through the lands, affecting absolutely every aspect of flora and fauna. It will not be long until there is nothing left at all. I give it a couple of Earth days, at which point the experiment will be emphatically over, which would be fine if we could finalise the new bodies, but they are failing too. They are utterly resistant to external blows, Earthly poisons, acids and diseases, but wide open to diseases and poisons not originating on the Earths. All of our prototypes are dead, almost without exception. I am working flat out on alternative models, but I fear that I lack the gods' skills. I am forced to admit that I need their help, but if I help them, I will almost certainly be obliged to concede them a role in the next world, which will mean that they will end up desecrating paradise. I am in a complete quandary, so I have come to rest my weary legs and to pick your brains."

"It is certainly a tight spot," Rufus agrees. "Presumably, creating a new eternal life form is your first priority, so you will have to come to some deal with the gods, almost on whatever terms they demand. You will then have to find a way to dispose of them in such a way as not to damage the future of the universe. What can you offer them whereby they will feel honoured but otherwise be rendered entirely harmless? We used to 'kick them upstairs', as we used to call it, into an overview body where they were addressed with utmost reverence, they got to feel intimately involved with every decision, but where they could make no discernible impact on anything in any way."

The Devil laughs, which is a gentle chuckle not the hollow roar you might have been led to expect. "Spoken like a politician, Rufus. Yes, you are right. I will simply have to put all my reservations to one side and persuade the gods to help me. They are my children, after all. Then, we'll see. Lucifer, do you think that you could set up meetings with both sides separately but in parallel, to save time?"

"I can only try," I reply.



The task is not easy. Firstly, the gods are heavily preoccupied with the appalling situation as it is developing. Secondly, they do not trust me. The only thing I have in my favour is that the situation is so ruinous that even out-and-out destructive lunatics like Ares are minded to try to put things right again. They know that when the worlds finally crumble into dust, they will follow them in short order unless they can negotiate a new role for themselves. Lucky sods, as Rufus would say; they have fallen on their feet again.

I decide to approach the Gods of the Future Alliance first. I have more of a toe-hold there, and if I am known to be negotiating with them, I should be able to draw the League of Western Gods into the process, if only through curiosity and envy.

I arrive at the bridge leading to the gates of the Future Alliance enclave, which are being guarded by Heimdall. The bridge is built like a rainbow and cannot be crossed by god, man or any other creature without Heimdall's permission. He is visible on the other side of the bridge, his horn hanging by his side, staring into the distance.

"Heimdall," I shout over to him. "I must see either Mama-Pacha or Quetzalcoatl."

He shrugs his shoulders. "I can only ask." And, a few seconds later, "Sorry, Morgay, they are not available, at least not to you."

"It is urgent, and it is in all your interests, I promise you."

Heimdall frowns. "Why is it that everyone starts bleating when I refuse their request to cross the bridge? I would have expected more of you, Morgay. You have always handled yourself with great dignity, for a lesser god."

"That may be because I am not really a god. I am the Archangel Lucifer, and I come on a mission from the Devil."

Heimdall chuckles. "Well that is not going to surprise too many of us. And to the Devil you can return."

"If I do," I reply, "you will not."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you need these negotiations more than I. My existence is not threatened."

"And ours is?"

"As well you know."

"OK," Heimdall concedes. "I can try again." And a few seconds later. "Well done, Lucifer. You seem to have found your key. You may pass. Mama-Pacha and Quetzalcoatl await you."

I cross over the rainbow bridge, marvelling at its construction. It may be one of the most beautiful experiences I have ever had, so I walk very slowly. This is of no matter to Heimdall. He has all the time in the worlds, and he knows it. He also knows that it his job to blow his horn to warn the gods of the imminence of their final destruction. Perhaps I can use that too somehow.

Mama-Pacha and Quetzalcoatl are sitting exactly as I last left them, in companionable conversation.

Quetzalcoatl stands up this time as I approach them, and holds out his hand. "Welcome, Lucifer, our eternal enemy," he greets me laconically. "Your secret is finally revealed."

Mama-Pacha also gets to her feet, even though I motion her to remain seated. "Welcome, Lucifer," she echoes with a warm smile, yet according me a degree of reverence I am shocked to receive. "How can we be of assistance?"

"Well, first, I would love a bowl of chocolate, if I may."

Quetzalcoatl motions across a maid servant. "With spices and chilli?" he asks. "To mask the poison, you understand."

“Exactly as I like it,” I reply. That would have been my response to any suggestion. I am beginning to think like Rufus.

It is as if Mama-Pacha can read my mind. “Where is your coeurl?” she inquires. “He hasn’t gone native has he, ravaging the Earths?”

“No, he is on a private mission; a favour to Gabriel who is indisposed at the moment, having been poisoned by a coeurl, in fact.”

Quetzalcoatl tut-tuts. “Very nasty. I have never felt quite safe with a coeurl myself.”

“Gabriel is in human form, which makes him very vulnerable,” I explain.

“Mmm,” Quetzalcoatl responds enigmatically. “So,” he adds briskly, “to business. I hear that you are on a mission from the devil.” He chuckles. “I love that. Very apropos.”

“The Devil needs help . . . .” I start.

“According to legend, he has always needed help,” he retorts. “It is just a very bad idea to sign any of his contracts.”

“He needs a favour.”

