

# "The Loom of Thessaly"

a novella by David Brin

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"You can't get there from here."

At the time, Pavlos Apropoulos thought his American friend was joking. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Try it and see," Frank had said. "It's less than 250 kilometers from Athens, and I'll bet you can't even get close to it!"

That had been easy enough for Frank to say, sitting in the comfort of Pavlos's Athens apartment. *He* wasn't going to be the one who went alone, into the wilderness, to test it.

Pavlos's arms felt as if they were about to come off. The branch he was holding on to might tear free at any second, leaving him without any firm support. Yet his feet couldn't seem to find a purchase.

There was dust everywhere. The canyon was filled with a clay pungence that mixed with the overripe odors of bramble bush and perspiration. He could taste blood from one of the cuts he'd taken on his face, during the panicky scramble down the flaky, slippery talus.

This was the easiest route. He was sure of it.

The branch tore loose just as Pavlos got his right foot settled on an uncertain chunk of partially decomposed granite. For a moment he teetered. The canyon wavering about him in a blur of hazy green thorn bushes and a narrow strip of cloudy sky.

Pavlos threw the cluster of twigs away and grabbed for another hold. But dry leaves came off like chaff in his hands as the ground crumbled beneath him.

The brush that had been so formidable in blocking his earlier descent now broke and parted in front of him like chips flying from an axe. Branches tore and whipped at his arms, which he vainly tried to keep over his face as he fell, running and crashing, down the steep slope.

Somehow, he stayed on his feet, though they skidded on the powdery surface. The shrubbery thickened toward the bottom and the slope flattened, but this slowed him only slightly as the headlong rush sent him splashing across a small rivulet of dirty water to slam, arms outstretched, into the opposite canyon wall.

Fragments of desiccated, ancient rock rained down upon him as he labored to catch his breath in a series of shuddering gasps. The clumps fell in a steady stream -- a miniature landslide onto the back of his head.

Pavlos stood still, taking things in order. He wasn't ready to begin cataloguing the bruises and scrapes he had taken. The thudding of loose gravel on his skull meant no more to his overloaded senses than the chalky, rank odor of dust and sweat which he took in with each ragged breath, or the almost unbearable weight of his backpack.

The landfall subsided at about the same rate as Pavlos's breathing. Dust settled, leaving a fine white patina on his hair and hunched shoulders. He waited a few moments longer, eyes shut tightly against the floating grit, listening to the fading creakings his passage down the scarp had set off. When finally he looked around, Pavlos shuddered.

In thirty years of mountaineering he had seen many ravines like this, but this was the first time he had ever been in one. There had never been a need, before. There had always been another way... an easier route.

Not this time, though. The place where he had come down was the best he had found in an entire day of searching. It was hideous.

Gnarled trees and thorn bushes covered the sixty-degree slope. Jagged rocks protruded from the starved, parched soil. It was a miracle he had come this far without breaking a leg, or his skull.

More than ever he was convinced he was on the right path. This monument to inaccessibility had to be the place Frank had spoken of.

He checked for cuts and bruises. It was a good thing he had chosen, after carefully

examining Frank's aerial photos, to wear leather for this expedition. It had protected most of his skin, although several unbelievable thorns had pierced his garments and had to be pulled out amid momentary, excruciating pain.

He allowed his pack to slide down and form a seat to rest on. With slow deliberation, he drew out his aid kit and applied disinfectant to the cuts on his face and the backs of his wrists.

Only after his breathing settled, and the spots disappeared from in front of his eyes, did he allow himself a slow, sparing swallow from one of his canteens. He wet a handkerchief and carefully wiped the grit away from his eyes and lips.

Upstream to the right a few dozen meters was the path of ascension he had picked out during his visual scouting, earlier, from the other side. It was the route with marginally fewer obstacles than elsewhere along this face.

He stood, groaning at the stretch of abused muscles, and moved a few feet to examine the route. Then he compared it with the path he would have to take if he turned around, right now, and went home.

Sure enough. As bad as the way down had been, it looked more tempting to someone trapped in the ravine than the hellish slope he would have to climb if he continued forward.

It had been that way all the way here. Every trail, every game path, every natural sloping led one circumspectly *away* from the small area he wanted to reach. In no specific case had there been anything suspicious about the avoidance. Each time there had been a good and obvious reason to turn one way, instead of the other that led here.

It was the sum that drove Pavlos crazy. It had only been by the most steadfast determination to violate all of the rules of mountaineering that he had been able to get this far. It had taken two days to come just five kilometers from that last hamlet of surly, taciturn herdsmen.

Pavlos reached into his pack for the high altitude photos Frank had given him.

"This is the first one I took from orbit," Frank had said when he showed Pavlos the first large-scale photo. "I used the cartography telescope in interface with the computer on board the Platform. This locale was flagged in the course of a survey I was doing for the EEC -- an attempt to determine population density versus terrain type. This spot gave Fourier Transform that was quite unusual."

The satellite photo was very clear. It looked like it had been taken from only a few thousand feet in altitude. Pavlos easily recognized the elevation contour markings that lay upon apparently typical Grecian highlands. He had, after all, been teaching map reading and leading expeditions while his young American friend had been scrawling stick figures in crayon on the kitchen wall in his parents' house in Des Moines.

The photos lay on his dining room table, three stories above the noisy streets of Athens. Outside his apartment door children ran down the hall, screaming in some incoherent game. To him it was all part of the background. He worried over the other lines and squiggles on Frank's map, reluctant to admit his ignorance to the astronaut, however close they had become during a mission in the Sudan, two years before.

"This is in Thessaly, is it not?" He pointed to the shape of the hillsides, the lay of the sun in the creek beds, wishing to show that expertise meant as much as did fancy technology.

Frank's eyebrows rose. Impressed, he showed it with typical American ingenuousness. Americans had no second skin, no Mediterranean wall of caution. Pavlos loved them for it.

"Yes, that's right," Frank had said. "And here you see how the population density and terrain accessibility profiles rise and fall together nicely everywhere.

He pulled out another photo.

"Here is the city of Thessalonica, with almost a million people. Now weighted *only* against local resources, there's no good explanation for its population advantage over, say, Larisa a bit farther south. But taking into account factors such as travel times along various egress points, terrain....

"Yes, yes. I get the point." Pavlos was pleased. He had managed to get the information out of Frank without asking for it, and picked up an opportunity to mutter with fatherly impatience at the same time. Such minor stylistic victories helped make a pleasure out of a lazy afternoon.

"So what I can't figure out is why you thought it so important to show this to me at my apartment, and in such secrecy, hmmm?"

Frank sat down.

"Oh, hell. You know this is low-priority stuff, Pav. Ever since you helped us find that capsule in the Sahara, you've known that my main job is to experiment with space-borne antimissile systems. When I started getting strange results in my accessibility studies, I just couldn't get anybody interested."

"All right." Pavlos smiled. "Then I am your informal consultant. Now show me these 'strange results' of yours."

Frank pulled a large envelope from his briefcase. He drew the first of several glossy prints from it.

"This is from the same general region, only about thirty kilometers to the southwest of the corner of that large overlay. I want you to take a close look at this area, in particular, before I show you a bigger blowup." Pavlos bent to peer at the plateau Frank pointed out, bringing over his magnifying glass.

His smile faded as he studied the photo.

"I cannot say for certain, as your lines of probability get in the way... but it appears that this water course loops back upon itself! It makes almost a natural moat around the hilltop."

Frank nodded. "I've tried to use the newer telescope we have on board. It's tied in to our experimental beam weapons system..." Almost unconsciously, Frank lowered his voice, although he knew that Pavlos's apartment was secure.

"I could count the number of black fleas on the backside of a dog with that machine. But it's a bitch and a half getting the thing tuned properly, at this stage. I'm not at all sure I'd be able to devote that kind of time and effort using it on what's essentially a side project, especially when NASA's already paranoid over security. At *least* I'd like to get some sort of preliminary confirmation before taking the risk."

Pavlos nodded. As a reserve NATO officer who occasionally helped out in expeditions to desolate regions, he had seen examples of amazing photography from space. And he had the feeling they hadn't ever shown him all they could do.

"So let us see the best you have." He waved with his right hand as Frank pulled out the fourth photo. "You have me curious about this mystery of yours."

It showed a plateau in the middle of a set of concentric, parched creek beds, surrounded by rugged, goat-ravaged hills. At the corners of the photo there were signs of humanity, as one would expect everywhere in a land that had been inhabited at high density for four thousand years. In two places there were the ubiquitous shepherd's shacks for overnight shelter. Goat tracks lay everywhere.

But in the center, all trace of man and animal disappeared. Puzzled, Pavlos peered closer. "Are those...? No, they cannot be."

"What are they, Pavlos?"

He rubbed his chin. "I believe those are *cedars*, very large cedars, of a kind you can only find in the Caucasus these days... or on the estates of old and very wealthy families."

"There are no estates here, Pavlos. What else do you see?"

"There are cypress, and some other large trees I cannot identify, and..." He peered closely. "There is a *building* of some kind. A large, rectangular structure, mostly shaded by trees."

Frank stood up straight and tapped the photo.

"See these faint lines? I had the computer draw them along curves of *accessibility*. See the gradients? If all roads lead to Rome, then all roads, all trails -- hell, all *goat tracks* -- lead away from this place. Now, how the hell could anyone have built a thing that size on top of that plateau?"

Pavlos sat back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the tabletop. Then he started rummaging through his jacket pocket for a cigarette. Only when he had one lit did he get up and start to pace.

"I see two possibilities," he began. "The building may be modern, in which case it could have been prefabricated and taken to the peak by helicopter. The question then would be why? And who would do such a thing? How did they keep it secret?"

Pavlos turned to look at Frank. "That is the possibility that interests you, is it not? Things like this make intelligence officers sleep poorly."

