

MECHANOS  
By MJ Politis  
[mjpolitis@yahoo.com](mailto:mjpolitis@yahoo.com)

Copyrighted, 2013  
All rights reserved

CHAPTER 1  
CHAPTER 2  
CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4  
CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6  
CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8  
CHAPTER 9  
CHAPTER 10  
CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12  
CHAPTER 13  
CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15  
CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17  
CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21  
CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23  
CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25  
CHAPTER 26  
CHAPTER 27  
CHAPTER 28

## CHAPTER 1

They say he was the greatest mind of the ancient world. They say he was a man who was smarter than the gods. They say he was a man who wiser than Socrates. And a man who was almost as clever as most women were. But maybe not clever enough. But you're asking here...who is 'they'? I suppose that's everyone else other than me, and Mechanos. It seemed that him and me, we were both 'different'. He was different in a good way. He invented all of the machines that did everything in Athens, and also in Sparta, and even Crete. He wrote down the pictures for them on papyrus when he had it, the ground when it was available, and in his head when there was hard rock under our feet. He gave lots of services to people. Gave them what they needed or wanted, and sometimes what they needed AND wanted. Yes, he gave 'them' a lot because he was smart. And me...he told me that I gave 'them' a lot because I was not smart. 'They' said I was slow. Stupid. Dumb. Infected with something between my big ears that made my brain smaller than everyone else's. But when I was feeling sad about it, Mechanos said I was gave people something even more important than machines they wanted, or needed. I gave them laughter. Of course they were all laughing at me. At how I talked with stammer, and words that came out of only one side of my lopsided mouth. And how I walked, with one leg that had a long stride and another that had a short one, no matter how hard I tried to make them talk to each other. And how I gathered up everything Mechanos told me to from the shops in town so he could turn 'stuff' into his really great looking machines, that all worked while I stumbled around all the stuff and couldn't pronounce the names it was called. And while people invented jokes about it al. About me. At me. But, Mechanos said it was a good thing. "If they are making jokes about you, they aren't spending that time laughing at each other and then making plans to kill each other. And it gives us both time to teach them to work with each other rather than to work against each other."

Maybe Mechanos was right. Maybe because I was always wrong. He knew a lot. Mostly about how to make 'stuff' into machines that can help people. But sometimes the machines were used to hurt people, or just make them good about something that would make things bad for them afterward. Maybe it was because he knew so much about machines and so little about people. I wish I could have helped him with that, particularly on the day he needed me most. But, the gods, or whatever smart people were on top of Mount Olympus, didn't let that happen. Maybe I should have gotten smarter. But I didn't. I always saw the good things in people before the bad. "It's a gift, from something beyond the gods" Mechanos would tell me every time I said something about it when we shared bread, olives and soup at the end of every working day. I like working for Mechanos, maybe because I didn't know what it was like to work for myself. But maybe everybody works for someone else. Or works for themselves. Both at the same time, maybe? It didn't make sense but it was the way it was, so Mechanos said. Like the sky being yellow and red both at the same time, even though all my eyes saw was blue. But I do remember the day when me and Mechanos met, and how it all got started.

It was a hot day, I remember. For me anyway. I was sweating a lot, moving things around town for other people in my village who seemed to be cool, even cold. A basket full of fish my uncle. A bail of hay too heavy for his mule for his new wife, who seemed a lot younger than him, and looked a lot like him too. Lots of buckets of water for everyone else whose names I don't remember. But though my muscles hurt, my arms weren't cold. And my feet didn't need to have any coverings on them. And my chest didn't need any cloak, like everyone else did. I felt good about it all. I was used to doing the work. Everyone else was used to...doing whatever they did. Whatever it was didn't concern me anyway, as long as I got to eat at the end of the work day. What else does a man need other than a barn to sleep in, some water to drink and some hard bread to strengthen your teeth with? "Purpose," a small man next to me said just as I sat down to share my evening meal with the pigs, mules and goats in the shack my then owner called a barn. "And a means to carry it out," the surprise visitor continued. Unlike everyone else in my village (the people and sometimes even the animals), he didn't seem to be offended my face, and looked straight at it with a fascination instead of horror. Odd that this man with a face that was the same on both sides, a back he held straight like a tall pine tree, and arms and legs that all matched each other was looking at me, a man who was born as a boy with mismatching limbs, a twisted backbone, and a face that in which neither the eyes nor the nose looked the same on both sides, was looking at me like I was just like everyone else on the outside.

I offered him a piece of my bread. He offered me his hand, introducing himself as Mechanos. And then he did something that no one else had done in a long time. "What is your name, and what is your Purpose?" he asked. Someone asking me MY name? And a question that sounded like it was important? Not that I had an answer to the question or even understood it. But Mechanos seemed to be looking for answers to questions I didn't even know about. Like how one strong man could use a tool to be able to do the work of ten other strong men. Or how one small, weak man who was smart could do the work of a hundred strong men. He first showed me what he meant with a long pole that was flat on one side. He picked the heaviest piece of metal in the barn, a heavy small stove used to cook metal into horseshoes or swords, and asked me to lift it. Since my job in the village was to do whatever anyone else asked me, I did it, but could only lift it a few inches off the ground. Then it fell onto the ground again. Then he set up the long pole on top of a large log. "It's a lever," he said. "I can lift this object higher than you, or a horse, or even one of the gods can, because I have this," he said, pointing to his head.

"A balding scalp?" I said to him, as he pointed his finger just above his eyes.

He laughed, and said I told a great joke. Odd, that he didn't say I WAS a great joke. While I tried to figure out what the difference was between saying a joke and being one, he lifted the kiln above the ground, then above my knees, then above my head. He held it there, counting to three, then let it down. He was tired, and his small arms looked like they hurt. So did his feet look like they were hurt. It took him a little while to catch his breath, but he proved what he said he would do.

By his robe, he didn't look like he belonged in the village. His eyes didn't look like anyone else's either. He was different. And he carried with him parchments wrapped up very tightly. There was writing on them, and pictures, and lines that looked like they could be buildings, bigger ones than I had ever been in, or even seen. I asked him, "Do you make buildings for the gods?"

"For men want others to think they are gods. Men who some men say can talk to the gods," he said.

"Do you talk to the gods?" I asked him.

"Not anymore," he said with a laugh on his face.

"Is that because they are angry with you?" I asked.

"No," he said, coming down from a really big laugh that seemed...kind, and painful. "I've outgrown the need to talk to the gods," he continued. "And even the need to know if they exist."

This I didn't understand at all, but it felt like something very truthful, and kind. I offered him the rest of my supper, so that he would stay and keep talking to me. I asked him where he was from. He named the place, but I didn't recognize the name. He said that was alright, and that I was better off not knowing about the place where he came from. Or the people he knew there. Or the people HE had to do things for who asked him to do things. But he did tell me why he was in my village, the one where I was born slower in the head than anyone else, but bigger everywhere else.

"I need rocks from the hills here, and someone to help me find them, and carry them down the mountains, and help me make those rocks into stoves and other things that people everywhere want, and need," he said. "And as you see by my thin arms and legs, I need someone I can trust to move rocks, and what I make with what's in them. Would you like to be that person?"

I had never been out of my village, and never had the wish to leave either. But maybe I needed, or wanted, to be somewhere else. I heard my mouth say 'yes' to what he was asking. He smiled, placed his small hands on my big shoulders and said something that no one else in my village had said to me, in a long time, anyway. "Thank you," were the words he used. And in the language that important people say to other important people. I felt...important. Good about myself. I thanked the gods with a prayer, but then he stopped me. "Don't be fooled like everyone else is," he told me. "If the gods do exist, they live inside of us, not atop Mount Olympus."

I didn't believe it. No, not because it was so strange to here it. But because I didn't WANT to hear it. A world without gods to keep people in order? A world where we rule ourselves? A world where everything that happens is up to us? A world without the ghosts of my parents and older brother telling me what to do, or the people they sold

me to telling me what to do? No...this wasn't how it was. For then anyway, but all of that was to change very fast.

Mechanos heard voices outside the barn and told me to be quiet. I didn't understand what they were saying, but it seemed that there were soldiers there. After they were finished talking to some more important people, the ones who didn't sweat in summer or freeze in winter, Mechanos turned to me and whispered. "If you come with me, I'll give you whatever you need, and if I can, what you want. But you have to come with me NOW!"

I said 'yes' again. Mostly because I was asked. And, of course, the nickname I had was 'he who always says yes'. Yes, that was how it happened, and how it all started.

## **CHAPTER 2**

The next day, Mechanos took me to my master. Actually, all of my masters. All of my masters said I was a great slave, as long as they shared me with someone else.

Whoever owned me completely had something horrible happen to them a month or two later. With the town leader, who had a title I didn't really understand for reasons I never understood, it was losing his ability to think clearly then losing the ability to raise his right hand up in a fist to yell at everyone else in town. The village blacksmith had an accident at his horseshoe-making stove that broke his left leg the fall after the summer that I made his profits go up many times. The three 'nobleman' farmers outside of the village had crops that were bigger than any they had seen because when I was pulling a plow for them, as I was stronger, and a bit smarter, than any horse or mule they had used, but something happened to the ground or the prices they got for their crops that stole them of their riches.

It was my mother, after my father made her get rid of me, who told everyone that it was because I was a 'gift of labor' from the gods to whoever used me, but didn't own me. So, I had many 'masters' who all shared me. It pleased the gods, and it pleased the villagers who didn't have to pay me very much, and it pleased my brother. My brother took care of me after my mother and father died after they had a fight over who my mother had known before she met my father. He never told me what the argument was about, and took care of himself very, very well as he rented me out to lots of people, some of whom liked what I did for them and some who didn't.

I told Mechanos about the curse of owning me, and that my brother said that whoever banished me from the village would make the gods very angry. Still, Mechanos paid high enough price to my brother to make a special offering to the gods that, an hour later, he said lifted the curse. But Mechanos never said I was a slave. He told my brother that I would now be an 'apprentice'. He said the word like it was 'friend'. Strange, as I never had friends who had less than four legs. Besides, the world at that time was divided into Masters and Slaves, even among four legged 'people'.

"We all have masters," Mechanos said to me the next morning when he collected all of his parchments, 'machines' (as he called them) and tools in a big wagon and I threw what was mine into a knapsack that was far easier to carry. "You have to know the difference between how to serve people and how to please them," he said as we headed off to what would be my new life. This confused me as I felt the sunlight shine on my face in a way that felt...strange. "It's like differentiating between what someone needs and what they want," he explained. I remembered the word 'differentiated', since I could memorize words people told me without understanding them. It made pleasing people easier when they gave me orders. But what you wanted and needed, that was another thing. He explained it to me over breakfast.

I sat at the tables that I normally cleaned, or served people at. It was strange to be eating at the taverna rather than working there. But, Mechanos commanded me to sit, so I sat. And listened. Then answered his questions when he asked them of me. The first one was..."What do you WANT to eat?"



“Whatever you say I should,” I said to him. “Whatever no one else is eating. Or whatever you’re having, after you are through eating it. ‘Leftovers’.” I smiled, remembering the word this time, being proud of the ability to use it.

But he didn’t smile back. He ORDERED me to ask the slave who came to our table to tell him what I WANTED to eat, not what I needed to eat.

I remembered what fresh lamb and oregano smelled like from one of my masters who allowed me to do the serving, cooking and cleaning at his daughter’s wedding feast. With olives that were green, green from the tree and not green from mold. And bread that one could chew without hearing a crunch in one’s mouth. As most of his invited guests didn’t like him, nor his daughter, there were a lot of leftovers, which I was allowed to eat, when they were actually warm! I described that mouth watering meal to the slave who Mechanos called a ‘waiter’. The waiter rolled his eyes and raised his head slightly.

“So, you don’t have that, don’t you,” Mechanos said to the waiter as my watery mouth turned dry and salty again.

“We have cheese, bread and porridge,” the waiter informed my new master. “What do you want?”

“What you have, I suppose,” Mechanos said, disappointed as he laid down a small coin and a large one. “For me, and my apprentice,” he continued, referring to me. “A large portion, please.”

The waiter put the large coin in the jar where the money was supposed to go, and after he saw that his master wasn’t looking, put the small one in his pocket. He returned with two wooden plates divided in three parts that he placed in front of us, then three pots, from which he dumped cheese from one pot into one portion of the plate that fell apart as it hit the plate. Then bread into the second portion of the plate that made a loud thud when it hit it. Then porridge into the third which looked more like mud than food. But, there were no insects in the food and the mold on it was only a thin layer on the top. And, we were hungry. Yet, somehow I still yearned for that lamb and olive ‘stew’ with soft bread. And I think Mechanos was looking forward to such a meal as well.

Mechanos picked up the rock hard bread, dipped it into the porridge and placed a piece of cheese on it. He invited me to do the same, which I did. “Sometimes we don’t get what we want, so we should want what we get, or need,” he said, bracing his mouth for a taste of the food. He took a large bite, inviting me to do the same. To actually eat WITH him rather than AFTER him! It struck me that this was the first time I was eating with someone else since I was allowed to eat with my mother at the dinner table, when my father was away of course, a long, long time ago.

### **CHAPTER 3**

Mechanos needed a good animal to pull the cart he bought for us to go into the mountains, and he asked me who would be the best choice. And who would be MY choice. “Something that is fast, sure footed, and able to handle long distances over hard terrain without complaining,” he said. The best combination of those needs was none other than Linalita, a creature who was part mule, part horse and part goat. A misfit, like myself, who looked and acted differently than anyone else, who I got along with better than anyone else. My brother was her official owner, and if not for me begging for her life and offering to do whatever my brother wanted, she would have been killed for pig meat. But Linalita was the fastest mule in the village, something Mechanos said we would need to get out of places we needed to get out of fast. She also had smarter feet than any horse, something we needed to get into places no one else would go. She could be trained to go anywhere, as long as she wanted to go there.

Mechanos paid my brother far more than he wanted for her, and my brother was glad to get rid of her, for any price. But as I hitched her up to Mechanos’ wagon and flicked the whip on her behind, softly then hard, she just stood there. As if she didn’t want to leave my village. Or maybe she didn’t want to leave me, since she was as ugly to people as I was. Or maybe she wanted me to move her forward the way I so often had to at other times.

I put a bag of grain in a napsack tied to a long stick and placed the long stick a few feet away from her mouth. It was how I always had gotten Linalita to move forward before. An idea which I came up with on my own which worked for me, and no one else. But this time she stood there and looked at me, giving me a ‘that is not going to work this time’ stare.

“There is maybe another trick another trick you know to motivate her?” Mechanos asked me regarding.

“Yes, I am afraid that I do,” I said, as I gave Mechanos the reins, jumped off the wagon, tied the grain sac onto my back and walked in front of Linalita. “We are leaving here!” I informed her. “Trust me,” I said to her as I stroked her neck. “I will not ask you to do anything I am not willing to do,” I said, proceeding to walk in front of her, then trot, then run. Linalita followed me, and I did my best to give her just enough grain to keep her motivated but not enough to feel satisfied. Maybe that was what people were doing to me here, but we were both on our way to...somewhere else. An exciting and scary thing.

My feet got tired after we got over the first two hills and entered the ‘valley beyond’ which was at the foot of a hill that was definitely a mountain. Mechanos told me it was alright to have Lionata eat some of the grain, and for me to have some too. But Mechanos seemed to be working a lot harder with his head than I was with my feet and Lionata was with her hoofsore legs. I offered him some of the grain, but he refused to eat it. He was worried about something. I asked him what it was.