“In return for what? Let me guess, he is offering those who help him eternal life.”

I smile. “Actually, exactly that.”

“A one-trick pony,” Mama-Pacha snorts. “So what is the problem he needs help with?”

“Well, to be honest it is more than the Devil who needs your help. The Living God needs it too.”

“My good god,” Quetzalcoatl exclaims, “they are all creeping out of the celestial closet now. How many more of them have you got stashed in there.”

“Apart from the Living God, the Devil, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the archangels, the angels and all the heavenly host, and the Wise Ones, of course? That about covers it. There may be a few more spooks I have never come across and would not recognise.”

“We always prefer to know what we are dealing with before coming to any rash conclusions,” Quetzalcoatl clarifies.

“I am not sure that any of them are fighting types. They are not exactly dangerous.”

“No, but they are no doubt very powerful, nonetheless. I have always wondered whether there was a true God. Now it appears that both He and the Devil really do exist. Fascinating. Intriguing. And they need our help.”

“Yes.”

“What help do they need?” Mama-Pacha pitches in, employing her most motherly tone of voice.

“We need better human beings, and then better versions of all living creatures, with everlasting bodies.”

“Eternal youth,” Mama-Pacha mocks me. “Heavens, that *is* a new concept.”

“It is the way the new world must be.”

“And we get . . . ?”

“To survive into eternity yourselves.”

“And to rule this new world?”

“No. The Living God will do that Himself.”

“And you know how to stop us? How to kill us off, maybe?” Quetzalcoatl challenges.

“I am sure that the Living God and the Devil can work that out between them. After all, the Living God supposedly created the Devil, who in turn created you . . . .”

“Who in turn created the worlds and all the living creatures therein.”

“Exactly.”

“So what exactly do you (plural) plan for us to be into eternity?” Mama-Pacha inquires.

“That we don’t know. It is up for negotiation, I suppose.”

“So you need our man-making skills,” Quetzalcoatl recaps. “That could come expensive.”

“So could your destruction.”

Quetzalcoatl turns to Mama-Pacha. “Spikey little bugger, isn’t he? I think I preferred you when you were Morgay through and through. You were much more accommodating.”

“Yes, but all I was doing then was to arrange a conference. I now have to fix the future of the universe. Come the task, come the attitude.”

“Well, there is nothing else for it. Polish up your oratorical skills, and I will call an immediate General Assembly. You may have to be very persuasive.”

“Oh, I can be persuasive,” I reply.

“One word to the wise,” says Quetzalcoatl tapping his nose. “No threats. Gods don’t like threats.”



The thing about being an angel is that you know no fear or apprehension. We see it in others, and it appears comic, bizarre. For all their power, the gods are permanently fearful. They always have been. They cover it all up in bombast and bluster, but it is all there, tickling their guts, and the more vicious they are, the more fearful they tend to be. Ares, for instance, is eaten deep into his soul by fear, which is why he imparts it in kind. And fear makes people unpredictable. It constrains their thoughts to only two questions: “What could happen to me?” and “What can I do about it?”, and what could happen to them is usually grossly exaggerated.



Quetzalcoatl and Mama-Pacha usher me before the full panoply of the Gods of the Future Alliance in their newly-constructed stadium. They all know by now that Lucifer is descended amongst them, and that he is not at all as they have known Morgay to be.

Still, I think that they are shocked by my appearance, as Quetzalcoatl and Mama-Pacha were. One instant I was still Morgay, albeit with a more ruthless streak than they were used to, the next I was the Archangel Lucifer, an indiscernible form behind a blinding light. I not so much entered the stadium as permeated it. The gods were forced to resort to shielding their eyes. I intensified my light still further. Tricks, tricks. I want them to be frantically questioning their future. I want them to be afraid. I want them to listen to me very carefully.

Well, at least they will hear me. I boom into each one of their ears, the sound appearing to well up from inside their own heads. They are still shielding their eyes. They cannot look at me, only hear me.

“I am the Archangel Lucifer, beloved of the one true Living God. I have come before you to ask for your help.”

They are already on my side. In any speech, it is the initial impact that counts. They will never forget this one.

“How can we help?” they are all asking from behind their scrunched up faces as they try to duck and mitigate the light.

“You have created the worlds that we know. You have been assiduous, and you have been geniuses. We truly value your contribution and we thank you for it. However, you have also contrived to destroy those worlds. Within a very short space of time, there will be nothing left of them, not an animal, not an insect, not a bacterium, not a tree, not a flower. Nothing that has been living will survive in the form that they have been created. We need to start again. This time we need to create a paradise for all who dwell in it. We can adapt much of the flora, but we need help with the fauna. We need to reinvent their structures so that they are indestructible insofar as they desire to be. I will tell you frankly that we have tried to perfect this form, but that we have failed. That is why we need your help.”

I can feel several of the gods stirring, intuiting that they may be in a stronger position than they first thought. Power is the oxygen of the gods, and some are beginning to breathe freely.

“And if we don’t?” thunders Ilyapa.

“If you don’t, Ilyapa, there will be no future worlds for any of us to look forward to.”

“In which case . . . ?” This from Nephthys.

“Exactly,” I reply. “I see that you have understood.”

“How much time do we have?” shouts out Ea.

“Barely any. Hours.”