Frank nodded, but said, "I tried to interest my superiors but they didn't care. They even forbade me to ask the Greek government about it. Our allies are already touchy about the extent we can peer down at them. I'm stuck with following this up on my own."

Pavlos nodded. "Ah. To be expected from politicians and soldiers, present company excepted. Well, there is a second possibility. If the structure is *more* than fifty years old, it would have taken fanaticism to build it on that site... a brand of fanaticism that has not been seen in this land for many centuries."

"And *that's* the possibility that interests you, isn't it?" Frank suggested. "You'd just love to find an untouched Roman temple, or a pristine Nestorian monastery or hermitage, wouldn't you?"

Pavlos stopped pacing again, took a deep drag from his cigarette, then waved it at his friend. "I have a feeling I am being *persuaded* to do something. Is this so?"

Frank had smiled.

Pavlos put away the photos and shouldered his backpack. Pain resumed at once, spreading from chafed shoulders down his spine and arms. For the ten-thousandth time he wondered what masochism could drive a man who wasn't in the army to put forty pounds on his back and go places a donkey would refuse.

When he reached the chosen site he took out his machete, looped its thong from his right wrist, and began climbing.

No classic ascent, this. None of the clean exhilaration of a challenge with goldline, harness, and carabiners against a bare rock face. The danger here would not be from a single fall -- likely to be broken by shrubbery -- but from jagged rocks, nasty thorns, poisonous snakes, and plain agony. Cerebration would not help so much as watchfulness and stoicism.

At first the hillside was steep. The foliage was thick enough to bar his path, but too poorly rooted to use for support. It came free of its roots in his hand, leaving him teetering on the crumbling soil. Finally he hit on the technique of tearing the bushes loose on purpose, opening a path to crawl through.

Soon, however, the slope flattened just enough to give the roots leverage. He found himself again and again forced to take detours... every one of which led him inevitably downward. Finally, he had to lay on his stomach to worm among the burrows and insect nests, shoving upward by brute force.

It was neither a time nor a place for finesse.

He hacked at roots with the short machete. The tough, springy bushes bled a gooey yellow sap that soon coated his hands with a cloying, binding stickiness. Perspiration ran in clammy streams along his sides, under the leather jacket. The sun burned down through a muggy haze. The smell of his own sweat mingled with the evil stench of the thorn shrubs.

Repetition soon became automatic. Reach, pull, hack, hack again, and again, until the plant tears free... keep flat, crawl through the gap, ignoring the jutting rocks and jagged root stumps... reach, pull, set your legs, hack... hack... hack...

Shortness of breath made him regret his lost youth.

He kept his mind on only one idea. *Take no detours!* Every easier path inevitably led downward. It became easy to tell which way was the right one. Pavlos looked for the worst, most miserable path. It was invariably correct.

Mercifully, just as he thought he could endure the smell, the ache, the heat, and the confinement no longer, he reached a patch of open rock. It was not more than one meter by two, but he fell across it and rolled out of his pack with a groan of relief.

With trembling fingers he pulled out one of his canteens. He filled his mouth, swished the water around, then spat onto his hands and rubbed them on his pants to dislodge some of the sap.

Pavlos squinted at the painfully bright, hazy sky.

He wondered if Frank was overhead. If he were using the spy telescope, and happened to have a spare moment to look this way, Frank might see him right now.

Pavlos waved languidly at the sky.

*Probably not*, he thought. *Frank wasn't going to risk getting in trouble until I called from the top.*

There was a small transceiver in his backpack that, Frank promised, would be able to reach the Platform whenever it passed within line of sight. As executive officer of a five-man crew, he would be able to arrange several hours alone with the equipment, while the others slept.

It hurt a little, in a wry fashion, to think of the astronaut whizzing overhead in weightless, air-conditioned comfort, pondering his theories of "accessibility of terrain." Pavlos knew that

inaccessibility was, like the texture of a woman, known only through intimate contact.

Right now he was being intimate with inaccessibility in a manner that made him think of the Anglo-Saxon expletives he had learned over the years.

One hundred meters, that was all the distance remaining. Pavlos crawled with a sense of dogged martyrdom. He was sure two fingers of his left hand had been sprained, if not broken, by a falling stone from a rockslide he'd set off. The other aches were innumerable.

The ascent became a melding of miserable repetition, he would grab, pull, hack, then use the root as a support as he searched for footholds on the flaky slope.

His mind meanwhile walked a random path among fantasies of what he would find at the top.

A pre-Constantinian hermitage, perhaps... or even a monastery, untouched for fifteen hundred years because nobody ever happened upon it in all of that time.

Or maybe this was one huge tell -- a solid ruin from some ancient fortification. It *did* defend itself well. Not by steepness or remoteness or height but by sheer *unpleasantness*... a nastiness that deterred even goats.

By the frogs of lower heaven, why not go all the way! This is, perhaps, a covered-up installation of visitors from outer space, who buried one of their starships here when they ran out of tapioca to power it!

Pavlos's foot slipped and the root he clutched barely held as he scrambled, face buried in the gritty dirt. With a mighty strain, he lifted himself within range of another foothold. It held.

*Probably*, he thought somewhat dizzily, *I will find a helicopter landing pad, guard dogs, and an oil tycoon who will have me arrested for trespassing.*

Pavlos hardly noticed when the slope began to flatten.

In fact, he felt a momentary panic when his hand reached out for another root and grabbed, instead, only air and then grass.

Cedars formed a pocket forest at the center of the plateau. The grass surrounding the grove was a subject for speculation. It was thicker and more lustrous than one might expect in this terrain, yet it did not appear to be tended, either. Pavlos saw no sign of a helicopter landing pad.

Not on this side, at least. Who could tell what he would see once the spots cleared from in front of his eyes?

He knew he looked hardly presentable for knocking on someone's front door. He itched all over. Somehow removing his leather outer garments and tending his wounds had changed the pain from a general background roar that could be ignored to a set of isolated screaming sensations. He had been injured on other expeditions, of course. Often far worse. But never had he felt so *generally* abused.

Pavlos took one last swig from his canteen, then hoisted his pack.

"All right," he mumbled, fighting off dizziness. "This had better be worth it."

The air was cleaner up here, almost tasty. The smell of the cedars was sweet and pleasant. He entered the grove and almost at once saw the outlines of the building through the trees.

He paused for a moment, struggling not to fall to his knees. It couldn't be true!

It was pure beam and column construction. Not an arch could be seen. The columns were Doric, or even pre-Doric -- chaste, simple, unadorned, but beautiful. Their rounded contours might almost be Minoan.

And the beams resting on the columns! Where a Doric entablature was strictly sectioned into the three horizontal bands, here there was only one, carved in intricate figures that seemed to march upon a protruding lip, like the rim of the door lintel of a Cretan palace.

The structure was obviously designed to stand open to the wind, yet someone after the original builder had chosen to close off the interior in a crude fashion. The openings between the columns were blocked by slabs of white marble, roughly mortared; the flaking remnants of ancient paint still clung in spots.

Pavlos walked forward slowly, silently, as if in fear the sounds of his footsteps would blow it all away. He felt telescoped as he approached -- the marble seeming to come to *him*, like the advancing of a dream.

No graffiti... no carved names and dates. The figures of heroic horses and feathered men in combat using spears and rounded shields, these bore no defacement other than that which



Time itself had meted.

The warriors, some plumed, some naked to the waist, were of many types. Pavlos saw some that were clearly Minoan and he felt his heart leap. There were others... Egyptian of the Old Kingdom, for certain, and.... Akkadian?

Pavlos approached one of the columns. Gently, he reached out and touched it.

The marble had taken pits and tiny scratches over the centuries. It felt rough, in its underlying smoothness. To him, it had the texture of durability.

The wind sighed through the cedars. It seemed to be speaking to him with the voices of ancient men and women.

"Well, hero. You are here at last. *Come*, and you shall tell us of the changes in the world outside."

Pavlos shook his head to clear it. The words had seemed so real.

"*Come*, hero!"

He turned. Standing at the far end of the row of columns was a woman. She wore a simple garment, bound by a rope belt. Her black hair was braided, though not with great precision.

She smiled, and held out her hand in a gesture of welcome. But as Pavlos felt himself begin to walk -- numbly and only partly, it seemed, at his own will -- he thought he heard a quiet "clicking" sound, and the sunlight glinted hard into his eyes... reflected bitterly by the golden thimble she wore on her finger.

## 2

"This is the back way," she said as she led him up a narrow set of marble steps. "We find it better to bring heroes in here first, and let them browse around the storeroom. They always find something that interests them, and it helps them adjust."

At first he thought she was speaking Katharevusa, the modern Greek dialect almost exclusively used by scholars and intellectuals. But the style and pronunciation were different... older. It was almost a bastard classical version she spoke, though his early learning in Katharevusa enabled him to understand her.

Why was she playing this language game with him? Was she another discoverer of this place, determined to re-create the original dress and speech of those who first served their gods here? If so, she was a failure. The early priestesses of this temple surely spoke Achaean, or something even older.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She turned her head from the task of opening the rear door, and arched an eyebrow at him.

"An odd first question. You may call me Moira, if you wish. Later there will be time for other names, including your own."

There was a moment's flash of humor in her eyes as she spoke, and perhaps a touch of pity, though Pavlos could imagine no justification.

Moira? It had a strange pronunciation. Wasn't that an Irish name? Very odd.

They entered a large chamber that was dimly illuminated by gaps in the marble wall slats, and by one flickering oil lamp. The beam and post construction was genuine. A little more than two meters separated each of the simple columns that stood in even rows throughout the interior. Most of the colonnade was used to support row after row of shelves, upon which piles of dusty memorabilia were laid.

"I will leave you now," the woman said. "You will find food and drink at the far door. Do not pass beyond until you are called, hero."