“The future, and what I will make of it,” he said, almost like a god, according to the picture I had of them in my head. But one of the gods who was as worried about people more than the other gods. And a god who needed to climb the tall mountains to get something from them that was more important than his own life.

“I heard that there are precious metals up there,” he told me. “Like these.”

He reached into a bag he had sewn into the inside of his robe and showed me with a bunch of pebbles. They all had different colors and graininess to them. He named the materials in the rocks with words I hadn't heard before. None of them were gold, or silver, I know that. But I did know where more rocks like that were located, since I had been sent up this mountain many times to look for gold and silver by my many village masters, including my brother, who told me to tell everyone else that I was there while I was collecting marble, granite and wood. I Mechanos needed these other rocks that had some gold and silver in them, but a lot of other stuff that no one I knew seemed to want, or need. He told me that it was for “machines that would free Lionata and I from labors of our tired bodies, and open up the Minds and Souls of the masters so they would stop becoming Masters of anyone.”

A world without Masters and Slaves was still strange and scary to me. But a world of machines fascinated me. Not that I knew what a machine was. But it was the way Mechanos talked about these things when he talked about them, or looked at, or write more about them on the thin pieces of wood he kept in his bag, close to his heart, and held tight to his chest.

We let Linaolita rest at the bottom of them mountain, and I started to lead Mechanos up the ravines for the rocks he wanted, but seemed to need, very, very much. For ‘technical’ reasons he tried to explain to me but I didn't understand. But, I liked it that he kept trying to explain it to me anyway.

It was a hard day of collecting rocks for me. A harder one for Mechanos, who was busy thinking about something. He asked me something that then was strange and not very important, but now, and probably to you, is very important. “What time is it?” he asked me as he looked up to the sun.

“Time to feed our stomachs?” I asked.

“According to the clock in your belly? The clock in the sky?” he answered. “Or the clock that measures time in an even more accurate way? Please, answer me.”

“I would if I could,” I replied.

“And what will make you able to tell me what clock tells you it is time for midday meal?” he said, demanding that I come up with an answer. “What do you not understand about the question?”

“What a ‘clock’ is?” I answered.

“Something that measures time irrespective of our perception of it, or even the gods’ perception of it. A measure of time that everyone obeys and serves and agrees to,” he explained. “And something, with these rocks, I will make and have in every city, every village and even every house one day, so everyone can know when it is time to do what. Like determining when it is time to eat. When to sleep. When to work. When to meet people you want to see. And when to...”

His explanation was stopped by three women walking on the hills above us. They were dressed in plain white robes that were made brown by the mud and dust, though the lamb they were bringing with them was clad in ribbons, bows and beads, not a spot of dust on its wooly coat. The skin of these women was white as snow. Their eyes bright as the sun. Their hair flowing gently and naturally as fresh, spring water flowing down the ravines on the mountain down to the ponds to brown grasses needing it to grow tall and green, and animals who needed to eat the grasses so they could stay alive, and by doing so, allowing us to, on two of their heads anyway. The youngest woman’s head was sheared as close as any sheep I had seen, had her hair in a basket, wrapped in a ribbon.

“They remind you of someone? The women, I mean,” I asked Mechanos as he looked at the Elder woman with the eyes that were open the widest and whose face seemed to be the one most tested by life.

“Who are they?” Mechanos asked me.

“Pilgrims on their way to see the Oracle, I think,” I said. “Important people who are trying to look unimportant from places I don’t know. I don’t recognize any of them.”

“Good,” Mechanos said. “Just as long as they don’t recognize us,” he continued, then put me back to work banging rocks out of the earth with a metal spike, and him to work crushing the rocks into pebbles, then dust, then putting them into bowls that had liquid in them whose smell I didn’t recognize. He seemed pleased at what I was able to pull out of the ground and the cliffs. I had no idea how this could make a clock, or anything else, but I did know that he was someone running away from his past and trying to jump onto a future that was in his head, and no one else’s. Why he would want someone as big, ugly and stupid as me jumping with him, I didn’t know. But if I did, I perhaps I would have never taken him up that mountain that afternoon, never let him buy me a meal that morning, and never offer him my supper the night before.

## CHAPTER 4

That night, our meal was cooked with a fire made from wood the trees had let fall to the ground, and eaten with our backsides on hard, jagged rock cushioned with a thin layer of moss. The sky provided us with a clear view of the stars. The steam gave us clean, cool water to wash our sweaty faces and chests and other parts with, and some fish that seemed to be alright with us eating them, as they let themselves get caught by me very easily. Mechanos gave us...something he called 'food' to eat. I offered to cook the fish with the bread, herbs and vegetables he had purchased for our long trip, but my friend, Master inventor and alchemist, insisted on making the meal. "Cooking is chemistry that you can eat, and which makes plain matter into vital Spirit," he said.

"So, how it is?" he asked me with a wide smile as I took the first bite of the pot and let it slide around my thirsty mouth as my stomach begged for a fast delivery of it down to my belly.

"Different," I said with a smile that I thought would make my new friend, and Master, feel good about himself as I forced my throat to swallow what I had taken into my mouth.

"It's healthy," Mechanos then told me as he took a large bite of what he had made and gulped it down to his stomach. "The best herbs, fish, vegetables, and fruit in all of Greece. Combined into a dish that will make the gods of Olympus beg to eat at OUR table down in the valleys below," he proclaimed.

I wondered if his mouth and tongue were as different as his body was, or his eyes anyway, which were very large during the day, and even larger at night when the moonlight hit them. And in that moonlight, I noticed that his fingers were longer than any man his size that I knew, and his head seemed to be two sizes too big for his neck and chest, something I saw when he changed his robes. But as for his mouth and everything inside of it, he seemed to come from a different place, a village, and perhaps kingdom, or world that I had not heard about in stories told at the taverns on most days, nor tales told by Priests on High Holy days. Who else would enjoy a meal that even the crows and ravens would not want to eat? Yes, this was true! No matter how many times I tried to sneak spoonfuls of the meal Mechanos had prepared especially for me to the birds behind me, they refused to eat it. "You try it first," they seemed to say to me, then laughed as I continued to pretend to like it. But, it was alright. Animals have a right to laugh at people, since people usually do a lot more harm to animals than laugh at them. And it was their mountain more than ours.

I always was able to hear mountains better than people. They didn't speak in any language I could understand, but I trusted what they had to say. It was a loud kind of silence that I said that I heard louder than any words from the mouths of people. My brother said that I should not talk about that silence a lot, since it would make me even less useful to people who were his friends, and my masters. But Mechanos seemed to be listening to the Silence too that night. Either that or something the birds were talking about under a bright moon that shone as brightly as any sun during the day. Or maybe something the stream was saying as it delivered water down to the river.

He listened to, and watched, the gentle water flowing over the hard rocks then seemed to fling up small bolts of lightning. Watching them with fascination, he took out a stick and a piece of parchment and started putting marks on the parchment. They were lines and numbers, not words. I don't know where his ideas came from, and maybe he didn't either. But at the end of writing everything down, he looked up to the sky and said 'thank you'. Then to the earth and said 'thank you' again. Then to me and said, 'and most of all, thank YOU.'

"For what?" I said.

"For listening to what I was thinking, and feeling," he continued, with kindness and respect. Then he was hit by another flash of lightning from somewhere I couldn't see. "And for not getting in my way, and not being a threat to me or my Visions," he said as he saw...something else. He seemed to be drawing another picture with his finger, using the sky as a canvas for it.

I asked him what it was he was seeing, and he spoke to me in a language he called 'mathematics'. As a servant of those who spoke many tongues, I was expected to learn different languages, but he said that the language of mathematics was only understood by those who were 'gifted' with the 'special' brains.

"I'm 'special'," I said to Mechanos, remembering that it was the word my mother said I was when my father and brother would keep me out of conversations they were having about 'important' things. "And I'm also 'gifted'," I informed my new Master, but this time like I was a Master, recalling another thing my mother, in her kinder moments, said to me.

"Life gifts people like you with survival because it needs people like you!" Mechanos said back to me with a stern face. And eyes that had doors behind them that stopped me from seeing what was behind them. "Life allows people me to survive only if I keep the masses technologically hostage or entertained," he said, but this time looking behind his eyes to stories he seemed to be reliving again and again, but told nobody. "I am the Master of Magic that the world needs more than it knows, and when the Magic doesn't work, or is seen to not be working, I will be considered more useless than any slave. More worthless than any animals. And more worthless than any excrement that comes out of their asses."

With that, he informed me, in very plain language, that he wanted to sleep, and that I would be needed to guard the wagon full of drawings, and rocks we had collected and new 'chemicals' Mechanos made from them. I was angry with him at first, but then when I looked at him trying to get to sleep, battling with demons behind his closed eyes, I pitied him. It was then, for the first time in my life, that I felt important, at least to another person. I thought it would make me feel happy. That it would make me laugh with joy like my brother and his friends in the taverna. But instead it made me shake with fear, feeling something cold in the warm gentle night winds. The Silence of the air, and the hush of the mountains said that something was happening. When I asked the birds to translate it into a language I could understand, one of them cawed at me. His friend flew up to a branch of a tree above me and spoke to me with the opposite end of his 'alimentary tract'. Linalita snorted a smile my way. Feeling what she wanted to say, and trying to see if it was true, I laughed inside of my cheeks as I wiped the bird droppings off of my sweat-caked face and worried eyes.

I went to sleep with one eye open, as I had done for many other Masters, thinking that this one was someone 'special', both blessed and cursed, in ways that both of us would have to discover very soon, or face the wrath of man, gods and birds that crapped out more than shit from their backsides.





## CHAPTER 5

My new master would not tell me where we were going, and I didn't ask him. But clearly he was not happy when Linolita decided that she was more interested in a stallion on the other side the road than moving down the path towards our destination. The old mare effortlessly destroyed what was left of the broken fence between her and the young stud who 'winked' a 'hello, how are you doing today, you old hag' to her like a young fillie, her tail up in the air, her neck arched and her feet floating more than trotting. Thankfully she didn't take the wagon with her, nor did she take us. Mechanos cursed at the beast in all manners of insults in languages I didn't recognize. I just accepted it like it was one of those things that happens. Like a large bruise on my leg the rope Linalita made when I tried to hold onto it too hard. Or the larger cut on Mechanos' arm when he fell down to the ground, his leg stuck under the box of the wagon.

Coming to our rescue was a large man who introduced himself as Unitos. He was more like a wild boar than a man, and next to him a small woman who seemed much smarter than he was but who kept herself silent. Unitos lifted up the wagon while his woman (who seemed to be more like a goddess than the wife, or daughter of a big, manlike boar) asked if we were alright. I lied and said 'yes'. Mechanos didn't, and was very loud about how much pain he was in, and the anger he felt any four or two legged creature responsible for it.

Mechanos accepted the young woman's help into the house, and the apology from her that the stallion should have been fenced in. She pointed out the break in the fence to Unitos, who then hit himself very very hard. He seemed to take the whole thing very personally. She introduced herself as 'Wandelina' with a warm, inviting smile, then softly suggested something to Unitos that made him go away and fix the fence, and some other things.

Wandelina seemed to be the one taking care of Unitos, but she let him think he was taking care of her. That was the way it seemed to me when we shared a supper with them inside the house, while the ugly 'half mule half horse' Linalita was sharing

something else with the royal-looking Persian stallion. I was told that it was not something that would be bringing her babies, since I had been told by several 'horse' people (all of whom of course considered themselves the most skilled expert in my village) that Linalita was too stubborn to have any children and that only mothers who stopped having minds of their own would have babies, be they mothers with two or four legs. I was told lots of things by people, and since the gods made people suffer for lying, people were smart enough to tell the truth.

One truth about things was that Wandalina really enjoyed taking care of Mechanos. And she was good at it. She gently picked the dirt and rocks out of Mechanos' wound, then gently put a slab of something sticky over it, then stitched up the sides of it so it looked better than new. Something about her hands made the pain in his leg disappear. But something about the way she moved her fingers, and held her eyes, that made the worry in his head ever worse. "I'm alright," he kept telling her, but he wasn't.

Unitos didn't seem to be worried about what Wandalina was doing, and talked to me about 'man' stuff. He asked me if I had heard any news from Spartans about the Athenian soldiers. Or from the Athenians about the Spartan warriors. Or from anybody about the roaming 'bandit pirates' from Crete, who were twice as mad and three times as unreliable as any Athenian or Spartan. I told him I didn't know anything, which only made him ask more questions. I told him that I was just a man who had never fought in any war. And that I never yelled at anyone except mules, goats and, when I was frustrated enough, the gods.

"You mean you never even yelled at a woman!" he asked me as I ate the bread and fruit put in front of me, doing my best to not share the large jug of wine he was drinking, and trying to make me drink too. "Every woman wants to be yelled at! They deserve to be yelled at! They like being yelled at, then hit, then thrown onto a cot and stripped naked, right?" he asked Wandalina with a bold laugh that had more wine than air in it with each drink he took from the jug.

Wandalina agreed with him, and pretended to laugh at the things he kept saying about what women liked, which he thought were funny. Mechanos pretended to smile, but he was more concerned with Wandalina's safety than his own.

"So, have you ever slept with a woman?" Unitos asked me with a big loud mouth filled with rotting teeth. With his non-drinking hand, he grabbed a big, sharp dagger that he seemed prepared to use on me rather than the loaf of bread on the table or the rump of dried meat next to it that smelled more human than animal. "Tell me the truth!" he insisted. "Have you ever slept with a woman?"

"Of course he has," Mechanos said, before I could tell Unitos that the only women who I slept next to was my mother when I was young, and Linalita when I was older. And that all I did was sleep. "You want to know why my apprentice got such strong muscles?" Mechanos added. "Because this past winter he had sex with 4 women

at one time, for ten nights in a row! And as for his bent over back... three of them were rumored to be daughters of Athena who he broke his back pleasing in ways that they had never been pleased before, even by their husbands on Mount Olympus! ”

“And what did he break on them!” Unitos asked with a voice that was more slurred groans than words. He grabbed hold of Wandalina and threw her into my chest. “Here! Show me how you pleased the wenches in the valley and the goddesses from...where do the gods and goddesses come from again?”

“Olympus,” Wandalina said, handing Unitos another jug of wine, which he drank down with a series of five uninterrupted gulps. “Or somewhere else far, far away, where they’ll keep you safe, and happy, and...” she continued as his eyes became sleepy and his head fell into a bowl of porridge on the table, and his nostrils blew bubbles into it.

Wandalina got off my chest, then stroked Unitos’ porridge soaked beard. “He’s not a bad man, just one that...”

“...You can’t leave, even if you want to?” Mechanos inquired, gently.

“Or need to,” she replied, looking at the man who she had feared when awake, and pitied when he was asleep. “Besides, I have no where to go. The gods gave me a smart brain, and him a defective mind. And, we have an arrangement.”

“Does he own you?” Mechanos asked.

“Actually, I own him,” she confessed. “A slave he was, once, and a good looking one too. One that my father gave me in place of a husband. Till I...” Tears ran down her cheek, making her lips quiver rather than speak.

“Till you what?” Mechanos asked, demanding an answer.

“Till she did something to make his beautiful body and mind ugly?” I found myself saying, as if I was channelling something from my own mind that was far smarter than I ever was.