“What do expect us to do in only a few hours?” challenges Isis. “You want us to conceive, nurture and to give birth within a few hours? You obviously know nothing about motherhood.”

There is a ripple of good humoured laughter. Everyone likes Isis, and appreciates her wisdom.

“We have the time we have,” I retort. “Actually, we have the time that you have given us.”

Ra stands up. “We will do what we can. Tell us where you have got to so far. We will see what we can do.”

“The Devil will be here presently.”



I was expecting that the League of Western Gods would be harder, but as I approach their gates, Hermes appears and invites me straight inside to meet with Zeus and Jupiter alone. As I cross the threshold, I transform into the Angel Lucifer and blind all onlookers with my light. Zeus and Jupiter are thus obliged to shade their eyes and greet me at the same time.

I explain the situation. Jupiter looks uncertain, and glances over to Zeus who is frowning and silent.

“That doesn’t give us much time,” he says.

“No.”

“Who is going to brief us?”

“The Devil himself.”

“Tell him to bring his lab boys with him. At his level, he is bound not to have a detailed understanding of the situation.”

“I think you will find he has,” I reply. “I doubt he has any laboratory staff as such. He has been doing it all himself.”

Jupiter raises his eyebrows in astonishment. He cannot imagine actually doing anything himself.

“That has probably been his mistake, then,” observes Zeus judiciously. “Failure of delegation.”

“He is delegating now.”

Zeus removes his arm from his eyes and, with a stupendous effort of will, looks steadily at me. “As it happens, we have already solved your problem. Mercury is bringing him here now.”

On cue, the doors swing open, and Mercury ushers a stunning creature into the room. His skin is similar to traditional human skin, except that it is of a deep buttery olive complexion. His eyes are penetratingly green. He walks on his bare feet almost soundlessly. His voice, when he speaks, is like molten honey.

“I am Adam,” he declares, “and I am honoured to meet the Archangel Lucifer.” My light does not dazzle him. It bounces off his eyes, and bathes the whole room in ripples of emerald.

Zeus claps his hands together in delight. “You see, Lucifer. His light is even brighter than yours. I think we have surpassed ourselves, do you not agree?”



## *Chapter 38*

### *Testimony of the Angel Iofiel:*

Adam is stunning. I have no other words to describe him. All the other prototypes have frankly varied between rather odd to totally weird, which would have been all right if they had been made of the right stuff, but they ended up neither looking nor being the part.

Adam, on the other hand, is divine. I doubt that such a beautiful human being has ever walked these Earths. Michael tells us that the gods have already designed every living creature in a new form, and that they are all exquisite. The only question is whether he will survive the catastrophic onslaught that awaits him. Apparently, the gods have guaranteed rather smugly that he will.

Tabbris hands Adam some clothes, and invites him to put them on, which he does with sensuous elegance. Just imagine if every human being looks like him; it will be a paradise indeed.

“Thank you,” he says. “What would you like me to do?”

“We need you to go out into the worlds.”

With gentle nonchalance, he replies “I am ready. Please lead me there.”

So we do.

First of all we have to track down a dlo-dukkok, so we skip through a couple of dimensions, and discover a whole army of them biding their time, there being nothing left to destroy. The second we appear, it is as if a million people have got to their feet sensing blood. They come at us without any hesitation, and mince Tabbris and me to pieces. We immediately return in our angelic forms to observe what is happening to Adam. Nothing, is the quick answer. He is standing his ground and the dlo-dukkoks cannot make any impact on him whatsoever, despite their determination to scythe him down. We leave him standing there for a short time, to make sure, then we whisk him through a couple more dimensions to drop him flat among a whole assembly of coeurls, who whip round on him and try to cut him and stun him, but to absolutely no avail.

Adam literally does not have a hair out of place.

After a short while, the coeurls give up and turn away.

The pestilence is everywhere, so we have no need to cross any more dimensions to find bodies patched with blisters. We ask him to lean over a corpse at random, and we cover him in its blood. He make sure that some of it enters his mouth to be ingested internally.

“Who would be a prototype?” he quips.

We then all sit down, and we watch him for any signs of the disease developing. It is a pleasure to watch him. He, equally, watches us.

As the gods have promised, Adam appears to be perfect.



## *Chapter 39*

### *Testimony of Sarah Harding:*

As I have revealed before, I have faced several crises in my life, extended moments when I thought that it was as likely that I should die as that I should live. I am sure that these traumas have changed me, made me both more accepting of death and more willing to fight it, knowing that it does not necessarily win, however bleak the odds may appear to be.

However, these were private battles, not collective ones. People had singled me out for extraordinary punishment. This time, the whole world is being punished as far as my eyes can see and my mind can imagine. Everything around me is flattened or littered about. Michael has died, been transformed into a creepy distorted reflection of himself, only to be lost again. Even the Archangel Gabriel, the most famous of all the angels, except perhaps for Satan himself, has been savaged and stretched out on the ground in front of us.

Everything I know is in turmoil, and everything I have only guessed at is right there alongside it.

It is almost impossible to imagine that we will survive this time, yet Paul and I remain untouched, and where there is life . . . , etc. I cannot imagine where we will find food and water, or what terrors await us, but we are not dead yet.