Again, Pavlos felt the self-assured power in her voice, as well as a benign amusement. He wondered what fanaticism bred such arrogance. He called out to her after she had gone a few meters from him.

"Say, why do you call me hero? That's not my name.

She looked at him. The lamplight flickered in her eyes.

"Is it not? How strange that you don't think so. Most heroes know who and what they are. I shall have to ask Clotho to check her pigments."

She left. Pavlos heard a scraping sound, then a sliding clunk as a bolt was placed.

With a sigh he let his pack slip down against one of the pillars, then he sat on it, his back to the cool marble.

This was all too strange to be true. A "genuine" priestess of an ancient cult... Had she

implied there were others? He wondered what sect they had chosen to re-create. What rites?

He was glad he still had his machete.

Pavlos was growing mildly worried about his frame of mind. He felt detached, numb, almost as if he were watching these proceedings through a protective barrier of cotton batting. Things were being revealed to him in a dramatic sequence. The next scene obviously called for him to go poking through the dusty shelves of this storeroom.

Hadn't he been invited to do so? He grunted as he pulled himself up and went to the shelves that looked most rummaged.

If the storeroom was supposed to catch the interest of heroes, this certainly *was* the section which would have had the most attention. Pavlos nodded in bemusement. This was the weapons collection.

It was an odd mixture, not in keeping with the apparent classical fixation of the woman's cult. The front shelves held an anachronistic assortment of old, but not archaic, weapons. There was a fine Spanish rapier, resting upon a matchlock musket that had to be five hundred years old, if a day. He blew the dust off a flintlock pistol and peered past halberds and Turkish helmets in search of the real treasure.

The benumbed haze kept him calm and complacent when -- finally -- he found what he was looking for.

The bronze was incredibly well preserved. It had maintained much of its original shine and hardness. He wiped dust away from the decorated nasal of the ancient helmet. Its crest of horsehair was still long and stiff, though discolored and flaking. He set it beside a round shield, three feet across, and a short sword with images of snakes running down the haft.

For a long time he merely looked at them. Then he found the nerve to try on the helm.

It fit perfectly.

The musty odor was oddly compelling. Carefully, he fought down the thrill of power he felt. Pavlos removed it and put it back on the shelf.

Maybe later, he thought.

In the middle of the room, near the hanging lamp, he found the books.

There weren't many. That fit. The type of fellow who would fight both nature and his own instincts to come to this place -- whether on a pilgrimage or out of obstinate curiosity, would not have been likely to carry much reading matter with him.

Pavlos smiled as he returned to his pack and rummaged through the bottom flap. He quickly found the flimsy, air mailed edition of *L'Express* which he had purchased at the Hotel International before setting out, three days before. He had bought the Parisian paper on an impulse, while stopping off for tobacco. Now he returned to the "library" shelf and carefully placed it next to a small, dog-eared Dutch Bible and a crudely bound volume handwritten in Arabic.

The newspaper looked good, lying there. Some future... "hero"... might see it and think that a twentieth-century Frenchman had been here.

*Ah, well, Pavlos thought. That's close enough.*

Besides a few Bibles and other apparent guidebooks for a faithful wanderer, there were several crude maps and scrawled notes in many languages. One stretch of vellum came embossed with seals and endorsements. It looked like a treaty of some sort. He could tell that the signatories were Turkish and Italian, but the text appeared to be in some sort of cipher.

He had carelessly flattened one scroll of brittle, burn-etched sheepskin, and read at least twenty lines of very archaic Greek script, before the meter and carriage of the words penetrated to whatever place his critical faculties had taken to hide. He stared down at the ancient libram then, halfway between agony over the damage he had done it with his rough treatment and ecstasy over his discovery.

He read, with mounting excitement, the anguished story of a Titan, chained, yet still defiant.

*"Nor yet nor thus is it ordained that fate  
These things shall compass; but by myriad pangs  
And fortunes bet, so shall I 'scape these bonds:  
Art than necessity is weaker far."  
"Who, then, is helmsman of necessity?"  
"The triform Fates and ever mindful Furies."*

*"Is Zeus, in might, less absolute than these?"  
"Even he the fore-ordained cannot escape."*

How easily the classic language read! After all, Pavlos had seen these words before, many times. No one had ever written as once did Aeschylus... unless it was the sage, inspired or not, who first chanted the rhyme that later became Ecclesiastes.

He dared not imagine that Aeschylus himself had burned the words onto the vellum, any more than Jean Francois Revel had hand-set the newspaper on the shelf, inches away. No, this was surely only a copy of *Prometheus Bound*... but would have to be the oldest copy anyone alive had ever seen.

Prometheus, according to the ancient pantheon of Hesiod, had been of the race of Titans, children of the Earth and Sky, who preceded Zeus and the other Hellenic gods. When Zeus rebelled and drove most of the Titans from the face of the Earth, he nevertheless kept Prometheus by his side, for he grew to depend on the advice of the Titan whose name meant "forethought."

How humanity came to be was never made clear in Greek legend. His destiny as a thinking being, however, was said to have been the gift of Prometheus. The Titan, in his pity, supposedly lent mankind a sliver of his own power -- the fire of imagination, alternately fabled as the skaldic mead of poetry.

For this, Zeus had Prometheus nailed to a rocky crag, where an eagle daily tore at his ever-regenerating flesh.

The story was said to have ended happily. Prometheus was released, coming to a reconciliation with Zeus and Man.

Yet that part of the story had never read as convincingly. It was as if Aeschylus had allowed his fixation on the palpable, growing presence of justice in the world to prejudice his storytelling. Perhaps he simply couldn't reconcile leaving the archetype of justice and pity stranded for eternity in torment.

Pavlos sniffed. A heady, flavorful aroma suddenly reminded him how hungry he was. He carefully laid the parchment on the shelf and turned to follow his nose.

A tray of roast lamb, still steaming on the spit, lay on a bench by the door the priestess had used to exit. That he had heard nothing didn't surprise Pavlos at all.

The meat was tasty, if somewhat unevenly cooked. He chewed slowly as his mind fell deeper into a paradoxical state of numb, bemused excitement.

Somewhere on that shelf of scrolls might be the *missing* portions of the work of the moralistic, unhappy Aeschylus... or of the compassionate, upbeat Sophocles... or why not ask for the long-lost Achaean scribblings of Homer himself?

So many secrets on a shelf of ancient cedar! Could there be a fragment that some Cretan scribe left here, one that might tell of the founding of Knossos or its fall?

Might there be a tablet that would shed light on who it was, who did whatever deed it was, that caused men to build a legend that became Prometheus?

There were things here for which a hundred men he knew would gladly kill.

The bronze helm alone was worth a fortune.

*All right.*

*This is not a millionaire's retreat in the hills. It is not an ancient ruin refurbished by a few modern fanatics, recreating an ancient cult.*

*Everything in this room was left here. And time has touched each of these things hardly at all since each hero left his contribution to the collection.*

*Heroes.*

*Just like me.*

Iron slid along granite. The oaken door swung back, scraping noisily on the stone floor. Pavlos stood. The woman, Moira, regarded him.

"Beginning to adjust at last, I see. But you are a strange one, hero. No souvenirs? Or have you stuffed all our gems in your backpack, hoping to fool us?"

Pavlos was beginning to understand the condescension and amusement in her voice. It hurt, a little, that she thought him so stupid as to choose the poorest treasures, or to attempt a simple theft. He was tempted to protest, but managed to refrain. She looked at him much as his teacher had when he was five and in nursery school. The analogy was probably not unrealistic.

He tried, and found it easier than he had expected, to meet her gaze. There were lines



around her ice blue eyes that he imagined to come from long, sad laughter. They did not detract from the handsomeness of her high forehead and fine nose. Her carriage was erect and slender, yet there was something in the careless braiding of her hair, or the curve of her ironic smile, that spoke of a burden of waiting that had long passed tedium.

"Are you ready to see more?" she asked.

Pavlos waved his hand in what he hoped was an idly grand gesture. "What else could you have that would astonish me more than this room has?"

She stepped back to hold the door for him.

"Everything else that has ever mattered, hero," she answered softly, but with a vatic tone. "Everything else that has ever been."

### 3

Racks filled the rest of the temple as far as Pavlos could see. Only a few narrow aisles between the columns were not blocked by tier upon horizontal tier of wooden doweling. There were thirty-three tiers between the stone floor and the dusty, cobwebbed ceiling; and upon every shelf there lay bolts of shimmering, silky, multicolored cloth.

The arrangement was intricate. As Pavlos walked, peering in the dim light cast by his lamp, he was puzzled at the way the cloth snaked back and forth over the dowels. Only a few folds lay upon one another on each shelf. Yet the fabric on one shelf connected to those on tiers above and below it.

The long, continuous bolt on his left leapt the aisle high over his head to join the one on his right just under the ceiling. The colors in the portion overhead were bright and vivid, though the lamp was too dim to bring out features. Still, something in what little he could see made Pavlos break out in goose bumps.

It was one gigantic tapestry. Only two meters wide, its length must have been kilometers.

The sense of defensive detachment that had never totally left Pavlos now returned in strength. The hand that reached out to stroke the smooth, cool fabric felt like the hand of another man. Glass had never been smoother. Mercury could not have felt more elusively alive under his touch.

He lifted the top fold and held up the lamp, then bent forward to look into the narrow opening.

The threads were too fine to make out individually, yet he felt sure that, holding his head at the right angle, he could easily pick them out one by one. It was an odd sensation.

The pattern of the threads was unlike any he had ever come upon. The weft twisted with incredible complexity, not only in and out of the warp, but with itself, as well.