“Yes,” she said to me, grateful for the secret to have been found out by somebody. “I went to a sorceress who said she was a healer. I asked her to turn my ordinary slave-man into a god, between the ears and below the neck. The herbs she told me to give him turned him into a monster, bit by bit, in every part of his body and his mind. And when one day I asked her what was going on and why, she said ‘he was my slave before he was yours, and I want you to know that’.” Then she laughed, and threw back her long, red hair and her left blue eye looked like a black hole while her right brown eye got larger and larger---“

“---till it glowed like a bright white light that turned green?” Mechanos said, remembering something horrible in his own past. “And when you asked her what her real name was, she said ‘you couldn’t pronounce it’?”

“Yes,” Wandelina said to Mechanos, her own eyes alive and hopeful somehow. “How did you know? But you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, or can’t. It’s just good to be with someone that who...knows things, and perhaps people.” She hugged Mechanos as if he was a god rescuing her from demons. She wanted to give her everything of her body, mind and soul, and stoked his weary head with her life-promoting fingers.

“I know too many things, and not enough of the right people,” my Master said, pushing her gently away from him, knowing that as it did, she was falling down to the ground in her heart, though her feet still held her body up. “And I have done too many things. And have many things to do to make them right. Like...” He stared at me and Wandelina, as if he was trying to size up a stallion with a mare. Then he put us together, chest to chest, finding it disturbing that we didn’t ‘fit’ with each other. But we were different ‘animals’. Certainly different kinds of people, on the inside and the outside. But, this didn’t matter to him. “You two...seem right for each other,” he declared, seeing something beneath my deformed, skin baked skin and her smooth, white, blemish-free flesh. Then he looked at me, alone. “I command you, my friend, to become...”

“Pleased?” Wandelina asked to her new liberator Mechanos, about me..

“I want you to become experienced,” Mechanos said to me as he tied Unitos up with a rope, then to put some powder from a small sac in his pocket into the side of his slumbering, drooling mouth that made him sleep deeper, and ‘happier’. Then Mechanos turned to Wandelina and said “And I want you to become free.”

“Of him?” Wandelina said, pointing to the deeply sleeping Unitos. “What will we do when he wakes up tomorrow?”

“Let him,” Mechanos said. “By that time we will all be far away from here, and hopefully the sorceress who make him like he is, and you like you are, and me like I am.”

Mechanos had a private conversation in whispers with Wandelina and then handed her something in a big sac for the table and something in a small one that she put into a jug that she closed shut. He said ‘good night’ to me, then went outside to sleep with Linalita and her stallion, ordering me to sleep with Wandelina, and to let myself be “happy”. An emotion Mechanos seemed to never be able to have and which didn’t fit around his always-thinking eyes. Then again, a wide smile on his mouth would clash with, or push against, the worry lines on his always thinking forehead.

## CHAPTER 6

Unitos was the only one who really slept that night. From the cot where Wandelina took me, I heard him snoring deeply. His arms were still tied to a post, reinforced by some 'metal rope' from Mechanos' wagon which he called 'wire', which Mechanos had apparently put around the 'boar-man' after Wandelina had taken me into the room next to him. Unitos' legs, which were now bound by chains, danced in a dream he was having. This time, my dream was in the world where people didn't sleep. Wandelina's face was like no other that I had ever seen with the light shone on it by the 'lamps' which Mechanos had built and left behind on the table for us. They shone brighter than any torch I had seen, or fire I had kept going, or even the moon, or even the sun. It was amazing to me to see such light after the sun went down.

Wandelina's face changed every time I looked at her, as if she was many different women. Maybe it was her. Maybe it was the light from the magic lamps. Or maybe it was the wine that she insisted I drink, in small sips, and the dried fruit that she told me to nibble on like a 'philosopher king' rather than gobble down like a hungry slave. When her fingers touched my skin I felt pulses of something going through me. And a feeling inside that was terrifying and assuring, both at the same time. Every time I tried to ask her what was happening to me she 'shh'd' me with a gentle firmness in her eyes. I closed my eyes as she undressed me and stroked me between my legs, under my arms, and around my shaking lips, but every time I did, she told me to keep them open.

I don't know why I trusted her, but I did. I had to. I was told to by Mechanos, and her. When her body was pressed next to mine it felt like we were the same body. A big body that was both very small and very large, both at the same time. Then she stroked the organ I use to urinate with and it got hard. Like it was standing up on its own, stronger, firmer and more sure footed than any of my legs ever did. Then she guided it between her legs and it got lost inside her. As indeed I got lost inside of her. And then something sprung out of it, like a burst from an underground spring bolting up to the sky. I bellowed something that must have sounded awful as it was coming from inside of me,

into that third leg, and going into her. She did too. And it felt like a lightening bolt connected the two of us. Then my whole body went limp. My hunched back seemed to straighten up as it fell down on the cot, every knot in it untied somehow, and the inside of my legs felt sticky. Then, as she hovered above me, her hair dangling onto my beard, she kissed me on the cheek, saying that one day ‘someone who is really special will kiss you on the lips.’ Then she stroked my hair, like my mother used to do, and wished me ‘good dreams’, like she used to do. But in a different way than my mother did.

She went into the kitchen of the house and washed herself up, then brought a cloth drenched in water that she used to wash me too. Like my mother did, but...different.

“Have you done this with other women?” she asked me in a voice that was old and young, again, at the same time.

“My brother has done this with many women, and he said that if I did it, I wouldn’t like it,” I answered.

“Well, did you like it?” she asked.

I nodded ‘yes’ with my head, and a smile that felt...different. She got up from the cot, but I reached out and pulled her back.

“Your friend only paid me for one,” she said, like an smart parent talking to a dumb child. Like my parents and my brother talked to me, as I remembered.

I felt small again, till she turned around and smiled and said. “But you will pay me very well for one more time, somehow.” And with that, she stroked my body again, kissed me under my jaw, and nuzzled her small, goddess-like head under my big, thick animal-like neck. My third leg started to rise again and she was pleased. As was I. And after the spring from my loins came out again, I slept very soundly. So soundly I don’t remember going to sleep, nor dreaming, nor being anything I used to be. Everything looked and felt different in that room with the ‘lamps’ that Mechanos had built to make such magnificent and ever-changing light during the nighttime. But...the sun did come up the next day, and everything under it was...different, and the same.

## CHAPTER 7

The angelic goddess I had slept with the night before looked like a woman born of mortals the next morning. She seemed serious about a lot, but then again, there was lots to be serious about as I loaded everything she valued onto the cart and we hitched up Linalita and her new 'boyfriend' to the harness. Unitos was still slumbering inside, his eyes closed but whatever he was seeing behind them not as pleasant as the night before. The ropes and wires around his arms and feet were still intact, but a few had broken over the night as he twisted and turned in them during an uneasy sleep.

"We have to do something about him," Mechanos reminded Wandelina.

"I know," she said as I loaded yet another heavy sac which was kicked after something inside of it made a sound that frightened Linalita and angered the stallion.

A lute, as I recall the name of it, correctly or incorrectly, an instrument with many strings connected to a curvy piece of metal on both sides, fell to the ground. I held onto it and asked Wandelina, "Do you know how to play this?"

"I used to," she said, with regret in her voice. "I used to play it very well."

"Why didn't you play it last night?" Mechanos asked her.

"It makes me feel calmer, and more at peace with myself. It makes Unitos more angry and at war with...well, everything and everybody," she replied.

"Including you," Mechanos said, pointing to several large bruises on her legs and arms in places I had not seen the night before.

"I deserved what he did to me, Mechanos" she said.

"Did you ever fight back?" he asked.

She looked downward, and shook her head 'no', maybe from shame, and maybe from fear.

I tried to hug her, but she pulled away, and turned her back on me and Mechanos. She looked up to the sky, as if thinking about something again.

"You're not ready to go with us, are you, Wandelina," Mechanos asked, with a sadness that comes with knowing too much, addressing her by name for the first time.

With her back turned and sad head turned downward, she shook her head 'no', again.

"You want us to unpack these things of yours?" he asked.

“Yes” she said with a nod of her head.

Mechanos motioned with a small flick of his finger for me to make big movements with my arms, and legs. I started to unload everything of Wandelina's. They felt much heavier coming off the wagon than going on. Maybe it was because of who we were not going with to wherever our next destination was. Though Wandelina hadn't smiled at me all morning, being around her made me feel stronger and somehow smarter. Linalita didn't care much for being separated from her new mate as well. She bucked and whinnied when I took the stallion and put him back in his pasture behind the now repaired fence while Wandelina walked back into her 'pen'---the house where she, as Mastress, was held captive by some kind of arrangement she had made with her slave, Unitos. An arrangement which now the slave didn't accept.

Linalita woke up Unitos before I could cut the ropes around him with a knife, and he burst them open like a wild boar. He grabbed hold of the knife with one hand, then Wandelina with the other and put it to her throat.

I don't know why, or how, but I saw my trembling hand go into a clenched fist that found its way into Unitos' belly. Then when he doubled over, I saw my hand pull the knife out of his hand and stab him in the stomach, five times. Then three times in the chest. Then that same hand, as if possessed by the blood on it, grabbed the organs between his legs and cut them off and stuck them in his mouth as he struggled to take in air, while spitting out trickles of blood that became rivers. He fell to the floor, shaking between my shaking legs till he lay dead as a rock.

Sense had come to my head as I once again could see where I was. I turned around to Wandelina, who had tears in her eyes. She pushed me aside, with anger rather than thankfulness, and kissed Unitos' dead body desperately, but the harder she tried to rock him back to life, the faster color left his face and life left his shocked eyes.

I looked to Mechanos for an answer as to what had happened and why. “What kind of demon just possessed me?” I asked him with my terrified eyes.

He put his small, slender palm on my big, shaking shoulder and said “You have become necessary evil, God help you,”.

It didn't make sense. Especially about the word 'God'. “There was one God, and not many gods?” I thought, but didn't say. The gods would be angry with me if I did, after all. But matters of mortals were necessary to do now.

Mechanos gently put his hands on Wandelina's back, and shared the grief with her. Between bawls, he told her, “We all have to get out of here. This place isn't safe for us anymore.”



“Yes, I know,” Wandelina said, wiping off the tears from her face as more from her eyes laid in waiting to come down.

“And we have other places where we have to be,” he continued.

“Yes, I know,” she said, sniffing in the rest of her tears and standing up. “We should say something for his safe passage to a better place in the afterlife.”

“Or play something for him,” Mechanos said, giving her the lute. “Music can heal sick souls, and ressurect dead ones, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, plucking three times at the strings, checking to see if she would get beaten by Unitos. He instead remained on the ground, but he did seem to hear something. I am not sure if it was the flickering of Mechanos’ lamp in the room, the way the sun hit his face, or just something I wanted to see, but Unitos’ lips seemed to turn upward into a smile. Then as Wandelina played with courage and love, rather than fear, the lips turned upward some more. And when she let herself smile while playing, a laugh seemed to come to Unitos’ face, eyes and, I think, Soul. Then something rose up from the ground into the air. Maybe I saw it because I wanted to. Then the wind blew in through the windows. Then the wind stopped. Then I looked down at Unitos and only saw dead flesh. Maybe because I was somehow dead myself. Even when the very Alive Wandelina put her arm around my waist and let her body lean against mine. Then she packed the rest of her belongings back on the wagon herself.

“Well,” Mechanos whispered to me as I looked at the first armed man I had ever killed, after having run away from so many wielding weapons of all kinds. “It looks like today you are a man.”

“With a new name?” I said, noting that he had never addressed me by my ‘village idiot’ name.

“What do you want to be called?” he asked me.

I pondered what name I would be now that I had reached manhood between the ears, only 15 years after my body had sprouted pubic hair, a beard, and now a very functional penis. I could not think of one. There was no mortal I knew who I really wanted to be like, and the gods, ideal men to me anyway, would be offended if you called yourself by names they had. But there was name I could grow into. “What if you call me ‘Mechanosina’. It means ‘small Mechanos’.”

“So you could grow into becoming me?” Mechanos said. “I will not burden you with that,” he continued. Then he looked up to the sky, as if he was seeing or creating a future there. “But the world may burden you with such a curse, soon enough,” he said. “So, for the moment, I will call you ‘Brother Apprentice’.

And with that, he went outside to ponder things that were beyond what I could see, and think, but somehow were closer to what I could feel, gods/God help me.

## CHAPTER 8

We went through a few more villages and towns that I did not know the names of, and didn't care to remember. All I do remember was that we were going South, and that we had to move quickly, though the rest of that season moved slowly, and we seemed to be going in more circles than straight lines, especially when there were soldiers in the towns we just left. And that we all used different names when people asked us who we were and where we came from. I suggested to Mechanos that if he didn't want anyone to know who he is, he should act like someone else. And at one town that I remember very well, there were more armed soldiers than unarmed slaves in the valley. On the hills around the town spring grass that had turned brown and dried up creeks with barely enough water to keep a lizard from dying of thirst. This was a place that had more people than livestock in it, as most of the animal population was strung up on posts with their thin flesh dried out. Soldiers guarding every one of their carcasses. Those animal carcasses were once living rats, goats and a variety of even bigger beasts resembling Linalita and her new 'royal' stallion companion, who now was HER servant.

"We have to be extra careful about this place," Mechanos said to me. "And, yes, I know, we should have tried to go around it, like you suggested, Brother Apprentice, but now that we were spotted here it makes things complicated," he continued, noting that an high ranking soldier below had taken notice of our wagon on the hilltop above.

Wandelina suggested that I be the Master and Mechanos be my slave, and my slave as well. While Wandelina pretended to change her robes, diverting attention of the officer and his friends, I snuck behind the wagon and exchange clothing with Mechanos. We then proceeded down the hill toward the village Mechanos insisted that we had to go through towards our final destination, which for all I knew could have be anywhere from an abandoned farm in Rhodes to the peak of Mount Olympus.

On the way into this village, which to me seemed more like a city as we approached it, Mechanos motioned for me to sit up straight and look straight up, while he hunched his back and looked downward, trying to look as 'dumb' as the animals pulling the wagon, which was now covered with an old sheet, the holes in it filled with grass, dirt and manure . Wandelina covered her head with a shawl, but no matter how much she tried to hide who she was, her beauty shone through, particularly when she played her lute, something that Mechanos insisted on her doing. She put a crazy look in her face, one that made her interesting but not trustable. Like someone who is 'special' in ways that most people would never want to be, but maybe sometimes want to be. And there were no 'special' people in this town.

Odd...the Masters in this town seemed to be well dressed, but thinner under their robes than any other places we had been through before. And they all talked with voices that were parched with thirst, so it seemed. But, the music made them smile.

"Keep people like these happily entertained, and they keep us alive," Mechanos whispered to me as an explanation for his plan this time, in this town. "We are

musicians, on our way to Pelopenosis,” he continued as several groups of soldiers guarding town wells let us pass without inquiry into what seemed like better armed soldiers who were all about ‘inquiry’.

“Where is Pelopenosis?” I asked. “And why are we going there?”

“The festival, of course,” he replied, seeming to be impatient with me. “You have important business there.”

”What festival?” I asked. “And what important business?”

“Any business that makes these people feel Unimportant!” he blasted back at me with a grunting whisper. “With important people who don’t exist. Believe that they do, and that they are important, and they you are important, and you will make these idiots and assholes here think that they are unimportant.”

“So I should lie,” I said.