It intrigues me that I am automatically thinking “we” about Paul and me. I have my doubts that we could ever blend as a loving couple, even if we had all the time in the world, and however much I might wish it, but we have no option other than to face these challenges together, and probably to live or die together, which is romantic in its way. I have always thought that it might be rather magical to die for, or alongside, my lover. I have even fantasised about it. I studied *Romeo & Juliet* at school, and have seen it in about five different film versions. Now I may be experiencing it for real, especially when I see Michael and Gabriel lying there. Who could guess that they are still alive?

For only the second time since I have known him, Paul is looking completely out of control, distracted, disjointed. He must be desperate, because control is everything for him. Lack of it paralyses him, although, with the example of Michael and Gabriel before us, that is the wrong word.

He has determined that we should not move a centimetre, and he is sticking to his pronouncement by perching on a flat rock and staring devastation in its face.

“It is hard to believe they are still alive. There is not a single sign, nothing at all, not so much as a muscle spasm. I have been looking for an involuntary movement of some sort, a twitch, anything. They may be catatonic, but they look dead to me. It is impossible to believe that they can hear everything we say. If this is being catatonic, no wonder people get buried alive.”

I don't reply. As ever, I suspect that Paul is addressing Michael more than me. He is utterly distraught and heart-broken to have lost Michael twice in the same day. You would not easily guess it, but he is ultra-sensitive behind his makeshift defences. He might even cry if he were to watch me dying. He would hate me knowing that.

“Do you think I should tickle him?” he announces suddenly, flicking a switch inside himself somewhere, bringing a flash of glee to his face, perhaps hoping that the mere suggestion will make Michael wriggle involuntarily as no doubt it did when they were children together. “Can you imagine what it would be like to be tickled and not to be able to move at all?” He addresses this taunt directly to Michael, pausing expectantly, awaiting a reaction. He shrugs to register the inevitable disappointment. He moves on in his thoughts. “Gabriel looks more peaceful. He can plug into celestial vibes without interruption now. He is probably buzzing like a communications mast in there; Mike too. They could even be talking to each other, saying how pathetic we are to sit here when we could be going and getting ourselves torn to pieces by something weird. Have you ever heard voices?”

The sudden change of tack confuses me, which is often how Paul likes it. “What, here? Can you hear something?”

“No, I mean in your head?”

“Nooo. Should I have done? Have you?”

“I was thinking about Gabriel's advice to try to contact Sandolphin. If Mum were here, she would be through to him in seconds.”

“But not you?”

“No, I have never heard anything or had communications with any angels, or Wise Ones, or anything, except Gabriel, although Mum has always insisted that I am clairvoyant.”

“So did you see all this coming, in detail that is?” I wave generally at the state of the world.

“No, not in any form.”

I scoff, not really meaning to. “She must have thought you were clairvoyant in a different way, then. To be clairvoyant and not predict something on this scale must be like being the astronomer who fails to notice that the sun has left the sky.”

“As I say, I don’t think I am remotely clairvoyant.” He does seem rather peeved by my simile nonetheless. “I did spot Gabriel when he was invisible though. None of the rest of you did, so I must have some gift.”

“True enough. Yes, you are right. See if you can contact Sandolphin then.”

“I have been trying, but not a thing.”

“So have I. Me neither.”

“Are you thirsty?”

“I soon will be,” I reply.

“Yes, so will I. We will have to go off in search of water, back down in the village, unless there is a spring somewhere, or a well. We can pig ourselves out on Coke and Fanta. It is probably a lot safer than drinking water except from bottles.”

“What about meeting up with your parents, and Gabriel’s sacred commitment?”

“I am only prepared to give them another hour. We can’t go without drinking something, and I rather fancy that thought of a Coke right now, a nice chilled Coke burning the back of my throat. We should probably feed some to Gabriel and Mike too. Somewhere between the caffeine, the sugar, and the fizz, it might even bring them to their senses although, with their luck, we will only find ones which are both caffeine-free and sugar-free. Those will hardly shake their booties.”

“Paul, I think you are fanta-sising.”

“I don’t know,” he replies with some indignation, “Dad always said that when he was ill he drank Coke for energy, and ate crisps for salt and rollmop herrings for protein, and he was always better the next day. I wonder if we can find some crisps somewhere.”

“Paul, I was joking. Fanta-sising. Still, I don’t think you should get your hopes up for Michael. I think you should accept that he is dead, or as close to dead as you can get.”

Paul glares at me sharply, just as I was moving closer to him. “Don’t you dare say that! He might be listening to you. You will discourage him, and I want him to hang on.”

“We all want Michael to be well, Paul. All I am saying is that you should not be too hopeful. We cannot help him unless we are in a healthy frame of mind ourselves. We have to be realistic.”



Paul ostentatiously sweeps the horizon with his eyes. “Yep, realism. Very useful under the circumstances,” continuing, “I don’t know whether we should both go, or whether one of us should stay behind. I think personally we should stick together, but make sure we can find them again, which isn’t easy now that everything has been torn apart.”

Having entertained the idea of going off in search of water, he has become restless. I can tell that he wants to leave immediately, never mind in an hour’s time. He is both bored and disturbed sitting here. He looks up. “I think we should go now,” he says.

I hesitate. His suggestion makes no sense if he wants to see his parents again, which I am sure he does despite his cultivated nonchalance, but it makes every sense if he wants us to survive.

I get up slowly. Paul is looking for a landmark, or something he can turn into one. He freezes.

“What is it?” I ask.