The design was intricately abstract at first sight. But there was something in the pattern -- the colors and highlights shifted like phosphorous diatoms as he changed position slightly -- that seemed hypnotically three-dimensional. Pavlos was reminded of the holograms Frank had shown him once. He held the light to one side and squinted at an angle; then his eyes adjusted to a virtual image.

*L'Shona the war chief, whose true name was hidden, feared the Powers no more nor less than any normal man. He would die of witchcraft, he knew, as did everyone; and however he died, yes even in battle, his brothers would avenge him by burning a witch. He gave this little thought. It was the way of the world.*

*But now came word that the great king of the Bantu had had a dream, and wanted L'Shona, whose true name was hidden, to come and help divine its meaning.*

*L'Shona was afraid. For the Fire Demon had come to him in sleep, as well, and told him that the Bantu must sweep east, into the land of the small wise ghosts. And he had afterward called in a slave, who he had disemboweled to read the entrails in the sand.*

*And now L'Shona, whose true name was hidden, avoided thinking of his second dream, that the king would do this same thing to him... and thought instead of the east, and war.*

Pavlos stepped back and rubbed his eyes.

The image had come and gone in a flash of color and emotion. He had not so much seen

as *felt* the emotions of a tribal warrior. He had touched the bright mind, the quick, sad resignation, and the complacent cruelty with which he had dispatched the slave.

Moreover, Pavlos had felt undertones from the dying slave, whose life ended in ignorant terror at L'Shona's hand. Pavlos sensed the presence of others -- L'Shona's parents and ancestors; his wives, slaves, comrades, and enemies; and his immediate heirs -- nearby in either space or time.

He felt a weird certainty that, had he shifted his gaze one iota during that holographic second, he would have seen... felt... another instant in the warrior's life, or in the life of a neighbor.

He moved along the aisle until another image flashed at him unbeckoned.

*Xoatuitl hid under a bale of amaranth stalks until the cries of the hunters and the screams of the pursued diminished in the distance. Then, with as little sound as he could manage, he crawled out. There was a chance some followers of the Teacher might be rallying by the lake, where the tools of power were stored. Although he was only twelve, he knew something of their use, and might be able to help them drive back the followers of the Bloodgod.*

*He turned just in time to see the (axe, sword, weapon)...*

Pavlos blinked. Suddenly the viewpoint shifted. He was looking through still another pair of eyes, dimmer, less acute.

*Old Tuitacpec leaned against the wall of the marketplace, breathing hoarsely through toothless gums. He had not been able to keep up with the mob, and had been left to use his (axe, club, indeterminate weapon) upon the prone bodies of wounded followers of the feathered serpent. It was not enough. He wanted vengeance on them, for seducing his grandson away from the old ways of the Bloodgod.*

*When he saw a head emerge from under a bale of amaranth, he gleefully took the opportunity...*

The next time Pavlos blinked he saw an overview. The small section of tapestry he looked upon was colored a sanguinary red. He felt almost overcome by the lust of one half of a city to kill the other half. Taken at a distance, the scene was almost beautiful, in a dreadful fashion.

A small shift of his eyes told a sad irony: that this civil war would lead, within a year, to the fall of the city to barbarians from the north. A centimeter downward, the color red overwhelmed all other shades.

There was, in fact, a lot of red everywhere he looked. Bright, sudden patches flashed at him as battles and burnings. Pink tintings leapt out as oppression and grief.

There were other shades. In fact, Pavlos thought he saw a perpetual effort, in greens and browns of health and chaste blues of thought and art... and especially in the shades of humor and courage, to force the weave in another direction altogether.

The conflict created a blend of terrible, tragic beauty. The tapestry, as a whole, made him ache inside. The stories leapt at him, individually and in groups, comprising a sum of melancholy that finally made him close his eyes.

"Moirá," he whispered.

The pronunciation had fooled him. It was not a borrowed, foreign name. It was an honorific. A title.

"Yes," she said, beside him. "I am She Who Walks, who travels... or used to. Come now, hero. You must meet the Three. The Three Who Weave wish to look upon you."

## 4

Once upon a time the three crones might have stood at a crude, warp-weighted loom, much as did Arachne... or Penelope, weaving as she waited for Ulysses. Now they sat on padded stools. Their broad, vertical floor loom looked no more than a few centuries old. Perhaps some visiting hero had been a skilled carpenter, and knocked it together for them before he...

Before he what? None of the possible scenarios Pavlos could imagine coming out of this

meeting included his being allowed to leave. They had some use for him, to be sure, these ancient meddlers. And they'd had long practice dealing with "heroes" who wanted to take home souvenirs and a story.

Moira beckoned him forward to be presented, but Pavlos interrupted before she began the introductions, partly to keep from falling into another awestruck trance.

"I know their names." He gestured to the old "woman" who sat a bit apart from the loom, with a basket full of woolly skeins at her feet and bottles of dye at her side. She rhythmically drew threads from the basket, winding each on a wooden frame, then painting on various colors with a blur of brevity. On finishing each, she wound the thread quickly onto a bobbin.

Something about her activity struck Pavlos as -- strange. It was as if he watched a stroboscopic image -- like that of a top spinning or an engine turning -- and for every "thread" he saw painted and wound, ten thousand were actually handled.

"Your name is Clotho," he said. She smiled at him crookedly, apparently giving him her entire attention, yet never stopping her work.

"You have also been called Urda, and U-dzu. You prepare the thread."

He turned to the weaver. She was the oldest hag. She looked as frail as a springtime icicle... as thin and friable as late summer grass.

"This is Lachesis," he went on, pointing to the weaver, who didn't even glance at Pavlos. Her hands dipped, with the same stroboscopic effect, into a bag on her lap, constantly bringing forth fresh bobbins of thread, tying the free ends into place upon the tapestry, then flying through the innumerable bobbins, weaving them among each other and the straight strands of warp.

"Her name means She Who Knows Sorrow. She has also been called Verdani. The Norsemen knew her, as well."

The third crone actually paused in her work, and grinned at Pavlos. She seemed the youngest of the three, though not as fresh as Moira. She was the first to speak.

"Well educated, aren't you, hero? Then you know, of course, what these are?"

She held a pair of bronze cloth shears up to the filtered afternoon sunlight. The sight of them made Pavlos want to quail, but he forced himself to stand erect instead.

"I know what they are, Atropos. You seem to be a bit lazy in their use, right now."

The third hag frowned for a moment. But Clotho immediately exploded in mirth. She put down her dyes and cackled dryly, slapping her thighs. Slowly, Atropos resumed her cruel smile.

"Very brave and humorous, hero. When Moira told us of you, we thought you were one of the weak ones. Perhaps not.

Her Greek was even more archaic than Moira's. Pavlos had to concentrate to understand the heavily inflected speech.

"You are right," Atropos went on. "I am lazy because Lachesis, my dear sister" -- she motioned to the weaver, who never once looked up -- "has this last century insisted that I give her more length in the average thread... even though they are more numerous than ever. Clotho and I have been humoring her, though it is we who will decide when this silly phase comes soon to end."

With that she grimaced and leaned over to snip with the shears. With each "click" a rain of tiny bobbins fell to the floor. Pavlos winced as the clacking speeded up to a high-pitched burr.

"Well!" Clotho cried out. "Now comes the part I like second best! Now that introductions are over, hero, what is your first remark?"

She sat expectantly, like an artist awaiting worship, but equally willing to accept vehement detestation as a form of praise.

Pavlos forced himself to answer, feeling a desperate need to maintain momentum until he had a chance to think.

"Your job was to prepare the thread that makes up the length and tone of a man's life. I'd like to know how you accomplish that."

The hag was startled for a moment. The expression looked so unaccustomed on her toothless, satisfied face, that Pavlos felt an instant's triumph. Any uncertainty he caused these furies was a momentary victory for his sanity.

"The first!" she cried in sudden delight. "The first hero to ask me that!"

"Always they ask the *stupid* questions, like 'Who gave you the right'... or 'Why'..." Her voice became mockingly querulous.

Pavlos remained silent. Those were the questions he had wanted to ask next.

"At last a *practical* hero!" Clotho went on. "No prayers to the dead little gods, or futile attempts to exorcise us by calling on One who is *too* big, and has forgotten we exist... no, *this* hero has gained my favor! Come, hero! I will show you *how* it is done!"

She reached for his hand. When she touched it Pavlos felt a brief thrill of power, as if her aura were something palpable and electric.

But her skin felt rough and dry. Her grip was very strong as she pulled him out the broad portico and down the marble steps of the front face of the temple, into the late afternoon shadows.

He was almost dragged through an overgrown carpet of grass and native flax, across an open area toward a forest-shrouded building on the other side.

A small tholos, a roofed circle of marble columns, faced the temple across the open meadow. It stood beneath a great cedar, the largest Pavlos had ever seen. The fluted pillars of the ancient structure were laced with almost microscopic filigree that had a sort of metallic sheen. But in between, the openings were blocked by massive slabs of undressed stone, which clashed with the original design.

With surprising agility, the ancient fury pulled him along up the short stairs to the narrow portico. There she stopped Pavlos and motioned him to be still as she dragged aside a granite stone blocking the doorway.

Clotho looked quickly about the rim of the opening, as if watching for something trying to escape. When finally satisfied she grinned at him and crooked a finger in sly invitation.

"So you wanted to see how it begins, did you? Then look!" she hissed. "No more than a handful of men have ever seen what you now see."

Pavlos peered into the dimness. Beyond the trapezoid of light cast on the floor by the doorway, the interior was gloomy as a starless night.

Yet, off toward the back, there seemed to be a faint glow. It shimmered with a suggestion of an outline that changed before he could grasp it. His mind struggled, and failed to form a straightforward image.

"It looks like... like a hole. Yes, it's like a deep hole in space, but with a hint of light at the end. It feels like I'm trying to see through my blind spot."

"Blind spot... hole in space? Yes! Yes!" she cried.