“Idiots and assholes can’t handle the truth,” he said, with sadness in his eyes. “And pity for the people we looking at. Some seemed rich, others were poor.”

“And how does one not become an idiot or an...asshole?” I asked, having just caught on to what ‘asshole’ meant.

Mechanos’ mouth opened like a spring of cool water on a hot, desert plateau. “By trying to be something better than what you are, and what people tell you that you have to be. By not accepting your limitations. By seeing with open eyes instead of closed ones, no matter how much the Light that enters them hurts,” he said in words, while Wandelina was doing her best to teach me with notes, and music.

I don’t know if I felt ‘important’, but I did feel good about myself as we continued the illusion that felt like a very healthy ‘reality’ At least we were not arrested and beaten like the thirsty commoners who tried to sneak in behind the soldiers to steal a cup of water from the buckets they were guarding.

We finally reached our, or rather Mechanos’, destination point. A blacksmith shop and a shack selling herbs, potions and stones fashioned into jewelry. He stopped and looked at both places, scratching his chin, then got unexpectedly worried that the signs on the door said, as he read them to me, that the shops were closed for the day and would open some time tomorrow, ‘gods and even fiercer relatives willing’. Across the road was an Inn, from which a big burly man came out and asked me who I was. Wandelina stopped strumming her lute, as if she had been visited by Unitos’ ghost. Indeed, this Innkeeper’s face bore a frightening resemblance to the man she had just left dead, to save her own skin, and ours as well. Perhaps it was his brother. This ‘Unitos’ asked me again who I was as she hid her face as best as she could.

“Ionicus,” I answered. “On my way to the festival in---

“---And her?” the big burly man who had the arrogance of my brother, the cleverness of my father and my bullish and brutish body, all combined into one asked me regarding Wandelina, whose face he had looked at very clearly and with much interest.

“My woman,” I boasted, of Wandelina.

“And her name is?” he challenged.

I felt my lips shake, about to answer in stutters and stammers, and thought as hard as I could about what to answer.

“She is whatever you choose to call her,” the Innkeeper smiled with a mouth full of ‘ugly’ reeking of strong wine and freshly killed meat.

Wandelina answered him with a few notes on her lute and a defiant stare that accompanied the angry tone of the ‘song’ she seemed to be inventing.

“And what do you call that ‘song’?” the Innkeeper challenged.

“It has no words. Just like her,” I found myself saying, feeling a brilliant idea coming from my head, which till I met Mechanos, was ‘stupid’. And till we found Wandelina, ‘sleeping’. “She talks to people with music,” I explained. “An accident she had when she was a child. And a sickness she got that even Hippocrates could not explain. Her father treated her like she was his wife when she was just a girl. And one day, she decided it was enough, so she killed him. Along her uncles who treated her like their own wives as well. Some with knives, some with potions and some in ways that only the gods know about, and perhaps with the help of the gods. The gods let her live, but only if she was to never speak about what she did and what the gods did to help her survive.”

I took in a deep breath of the dry air as the Innkeeper absorbed the story. From the corner of my left eye, I saw Mechanos give me a ‘keep going, you are doing well, Brother Apprentice’ nod. From the corner of my right eye I could see Wandelina, and Linatia, laughing inside their cheeks at the way I had turned danger and tragedy into something...funny! I was MAKING jokes instead of BEING a joke. But, jokes are always about someone being offended or oppressed, and the Innkeeper seemed to be the right victim for this Victory to be continued.

“We need a place to stay for the night, and it would please the gods, me, and the king of Pelopenisia, and his Nobles, Therolokis, Hiilokis and of course Mimlokia, if you give us a private place to stay for the night,” I said, making up pictures in my head to match the names I had just invented myself.

“Of course,” the Innkeeper said with a bow.

“With the best food you have! Lamb and cheese, and black olives!” I continued, my neck straight, which was painful for my usually humped back, but the most pleasureable pain I had ever experienced.

“Of course,” the Innkeeper, who was now MY servant, continued, with an even deeper bow.

“And good, clean water for our horses,” I said. “They are tired and thirsty.”

Being thirsty has nothing to do with how much water you can get here,” the Innkeeper said, with apologies. He pointed to yet another rockbed that was once a flowing stream behind his establishment. Upon it were bones of what looked like a dog, a horse and a child, or perhaps a woman. By the look of sorrow in the Innkeepers’ eyes he valued who they were. “The orders of the soldiers are that we let the bones of the people who died of thirst, or the poisons in the water, be left where they drank, or tried to drink.”

“Poisons?” Mechanos asked, noting instantly that he had revealed himself to be more than a hunchbacked servant.

“Yes, poisons, ‘Lord Ioconis’” the Innkeeper answered, seeming to look suspiciously at Mechanos’ inappropriately intelligent eyes, my inappropriate ‘brute servant’ body under my nobleman’s robes, and the parts of Wandelina’s very seductive anatomy that made her very sellable as a slave in the service of a man’s physical desires rather than musical needs. “Some say what poisoned our waters came from the mountain. Some say from the gods. Others say from one of the cities that want to conquer us...such as perhaps where YOU came from?” he speculated, then looked at me with a challenging stare.

Mechanos pretended to fall off the wagon into a pile of dirt, which upon his rising was dried manure. Upon getting up, he dug into the ground and pulled out a sample of mud. He smelled it, then tasted it, then handed it to me. I did the same.

“So, your servant eats dirt then asked you to do the same?” the Innkeeper said.

“No,” I said, feeling something from Mechanos’ mind about to come out of his mouth.

I let him whisper something in my ear, then pretended to laugh at what he said.

“What? What is so funny?” The Innkeeper said, feeling himself to be the butt of the joke.

“A private joke about...well, no one you know,” I said. “But there is one thing about this place that is not a joke.” I lifted up the silt and spoke ‘scientific-ese’ for the

first time in my life. I don't remember the names of the metals and other things in the water that Mechanos told me to say, but I remember feeling good about saying them. After rattling off the words he told me to say, I made up my own. But though the explanation was part true and part fable, the conclusion was the same "This is why your cattle and people got sick and died after they drank the river water." I said. "But you have wells here, do you not? That can deliver clean and safe water from deep under the ground?"

"Small ones that bring up small amounts of water, very slowly, and sometimes not at all," he said. "We have the best carpenters in Greece, but they are only good at making buckets and houses. They are idiots when it comes to pulling water from where it is to where it is needed."

And with that, Mechanos smiled. He reached behind us and snuck into the tarp that covered our valuables, and pulled out the most valuable of the valuables. He led my hand to a drawing and I showed it to the Innkeeper. "In my spare time, I do other things than find and transport musicians. One of them is to create ways to build better wells for places like this, and people like you," I said.

I had no idea about what the writing said on the parchments I showed the Innkeeper. But he seemed to see something of value in them. He tried to grab them from me, but I pulled them back. "My servant here can redraw what you need to tell your carpenters," I said.

"And what is the writing that I can barely read around the drawings?" he asked.

"Instructions about how to build machines that will deliver water from under the ground to anywhere you need it above ground," I proclaimed, confidently, trusting that it was not a lie. And hoping that Mechanos' claims to be able to do so that he had talked about were true. But there was one question which I had to answer before I was to be believe by our 'host'.

"What is a machine?" he asked.

"Something that makes less labor or men with their bodies so they can do more work with their minds," I said, feeling more like Socrates than me. At least what I think Socrates was like, or imagined about him from the tales Mechanos told me about him. And Homer. And Hippocraties. And people I had never met but felt closer to than any family, or mules, I ever knew.

If there was any time when I regretted not being able to read most, it was then. How I yearned to be able to understand the marks written on papyrus that allowed people to see and think things beyond what their eyes could see, and what other people told them! How I yearned to be able to tell others what I saw and felt by putting marks on papyrus, or stone walls, or rock hard asses of those who were too fat, lazy, cruel and stupid! But that would be for tomorrow. For that day, it was time for Mechanos to do

what he yearned to do most---to serve humanity he loved so much, though I knew he hated people more than I hated...well, anything. Hopefully I wasn't one of the people he hated, or just put up with.

I explained to the Innkeeper that we would need a private room for us, water for our beloved beasts and that the 'Lord' of this city owed us nothing but 'respect and safe passage' for instructing his carpenters about how to building 'pumps' that would save his village, and life. When the Innkeeper, seeing a way to advance himself up to station far higher than his own, asked about who would profit from such a water delivering miracle, and who would get to sell the water, there was one condition that I, Mechanos, Wendelina and even our horses insisted on. "Knowledge is free to everyone. No one gets to own it. No one gets to steal it. Or hoarde it. Or use it to make someone else feel small, ignorant or unimportant. If they do, the knowledge becomes a poison that kills everyone, including the one who discovered it," I said, on behalf of all us. It was something I memorized from an answer that Mechanos gave me to what seemed to be to be a stupid question I had asked many stupid questions ago. I was good at memorizing things. But, as Mechanos said, again and again, 'memorizing is easy, learning is hard, and innovating is the most joyous agony one can ever experience.' It felt that day that I was in for even more...experience in the days to come.



## CHAPTER 9

We were all treated very well that night by the Innkeeper, and all of his friends. The 'Lord' of the village was away somewhere, and someone who said he was his representative came to look at Mechanos' plans, which I was still able to pass as my own. The delusion worked as long as Mechanos poured wine into the Representative's cup to make his mind become numb, and Wandelina played her lute with alluring enough melodies to arouse other parts of his body. But thankfully this Representative's wife was more interested in music and keeping her husband's body unblemished by a woman whose 'contagion of madness' could spread to whoever was pleased by her. And the prospect of bringing water to the village again would make the Representative a Lord. So, we were trusted.

The next day, I found myself in charge of many people, and every beast of burden owned by such people. Every man with a shovel, plow or sword in the village was put to work, under my command! And commanding me, my slave, 'Mechanos', who adopted a new name which he said meant 'shiteater' in some language I didn't recognize from a place I had never heard of. But 'Shiteater' was very particular about what he whispered in my ear about the drawings I had copied the night before and given to the town carpenters that morning. We both knew that if I didn't translate all of the details absolutely correctly, and if those instructions weren't followed so that water from under the ground could flow freely and plentifully to every corner of the drought-struck village, it would be US who would be buried under the hard earth by nightfall.

Wandelina was invited as a special guest to entertain the women of the village who gossiped about the men in the village, and other places they imagined they would return to some day. No women were allowed into the house where the special event was being held, but there were well armed men guarding it. Ones who, I am sure, would cut Wandelina's throat, or violate the sanctity of her body in far worse ways, if Mechanos' magic underground water pumping machine did not work.

That machine was actually several machines, all connected by wheels, pullies, and things he called 'gears'. They all started with 'mouths' put into the wells that sucked in water by 'pulling air backwards'. A 'vacuum', he called it. To me, and those who built it for me, it this 'vacuum' felt like an ghost pulling you into another world with wind that had invisible 'ropes' in it. Sometimes when this wind pushed and pulled, it seemed to talk. Mechanos had particular fun making it 'talk' by adjusting things in it that he dismantled after he built them, under 'my' instructions, away from the workers.

Most of the day had past and the sun was still out. It was 'mid-afternoon' according to the 'clock' Mechanos was using to measure the passage of time. When he turned it on, water deep under the earth was pulled up to the ground, but not high enough to flow into the overground networks that were needed to take it where it had to go. People's mouths were still thirsty and the brown sticks which some called crops pleaded for just a few drops of water, even the water that had been poisoned that had killed or debilitated any who had drunk it. The village officials under the Representative's

temporary command were displeased. As were the village women who had come out with their empty jugs to fill them with the fresh, cool water that my elderly, bald slave had ordered me to promise them.

Thinking that it might help, Wandelina took out her lute and desperately tried to play some reason and patience to the crowd that was becoming an angry mob. Mumbblings amongst the men made some of them pick up their swords and look at me like I was a lamb about to become someone's lunch, and Mechanos like he would be dinner. I knew they were hungry, and I still had enough fat and muscle on me to feed several families, and I prepared myself to be 'of service' in that way, as I had prepared myself several times when my own village ran out of food.

Mechanos seemed to be pre-occupied with something else. He KNEW that the pumps holding the water underground could be talked into pushing them upward. And he took it upon himself to look at, hear, and feel every bit of machinery the workers had constructed. Then he stroked his chin, and walked around the village square like a deep thinking philosopher, or a day dreamer who lived in another world because he could not handle the 'real' one. In my village both of these creatures were considered useless enough to ignor, and scary enough to leave alone.

Mechanos roamed around the village, muttering things to himself that I am sure only he could understand, or perhaps the gods, or perhaps God, that Spirit he said was something that only men who were free from the gods, and other men, could get to know, in ways they could never relate to anyone else. I walked around the 'malfunctioning' machines and made up stories about how the workers didn't obey my instructions, that being the sole reason why they didn't work. I had learned a long time ago that if something goes wrong, the person responsible for it can get away very easily if the blame is put on someone else. Of course, I was always that 'someone else' back home. How I yearned now to be at home, in the horrible but predictable life I knew before Mechanos. Before Wandelina. And before I had become whatever I was becoming. I offered a prayer to the gods to deliver me from this place of uncertainty which would bring certain death if one of these machines didn't obey its maker. Then again, man didn't obey the gods, their maker. But what I was now was of my own making, somehow.

I turned to the crowd which was now an angry mob and told all of them, "if this well and the machines around it don't not bring you by nightfall with as much water as you can drink, I will drink a jar of arsenic tomorrow morning! Just like Socrates did!"

"Socrates killed himself by drinking hemlock," the Innkeeper informed me. "And if you were as smart as Socrates, or as good a friend of his as you said you were, you would have known that," he continued.

Other accusations were thrown my way regarding how there were more lies in what I said than truths, and now even the women were picking up sharp objects. One of them grabbed Wandelina's hair and threw her onto the ground, holding onto her chest with her feet. "Give me one good reason why I should not kill her now!" she screeched.

“We’ll gggivvee yyyouu a thousanddd bucketfuls of reasons,” Mechanos said with a stuttered and stammered slave voice as he limped his way to me, whispering something in my ear.

I smiled when I heard it, and hoped, nay, prayed, that it was true. “The secondary valve in the fifth gear needs some adjusting. A small error which we will correct by the time any of you can recite the first part of Homer’s Illead!” I proclaimed.

“Make it the first stanza, or LINE!” a high ranking officer said, starting to recite the tales that I heard when I was a boy wishing to become the kind of man I knew I could never become, or wasn’t allowed to become anyway.

While the heroic tales of how the Greeks won the Trojan War were being told, me and Mechanos ran to the defective part of his many-part machine and hammered back into place something that had slipped. Then readjusted its position from where it was supposed to be in the drawings to where it was supposed to be in real life. Then Mechanos nodded to me, with a very certain smile to ‘turn the machine on’. This involved pressing a ‘lever’ that set into motion many other levers, and pullies and wheels, and other things that brought the water from under the ground up to the surface. Then the water would go into the ‘aqueducts’ which had built with wood that was good wood and metal that he insisted have NO lead in it, as that kind of metal made people mad before and would, in some future civilization to come, do the same, because cheap construction is the one that conquerors always like to use first, because it makes their armies richer and their kings more pampered.