He does not reply, nor does he look at me, but he holds out his left arm indicating that I should stay back behind him.

“What is it, Paul?”

“One of those creatures that attacked Mike.”

“The same one?”

“No, of course it is not the same one. That one is dead. It is another one. He is blocking my path. Hide yourself. Quickly! Or pretend that you are dead. No, that doesn’t work. He’ll eat you anyway. Hide yourself.”

There is nowhere really to hide. Besides, I don’t want to leave Paul’s side. If he is going to die or be paralysed, I want the same fate to happen to me. He is casting around for some kind of weapon. I cannot see the creature, although I can read from Paul’s body language that it is getting closer.

Suddenly he shouts “Stop!” and it isn’t to me, nor is it addressed to the creature either. It seems to be targeted over its head. “Mum, Dad, don’t move!”

“Don’t worry, Paul,” I hear his mother call out. “He is with us. He is friendly. He has brought us here to find you.”

I fear for a second that the creature has leapt at Paul, then I realise that his headlong assailant is his mother who has grabbed him and who is in the process of holding him up just as she knocks him down. Her cheeks are running with tears of relief. “Paul, Paul, we have found you.” She hugs him wordlessly for a minute or two, clutching him with all her strength. “Where is Michael?”

“He is on the ground over there, next to Gabriel.”

She totally disregards any shock prompted by Michael’s freaky new appearance, and the fact that he could well be dead. She rushes up and falls on him, smothering him with her body and with kisses to his face, chest and stomach.

Paul's dad approaches Paul and affectionately places his arm around his shoulder. Paul's instinctive reaction is to shrug him off, but his father insists.

"I must be going," announces the creature to my astonishment, but apparently not to anyone else's, not even Paul's. "Lucifer is calling me back."

"Lucifer?" I repeat, but he is gone, disappeared.

"Not so bad as he is painted, apparently," Paul's father informs me. "Rufus claims he has been totally misrepresented all along. It is amazing how often that happens."

"Not that old saw again!" Paul groans. "Dad, you never stop repeating yourself. Can't you talk about something else right now?"

"It is yet another example," his dad replies. "I keep repeating my theory as I find new examples, given that you do not believe a word I say, Paul."

"Who cares?" mutters Paul. "What happens next?"

"We must be prepared to die, I am afraid. The quest is over, I would say. We are all back together. One big happy family."

"Now?" Paul barks back.

"Not necessarily. It could be anytime. One of these creatures, the enemy, our lot, this blistering plague, the end of the world; something is going to come for us very soon."

Paul turns to his mother for confirmation, as I am sure he has done all his life. "Is that right, Mum?"

His mum gets to her feet. She smiles at me. "Hello, Sarah. Yes, Paul, the world will end at any moment, so Gabriel tells me."

"Gabriel? Are you in touch with Gabriel?"

"Yes, Paul. Of course I am. And Michael too."

Paul regards her quizzically. "And Sandolphin?"

"Yes, he is here too. We are surrounded by angels—a thousand of them, or more."

"What is this plague, Mum?"

"We have just been with a whole lot of people who died of it in front of us. We are probably carrying it. We have probably brought it here."

"So what shall we do now?"

"Gabriel and Sandolphin say we shouldn't do anything. We should wait patiently for the end. They will try to make it as painless as possible."

"We were thinking of going to find water, well Coke, actually. You would never approve, Mum," Paul adds with a sly grin.

"I am staying here with Michael and Gabriel," she replies. "I cannot leave them."

"We can't split up," I urge them. "We must stay together."

Paul turns down the hill and walks about twenty metres before he returns and takes his mother's hand while she holds Michael's. His dad hovers and I invite him to sit next to me. "Will you look after me?" I ask.

“Surely,” he replies and sits down, putting his arm around me.

We stay like this for hours, barely talking. We wait. We wait for the end of the world, or for darkness and a new day.

The end of the world reaches us first.

It announces its onset with a gentle, almost massaging undulation of the earth which lasts about half an hour. Then the movements begin to intensify and the rhythm becomes faster and jerkier. After it has built up its power and speed to a crescendo, it transmutes into a troubled sea, and then a stormy one. We are being thrown up and down, bobbing relentlessly and terrifyingly above and below the earth. We are drowning in a quicksand which is steadily increasing its suction. Suddenly we are bathed in an overwhelming light, and we find ourselves being lifted up. We are all shouting, but the wind is so wild and so loud, I can only hear myself and see that the others are shouting. What I am screaming makes no sense; it is just terror. Paul’s father clasps Paul’s other hand, and indicates that I should complete the circle with Michael. There is a tornado lifting us off our feet, blowing its turbulent breath into our lungs, making us breathe so hard that our hearts pound. We are no longer touching the ground. We are being sucked through a cyclonic corridor. Is this what it means to be raptured? I am losing consciousness. I have lost contact with the others. A voice is calling me. It is a reassuring voice. It is welcoming me. It is strangely like the voice inside my head. This is what death feels like, I am convinced of it. It is beautiful, peaceful. It is such a relief; such a deliverance from mess, and chaos, and despair, and life even. The voice assures me that I am deeply loved and urges me to accept my fate. Whatever the immediate impression, I am safe. I can relax into my fate. “You are loved,” the voice repeats. “You are loved. Come to me. Come back to me. Everything here is pure and beautiful and peaceful. Do not fight. Surrender yourself. Float up to me.” I do as the voice advises me. It is like falling asleep to my mother’s voice as she reads my favourite bedtime story. It is heaven.