"You fool! Idiot! You are the smartest of all your race of apes to visit us, and *still* you don't recognize this?"

She whacked him on the arm and almost knocked him over. He would have a welt from that blow.

*Smartest of all? No, Pavlos thought. I'm merely the latest. I'm probably the first arrival who has heard of Einstein... who knows, at least in abstract, that space has shape and texture, almost like her "cloth." I've heard of black holes and antimatter, and I've seen the special effects in those American science fiction films. Perhaps that has prepared me.*

*But prepared me to do what? To devise glib theories, certainly. I can think of a half-dozen fanciful concepts to explain this, whereas all the other heroes had to think in terms of "miracles" and "magic."*

*Big deal, as Frank would say. Perhaps they were better off at that.*

The hag pointed at the shimmering, burning blackness at the rear of the building. Pavlos turned to watch her, feeling the cottony numbness pack more fully than ever around his mind.

"That's where *you* come from, hero," she announced with dry satisfaction.

"See the threads? You probably can't, with them in their natural colors, and not gathered into skeins or bobbins. But if I let them, they would fly free into the sky, to tangle with each other as they liked... each the essence of a human soul, good for a hundred years or perhaps more!

"Some do get away. A few fly off to annoy us. Some become 'great teachers and leaders'..." Her voice was thick with sarcasm. "We manage to kill them off eventually by finding the part of the tapestry which avoids control, where there is a gap that influences the threads around it. Then we choke it off, at last."

"But where...?"

"Fool! Look at it! It is a gateway that was pushed into this world... *my* world... fifty thousand years ago!" Clotho shook her fist into the gloom, menacingly.

"We greeted their emissaries courteously, at first... or as courteously as they had any

right to expect. Oh, they were great ones for having ideas. Claimed to be as old as we were and interested in learning from us. They settled down here and soon began meddling with our human pets! They said humans showed promise!"

Clotho sniffed.

"Oh, you were fairly bright. How you worshiped us! But naturally you lacked the Spark. No ambition at all. No curiosity. And your lives were shorter than this!" She snapped her fingers. "Well, our visitors wanted to let you have some experience with the Spark. They said that maybe if you were given some for a while, along with guidance, you'd start making it yourselves. Hah!

"Oh, we cooperated, for a time, though you never did seem about to learn anything. Finally we started to argue over what *kind* of experience humans needed.

"Zeus agreed with us... at first... him in his sky tower with his thunderbolts..."

"Zeus!"

"Aye." She looked at him archly. "He was their leader. A tricky devil, and worse still with the one you now call Prometheus at his side. He was strong, too. Like the time he helped us do in Aesculapius... But he went sissy in the end, like the rest of his folk."

"You mean the ancient Greek deities *all* had some basis in -- "

"Who said *all* of them? I'm being kind to a smartaleck hero by telling it in a way he can understand! Like wearing this *shape* was originally for you humans' benefit, until we grew accustomed to it and found that it suited our purposes.

"Anyway, who cares what their names were. We killed them all in the end. Or drove them back through their hole. That is all that matters! They got most of us, too; but still we won!"

She crowed and shook her fist at the sky.

"The hole's still open," Pavlos pointed out. "Is this other ancient race responsible for the threads?"

Clotho paused to look at him, head cocked, as if torn between ripping him to shreds for his insolence, or rewarding him for being clever.

"Yes!" she hissed. "We can't close it, or keep them from maintaining a narrow contact with your race. They send a thread of Spark for every human child born, without which you'd all be animals again! Each thread is tied to a life. Break a man's thread, and he dies!"

Pavlos nodded. "Then you *are* the Fates, the Norns -- "

"True enough. And we use their 'gifts' as we wish. We're making a *beautiful* tapestry out of the threads. When we're finished, we'll wipe out every last one of you, and stuff it down that hole to show them what became of their 'Grand Experiment'!"

Her laughter was shrill and loud. It grew and grew until Pavlos had to retreat with his hands over his ears. The sound chased him down the steps and out onto the lawn. When it finally subsided, he could still feel the echo vibrating in his bones.

He looked back once, as he trudged in the gathering twilight toward the main temple. Clotho was still inside the smaller building. He caught a glimpse of her, surrounded by a fiery nimbus as she leapt and hopped about the chamber, grabbing nothings out of midair and stuffing them into a bag.

## 5

Pavlos slowly felt a return to lucidity. He had recollections of wandering in the storeroom in back, searching among the memorabilia... for what, he couldn't remember. He recalled walking among the great stacks of folded tapestry, drifting dazedly, open to the holographic images that flashed at him from the past.

And he remembered pawing through his pack, in the storeroom, inspecting each item as if for the first time. For an hour he shouted into the transceiver, screaming what would have to be incoherence to his friend the astronaut. Frank never replied.

He had probably been out of line of sight. Or perhaps the ancient mountain was shielded, somehow.

And maybe it was best Frank hadn't heard him, after all.

For a while he watched Clotho at work, affixing her dyes to overlay the natural colors of the threads she had harvested. Finally, he sickened of her happy labor and went out into the night for a walk.

He had only their word for it that they were immortal.



Pavlos wondered about that. He still had his machete; and except for Moira, they looked like helpless old women. He had never killed before, although he had been willing to in the past, in border skirmishes and on expeditions into lawless lands. Surely he had the will now.

But Clotho had been terribly strong. And then there were the other heroes to consider. Surely some of *them* must have tried a frontal assault. Obviously none had succeeded.

Similarly, escape was probably impossible. It was too obvious an idea. All they had to do, probably, was have Atropos pick out his thread from among the five billion and snip it. He would fall in the darkness, or be bitten by a snake, and that would be that.

Morosely, he looked up at the sky, with the bitterly clear stars shining overhead. Mount Ossa bulked darkly against the distant skyline.

He considered prayer. The same logic held of course. It was an obvious thing to try... and had never worked, apparently. Still, it might be worth it to make the effort.

Pavlos had never been a religious man. Nevertheless, he cast his thoughts outward for a time. It brought upon him a poignancy like nothing he had ever known; but when he turned around, the predicament remained the same.

With shoulders hunched, he turned away from the chill and slowly climbed the broad steps into the temple. Moira awaited him, standing a few feet from the loom where Lachesis and Atropos continued their labors untiring.

He watched them for a while. Lachesis's fingers were a blur, yet there was a fascination to the rhythmic pattern of her movements. He tried to see the beauty translating from the whirling motions of her hands to the pattern of the weave, but was distracted by the incessant clicking of Atropos's shears. He couldn't make himself believe that he was seeing his own human society in the making, from moment to moment before him, in the microscopic lengthening of the abstract tapestry.

"Lately some of the patterns have developed a degree of spontaneity," Moira said from beside him. "Not only are there more threads than ever, but Lachesis seems to have been giving them their head in contacting one another. It makes little sense, geographically. People seem to be on the move more... and the rate of travel has surprised us.

"I thought you controlled everything we do," Pavlos said bitterly.

"That is true to an extent," Moira agreed, "though what is controlled consists primarily in who a person meets during his life. Lachesis handles this by having thread contact thread -- and in the way men and women feel about one another when they meet. That part is managed by Clotho's dyes. Finally Atropos chooses the moment of death, constrained by the pattern in the tapestry.

"Thus it is Clotho, primarily, who drives the theme of mankind's weaving, for her colors constrain Lachesis to fit them together in an arrangement that has meaning. Of late, however, our eldest sister seems to have become more imaginative in her patterning, causing threads to hop about like fleas upon a rug. We do not know why she is moving you humans about the world so, these days... Lachesis has not spoken to us for centuries, now. We are very interested in finding out how you are managing it physically. That is one reason why Clotho was so glad to learn that a hero had finally come.

Pavlos paused.

"You mean you don't know -- ?" Then he stopped. By lamplight he saw something he had not noticed before. Four very large bobbins hung at the edge of the tapestry. Their size alone was hint enough, but when he saw the long, totally straight trace of those threads, visible among all of the others and leading interminably back into the weave, Pavlos felt a cold elation.

With a cry he leapt forward, the machete gleaming bright in his hand. He seized the large bobbins in his left hand and brought the machete down with all his might.

He felt a slicing... a sudden parting. His blood surged with battle fever. But when he looked down he saw the stump that his blade had become. Four gleaming pieces of steel lay on the ground.

He opened his left hand. The large bobbins were intact, still connected by undamaged thread to the loom. But also in his palm was a curling mass of tiny tendrils, attached to tiny balls smaller than ants.

There was a sound like thunder.

Lachesis finally took notice of him, barely. Almost as an afterthought, she pushed him aside. The force sent him reeling, the bobbins torn from his grasp. He slipped on the smooth marble floor and skittered until he tumbled, jarringly, into a massive pillar.

Atropos laughed.

"Good try, hero! Only one in ten thinks of that! And only a few are strong enough to break steel on us!"

Moira came up to him, smiling with a certain degree of pity. She offered her hand. It was such a natural gesture that Pavlos took it unconsciously. His ears were ringing and the rumble of thunder was growing.

Atropos peered at the section of the weave he had attacked. "And a stronger hero, even still! Not mighty enough to break *our* threads, I fear... but the first in a long time powerful enough to snap a few *humans* he grabbed along by mistake!"

"What?" Pavlos felt dizzy. Suddenly he remembered the curling wisps, the tiny, antlike bobbins in his hand.

"As I see it --" Atropos looked closely "-- you snipped almost a hundred of them... not more than a few leagues from here!"

She sounded impressed. Pavlos stared.

The growling sound drifted in from the open portico, now punctuated with distant coughs and pops. Only slowly did Pavlos come to recognize it. With leaden footsteps, he followed it outside.

Flame leapt from a mountainside no more than twenty miles away. Several explosions followed one another, pealing across the hills like funeral drums. The tiny speck flickered with a hot, blue glare for long minutes, before settling down to a lingering, crimson flame.