It was a miracle! Water flowed up out of the earth and went everywhere. Into the buckets that fed people. Into the troughs that could be used once again to feed horses and cattle. And into the fields where the crops seemed to say ‘thank you’ to whoever saved them from being baked to death by the hot, dry sun. And into the in the middle of the town square, into the rocky pit that was once a fountain. Everyone with two legs, or even one, leaped into the water like children, splashing it around them and washing away all of the sorrows from the days of the drought, disease, death and the anger they had for us.

Being ‘gods’ now, Wandelina, Mechanos and me watched from a dry spot above them. One of the mortals in the new ‘public pool’ declared this day a feast day, and insisted that they honor me with a large banquet.

“Which I will cook!” Mechanos offered with pride, and joy.

Wandelina and me looked at each other, recalling how foul tasting Mechanos’ food was to anyone else other than himself. How many meals he cooked that we both pretended to like so desperately! But how much he took pride, and joy, in preparing of that food for us!

“You know what will happen if anyone here tastes Mechanos’ cooking,” I said to Wandelina.

“We’ll tell them it’s medicine,” she suggested from behind veil, so no one could see that she had a mouth to answer ANYone with. “And that good medicine always tastes bad.”

“Yes,” I said, considering that maybe Mechanos’ cooking really WAS medicine for the body, and perhaps mind. “But these people value good cooks. And good cooking.”

“Which I will put into their pots after I take out the disgusting slop that Mechanos cooked for them, while you, keep him occupied,” she suggested.

It was a plan, and one that had to succeed if we were to get out of there alive, as gods or mortals.

## CHAPTER 10

Somehow, Wandelina was able to replace, or correct, the cooking that Mechanos had done and served it to the village without the Master Inventor finding out what happened. “I told you that I’m a great cook,” he said as we were given a hero’s farewell by a well watered and well fed population of ‘mortals’. “If one day I ever can, or have to, stop inventing, I think I will open up a tavern,” he continued as we moved Linalita and the stallion onto a trot and moved at a brisk pace over the hill, where the wind gradually replaced the cheers of the people in the valley. “Yes, Wandelina can play her music as a feast to my customer’s ears. And I will cook for them, and make everyone’s palates happy with great tasting food.”

“As long as there is enough food for them to eat,” Wandelina reminded Mechanos, giving voice to what I was thinking as well.

“Yes, there is that,” Mechanos said as he looked over the distant hills at drought-killed brown crops that should have been green, and abandoned houses on the plateaus that were once rich pastures. “There is still much I have to do, before I can do what I want to do.”

“And you should spend every moment of time inventing things the world needs, rather than doing what people around you want,” she said.

“Like cooking for us at night under the stars instead of charting the stars, and discovering new scientific things that are under them,” I continued.

Mechanos pondered the matter, between his ears again. Both me and Wandelina prayed to whatever gods existed, or didn’t exist, that Mechanos would come to the ‘logical’ conclusion that gathering food and preparing it was OUR job and Calling, and not his.

“Yes, you are accurate about that,” he finally conceded.

Me and Wandelina both smiled, and offered up another one of the children who maybe we would have one day up to the gods as thanks for being spared another one of Mechanos’ ‘mouth watering’ meals.

“But, you are not Right about this,” he continued. “It is Right that I work with my brain and leave ALL the labor to others. My arms are far weaker than yours, Brother Apprentice. And Sister Wandelina, my legs are far less attractive than yours. So, I have to give service to the world with what I can do, which is to convert biological matter into food, which I share with my closest of friends. My most appreciative friends. Which are both of you.”

He went on about what we would have for supper when we reached the next campsite at nightfall. Me and Wandelina both planned to snack very heartily for lunch,

when Mechanos wasn't looking, on the remaining food that she had prepared for the village we just left, and the sacs of food they had prepared for us.

"Play us a song, please," Mechanos requested of Wandelina.

She let her fingers make the lute sing, but such was not enough for our Master, and friend.

"Now, you, Brother Apprentice," he said to me. "Sing! With the joy of a bird! And the conviction of a badger! And the boldness of a---"

"---You first," I said, interrupting him. For perhaps the first time, or one of the first times anyway. "I have never heard you sing, laugh, or dance," I said.

"No, you haven't," he said, sadly and with an angry regret. "That's because no one else has either."

"Because you did it when you were alone?" Wandelina asked with a warm, inviting voice.

"Only in my dreams," Mechanos said. "Which became nightmares when I tried to live them when I awoke."

And with that he was quiet for the rest of the morning, burying himself in writing things on more papyrus that did not involve singing, laughing or dancing. There was music in the rage that he put into his drawings, but it seemed that rage and exhaustion were the only emotions he could feel. I tried asking him about this, but I could not come up with any question that made sense, and when I tried to form the questions, all of his answers were "I know, and I can't do anything about it. But you still can."

## CHAPTER 11

We went through a few more villages, then some towns on our way to a still unidentified city where Mechanos said we could ‘eat, breath and laugh’ without worry. Wandelina and I survived every ‘delicious meal’ Mechanos prepared for us, yet still didn’t have the heart to tell him that most of what went on our plates we fed to the crows, foxes and goats, who seemed to have the same trouble swallowing them that we did. Mechanos survived being arrested by soldiers who looked at him suspiciously and or recognized by nobleman, and women, who seemed to recognize him.

Along the way, he did what he could for each village, focusing on the people most in need, ignoring those in want. I was of course the Master and he was the Apprentice, an illusion that I started to believe as a reality. I even found myself thinking that I was an man who women wanted to look at, and saw my arms and legs becoming the size they should be, and felt my back getting straighter and, with my fingers, seemed to feel my deformed face under my beard becoming ‘normal’ and even handsome. I did not dare look at my reflection in the ponds, shiny rocks or ‘mirrors’, plate of shiny metal that Mechanos built to move light from one place to another, and, as he said once, to perhaps measure how fast it traveled. It always moved far faster than he could measure, even with his ‘clocks’, but he kept trying. And though he was unable to determine how fast light moved, he became a master at making it go to where he wanted it to go, and even in ‘splitting it up’ into what looked like a rainbow, but one that was on the ground instead of in the sky. A ‘prism’, he called it, separating the faster blue light from the slower red light. Made possible with a special kind of stone that was clear and cloudy, both at the same time. Of course I was the one who carved the rocks out of the mountain and he was the one that shaped them into stones.

During the day and under every moonlit night sky when we were away from people, Mechanos built things while I got him things to build them from, and did with my strong hands what his strong head ‘saw’. The stronger I got, the weaker he did. And he started to cough a lot harder, and with more pain in his chest, and he got winded faster each day. Wandelina secretly told me it could be be an ‘act’ he was doing to get out of doing labor. Or that it was ‘bad behaviour’ caused by something off in his head that his mind was not aware of. “Mind controlling matter, or telling the body what it doesn’t want to do,” she explained it as.

She explained a lot to me, and I asked her questions about the world that I was now a part of. Some of the questions she could answer. Some she would not answer. And some she didn’t know the answers to. Like who Mechanos was running away from, and why. I suggested that she ‘pleasure him’, because a man who is under the spell of a woman is less able to lie than one who isn’t. And when he is lying, a woman would be able to see it more easily than a man. Such was how my mother and father got along, according to my mother anyway.

During one of the reading lessons Wandelina gave me I looked at her, and saw in her something that resemble my mother. I do not know if it was her light brown hair, her green eyes, her white face, or her small hips that made it difficult to have children but easier to attract men. She was drawing letters in the sand next to an old stone wall that looked like it was once a holy place, or at least an important place of some kind.

“Again, tell me what this letter is,” she asked me as she scrolled an alpha into the dirt, then the letters that followed it.

I answered correctly, all the way from alpha to epsilon. Then I looked at other letters written in the upturned stones behind us at what looked like an abandoned building that used to be a very important one. The writing seemed VERY important. Like it said something the person who wrote it needed to tell the world. I tried to pronounce the words, but I did not understand their meaning. The words were not anything I heard from Wandelina’s warm, kind mouth, nor Mechanos’ tortured smart one. I asked her to translate the writing painted on the stone over sacred sculptings.

“King Thelopolikus sucks cock and sticks his dick up the ass of goats,” she said.

“Why would someone write something like that in such a sacred place?” I asked.

“Because it is either true, or someone wants us to believe it is true,” she answered. “And I suppose now you are doing to ask what sucking cock means and what a dick up the ass is,” she continued.

I nodded ‘yes’.

She shook her head ‘no’. “I won’t tell you what it is, and I won’t show you what it is.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it is an expression of eros. Love of body. And with you, we have philos, love of comrades.”

“What about agape?” I asked. “Love of spirit. The Great Spirit inside all of us?”

She looked to the sky, then the painted on wall, then inside herself for an answer. After a few tense moments she answered, “The Great Spirit has to prove it is worthy of being trusted by man, or woman, before I give it, or anyone else, Agape.”

Perhaps that was an explanation as to why she would hug me, but not caress me. Why she would kiss me on the cheek whenever I tried to kiss her on the lips. And why she would sleep next to my body at nights, and sooth my aching arms and legs with her hands, but never the muscles between my legs.



Mechanos knew no 'trick' I could use to make her 'copulate' with her, as he called it. At least none that worked. It wasn't that I needed to copulate with Wandelina to feel like a man. But it seemed that she wanted it, but denied it to me, and herself. She would talk about it to me one day, I supposed. Just like Mechanos would tell me about where he came from and where he was going. After all, I told Wandelina and Mechanos everything about me, and it was only a matter of time, and fairness, that they would tell me everything about them. Such was the 'mathematics' of the world as I 'calculated' it. Then, anyway.

## CHAPTER 12

There is a thrill in seeing places you have never heard of, which was mine. There is a disappointment in seeing places you HAVE heard of, and been to, which was Wandelina's. There is painfulness in seeing places that you want to forget, which was Mechanos'. Such was the next town we got to, which was a city as we got closer to its center. I do not remember its name, but such is not important. What is important is what Mechanos told us with his sad eyes when we got there. "Today you two wash your bodies, feed your stomachs, and re-clothe the skin that had been exposed to the harshness of the world of the travelers. Tonight you will see with your worldly eyes what your wildest imaginations could only imagine," Mechanos said with a warm, honest and promising smile, giving each of us a handful of coins.

While Wandelina turned her head towards shops where she could replace the robes that the rain, wind and sun had turned into rags, and I looked at the shops that had every variety of food that could be eaten by mortals, Mechanos stared at the only man in the city who seemed to recognized him, a lowly Monk who carried himself more like a High Priest. "And while you are doing what you want to do," Mechanos said. "I will do what I have to do. So I can continue to do what I want to do...some of the time anyway."

The Holy Man in rags turned around and walked towards buildings taller than any I had ever seen, revealing a robe lined with gold under them, and sandals worthy of royalty. Mechanos left some of his papyrus scrolls with me, instructing me to guard them with my life. He marched towards the 'Monk'. They both disappeared in dark alley between two buildings that had hand-painted writing on the walls over sculptures of what seemed to be great people.

"Maybe that writing says what Queen Thelonikis did in her bedchamber with a newly purchased gladiator while her husband King Thelonikis was away at 'war'?" I asked Wandelina. "If we can get closer to it, maybe I can make out the letters and tell you myself," I continued as I walked towards the stone walls to read what was written on them, making out the letters one by one, when the first words of the 'poem' on them became very very clear.

Wandelina pulled me back before I could make out the rest, just as a group of soldiers appeared in front of me with eyes hidden by their helmets, their large hands grabbing hold of the handles of their swords. "Yes," she said to me as she smiled at the soldiers, and escorted me away, as if she was my Mistress, Mastress, or Mother. "It DOES say, 'Only those who the gods have chosen are allowed past this wall. All others--  
--'"

"---Will be hung, burned, fed to the Priest's pigs or forced to eat an entire meal cooked by 'chef' Mechanos'," I said, trying to turn a stern warning into a joke.

But Wandelina wasn't laughing. Everything about her told me that whatever she was thinking was not a joke. She kept a serious look in her eyes for what must have been

three 'hours', as measured by Mechanos' clock. Even when I tried to gleefully splash water at the bathhouse we went into, playing with her eyes and nothing below her neck. Even when we went through the shops and stands where vendors tried to sell us beautiful robes for her, and she finally consented to let me buy one for her after threatening to buy it for myself if she would not take it. Even when the shopkeepers tried to sell knives to me with magnificent handles, while Wandelina examined the sharpness and strength of their blades, demonstrating how they could barely cut a piece of leather. And even when we arrived at the Inn where Mechanos told us to go to, which had one room available, a large one with one small cot, a very comfortable fur lining on it and an escort to the room who wished us 'a good afternoon sleep, with many happy children to come in the many afternoons to come.'

The sun had risen quickly that day, and it became hot. On such days, everyone with any brains ate a meal and then went to sleep until the sun started to go closer to the horizon and bake someone else someplace else. Even slaves were allowed to have such rests during the day, at least if their masters wanted to keep them alive. And staying Alive, with a capital Alpha, was what Wandelina and me both felt as we lay our tired, travel weary bodies on the cot. We both let the fur lined blanket sooth our legs and arms, and the sac filled with feathers, which she called a 'pillow', rest on the backs of our sunbaked and windblown necks. Then she stroked my wrist with her fingers, then let my fingers interlock with hers. "Maybe we should mix in philos, eros and agape into a word that only you and me, and perhaps a life inside of me will understand," she said softly. Then she moved closer to me, lowering her head. Somehow my other hand knew what to do, as it found its way around her neck and my head moved in closer to her, and our souls met, through the lips first.

It was the most special and sacred kiss I ever had, or ever gave. And as the sun went higher in the sky above us, we dived into a world that was a thousand leagues deep and two thousand leagues high. Time, however anyone measured it, lost all meaning, and as for where we were...well, where I was anyway...it was not anywhere inhabited by mortals, or gods. Each moment felt like an eternity, past, present and future merging into one 'event' called Life. My body, ugly and mis-shaped, and inexperienced as it was, knew how to do everything she wanted, and needed. It was the first time I remember not thinking about anything or anyone. No one except the many people Wandelina had become as I looked at her, and the life that perhaps I was creating inside of her. And if I was to become a father, that son (or daughter) was to be conceived with the greatest of joy. And if so, how could he, or she, turn out to be anything BUT magnificent once out of the womb! Our child would have Wandelina's musicality, beauty and brains. And my...well, maybe I was on my way from being Brother Apprentice to something far smarter than that. Perhaps the next Mechanos, in some way or another. And as for Mechanos, who seemed to have been engineering whatever was happening between me and Wandelina, he would teach our child what I couldn't.

I did briefly think about what Mechanos was doing at work, while I was at, yes, 'play'. After 'the event' was over, I did try to talk about it with Wandelina, but she 'shh'ed' me with the gentle touch of her fingertips on my lips, then the sound of music

from her lute. She sang something in a language I didn't understand, which translated, to my ears anyway, as 'today, I am a man, and forever, she will be my woman.'

## CHAPTER 13

The sun finally did go down over the horizon, and the moon rose. Half of it showed itself to us, the other half hidden under a cloak created by the heavens, the gods, or perhaps a machine Mechanos designed with wings that flapped with a 'motor' fueled by the setting sun. But whatever created that moon, it was magnificent. As were the seats given to us by the Innkeeper for the theatre event near one of the buildings Wanelina said that the Priests looked after, and where it was said the gods resided for certain periods of the year. Above us were the stars in all of their brilliant glory. Along side of us were noblemen and women, and some 'commoners', all admiring, or envying, our amorous glory. Below us...a black pit which opened up with lights inside and wind that sounded like voices that 'talked' somehow. Then sang. Then, musical instruments provided 'texture', as Wanelina called it, to the singing. Then a boat filled with men and women emerged from the pit, sailing upon a sea that had waves which moved the boat 'forward' to our eyes, yet still remaining within the pit. Then a speaker who seemed to had the nobility of Socrates, the wisdom of Zeus and the courage of Prometheus rose up from the 'sea', without a drop of water on him, and described to us what and who was on the boat with Homer's words, and some of his own.