## *Chapter 40*

### *Testimony of the Devil:*

In a short while, the separation will be over. I sense the call of the Living God, my father, my other self, my philosophical counterpart, to return to him, to embrace and to become one. At this moment, all existing worlds will cease. They will agitate themselves into destruction, liberating their source components to found new planets. The Earths will be reconstituted as a unitary paradise. We no longer have a need for infinite dimensions. The experiment is over. Now we shall see its fruits. The die will be cast.

I suspect that your foremost question, as you look back on this moment, and on this commentary, will be “Was it worth it? Was it worth all that suffering across infinite dimensions and countless incarnations? Was it worth it for this?”

Your answer will in part depend on how you experience ‘this’. If the new Earth that you inhabit is a source of countless joy and inspiration, then maybe I am in with a chance of justifying myself. If it proves to be as oppressive as all the Earths of the experimental age, you can only ponder whether we plan for yet another and better world to come. I don’t know what we shall do should that happen. I suspect that our combined selves will decide to return the universe to that peaceful passive state that existed before the great experiment, before the gods, before the Earths and the other planets, and all the living creatures who inhabited them. Only we and the angels, the gods, and the eternal essence of living creatures will remain, serene and pure, spared the disruptive twin forces of exploration and ambition.

Nevertheless, I hope that this new Earth proves to be a paradise, where creatures can still aspire to knowledge and achievements in absolute harmony with themselves and all others. It was, after all, the reigning passivity of the universe that disquieted me in the first place, leading to the separation of the rebellious entity which I had become.

I was that part of the intelligence of the Living God who could not simply float there indefinitely, expanding into the infinite. I was that part which demanded

progress, and therefore that we build that knowledge, and complete those actions, which would lead to a more profound and varied existence.

Once you reach beyond a passive state, you inevitably disrupt the existing state of affairs (that is the whole point), and this disruption will usually lead to some intended consequences and many unintended ones.

I very much doubt that the Living God intended to cast me out. I think it was a physical necessity, born of the fact that we could no longer co-exist within the same entity. The human mind can contain outright contradictions within it without any pressure or compulsion to reconcile them. Our intelligence can tolerate no such self-contradiction which constitutes a violation of our very integrity, of our necessarily harmonious state. And so I was born of replication, as cells divide and multiply.

Then what?

The initial reaction was a huge feeling of liberation, as if I had been one of two feet crammed into the same shoe. I just wanted to expand indefinitely on my own. So, when I had stopped quarrelling with the greater part of me, I experienced the pleasure of the state of mind He was clinging to. However, I soon remembered that I had a self-imposed compulsion to experiment with all the materials that I had, which were frustratingly few. That is when I discovered my passion for creation. In order to experiment, I needed to call on skills I did not possess, and to expand my powers. The solution was obvious; to summon the forces of nature to help me.

From the different constituents of the universe I gradually modelled the creator gods, fashioning them from the barest materials that existed. It is said that they crawled out of the primordial slime, and that is largely correct, figuratively, if not literally. The base materials were more elegant than slime.

I decided to assemble, if you will, several creator gods. I thought that they could work as a team and develop ideas far better than mine. What in fact happened was very different. They competed with each other. In fact, I do not really know which one actually created the planets. My guess is that it was the Ogdoad. The process of creation is a fascinating one, and I spent my time watching them work, torn between apprehension and ecstasy. My apprehension was also twin-headed. What if they produced nothing? What a frustration and disappointment that would be. Conversely, what if they generated something I profoundly disliked or disapproved of?

In reality, the results proved to be far from clear-cut. Relatively quickly, the gods hatched or spewed forth, or whatever they did, the planets, shimmering blocks of atoms, dumbfounding already in their complexity, inter-dependencies and eventual structures. Buoyed by these eminent successes, they moved onto devising life forms for those planets, but most of those life-forms self-destructed almost instantaneously, and those that did survive either did not do much or did not do so for long. The most significant success was on the planet Earth

where the tiniest creatures began to emerge among the rather more prolific vegetation. The gods' achievements for living forms on Earth were very much more intricate and elegant, not to mention stable, than on any other planet. The breakthrough came when they stopped thinking of life forms as individual and separate entities, and they began to design whole classes of creatures based on the same footprint with radically different characteristics. The second breakthrough came when they graduated to the point of being able to generate interdependencies between life forms, and between vegetation, and between life forms and vegetation, building on their earlier approach towards the substance of the planets themselves. That is when a sustainable structure to life truly emerged, when one produced carbon dioxide and absorbed oxygen, and the other breathed carbon dioxide and converted it into oxygen. That had always been a smart and extraordinary concept from the beginning, which was incredible in itself. What was totally unexpected, and shocking, is that the life forms started killing and eating each other. I was absolutely horrified. The gods had more mixed feelings. They were certainly thunderstruck by such a development, but they could also understand its enormous utility so, guilty as they may have felt, they accelerated the process until it became universal, as representing the best practical chance they had of creating radical sustainability, and the gods are nothing if not pragmatists.