"... a plane crash," Pavlos muttered to himself, the cottony numbness gathering around him once again in a protective embrace. "Something straying from the main routes... maybe a military jet."

Moira stood beside him, watching the disaster slowly burn down. Finally she asked, "What is a 'plane'? And *what* is a -- a 'military jet'?"

## 6

Pavlos rubbed his eyes, peered about in the gloom of the storeroom, and wondered how long he had been asleep. He sat by the eastern wall, in a circle of helmets, scrolls, ancient artifacts, and articles from his pack, letting his gaze rest on each item in turn.

Weapons, texts, personal items from a hundred brave men. Each hero must have striven in his own way to overcome the ancient creatures who dwelt here. And each instead served them, by reporting the state of the world he knew.

His gaze fell on the transceiver, still turned on and apparently operational, yet also apparently useless. Frank had never answered. Now Pavlos hoped he never would. If he heard Pavlos's story, he would undoubtedly think his friend delirious, and have a helicopter sent out.

The helicopter would, of course, burn like the jet did, as would anything humanity sent against these hags.

The door at the far end scraped open. Footsteps whispered softly in the dust, and Moira appeared at the end of a nearby aisle.

"Atropos and Clotho want to see you," she said.

"What do they want?"

Moira shrugged "They will want to ask you questions, to have all of your knowledge. They are curious about some of the changes that have taken place in the physical lives of men.

Pavlos held the bronze helmet on his lap, fingering the design along its crest. "How can you manipulate us without knowing anything about our science, our machines... our weapons?"

"They hardly matter, do they?" She sighed. "Have they changed your emotions? The way you treat each other? The savagery and misery -- "

"Which Clotho colors in!"

"Which she only exaggerates! They are there *anyway*, to a lesser extent!" Moira snapped. There was power in her voice, and irritation. Pavlos also thought he detected a note of defensiveness. "It would be impossible for her to corrupt you if you had not the seed already, in copious supply."

Pavlos looked down, avoiding her gaze.

Moira glared for a moment, then shrugged again.

"We were surprised, three heroes ago, to learn of gunpowder. The last hero told us of steamships. Clotho added some new pigments to see what wars would match the scale of

your new toys. The pattern of the weave became more uniform."

She looked pensive for a moment.

"I will admit that I've become curious, these last few years. The number of new threads Clotho collects shows a massive birthrate, as if you humans were testing our power, somehow.

"And there have been times when I have seen things in the air, like the rocs of elder days; things that fly growling through the sky. I have recently come to think that they might not be natural, but something caused by man. Are they these 'planes' you spoke of? They fly so swift and free" -- her expression grew distant -- "much as I once flew, before the war that brought down Zeus's sky tower and ended the glory of my race.

Pavlos hardly paid attention to her words; he remembered something she had said earlier:

*"Clotho added some new pigments to see what wars would match the scale of your toys."*

*No wonder we've gone so long without nuclear war,* he thought. *In our natural hues we're too sensible to go that far. Now, though...*

Pavlos shook himself away from that thought. He looked up at Moira. "Where do *you* fit into all this?" he asked. "Your name, I know -- "

"Means 'Fate,' yes. Another of your nations called me Nemesis." Her eyes seemed to shine, as she remembered. "When we agreed, at first, to the experiment proposed by the emissaries from the Other Place, I was the one who was the most enthusiastic. I worked with the emissary whom you now call Prometheus. I weeded and pruned. I ran to and fro across the globe, tending mankind like my own personal garden.

"You needed so much work, in the beginning." Moira smiled distantly. "It is true that the Spark of Imagination and Ambition needs practice. Your ancestors were always hiding from it, or misusing it terribly. They wasted it on 'magic tricks' and mental powers for which they were simply unready. It took us long to suppress those powers deep within you, until such a time as you were ready for them.

"Yet still I remember the most precocious of my children. Aesculapius, who had so much Spark of his own that he had to be destroyed. Alcestis, who spontaneously invented self-sacrifice, something we had never known. And sweet Odin, who visited me when I was Mimir, sitting by the gateway beneath the Great Tree, long before the terrible war, and offered me his eye in exchange for wisdom."

Moira frowned.

"Then came the day when Zeus declared you ready, and my sisters became afraid. Even *I*, your eldest mother, who was Gaea and Demeter and Amaterasu, thought you were unripe and dangerous.

"I *helped* my elder siblings pull down the sky tower and drive Prometheus into the Gateway. The last I saw of him was his smile. He winked at me, then disappeared. Within a day, the threads began arriving; and Clotho found she no longer had the power to end your race, merely to warp it.

"To do even that much we had to make our transumptive personas almost real. To gain control over the potency of the threads, we were forced to weave *ourselves* into the tapestry, giving, for this epoch, our very lives into yarn to be woven therein.

"Is it any wonder, then, that my sisters and I grow bored or bitter at the passage of time? There was a sweetness that I once knew, in wearing this form, but now I cannot remember it. Now even a rare visitor excites in me no more than a vague unease... and a wish that somehow this labor could come to an end."

Pavlos began to speak; but something powerful stopped him as he looked at her distant, unfocused gaze. It was as if his ancestors had reached out to stifle him with a warning. Something of the experience of his forebears told him it was better to stay small and quiet during the confession of a goddess.

As if to verify this, Moira's eyes shifted to gaze upon his. They were now steely and alert. If lightning had flashed from them he would not have been surprised.

"So get thee up, thou lean-thighed Athenian, and bring toys to demonstrate them," she said. "You will get to ask of us one great reward, as heroes are privileged to do, before giving us your mind and becoming immortal in our memories.

Pavlos hurriedly swept the items on the floor together and stuffed them into his pack. At this stage disobedience was the farthest thing from his mind.

"This is your life!" the Fate cried. Atropos held a tiny bobbin in her hand. She grinned at him and raised her shears high. They glinted in the half-light already streaming in from the predawn sky.

"Look at it! Do you see the colors? Some of Clotho's pigments scraped off this one, as they sometimes do. Or more likely such a strong thread shook them off by itself! And you doubted yourself a hero."

Pavlos squinted. The thread was almost invisible. By rights it should be, in order to fit into a tapestry with five billion others. But he was beginning to understand the odd way in which subjectivity operated here.

He squinted, tilting his head from left to right, and did catch an occasional flash of color. He found it hard to pay attention, though. Irrelevant memories interfered with his concentration.

He recalled the prideful ownership of his first knife... the time he was lost in the woods for two days and came home with a wounded fox kit that became his pet for a year...

There was the shame of being caught cheating on a third grade exam... the glory of serving on the honor guard at an all-Europe Boy Scout Jamboree... his first love... his first expedition across the Deccan of India... his third love... his mission for NATO...

Suddenly he recognized what was happening to him. He tore his gaze from the tiny thread, and the flood of memories cut off at once. He threw his head back and laughed richly.

"A hero's reaction." Clotho nodded. Even Lachesis looked up at him from her innumerable bobbins and regarded Pavlos for a moment. She gave his laughter a dim, satisfied smile that lasted only an instant. Then the dour expression returned and she went back to work.

"Just remember this, hero," Atropos said as he subsided to a broad grin. "I hold the shears. You will now pay the price heroes must, by giving us your mind and memory. Do not be tempted by rash thoughts. You already know that you cannot harm us, but if you try, and do any more damage to the tapestry than you did last night, I can snap your thread as quickly as I cut this one... or this one... or this one..."

The shears flashed, and each severed thread gave off a tiny spark as it expired.

"Stop!" Pavlos cried.

Atropos arched her brows.

"Yes, yes, I understand," Pavlos said, hurriedly. "You don't have to kill anyone else to demonstrate your power!"

The crone smiled. "They were doomed, anyway. But *you* will have a form of immortality, living forever in the minds of my sisters."

*A dubious home for all eternity,* Pavlos thought. *I'd rather spend it in a cesspool.*

"What was this about a reward?" he asked. "Don't I get some sort of prize for cooperating?"

Lachesis grumbled. She bent forward over the loom, muttering to herself. Atropos smiled. Clotho put her arm around her elder sister's shoulder, then grinned at Pavlos.

"Poor Lachesis. She hates this part. It always makes more work for her.

"Yes, hero. You may choose anything that is in our power to give... providing it does not thwart our purpose, or change your commitment to us, and takes no more than a twentieth part of the day to fulfill."

"That leaves a lot of choice," Pavlos said sarcastically.

"Heroes usually ask some favor for one they love, or for the city or country of their birth. We can do all of this for you, hero! Think of your loved ones! It would amuse us to do you, the finest hero we have had in many centuries, the favor of a long and prosperous life for your children. Should your city prosper? Know that the *overall* suffering around the world shall remain the same, but for some years your homeplace will be joyful!

"Choose your favor, hero! You have won our hearts and will not be denied!" And if Clotho's ancient, puckered face were capable of affection and generosity, it showed them now.

Pavlos hesitated.

He was being offered a great prize indeed. It was a clever one, as well.

If he chose, for instance, to ask for another Golden Age in Athens, he was certain the city would, indeed, see some return to greatness... to whatever extent it would not interfere with these Norns' overall plan for this era.

Or he could ask to have his favorite nephew, Theagenis, cured of his emphysema and go on to be the Olympic runner he dreamed of becoming.

But whatever he asked for, someone unknown to Pavlos would suffer to counterbalance

the boon he handed out. And there was another disadvantage. Anything they gave him could be readily repealed if he succeeded in killing himself.

In the feathery unreality of his encounter with the Fates, he now found a plan crystallizing with stark and terrible clarity.

The one advantage humanity had, at the moment, was its new technology. It was no accident, he now saw, that so much had been learned by men in the short time since these creatures had last been visited by a hero. The Spark itself was making a countermove, at last.