As the show went on, I found myself believing the illusions presented to my eyes, created by light, wind, water, fire and every other element experienced by man, or creatable by the gods. I saw Homer's Illyad and the Oddesy with my eyes! Heard the blind poet's words with ears I had never felt! Experienced the terror of the warrior heros as they faced obstacles on the battlefield and the sea! Rejoiced with them as I, through them, slew the various manifestations of evil with their wooden swords that felt like real metal! Lamented as some of those heroes succumbed to the power of demons, and their own shortcomings. Hand in hand, mind in mind, Wanelina and I left the Greece of our own day and journeyed into the epic heroic past which was our heritage, and legacy. We all felt as noble as Socrates and as powerful as gods. Indeed, noble enough to not have to be powerful.

Then the ground trembled under my feet, and it seemed, no one else's. The wood and stone below my soles slipped away, creating holes. Holes that I opened up further as someone below tried to fill them in while Wanelina's full focus of attention was the show and the mythical actors in the pit. But there was a very real actor under my feet. Yes, it was Mechanos. I could see his face all too clearly through the revealing light of the moon above and the light created by the machines around him. When the audience felt uplifted in Spirits, a very satisfied smile of accomplishment came to his face as he manipulated levers, pullies and ropes with a rhythm that was Passionately musical. He seemed even more happy than when he cooked a meal and we pretended our best to give him a compliment about it! Almost as happy as he was when he turned on a mass of metal and wood and rope on a new machine he, and I, had just built, saw it work!

Then a look of extreme regret overtook him. It was towards the end of the 'show' when a dark shadow in the shape of a man walked up to him. The man who was wearing a "Priest robe", lined with gold stripes. He nudged Mechanos, and ordered his Monks to

wheel over another machine. The Priest offered Mechanos a plea for 'reason' which had something to do with the machine. To whatever 'request' the Priest asked, Mechanos defiantly shook his head 'no. Then the Priest offered a bag of gold to my Friend, to which Mechanos rolled his eyes the way Wandelina did when I asked her to do something stupid and she was smart enough to tell me that doing it was both stupid, and undoable. Then the Priest withdrew a dagger from belt and pointed it at Mechanos neck. His refusal to submit was delivered with a bold and 'what else can you do to me that I haven't done to myself' laugh. Then the priest pulled three dolls from under his robe and showed their faces to Mechanos. Before I could see who the dolls were, the look on Mechanos' face told me that he cared more about them more than Life itself, and maybe more than my life, or Wandelina's, or the lives of anyone else. The Priest then edged the dagger in towards the dolls' necks, knicking one of them in the neck and pushing the head back. And with that, Mechanos bowed his head, pulled on a lever, moved some valves, and produced another 'miracle'.

An 'apparition' of the gods emerged as a cloud of bright fog from the depths of the black 'stage' pit. Zues, accompanied by Apollo and Athena, I think it was. They looked real. They spoke with the 'wind voice'. They warned all of us to honor the gods, and not defy their will, or what happened to the fallen heroes of Troy would happen to us, and our children and their children. The voice of Zeus referred to us as his special children whom he loves and wants to take care of. Then, the voice and the 'apparition' vanished into the pit. Music replaced the wind, dancers replaced the noble heroes, and the event ended with dancing, joy and jugs of wine that started to get passed from one end of the arena to the other.

It was a happy ending to a very special play. Everyone smiled, including Wandelina, who seemed to forget all of the heartaches and pain of her own life. Her smile widened more than I had ever seen, ever, particularly when she drank the wine being passed around which everyone felt obligated to imbibe, and enjoy, which smelled dangerously sweet. Yes, all smiled that night, except for Mechanos, who I saw through another crevice under my seat. He gave me an apologetic grin. Like the one I gave so many others when I made a big mistake after trying to do something Right. A mistake that was necessary, forgivable and (so he seemed to hope anyway) correctable. Yes, on that afternoon I became a man, and that night I became...something that most men, or perhaps most women, would fear more than the gods themselves.

## CHAPTER 14

The next day had me and Mechanos climbing mountains again. To mountain people like me they were only hills. Buried in the middle of one of them, seeable only by someone who knew where to find it, there was a hut around which were many things made of wood, metal and rock which were not makeable by Nature. He set me to work moving heavy things around while he put them together, saying nothing about the night before.

“So, this is home?” I asked my once blindly-trusted friend. “A place where you build machines to make rain for people in dry, hot valleys? Warm lamps for those who live in cold, dark mountains? Illusions of the gods for those who want to know the truth about them, and themselves?”

“We all do what we have to do to make things work,” he said, refusing to look me in the eye no matter how many times I tried to stare into his. Instead he tried to let his machines do the talking for him, demonstrating his point with use two mismatched parts of something I didn’t recognize to tell me something. “These square pegs and round holes. You would think that square pegs should go into square holes, but sometimes they fit better with round holes. It is against everything we believe, but it is true. You understand?”

“I understand that you are working for Priests who----“

“----Have more power than you can imagine, Brother APPRENTICE!”

“I thought you said that ‘a brilliant and honest mind is the most powerful thing in the world, Master Mechanos,’” I shot back, not knowing if I was angry or brave.

“And a brilliant mind is what you are growing into,” he said to me, with pride.

“Because I’m so honest, I suppose,” I replied.

“And able to use sarcasm,” he pointed out. “And so many other tools for communication between men, particularly after you and Wandelina found each other.”

“You mean after you PUT us together,” I said, recalling all those talks he had with me about how to please her. And how every piece of advise worked, even better than his machines did. And the ‘coincidence’ of meeting her. And his knowing about the red-haired witch that put a curse on her and her slave-husband. And how he made a beautiful woman like that fall in love with an ugly man like me. It all came to me as the words flowed out of my fire-breathing mouth. “You put me and Wandelina together for some purpose that you aren’t telling me or her about. Until, perhaps, the gods, the priests, of you decide we are ‘ready for it’.”

“She is good for you,” he said, not bothering to deny my accusation. “She is teaching you how to read, yes?”

“Yes, she is,” I said. “But—“

“And teaching you how to laugh,” he pointed out. “And smile with pride in yourself.”

“Yes, she is, but---“

“And teaching you how to sing, and dance. Brother Apprentice. Far better than I ever could.”

“That is not so great of an accomplishment,” I said, wanting to continue with “Like saying that she is teaching me to be a better cook than you,” but I followed it up by lifting up one of the machines. Something that looked like it had wings on it that I once saw in the sky, alone, at night. “But this accomplishments of YOURS. What is it for? Taking me and Wandelina up to the clouds for week of ‘further education’ so we could produce children that would be kidnapped by beings more powerful than me, her, or even you?”

Mechanos seemed to say ‘yes’ with his shocked eyes, but he revealed nothing with his mouth. I had found something out I was not supposed to, it seemed. And earlier than I was supposed to. Part of my ‘education’, I suppose. But maybe it was time to leave school, or at least give the teacher a lesson. What I didn’t know was that the ‘lesson whip’ would draw blood from someone completely unexpected.



## CHAPTER 15

Mechanos made soup for us that night in his hut on the top of the mountain, which smelled, looked and even felt like real soup. The kind that people could eat and crows could lap up afterwards without getting sick. Wandelina seemed to like it, a lot. “What did you do to make this so---”

“---different than you usually make,” I said, so that Wandelina would not ‘spill the beans’ on how bad our ‘uncle Mechanos’ cooking really was. As Wandelina threw it down her throat as fast as her large spoon could pass it through her small, tender lips, I sniffed the chicken broth that was very...different than how Mechanos usually made it. I wondered if there was real chicken in it. It seemed too perfect to be chicken. Maybe it was crow, the remains of the birds that braved eating his cooking the last two nights. Or maybe wild hawk that was convinced to become tame duck when he had played with his wind-talking machine up on the hills, alone. Or maybe, I found myself thinking, this was human meat, made from those who the priests had chosen for sacrifice to the gods, or those who discovered how the priests really kept their power of ‘faith’ over the commoners who continued to give offerings to the gods, and food and shelter to those looking after their temples. In any case, I sniffed the soup that Wandelina ate, and noticed something different about her. She was looking at me like I was...handsome. She smiled with delight, and need, and want, and kissed me on the lips.

“Come with me, outside, and we can watch the stars,” she said. “And fly to them, together.” The way she took me by the hand, there was no saying ‘no’ to her. But somehow, I had to.

“I have to work,” I said. “Mechanos and me have to build a new water pump for the old woman who takes in orphans. And repair the lamps that keep the town streets lit so that the children can walk safely in them at night. And the grain collection machine that collects all of the wheat and grinds it up into life-giving bread that---“

“---You don’t find me beautiful anymore?” she said.

“No, that is not it,” I answered.

“My nose is too small. I can make it bigger!” she said, pulling out a pair of miraculous metal pinchers and stretching her nostrils out until they bleed from the inside.

“No, that’s not it!” I replied, grabbing the ‘plyers’, as Mechanos called them, another one of his many portable inventions.

“My skin! It’s too white! I can make it darker. Blacker or redder,” Wandelina said, picking up a pot filled with tar with one hand, a vase with red paint with the other.

“No! Your skin is perfect!” I said, taking away the pot and the vase as quickly as I could. She desperately put her hands around my groin. I gently put them back on her head.

“Now I know!” she said. “It’s my hair! You hate it!”

“No!” I exclaimed as she grabbed two blades attached at their base which Mechanos had designed to cut sheets of leather, grass or long weeds with her left hand. With her right, she grabbed hold of her long locks and put them between the two blades. “I love your hair!”

“Maybe you do,” she said, putting the scissors down. “But you don’t love me,” she continued, spitting in my face, then slapping me on the cheek, then storming towards the door. Then, she stopped, keeping her back to me. “I will believe that you do love me if you say that you love me.”

Mechanos begged me with his eyes to get off my chair and walk up to her and hug her in the way a man loves a woman. “You will never have children if you act like a child,” he whispered to me with a kind, but very fatherly smile.

“What kind of love?” I asked, feeling grown up in ways that made Mechanos shake in his sandals, and Wandelina cry into her hair. “You have to define the terms of ‘love’ that you think we have. Is it Eros? Agape? Or Philos?”

“If you have to ask, it is none of them,” she grunted. And with that she stormed out the door, walking into the dark, cold night, her head bowed in sadness and anger.

“Go after her!” Mechanos screamed at me. “It is dangerous out there for her alone!”

“And it’s ‘safe’ here with you?” I challenged Mechanos. “With a man who says he believes in something beyond the gods, yet helps the priests keep people believing in them.”

“Not everyone is ready to believe in what is beyond the gods,” he shot back at me with desperate and still secret eyes that stared out at Wandelina roaming around in the moonlight muttering prayers to the gods, then a light in the sky that seemed to hover above her.

“So you make them fear the gods,” I said. “And you, a man who says he loves Truth and Honor.”

“Before people can become honorable, they have to be obedient. Obedient to laws. The gods provide laws. The priests inform them of the laws,” he said, worried about the light in the sky that seemed to move aside when he ‘shooed’ it away, but then reappear in another place, on its own terms.

“And you punish people, mortals, if they disobey the laws?” I said. “Maybe by making machines that take away things from people who do bad things?”

“Nature eventually punishes those who disobey the laws of logic and goodness,” he claimed as the light in the sky hid behind a cloud, Wandelina starting to sing a sad song under it, her eyes still looking downward. “And I’ll punish YOU if you don’t go out there and tell Wandelina how much you really love her!” he said, picking up a stick, the most primitive of tools of persuasion, and threatening to hit me with it if I didn’t obey.

“What makes you think I don’t love her?” I asked Mechanos.

“It doesn’t matter what I think, just what she feels,” he said. “And what you do, too.”

I don’t know how Mechanos ‘got’ me again, but he did. My attempt to shun Wandelina failed. As did my Mind’s ability to figure out how Mechanos was manipulating me, the people he served or perhaps himself. No, I was a bad manipulator. Mechanos knew that. I knew that. And Wandelina knew that too. Her prayers to the gods seemed to be giving her what she wanted, and needed. The conversations she was having with those who lived in the clouds that she delivered when looking at the ground turned her sorrowful anger into hope, and happiness.

I walked outside into the night and approached Wandelina. I kept my distance and walked around her, not knowing what to say. I wondered if I should tell her that the gods she valued so much, and seemed to be getting solace from, were an illusion made up by ‘higher’ beings to control ‘lower’ ones. Then, I myself felt something up in the sky follow me. I could feel it move with me. Perhaps it was another one of Mechanos’ magic tricks. Or maybe something bigger than that. Or smaller. Just when I thought it wasn’t looking, I abruptly turned my head upward. My eyes met it, straight on.

“It’s a bird,” Wandelina told me, as my eyes saw a winged creature with broad wings that seemed to glow in the dark.

“A hawk,” commented, looking closer at it as it hovered above.

“A hawk sent by the gods, to make us feel better about ourselves, and each other,” she said, hugging me in a way that gave, and needed, love. All three kinds, as she gazed into my eyes, trying to find herself in the ‘us’ that could not be killed by truths, lies or anything in between.

“And a hawk that got into, or was covered by, some of Mechanos’ glow in the dark paint,” I thought, but didn’t say, as I looked at the strokes on the wings of the avian ‘guardian angel’ who came to visit Wandelina at her beconing.

For that moment, I let Wandelina love me and I tried to love her. Yes, 'trying' to love her. I suppose that means that I was not in love with her anymore. A condition that would linger until I found out for myself what was beyond the night clouds, or not beyond them, and what to do in the world that we were all stuck in under them.

## CHAPTER 15

The next day, Mechanos sent me to the market to buy more things for him. Things he didn't want anyone else to know he was buying, it seemed, since he had me wear a robe that looked a lot like those worn by the Priests, and instructed me to go to each of the shop keepers and present them with coin and the name of what I wanted, and NOTHING else. By the ninth shop, the cart was full. It was a new cart with better wheels than the one we came to the city with, but it was still pulled by the same animals. However, they didn't look the same. Linalita had been 'dusted' white and the white horse next to her brown. I didn't ask why Mechanos wanted it that way, but I was tired of asking questions to which he gave me no answers. Like where his real home was, where he grew up, and if he had any family, and he yet again just looked up to the stars or through the clouds longingly. Like how much of what he did was for the Priests and how much for the people who considered them conduits to the gods. And why he had kept me as his Apprentice so long when there were plenty of other people with stronger backs and simpler minds than me, particularly here. And why he had told me to never let anyone see the parchments he left with me when he went off with the head Priest the morning of the evening 'theatre' event. And why he made me swear on whatever I held holy to not even unroll them myself. So far, I honored that pledge, but with each load I put into the cart, with no explanation as to what it was being used for, I felt more and more tempted to open that sac of parchments in the hidden compartment in the back corner of the cart.