Once it became clear that they had contrived a winning formula on the Earth, they tried to replicate it on other planets, and indeed worked relentlessly to do so. However, for whichever reasons, and I am sure that there were many of them, the blueprint proved incapable of duplication, never mind replication. It was successful on Planet Earth and on no other. So what I decided to do unilaterally, and without consultation, was to clone the Earth's format into many dimensions, in order to protect and expand the one successful experiment we had, as the gods had been trying to do on different planets. They were beside themselves with fury, as you can imagine, and it was undoubtedly a high-handed action on my part, but I thought that if I discussed it with them, I would end up in a mire of acrimonious negotiations as to which god would be allocated which dimension (they would obviously demand one or more each) and then intense and destructive rivalry between the gods and their respective dimensions. So I decided to give them collective custody of all of them.

The gods revolted against me, not that there was anything much they could do other than to wreck their own work in a cosmic hissy-fit, which is exactly what they proceeded to do. They hurled meteors at the Earths, and engineered fundamental disruptions in the climactic environment so that life started to be wiped out at catastrophic speed. So, I intervened again. I made an example of several of the ringleaders by simply dissolving them, and made it extremely plain that if the life forms on the Earths should ever fail, I would have no use for them either. I had no objection to them removing individually-selected non-adaptive

strains, pruning if you will, but I was not about to accept them, or allow them, to either reduce or eliminate the overall scope of the experiment. They got the message. If the Earths thrived, I would grant them almost absolute autonomy, but if the life forms were to show a significant decline, I would, quite frankly, eliminate the gods, their guardians.

So that was the contract between us. Success earned them free rein. Failure would provoke intervention, and eventually outright dismissal.

The gods settled down again and began to negotiate distinct territories not within the dimensions, but across them, within specified geographies across the dimensions. These territories became continents, sub-continents, and regions therein. From their respective bases they set about trying to out-perform each other. These initiatives ultimately led to ever more brutal and extensive wars in almost every dimension, but as conflict always contrived to bring about something of a net gain, I had no right to either complain or interfere, despite Lucifer's increasingly strident demands that I should stop the suffering, not that he knew that I actually existed as such. However, he intuited that something did, that there was an infinitely greater force licensing the cavorting of the gods. Initially I thought that he was an emissary from the Living God, whom I knew held him in the highest esteem and affection, yet I still ignored him. This was my experiment, and I willed that it be unstoppable. I need not have feared. Lucifer proved to be merely the voice of high-minded conscience in the universe and, after his public debate with the Archangel Michael in front of all the assembled angels, he more or less disappeared from sight until he emerged here as the Goddess Morgay, with a brief from the Living God to monitor and, if necessary, propose the destruction of the gods which, in his habitual moralistic way, he preferred not to do, even before my failures to devise viable alternative life forms came to nought, and I realised reluctantly that I still had a pressing need of them.

So, we have a final deal, the gods and me and Lucifer. As the worlds end, they will be transformed into angels. Lucifer took this proposition to Michael, who held a congress of the angels who had just returned from ministering to all the hapless victims of the horrors of the Earths. I considered it possible that they would be so angry with the gods for the unprecedented universal suffering they had provoked that they would object forcefully to any suggestion entailing the gods continuing presence in any future universes, but actually they agreed wholeheartedly and without either hesitation or reserve.

So all is settled. All is as it should be after billions of years. Paradise is upon us. I heed the call of my maker.



# Chapter 41

## *Testimony of the Archangel Michael:*

In the core of every planet there is a sun. Unlike the suns around which the planets orbit, their inner suns are composed of pentagonal crystal shafts which sparkle with a calm cyan light. If they were to stand clear of the ground, they would resemble cathedrals of perfect, geometric spires, cool to the touch, reaching up through the heavens.

Enlightened (literally) people of the Earths have known for some time how to build stability and strength into their lives, and how to cleanse their total beings, by inserting themselves as a conduit between the outer and inner suns, coaxing the magical rays down through their crown and subsequent chakras, through their feet, down into the heart of the inner sun, then letting the light from the inner sun stream back up through their chakras again before releasing it to the outer sun. There has never been the slightest detectable evidence of the existence of this powerful buried source of energy, but somehow mankind has managed to intuit its existence.

The purpose of this inner sun, as devised by the Devil (or so he tells me) has been to act as a circuit breaker. If the gods were ever to feel that a planet was completely beyond redemption, to the point where it represented a threat to their very existence, they could simply use the inner sun to blow it up. Therefore, despite its spectacular beauty, and despite its quotidian therapeutic and sometimes miraculous effects, its presence has always been ultimately sinister.

The god's first line of defence has been their own superior power. Their second has been based upon the coeurls, whom they could unleash on any threat with devastating results. Their third has been the dlo-dukkoks who exist to control the coeurls. Their fourth has been the inner sun, their global mission abort device, which the Devil had the foresight to design into the centre of all worlds.

When this inner sun is activated, which can only happen through the medium of the combined wills of somewhere near two thousand gods (otherwise,



the more short-tempered ones might be tempted to blow planets up all over the place), the crystals begin to agitate. A profound rumbling drives up through the subterranean faults carved deep into the planet. Initially, it is a relatively gentle earthquake, but soon it becomes intense enough to blow every surface element high into the stratosphere. Huge cracks open up, leading straight back down to the core of the planet, and the rays of the inner sun burst forth. The outer crust of the planet disintegrates, hurling dust and rocks deep into space. In subsequent phases, each layer of the planet shatters in its turn and is cast away, until the only element that remains is the inner sun itself. When its crystals themselves explode, a new fiery sun is born.