It was a weak move, at best. Clotho, Atropos, and Lachesis could stave off anything, even a nuclear strike, by merely sensing an intent in the weave and severing the instigators from the tapestry.

Still, they knew less about humanity now than they had in millennia. They were confused geographically and technically. If the trend could continue while they stayed complacently ignorant of what was going on for another century... until another "hero" came...

By then there might be colonies on Mars... or psychics, trained through biofeedback to hide their thoughts. Perhaps those hidden mental powers Moira had mentioned might have a flowering, if given only a few more decades free from knowledgeable interference.

As a hero he knew his model had to be Leonidas at Thermopylae. His job was simply to buy time.

"I know what I want as my boon," he said at last.

"I want none of the things you mentioned, for even I will admit the aesthetic beauty of this tapestry. I do not love Clotho for her dyes of cruelty and hate, nor Atropos for her untimely knife, but I would regret seeing Lachesis's lovely patterns wrecked for the sake of a selfish wish. Those I love will care for themselves and each other... fate permitting."

Atropos and Clotho stared at him. Moira looked puzzled. Lachesis cast him a sidelong glance. For a brief instant he thought he saw a smile flicker before she returned to the weave. *Twice for one hero*, Pavlos thought. *The others will think you're flirting.*

"Then what is your boon?" Clotho asked sharply. "Do not ask for what we cannot give. You know the conditions!"

Pavlos bowed his head.

"I understand. My request will easily fall under them.

"All I want is to sit before this great loom, out in the sunshine, and contemplate the very latest work that you have done."

"No!" Atropos cried. She hissed at Pavlos and waved the shears dangerously close to his bobbin. "We will not take the loom outside."

"But why not?" he asked. "You are all strong enough. And it won't interrupt your work for more than a few minutes."

Pavlos tried to stay calm, but internally he was shivering. Now he had to stand by it, but that part about taking the loom outside had only been an afterthought, suggested against the vague chance that Frank might see something of sufficient strangeness, from his eyrie in space, to make him think twice about sending a search party after his missing friend. If, by some miracle, the American had heard Pavlos's earlier rantings, or was picking up this very conversation via the transceiver in Pavlos's backpack, he just might add two and two and have the wisdom to keep his mouth -- his very *mind* -- shut about this plateau for the rest of his life.

Anyway, he had made his request; now he had to stand by it.

"Besides," he said, "you ladies all look as if you could use some fresh air."

Moira laughed.

"He's right, sister. You act as though we were still at war and had to hide from Zeus's sky tower. How long has it been since you saw some sun?"

Her manner was hearty. Yet Pavlos thought he detected a hidden note of uncertainty in her voice.

"Clotho and I make the decisions here," Atropos threatened. "We outvote you, young Nemesis, remember?"

With a whoop and a cackling laugh, Lachesis stood up. She seemed so frail and tottering that a small breeze might blow her over, yet she beamed and her eyes danced with devilry.

Pavlos was only slightly more shocked than the others when the frail old Fury stooped, grunted, and lifted the loom into the air.



Moira shouted with delight and ran to keep the tapestry from tangling as it fed out behind the loom. Pavlos took a position by Lachesis's side. Not knowing whether she heard him or not, he kept up a running set of instructions to guide her down the steps.

His old scoutmaster would have been proud.

Stunned, Atropos was forced to drop Pavlos's bobbin and step back. The eldest Norn walked blithely past her and out on to the lawn.

The sun was just rising as Lachesis set the loom to earth. She straightened and dusted her hands. For just an instant Pavlos saw somewhat beyond her apparent form, and was struck by the stark blue power and clarity of her aura, pulsing in momentary visibility around her.

Then, just as suddenly, she was an old crone once more. With a cackling grin, she stood aside and bowed to him. Moira came up, carrying a stool, and set it before the loom.

Pavlos stood still for a minute. His fate was set. In his case it was a path of his own choosing. Heroes were unique in that fashion, he now realized. He would sacrifice himself in a useless delaying action, but not by their whim. Heroes alone pick their own way of ending.

Another thing. No other hero had so upset this household. He was sure of that. Atropos and Clotho would not soon forgive him for what he had done and would do this day.

He felt a great wash of *appropriateness* as he shrugged off his pack. He upturned the rucksack, spilling the contents on the ground.

With great dignity he stooped and brought up the helm of Theseus. Before sitting on the padded stool he carefully placed it over his head.

"Now," he commanded. "Please be so kind as to point out Athens for me."

*Bustling, crowded, noisy streets... Everywhere the dawn colors, gray and brown, blending with the soot and smoggy haze... babies crying... street vendors calling... a worker wandering home drunk, praying that he won't be possessed by the evil again and beat his wife and children... And dreams... the dreams of millions of people soon to awaken. Dreams that twist and curl and wave like smoke... like drifting, myriad strands of thread, struggling to cut loose and fly...*

*Elsewhere, patricians arguing... soldiers dying... fanatics of every stripe, free to choose whatever extreme ideology fit, so long as it matched the fanatical dye... and many good men and women here and there, whose minds would cloud briefly, long enough to make some colored-in mistake...*

*Hatreds persistent in spite of reason... love and honor persisting as well... beauty trying, an echo, ineradicable, of hope...*

The images leapt at Pavlos, filling his brain with more information than he thought he could ever handle. He saw not through people's eyes, but their hearts; and the cumulation of power coursed through him like a hot flux.

He reached out and caressed the pattern, and somehow he felt the individual threads, their textures, their will to fly.

His hand, unguided, passed over and held one thread, floating above the others. It was not his own, he could tell, but one with whom he felt a kindred current. He ran his fingernail along its side, and was surprised to find that the paint flaked off like a molted skin.

"Enough!" Atropos shook his shoulder. She had joined them at last, wearing a heavy shawl over her head.

"You have been sitting there, talking to yourself, for two sixtieths of the daylight. That's all we can spare you. Get up, so we can move the loom back inside and begin our questioning!"

Pavlos blinked. Was that all the time it had been? It had felt like forever. So many things he had witnessed... things taking place in the world right now.

The cruelties were unchanged from those he had seen in the racks. They were larger, more subtle, perhaps... more indiscriminate. But the tapestry showed that the old evils were persistent.

Yet *something* was different. The pattern of the weave, certainly, was opening up, reflecting man's new mobility.

But hidden in the opening was something else. Something Pavlos could not readily define, but which he was determined to protect.

He sighed. Well, at least he had kept the world free of their meddling for a few minutes. It was a good thought.

And now it was time to go.

Atropos stood nearby, holding what he supposed was his bobbin. Pavlos rose and bowed respectfully to Lachesis. "Thank you. I now know that it is the dye to blame. Your pattern is lovely.

Clotho, veiled like Atropos, snorted. But Lachesis smiled.

"With your permission," he went on, "I would like to touch the weave one last time.

The eldest nodded even before Atropos could object.

He stepped up to the loom and ran his hand along the surface, right to left.

Five billion threads.

Atropos held her shears up next to his own thread. His hand approached hers.

The color of the threads guided him. One large spool held thread the color of spite, the other that of contempt. He grabbed those, ignoring the other two, and pulled.

The threads stretched as he leapt backward and, for an instant, he felt triumphant as Clotho and Atropos staggered.

But the tension held when he had pulled two meters taut. Try as he might, he could stretch no further.

Atropos regained her balance. Her nimbus became visible, a fiery dirty yellow. She hissed at him.

"You try to tweak our noses? Why, hero? You know you cannot harm the threads without a more powerful weapon than you have. One of your *guns* might, but you have none. So why do you ask for the mercy of my knife?"

She pondered for a moment.

"That's *it*, isn't it? You *want* to end your existence before we can question you! Clotho! Go and get your dyes! This one knows something. I shall enjoy tearing it out of him!"

Pavlos felt despair. His plan had failed and, worse, he didn't doubt Clotho's power to make him do whatever she wished.

Could he reach his own bobbin and cut it himself?

As if sensing his desperate thoughts, Atropos snorted her contempt and threw his thread down into the jumbled mass along the weave. Never in a century could he find it by himself.

Quickly, he looked about for an alternate plan. He saw the tholos, the small shrine by the great cedar, only a hundred meters away across the grassy meadow. Could he get inside and launch himself into the "other universe"...? It might be possible even to survive, to get help, as well as deny the Fates his mind.

Pavlos's shoulders slumped. He remembered the size of the granite slab that blocked the doorway. By the time he moved it, if he could budge it at all, Clotho and Atropos could physically capture him.

Clotho approached, two bottles in her hand. An instinct he never knew he had told him the colors were Torment and Submission.

In an instant, he knew at last what a hero was. A hero died of no wound in the back. A hero was a gesture... a defiance. In moments he might be their willing slave, but now he had the Spark, and speech.

*"Cavernous shades! You dotard remnants of a wrong path taken! Know this! That you have kept the child restrained too long! That you have filled the world with woe too long! And you have taken undue liberties for ages too long without measure!"*

The helm of Theseus rang with his extemporaneous words. He felt a return of the thrill he'd had on first seeing it. The power coursed through him, imagined as he knew it to be... imagined as the sense of rightness he could feel streaming to him from the tiny building behind him, under the giant cedar. He held the bobbins of Clotho and Atropos tightly, keeping the tension in their threads, like bowstrings.

*"This then, you devious crones! Know that your time is short! Your days are numbered! Yes, they are numbered in seconds!"*

Atropos had stopped. She and Moira stared at him. Lachesis watched with a sober expression, eyes darting from him to her sisters and back.

But Clotho shifted her weight from foot to foot, apparently unamused and unimpressed.

Her boredom was his end, he knew. There would be time for only a few more words.  
Ah, good-bye, life. How sweet to die a hero!