The last load was the heaviest. I barely made it to the wagon with it, overestimating my strength for the first time in a long time. My shoulders let go of the sacs of metal tools that clanked loudly, dried manure that sent foul smelling odors into my nostrils and burnt ashes that delivered dust the size of pebbles into my parched mouth. Then I slipped, falling face first into the mud, my forehead covered with fresh manure fresh from the 'expressive end' of Linalita's ass. I felt like screaming and cursing like any 'man' would, but I dared not, as I was dressed as a 'monk', and monks are supposed to welcome abuse rather than fight against it. It didn't matter what gods they served, all monks were like that, so Wandelina told me in one of our long talks we had on the way to this place.

While holding the words of frustration in my throat, I thought of Wandelina. She had tried to get information about Mechanos' past so we could figure out what was in our future, but IF she was told anything at all, she didn't tell it to me. Particularly that morning when she didn't say anything to me at all. But as for me, there was more I did not talk to Wandelina about than what I did talk about with her. My mother said that such happens 'when the relationship between a man and woman matures'. That maturity involved, in her case, my father spending more nights away from home than in his own house, and in the same bed with my mother. 'Separation keeps people together', she would say by way of explanation when I asked her why father was away 'on business' so often, and talked less and less around the table when we were eating.

As I pulled myself out of the muddy and manure-soaked ground, I looked up and saw other families walking around. The children did most of the talking, the mothers the most listening, the men the most 'thinking'---and looking at women who were with other men. I found myself becoming one of those 'men', as I noticed myself looking at 'other women', then staring at them, then moving my head towards them. Then, as one of them turned around, I was tapped on the back of my neck a hairless hand.

"This is inappropriate behavior," I was told as the arm that belonged to that hand gently pulled me around. "Remember who you are, and what we have to be to these people," the high-pitched voice continued.

To my shock and relief, it was not Wandelina. Thankfully! Which was an appropriate praise, as the intruder's face did look very familiar. It was that of the Priest who 'informed' Mechanos of his duties in the pit below the arena floor. But in the light, it looked and felt different. His eyes seemed warm, and giving. The lines of his face were the kind that came from lots of worry. His hands lacked calluses but they were knobby and bony as a twisted pinetree trying to grow straight on a wind-blown cliff.

"I was...just," I said, my head down, hoping he didn't see my face.

"On your way back to the Monestary, Brother Monk?" he said.

"Yes, I was," I answered, disguising my voice in some kind of accent that I hoped made me sound like one of the local people, not knowing how to address my 'boss'.

"And your reason for loading this cart?" the Priest asked me.

"I was asked to do so by someone who paid me to do so," I said, doing my best to not stutter, and my damnest to not run away from the squad of soldiers who seemed to be marching towards me.

"And who paid you?" he asked me.

"Someone who...wants to give this to the temple," I found myself saying, my head still down and face still hidden under the hood. I handed the Priest a sac of coins and jewels that Mechanos had entrusted me with to pick up the rest of the days' supplies.

The Priest looked at the coins and bit them. He put the jewels to the sun so see how they shimmered. He seemed well satisfied, putting them into his own pocket. "The gods will be pleased," he said. Then he looked at the cart.

"This is a different kind of cart than I have ever seen here," he said.

"Yes, it is," noticing after the words came out that they were pronounced the way I spoke at home rather than these people talked here.

“Maybe it is from Sparta. Or Rhodes. Or Crete. Or Persia,” he said as he inspected the machinery. “Or some other place that wants to invade us,” he continued. “But you know we will not stand for it,” he went on. “The first duty of a Priest is to talk to the gods for the people but the most important one is to see to those people’s defense against other mortals. By whatever means possible. No matter what the gods say, or do, it is still a world where the most powerful man is the one who is the only one who will survive. At least not in chains.”

He went on about how ‘armed warfare comes before human welfare’, making various comments about how this cart which seemed to move so effortlessly on the hard and rocky ground would be an ideal chariot for the battlefield, or supply wagon to bring weapons and extra warriors to the battle. I found my eye turning towards the concealed box containing Mechanos’ most secret and sacred parchments. The Priest who seemed to hate his enemies out of love for his people noticed where I was looking.

“What are you looking at?” he asked me as the soldiers edged their way in closer to me.

“Nothing,” I said, and claimed. “Nothing but a well-built cart from a man who wanted to give money to the gods.”

“And money to you?” the Priest asked.

“Which I put in that bag,” I said to the Priest, as my hand felt one of Mechanos’ parchments in the lining of my robes. “I put all of it there,” I said, hoping and praying to whatever god ruled this city that the soldiers would pass me by.

They did, moving on to a beggar who was asking for help too close to the temple. Frustrated at getting no assistance from rich passers by, he pulled out a stick and wrote something on the wall, covering it with a sheet of rotten leather tarp. As the soldiers came by, he was pulled away.

The wind blew away the leather tarp, and my eyes could clearly read it. So could the Priest’s.

“So, ‘the God inside of us is the only one that really is’”, he said mockingly. “Maybe so,” he continued, with a sad smile. “But most mortals do good things because they fear the wrath of the gods if they do bad ones,” he said.

“Until honor and intelligence overcomes them,” I found myself saying, repeating Mechanos’ claims word for word, and my experience of them being fact.

“Yes, indeed,” the Priest said. “The words, or thoughts anyway, of...hmmm...what is the man’s real name again?”

I waited for the Priest to tell me Mechanos' real name. At least I would go to my death knowing SOMETHING that I wasn't supposed to. But, alas, I was cheated of that too.

"Socrates," the Priest said. "That's who said that, 'Socrates'. Or maybe Plato."

With that, the Priest put his hands behind his back and walked away. "Carry on," he said to me as he strolled away with a bold stride and disappeared into a dark alley. I shuffled my way atop the cart and moved trotted the animals in front of it forward as quietly as possible. But I had a feeling I was being heard, and watched. One thought came to mind as I tried to make my large body look 'small'. "I hope Mechanos can design a machine or potion that will make us invisible, and very, very soon." For all I knew, that was what was in the hidden box in the back of the cart. Stranger things had happened, and did after I arrived to the hut, taking a route that was more circular than straight.



## CHAPTER 16

Linalita seemed to know the best way to get back to Mechanos' mountain workshop, home and sanctuary. And a good thing that she had memory in her feet, because the sky got darker faster than the clock in my head or in the cart said it would. Rocks became boulders, but somehow she, and the stallion next to her, seemed to be able to find the smoothest and fastest way between them. Bright sky was replaced by black sky, then fog. It seemed like the clouds were coming down to earth to meet in the middle, with me as the battleground of the argument that was about to happen. I listened to everything along the way. The rattle of the wagon wheel as it would fall off. Footsteps of approaching soldiers. Or perhaps thunder from the gods that was about to piss hot acidic urine on me if I didn't evade them quickly.

I worried about a lot of things that, so I thought anyway, didn't happen. Maybe because there was a reason why I was doing all of this. There had to be. The answer to that was given to my ears in music rather than words. Guiding our way up the mountain was not a star from above, or a compass made by mortals below, but a song that echoed around every cloud, tree and thought that got in my way. Linalita voiced her approval of that divine music first with a snortle, followed by her equine mate, who seemed to be more interested in the half-mule's mind than body.

"Yes, my friends," I said to them both as I 'snortled' with a human sign of relief. "That music up ahead is Wandelina's voice and her lute. Expressing everything from pain to pleasure, sadness to joy, and fast and slow, all at the same time, somehow. And, yes, the music she is making is not of this world, though someone in it will probably try to figure out a mathematical answer as to why it touches us so much. Maybe it will be Mechanos. I pray to the gods, or whatever is out there, that it will not be me."

I then realized that I was on my way to becoming a Mechanos. That day would come when Mechanos would name me as "Brother" rather than Brother Apprentice. I always envied and admired my new master. But I pitied him too. There was wisdom in him, but not much wonderment. He had to explain everything, or channel it into some kind of 'good' for humanity. Even music, I thought, as Wandelina's expressions of that wondrous creation got louder, and I could see its physical source. Her white body lighted by the fire against the black sky, penetrating its indifference and quiet with a Silence that I once knew, and could hear, yes, when alone and without Mechanos to explain to me the 'physics' of 'quiet'. And now, I could hear it again, and feel it.

I stopped the cart and let myself be moved by her music, not allowing my mind to define it. Yes, if the gods were real, Wandelina's music was one of their most masterful Creations. And if the gods were not real, then all the more important to create illusions of things beyond what our eyes can see so that we could create another Reality. One that was Alive. One that...connects all of us, no matter what we think, or believe. And as to what we REALLY believe...was that the same as what we think and feel?

I felt my mind growing with every note Wandelina played. And in ways that neither Mechanos, nor I, could ever define. I lingered there in the dark, absorbed by the Light of her music. I closed my eyes so that I could see what was most Real. A hot chill went through me from the bottom of my spine to the top of my head, which still had hair it. And I felt myself, or another Self inside of me, rise upward like a ghost. That ghost raised my arms up from my thighs, then to my chest, then over my head, when--- something happened.

The music stopped. Such is what my ears told me anyway. I opened my eyes and saw Wandelina smile as she looked up to the sky and give something up there a humble bow. She then smiled at me. I jumped off the cart, ran with my mismatched legs as fast as I could, stumbled a few times in the mud, then got up to run again. This time she motioned for me to keep my distance. Then as something in the bushes around her moved like ghosts, she informed me with her hands to go away.

I don't know why I obeyed her request. It seems that is what I did best. 'Obey' people who gave me orders, and pleased people who I liked, or perhaps loved. So, I did what I was best at. And she did, what she maybe was best at. She played the lute while strolling along, pretending that the ghostlike or perhaps real intruders didn't know she was on to them. And finally, they went away. Or stopped moving anyway. It was then that she asked me to come up to join her.

Maybe it was one of Mechanos' tricks, I thought. Another illusion projected by one of his machines to trick people into seeing ghosts that weren't there. Or imagine heroes that are real in an performance in which people want and NEED to be fooled for an hour or two. Relief from their world of predictabilities was, after all, good medicine. Such was what music was as well.

As I walked up the hill, I hummed some of the music that Wandelina had sung. It felt out of tune no matter how my ear tried to imagine it otherwise, but only I could hear it. Or so I thought until a very real ghost came out of the bushes and pulled me into them. A blindfold went over my eyes and I felt many hands pull me into something hard. Then something going down my mouth that made it feel moist, salty then nothing at all.

## CHAPTER 17

I woke up in the room under the arena where I had seen Mechanos talking with the Priest who told him to resurrect the gods. To a builder of machines, it was Paradise adorned with golden light, each mechanical ‘creature’ more miraculous than the next, as if built by the greatest minds of the gods and mortals. To anyone else it looked like some kind of hell, all manner of workers, more distorted in shape than I was, struggling in their labors in rooms where the sun never shone on anything or anyone. I felt myself somewhere in between, my guide being the Priest himself. “It is important that we have a talk,” he told me.

“You mean you have a talk, and I have a listen,” I said, defiantly. “Unless you want to tell me where Wandelina is.”

“Only if you tell me where Mechanos went to,” the Priest said. “He didn’t show up for work today here. And he was not at home in his workshop. We had some things to talk about, and do.”

“That I know nothing about,” I claimed, as the truth. “But before you ask me questions, I want to ask you one.”

“You are permitted you to ask ONE question, and then you are required to answer mine. That is fair, is it not?” he said, and meant, as he spoke to me as...an equal.

A High Priest talking to a lowly commoner sold into slavery by his ashamed family such as myself was very...different. And I prepared to ask him the question... WHY was Mechanos, one who did not believe in the gods, working for Priests who seemed to need those deities? What would make a man so principled as Mechanos do the bidding of these Priests who manufactured religion for their own gain? The answer hit me in the face as I saw the faces of the dolls which the Priest had threatened to dismember if he didn’t cooperate. One of them was the face of Wandelina. The other of me. The other of...Mechanos, if he were twenty years younger, had hair instead of exposed scalp on the top of his head, and was born with breasts instead of testicals. “His daughter,” I thought, but did not voice. “And us, his new family,” I pondered, trying to not let the Priest see what I was thinking. “He is preserving the lives of his family at the cost of other families. Which some call love,” I said to myself behind silent lips. “And if I can find this daughter of Mechanos, and wherever Wendelina was, I could---“

“---What is your question?” the Priest asked me with a slight bow.

“What do you want from me?” I asked, feeling a character coming into me.

“Perhaps, at some time, to be the next Mechanos,” he said, proudly. “You work with him. You share conversation with him. You eat food that he cooks.”

“And survive it, as long as there are enough crows and dogs around to sneak it to while I pretend that I am enjoying it,” I said with a smile.

The corners of the Priest’s lips turned upward as well. No doubt, at one time when there was cooperation between the scientist Mechanos was and the theologian the Priest had been, he had the misfortune of tasting Mechanos’ culinary creations, and the blessing of having to pretend to like it.

But other matters were at stake. The Priest was already thinking about how I would spy on my Friend, Teacher and, legally anyway, still Master. And I was considering how I could trick him into something. But one thing was primary in my mind, and such was my question. A simple inquiry to which I required a firm answer. “Where is Wandelina?”

“Safe, and secure, for now,” the Priest replied. “As long as you talk some reason into Mechanos.”

“The kind of reason that says he is better off working for you than whoever else he is working for,” I said.

“And that whoever else he is working for is?” the Priest asked of me, not knowing the answer.

“I don’t know,” I replied, as part of the fable I was writing about the hero I was becoming, and as the truth. Fable and fact merged together equals legend, and legends are more powerful than fable or fact. Or so I hoped, as the Priest let me go out the door of the arena underworld without shackles, everyone remaining inside still chained up, one way or the other, including the Priest himself.

## CHAPTER 17

Why I was allowed to leave the underground ‘laboratory’ which was far better equipped and staffed than his hut ever was, I did not know. Why I was not followed was even more astounding, as I felt my brain getting smarter, and maybe even wiser, every day during those days. Maybe it was something Mechanos put in the food he made me eat and pretend to like. Or maybe it was being around Mechanos. Or being around Wandelina. Or knowing now that the gods whose representation visited the arena were a creation of man, and not vice versa. Or maybe, as the still god-believing Wandelina had said, not being around people from home who needed me to be the village idiot. Now, I was needed to be...something else.

Whatever that ‘else’ was, it was someone who could now read, and as a result of such, think with words that were very ‘complicated’, and which I actually did grasp an understanding of. Instead of thinking ‘get’, I would say to myself ‘obtain’. But with this came less happiness, more worry and the need to use my eyes for more than just seeing where the manure I was supposed to shovel was dumped on the ground.

One of the things I saw, no—‘noted’, was an increase in the ‘inseparability’ of religion and state. Every Priest I saw walking around in the streets was consulting with a Military Officer, as if they had been organizing things together. And every Monk was dutifully working with the soldiers, each complaining about their Masters with a distain that bound them to each other. And I noticed WHAT was around the Priests, Monks, Officers and Soldiers. Everything except their swords, staffs and sandals seemed to be designed by one man---Mechanos. I recognized their shapes and designs from the many drawings he made me look at, and those I looked at when he wasn’t looking at me as well. Maybe this was part of my Friend, and Master’s, plan...To let me see things about him and what he was doing which he wanted to keep secret. It made logical sense...give someone clues about what you want to have them find out about you and they find out that secret when they are smart enough to understand, and accept it.