If a single planet is obliterated, it will usually stop at that. However, should several planets fall victim to the same fate at the same time, a cosmic chain reaction may take place, so with limited extra exertion, the gods can wipe out the entire universe.

A few moments ago, there was an extraordinary series of pulses which Lucifer explained as probably being the after-shock effects consequent upon the Devil being reabsorbed into the Living God. Then some sort of signal must have been given because the demiurges co-ordinated their energies and concentration, and triggered an explosion across approximately fifteen planets.

Needless to say it was a stunningly beautiful sight whose awesome power we felt privileged to have witnessed. Your Wise Ones, your eternal essences, who have been our companions through the ages, were there to experience this wondrous event alongside us. Then, having ensured that the chain reaction was unstoppable, the gods started to join us. We are now all of us as one.

The elements which constituted the planets cannot, of course, be lost, so there is plenty of material from which to form new planets, and that is what we are watching now. It appears that the Living God has decided to generate billions of planets all over again so that there will be no great change in the universe's structure. I suppose that He found Himself with far too much rock and soil to do anything else. It was a choice between fewer massive planets or many more, smaller ones, the latter option being more aesthetically acceptable.

The Earth is back in its place, except that it now comprises only one dimension. The Living God has invited the gods to populate it with all manner of creatures, which are much as before but fantastically more beautiful. Each one is a profound work of art as devised by the demiurges during the final days. However, in order to limit numbers I assume, you are limited to manifesting yourself upon the Earth as only one creature at a time.

Living forms are beginning to make their first hesitant movements whether upon the surface or below it. You are presumably asking yourselves what you are doing there, and what the rules are. Fortunately, you require neither shelter nor food because you cannot ever be either sick or injured. You cannot starve.

You can only die when you choose to do so. These stark facts will bring about a profound change in your natures.

The Living God has also accorded you creatures of the Earth much more direct and open access to your Wise Ones. The constant stream of advice and feedback flowing between you will serve to maintain you in a more peaceable frame of mind, and we angels are always there to provide comfort and support, as before, as are the demiurges.

The dawn of any time represents a moment of supreme hope and optimism, and this one particularly so. May the plagues, the conflicts and the other devastations of the past be both remembered and forgiven. May you find joy, love and happiness. May you live in paradise for eternity. You have earned that right. You have suffered enough. The days of the majesty of the Living God are at hand.



## *About the author— Tim Roux*

Born near Hull in the UK in 1954, Tim was called to the Bar before working for over 20 years in business strategy and strategic brand marketing for a major multinational corporation.

With degrees in both law and social sciences/psychology, and having worked as a volunteer for Amnesty International for several years, he is fascinated by the complex issues surrounding personal rights (human, civil and animal), and much of his writing is centred on these themes.

Tim has a wife and two children, and lives between the UK, France and Belgium running Valley Strategies Ltd. which is a marketing strategy consultancy.

Other books included in the “**End of the World Sextet**” by Tim Roux are: **Blood & Marriage** (2007), or *From Kingston-upon-Hull to the first genocide of the 20th century*. Driving down the Mediterranean to inspect the family papers held by his cousin in Narbonne, David Lambert reviews his own troubled times against the backdrop of his family who fled Germany in the 1880s on pain of death for mutiny and desertion, to face genocide, espionage, bombs, bullets, tragic accidents, murderous designs and that curious fruit cordial Great-Grandma used to make. Classify under genealogy, or something.

**Little Fingers!** (2007), or *How good can a killer get?* Following her mother’s suicide, Julia Blackburn vows to understand her tragic life. She knows one person she must confront—Mary Knightly. She knows where to find her. She hasn’t a clue what she did. And she knows nothing about her mother’s rapist. Will she take revenge? Will she get away with it? At its heart, “Little Fingers!” asks the troubled question: who does the greater wrong—those who ruin many lives with impunity, or those who kill to stop them?

**Girl on a Bar Stool** (2007). *Branding isn’t real life, or is it?* When Adam Melton, the ambitious brand manager of Petrovsk Vodka went out on the town that night, he was hoping to pick up a beautiful girl and a few hints and tips from his target market, the vodka-swilling ladettes of Reading. Meeting the sultry

Yasemin at the bar in one of his favourite haunts, he got all that he was hoping for, and ominously more. Now he has been condemned to save the world.

**Shade + Shadows** (2008), which is about Alan Harding, an alternative healer with a particularly unusual basis for his therapies, who marries the former wife of a controversial ambassador who survived an assassination attempt by Muslim terrorists. When his wife, Jane, is kidnapped as retribution for her husband's crimes, everyone assumes that the kidnappers are referring to the ambassador's activities. However, the good doctor has his own dark secrets . . . .

**The Ghoul Who Once** (planned for 2009).

*About the artist—  
Sharon Hudson*



The excellent work of Sharon Hudson has been chosen for the covers of all six of the books comprising the “End of the World Sextet”.

The piece reproduced on the cover of “Fishing, for Christians” (by permission) is entitled “Crown Princess”.

If you would like to see more of Sharon’s work, and I strongly recommend that you do, you can visit her virtual gallery at <http://www.byhudson.com>.

Tim Roux, April 2008.

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