*"Watch then, you degenerate and pathetic creatures of the past, as I, and all humanity, do curse your threads and, in so doing, seal your eventual doom!"*

He meant it merely for show. A handwave that might or might not be a potent curse. Superstitious he knew them to be, at some deep level. Otherwise they would not be caught up in all of this allegorical rigmarole. Perhaps he could leave them with an uncertainty... a faint, nagging doubt that might keep them company in their cold evenings.

He plucked a horsehair from his helmet, and held it out. He brought its tip against one of the taut threads and said, "There is an end to all things, ladies. And your time is certainly long overdue."

No one was more surprised than he when the tip of the horsehair erupted in flame. A slender column of actinic light appeared before Pavlos. It speared down from the sky to land with searing brilliance upon one of the threads.

The smell of ozone filled the air as the bolt of light hunted, wavered, then burned into the slender strand.

Atropos screamed, dropping her shears.

Her nimbus ballooned outward in a violent display of pain. Within it, she whirled and capered and finally spun about to run headlong toward the supposed safety of the temple.

Pavlos suddenly felt a twang, as the fury's life thread *parted!* Her aura erupted as she was halfway to her destination, sending an explosion of sparks into the air. When they had fallen to earth, Atropos was gone.

"Zeus!" Clotho bellowed. She dropped her pigments and clawed at the sky.

"You're dead!" she screamed. "I pulled you down myself! The Sky Tower is no more!"

The column of light hunted, then shifted toward the other thread, Clotho's.

"A little farther *south!*" Pavlos cried out in English. "Steady, you fumble-thumbs Yankee! Steady!"

Clotho howled as the pencil of brilliance struck its mark.

"You!" She pointed at Pavlos. "You knew of this! *This* is what you meant by 'planes' and your new science! You men have learned to fly like *gods*, and throw their lightning!"

The thread began to smoke. Pavlos felt a numbness take over him... a tremendous need to stand perfectly still. "Steady, steady..."

"I'll fix this!" Clotho cried. She plucked her sister's shears from the ground. "I'll kill *billions* until I get those in your sky tower!"

She ran toward the loom, fire and death in her eyes.

And tripped over Moira's outstretched foot.

The pillar of light wavered, almost missing its target. The burning went on, but Clotho was apparently made of tougher substance than her sister. She scabbled on the ground toward him.

"How!" she hissed at him, as her aura began to show ugly discolorations. "How are you doing what the gods could not?"

Pavlos knew how he must look to her. The helm of Theseus might be appropriate for doing heroic deeds, but not for saying what he had to say to her. He removed it, being careful to keep his left hand, holding the bobbin, still.

"That's a very good question, and you deserve an answer," he told her.

"*Deus ex machina,*" he said, as blithely as he could. Then he strained against the tension and felt a snapping parting with the past.

## 8

"... I thought you were delirious! Those random mutterings about *mythological women*, controlling humankind with magical *needles* and *thread* -- "

"Of course, Frank. What else were you to think?" Pavlos held the microphone of the small transceiver close to his mouth. He rested with one elbow on the top step of the broad temple stylobate. He was relieved to find his American friend relatively calm. Only a small tremor in the voice from the tiny speaker gave clue to the shock he had experienced.

"Well, Pav, what was I to do? I was just about to call the police to get some search-and-rescue started when I realized it was sunrise, down there. So I took a chance and

warmed up the spyscope to take a look."

"And saw --"

"And saw a tapestry fifty feet or longer... with colors I'd *never* seen before! Shit. You were sitting there, those women standing around, then you touched that damned loom thing and something *happened* to me!"

Pavlos nodded. "So you decided to take a chance."

"Yeah. I mean, what the hell, right? Everyone else up here was asleep. I figured, what would it hurt to burn a thread?"

"I had no idea your experimental weapons were that good, Frank."

"Nor I! I wish to heaven I could remember what I *did* to keep the beam tight and steady like that! Speaking of which, you did some pretty fine fire control, helping me get that second witch. I almost had heart failure when the first one exploded like that!"

Pavlos laughed. It was good to know that Frank was going to be all right. An awful burden had fallen upon Pavlos, and he would need a friend with whom he could share it.

"Okay, Frank. Then there won't be any trouble at your end?"

"Trouble? What, *me* worry?" There was only a slight touch of hysteria in Frank's laughter. "Look, Pav, I gotta go. Talk to you later. The commander's up and he'll be wondering what I've been up to all night!" The carrier wave cut off with a subdued "click," but the astronaut's tinny laughter seemed to hang in the air.

Pavlos put down the microphone. He stretched back to rest his elbows on the granite platform and allowed the sunshine to do its work on him.

The loom was a few feet away. Lachesis sat in her accustomed chair, once again making a blur of her hands as she shuttled five billion bobbins in intricate patterns through the warp of the tapestry. The rhythmic pumping of the foot pedal sounded like a heartbeat. There was a hint of smile on her parched, ancient face, and once again she seemed oblivious to everything but her art.

Out on the lawn two seared brown patches stood out against the green. Beyond them he saw Moira leaving the Gateway shrine, carrying a covered basket.

She mounted the wide steps of the portico, a distant expression of bemusement on her face.

"They are still coming through," she said. "I'm not as nimble as Clotho was, so a fair number of the newborn threads escaped. That was what we had agreed to allow soon, anyway."

Pavlos nodded. "I've been thinking about it, and I've come to believe you're right. Starting off by letting a few percent run wild -- that would be a fair experiment. If we humans have learned to use the Spark properly -- maybe even well enough to dispense with the threads altogether -- then those children will show it soon enough."

"And if not?"

Pavlos shrugged. He could not help glancing at Lachesis.

The crone had dropped her bobbins and now held Atropos' shears. The clicking sound of lifelines parting went on for a moment, then she sat back and examined. The ghost of a smile returned. She went back to work, weaving.

"We could have taken this thing no further if we tried," Moira assured him. "Lachesis is less fragile than Atropos and Clotho. I doubt it is within the realm of man or god to thwart her. Indeed, this whole affair probably came about because she finally tired of Clotho's garish, unnatural colors, and Atropos's meddling. In the last fifty years she has been forcing Atropos to allow the average lifespan to increase. This may be what she was leading up to."

"I doubt very much if she'll let me wash Clotho's dyes out of the bobbins already in place. There will have to be a transition, or the tapestry will look disjointed -- something she will never allow."

"But I will try to clean a few of the uglier threads, or snip them. She won't mind that. And from this day forth the new threads will wear their natural colors... for well or ill."

Moira looked Pavlos in the eyes.

"You know how hard this is, to forswear all but the smallest interference. I am an old goddess, and I will find it hard to change. Even *you* may find yourself tempted to go too far, when you start feeling more and more of your power as a god."

Pavlos felt a moment's irritation. They had disagreed about this earlier. "I'm not a god, I tell you. Stop saying that!"

She smiled, and touched his arm lightly.

"Not a hero, then not a god? Pavlos Apropoulos, you did not hear yourself, perhaps, when you cursed my sisters and called down thunderbolts?"

"I *told* you, those were --"

"'Laser' bolts instead, yes. And your friend, who is also only a man, managed to overcome all of the safeguards on that secret weapon in his sky tower, *and* his doubts on hearing your weird tale through that talking box --"

"Radio."

"And you do not think these are the acts of gods?"

Pavlos shrugged. Moira made him uncomfortable. There were too many things to think about... things that would take time and open air to consider... a desert somewhere, or a mountaintop.

"By the way," Moira interrupted his train of thought. Her tone was no longer imperious, but that of an experienced elder speaking to a younger peer. "You should know that your presence will be required here in a year's time, when the summer solstice comes."

Pavlos looked at her. Somehow she had made her appearance softer. She must have taken the time to comb and braid her hair properly. In her hand, the basket throbbed with the healthy kicking of a hundred thousand newly sparked, undyed threads. She cradled the basket, smiling happily.

"Why that day, in particular?" Pavlos asked.

Her smile widened.

"Because today's events made it clear to me that the One still exists, and has finally intervened again. I decided, therefore, to make peace.

"On that day, an emissary will come through the Gateway. It will be only for a visit," she soothed. "So you needn't fear any more meddling.

"I merely want you here so that Prometheus can see how big, strong, and handsome his many times grandson has grown.

Pavlos was astonished to find himself blushing. He looked down at his feet while, a few meters away, Lachesis worked her pedals and wove her bobbins. The fresh air carried sounds of a new pattern forming.

## THE END

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

My short stories tend to be very unlike my novellas, which, in turn, have a different flavor than my long, generally complex novels.

The short pieces -- when they are not Analog tales about technical gimmickry -- are often attempts to express an epiphany... a hanging note that rings in the reader's mind after the story is put down, resonating in the sound of the language itself. Bradbury does this so very well. James Joyce was a great master. I dare try my hand at their art without needing to believe I can ever match them.

The novelette (7,500 to 17,500 words) and the novella (17,500 to 40,000 words) fill the span between short works of fiction and novels, a treasured zone allowing richer expression of character and setting without requiring the vast complexity or filler material of a novel. I love the novella form.

My novellas tend to deal with myth, or contain mythic elements. This is not hard to see in "The Loom of Thessaly," but it was also true for the first two portions of my book *The Postman*, which appeared as separate novellas in Asimov's *SF Magazine*, in 1982 and 1984. Comprising together the first half of the novel, they are the reason why *The Postman* has a more mythic tone than my other full-length works.

If science fiction has been kind to the short story, it has saved the novella. The vast majority of the tales of this length professionally published in the U.S. appear in the SF magazines and anthologies.



"The Loom of Thessaly" has always been one of my favorite pieces -- despite the horrible pun that it features, near the end. I am one of those who believe that there is such a thing as progress... that we are slowly getting better. One way we do this is by sympathizing with those who lived in the past, who struggled in almost total darkness toward the dim glow of dawn, to bring us where we are.