Maybe Mechanos wanted me to find out those things about him that he did not, or could not, or dared not, tell anyone else directly. When had he asked me questions, it wasn’t like Socrates did. That ‘other’ bald wisdom-overloaded man would put the answer to a question within the question. With ‘yes or no’ answers built into them. Like Plato’s Allegory of the Cave which, as I recall with my now thinking and not memorizing brain, “What would a man who has seen the Sun outside a the cave where his comrades had lived only in shadows say to his comrades if he were to come back into the cave after he had spent all of his time prior to seeing the Sun within that cave? And would he not appear strange to those people who knew nothing of the Light of the Sun, or the Sun itself? And would he not appear misled and stupid by those whose only knowledge of light was in relationship to shadows the campfire inside the cave cast on the wall? And when the man who had seen the Sun described the Sun, would those who did not understand him also fear him?”

No, Mechanos' teaching was more subtle than that. But time was ticking away, by every clock that I knew about, and felt. And saw. The ratio of soldiers to civilians had escalated three times, and the conversion of the latter into the former at stands where Masters were convinced to donate their slaves to the Army for good favor with the Priests, and themselves for good favor with attractive slave women seeking heroes who were behind the conscription officials. Whatever music had filled the air was now drumbeats rather than flutes. I was never comfortable around soldiers, especially ones who had just been civilians. Being a Village Idiot, I had been spared having to do military service by my 'important' Masters back home. As a matter of fact, one of them joked about defeating the enemy by me being conscripted into their army so that my defective brain and all the backwards thoughts in it would get them confused, confounded and then frustrated. I seemed to recall, as that memory came back into my head, that it was my brother who made that joke.

I wondered what enemy these people were fighting, and thought to inquire about it. But I stopped myself, because I would ask the question of 'why' they were fighting this enemy and if there was some way they could talk their differences out rather than fight them out. Such almost got my OWN tongue cut out when I inquired about the same to a conscription officer in my home, a man who limped home after the battle without his left face, his right leg, his left arm and any kind of reason to live behind both of his lifeless eyes.

No, there was another question which bothered me which needed to be answered. Each of the devices not created by gods or blacksmiths with simple minds in this city was made by Mechanos. From the pumps that supplied clean water to thirsty animals and slaves at the public well, to the carts that carried rich land and people owners around the streets, to the armour on the soldiers who, by the looks of them, had families who needed them to come home alive. And all in a city where no one knew Mechanos' face. Not when we came in to it a few days ago. And not when I asked them where he was now.

I thought about what Mechanos would want me to do now. "Think for myself," I thought. That is what he kept saying to me when I asked me to give me orders so I would have a sense of purpose to the day. "Think for yourself", would be his order. So, I did so, and the first order I followed was to violate his. The one he put on top of the list.

It took me a while to get up the mountain to the cart with the secret compartment in the back corner. When I looked at it, it still was unopened, and obviously undetected. The soldiers and the Priest were now long gone, by the footprints in the dirt, somewhere down the valley. Inside the wagon compartment made from trees that I cut down lay rolled up parchments which contained the inventions that Mechanos said only his eyes should see. Knowledge that no one is ready to have yet. But it didn't make sense. Every new Mechanos had seemed to discover, he shared with somebody. Three times every half hour he would talk about a new idea about something his mind had discovered at that moment, whether I, Wendelina, or the equine beasts which had become our friends wanted to hear about it or not. So why would he write down things that no one was

supposed to know about? I had to find out, so I opened the compartment just to ‘check if it had been broken into’.

My hand shook when my fingers touched the first roll, which sprung up at me with a leap while the others lay buried deeper inside the box. “Perhaps you want to get caught,” I said to the manuscript as I opened it. “Like an old stag or aging wolf who knows it is time to be captured by a hunter that will put you in a cage, or a pot. An end which you KNOW will happen to you. But rest assured, my good friend. I will neither enslave nor destroy you. I simply want to know what and who you are.”

The manuscript answered me with three words on the top. “Great job, Adam,” it said. Under it was blank space. And beneath that space more words that said “This discovery belongs to you, and you belong to it. It will be your Creation.” Underneath that there was a name. “For explanation of this, and what the rest of the manuscripts say, see Rachel.”

I recognized the name. It was one of those shops where I was supposed to obtain some goods for Mechanos from, but was stopped from doing so by my visit with the Priest. The parchment that called me ‘Adam’ had on it some recently scribbled down directions to it on what looked a bit like a map. But I when I got to town, clad as a lame, short-bearded, white-haired beggar that no one there had seen me as, neither words nor the drawings made sense. “The crazy medicine lady,” I remember a soldier saying to me when I asked him directions as to how to get to where Rachel was. The directions he gave were not at all what Mechanos did, and for reasons that made more sense to my belly than my brain, I had another go at following his instructions. “The shortest distance between two places is often a curved arc rather than a straight line,” I remember Mechanos saying to me so often, but when I followed those instructions, I always got to the destination.

This series of curved arcs led to a loud brothel, a stinky cheese shop and vendor trying to pass urine and blood-stained rags off as clothing worn by heroes in the last two wars the city had fought, and somehow survived. “Just be sure that she likes you, because if she doesn’t, it will be bad medicine for you and everyone you care about,” I recall as the warning when I was asked for more directions, perhaps of the wrong man. When I hobbled into Rachel’s shop, she recognized me right away, particularly when I showed her the exposed manuscript Mechanos instructed me to not open.

“Oh, Adam!” she exclaimed. “Enter. And please, help yourself to another apple,” the colorfully-plain old hag continued. “And please tell me, how is Eve?”

I didn’t know who or what an Adam was or an Eve. And the way this short, sure-footed, curly-haired woman with olive dark skin baked dry by the sun, talked was as strange as the goods lining the shelves. Everything was from somewhere else, including the way she rolled her r’s, and said h’s by blowing air over the roof of her mouth as the words were coming out in a voice that was as deep as it was ancient, and exotic. And as

for words, the ones she was writing on her own parchments were with lettering I didn't recognize, and she was writing them from right to left rather than left to right.

"Hebrew," she said as I tried to make out the writing. "Stories about men, women and God that, well, someday someone might read. I hope anyway."

"God?" I said.

"Yes, the God of Abraham. Yahwah. Who when asked to describe him, or herself, said, 'I am that I am. And all that is.'. That is all that matters, or should matter, to us Jews."

"A single god?" I asked her as I looked at her robe, as worn and torn as any beggar's. And her sandals, which had been re-sewn and repadded at least five times. And her aging arms and legs, which did not have any of fat on them, matching her long, gaunt but still hopeful face. "Are Jews so poor that they can only afford to make offerings to or speak to one god?" I said, thinking it to be a joke.

Rachel smiled, but didn't laugh. And after she finished writing Hebrew on the paper, she wrote something else on a leather pouch and attached it to a small jar containing powder to which she added other powders with pinches of her finger as the unit of measurement. She smelled the mixture when everything was added and adjusted in proportions. "Ancient recipe for cramps. And cholera. Makes the intestines move food along as it should, and promotes absorption of what the body needs. Just one of the things I learned in Samaria."

"Is that where Jews live?" I asked, taking note of her.

"That's where Jews go when they anger the Jewish Priests in Jerusalem," she said, resolved to her fate in ways that was courageous, and mournful.

"What angers Jewish Priests?" I inquired.

"The same thing that angers Priests anywhere," she continued as she prepared more potions for more patients, as natural at her craft as Mechanos with machinery, Wandalina with music, and me with carting things around that inventors and musicians needed. "Priests are enraged by people who can do more good for other people than they can. And people who make those people think, and reason. And people who believe things that don't agree with what they say is true."

"And the Priests here?" I asked. "Why do they let you live?"

"Because I am the only one who has been able to keep their wives, mistresses and children alive," she said with pride, and conviction. "As long as they are healthy, they let me live," she continued, fear overcoming her like a fog rolling in slowly on a sunlit morning. "As long as Mother Earth and Nature still lets me heal their bodies, of course."



“But, you seem to be a brilliant person. One with many healing insights,” I said, feeling her to be as smart as Mechanos, and perhaps far wiser.

“Brilliance and insight are talents that are rented, not owned,” she said. “They stay with you as long as you are hard working, and humble about them,” she continued.

“Humble to who?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Just humble, and thankful. But I am always ready for the magic one day to not work to people’s expectations.”

“Just like it did, or almost did, for Mechanos when he built the water pumps and irrigation system for the people in...” I recalled, forgetting the name of the village where Mechanos was nearly burnt at the stake for his ‘magic’ invention not working, until he made a small adjustment that turned the water on, turning the angry mob into an adoring crowd. “But I do what to ask you one question,” I continued.

“What’s in these ‘potions’ and how they work for all the diseases of the body, mind and spirit that, so far, they have been working for?” she asked. “I have some ideas about they work. And have improved some of them relative to what I learned in the many places I have had to, and wanted to, be. But until Mechanos invents a machine that can let me see what is inside the human body by making it look bigger to the eye, and until he or someone else maps out how the blood and the other fluids in it REALLY move from one place to another in health and disease, I can’t tell you how what I do works.”

I noticed a doll with lines over its body, and points on the lines. And next to the doll, needles, and on the smooth lined bag around the needles, writing that was neither Greek nor Hebrew. “That sac is silk,” she said. “Made in a far away world not too unlike this one called China. Just like those acupuncture needles. With them I can move chi from one part of the body to the other. Something the fingers teach you better than the eyes every can,” she continued.

Though the doll looked interesting, and what she had to say about what the needles did fascinated me even more, there was one question I had to have answered first. “What is an Adam, and who is Eve?” I asked.

“Player in a story written in ancient Hebrew scripture. And an even more ancient tale, perhaps reality in Sumerian,” she continued with her mouth as her knobby fingers took hold of a three hard rock, like the ones I helped Mechanos find, and crushed them into powder in a bowl with all the strength and conviction she could muster. “Which do you want to hear? The scripture or the tale?”

“I want to hear what is most truthful,” I said. “Or useful,” I continued, reconsidering the matter.

“Most of the time they are the same thing,” she said. “But not always. But, in any case, according to the Sumarians, there was once a beastlike monkey who was created into a man.”

“Adam, in Hebrew?” I asked.

“There was another monkey who was created into a woman.”

“Eve, in Jewish,” I surmised.

“The Creator of Adam and Eve lived up in the sky, and flew above the clouds.”

“The heavens, in Jew talk?”

“In Hebrew!” she insisted, then went on. “You see, the Creators up in the sky who come from stars a far distance away wanted to create a race of beasts that were smarter than other beasts here in our world.”

“And human like they were?”

“In some ways, but not others. You see, the beasts would have figured out how to become human sometime, but the Creators decided it was better to help them along.”

“And in exchange, the human beasts were supposed to do be slaves for the Creators?”

“Yes, and no. They would do things that the Creators couldn’t do anymore. Or wouldn’t do.”

“Like sweat. Overwork their muscles. Break their backs.”

“And other things. Like be able to feel things the Creators were not able to feel anymore. But one day, one of the Creators decided to pull a trick on his fellow Creators. He wanted Adam to be smart, and to have a mind to be able to think for himself. But he was too stupid, or complacent, to become smart. So, Eve got the idea, from somewhere, to tell Adam to eat from a tree that would make his brain smart. He was scared to do so, but she convinced him it would be alright. And that it was the right thing to do.”

“Women telling men what to do. This isn’t a good thing. That’s what my brother always told me.” I said.

“And in this case, your brother may have been right. But, in any case, the Creators had to live with men and women who were smarter than the beings they were supposed to be. And it was a good thing for the Creators. But, the Creator who got the idea to make Adam smart and Eve brave was punished.”

“Like Prometheus, for giving man the gift of fire, and the ability to think, and to take responsibility for his own actions,” I said, recalling the tales my mother told me about the gods. “He was tied to the ground and had his liver eaten by crows at night, and the next day, it would grow back just to be eaten again the night afterward. Or was it that the crows eat his liver during the day?”

“There are far worse punishments than having your liver eaten,” she said. “Having your heart broken, and the guilt in you eat away at your conscience. This is even worse.”

“And what did Mechanos do to be guilty for?” I asked, putting it all together. Everything from me ‘magically’, between the ears anyway, going from being a village idiot to probably the smartest person in this big city, other than of course Mechanos, and perhaps Rachel. To me being mysteriously ‘mated’ to Wandelina, who Mechanos continuously said would provide him ‘grandchildren’. To me figuring out secrets about the gods and the earth aedn the heavens that I wished I never knew about, but now had to accept and investigate.

Rachel didn’t tell me what Mechanos did to deserve the sadness that was always in his heart, and the guilt I saw in his downturned eyes whenever I asked him about his past. Instead, she gave me an elixir. I smelled it.

“Is this supposed to turn my still beast-like body into one that would be the envy of any mortal human, or ‘god’ who comes from the stars above?” I asked.

She smiled, warmly and kindly. “It’s something for the pain in your left leg,” she said. “And the yellow color that’s developing in your eyes.”

“Liver problems, like Prometheus?” I said.

“It’s called jaundice. And there’s probably a more logical reason for it. Bad food or rancid water. One that this milk thistle will take care of, according to the best of my intuition and experience.”

“And in your best intuition and experience, where is Eve, eh, I mean, Wandelina?” I asked.

“Maybe Mechanos can answer that question,” she said. “I’m just a doctor. Like Hippocrates. Not a mystical oracle or a seer witch, like some of the people here think I am.”

“People who are ready to crucify you if they can,” I commented.

“But who won’t as long as I keep their hurting bodies and ignorant minds alive,” she said. “But in the meantime,” she continued, her voice dropping down two octaves.

She cleared her throat, adjusted the scarf around her neck so as to not let me see the rest of the brand, rope burn or mutilated flesh that was under it and looked out the window as a squad of soldiers coming by searching several huts with drawn swords. “I suggest that you find Mechanos. And I would suggest that he is in a place where he would normally avoid. The place that repulses him most, and attracts everyone else who is not like him. According to my intuition and experience.”

According to my intuition and experience, there was only one place that fit that description. Cloaked in a Syrian robe which Rachel gave me, I snuck out the door and walked as confidently as possible down the street, through a dark alley, then into the establishment that my now friend, past Master and, if one accepted Sumerian legend as fact, ancient ‘Creator’ would be hiding.

## CHAPTER 19

'Clammer' was the best word I can use to describe what I saw in the streets on my way to the destination where my inner mind, bless and curse it's expansions, told me Mechanos would be. From the rythm beat of boots on the ground to the irratic and mournful wailing of mothers seeing their remaining sons go off to a war that had claimed the lives of their husband, everything was in 'transition'. The kind of transition where everyone was assigned a place to be, and a thing to do, with the utmost sense of urgency. And very much included in that were people of all kinds passing around parchments to others who could read, and showing sketches to those who couldn't. Some of the drawings were of the 'enemy' made to look like demons. Others were of 'our people', the women to be defended made to look like angels, the men like heros, or in the better renditions, gods. There was one drawing that caught my attention most, I as I tried to be paid no attention. It was being passed to soldiers of the lowest rank wearing uniforms that were either way to big or way too small. "Find this man, and bring him to me," he said with the utmost sense of importance. "He is very dangerous and clever, but he is needed in five days for a very important job. And whoever finds him will, in five days, be not only promoted one rank at the Festival, but be given an extra ration of meat for a week, and his family at home given extra ration of grain for two weeks."

As to who this dangerous and clever man was, that was obvious when I looked at the drawing. Though they got every detail about his face and torso accurately, the artist was all wrong when it came to the eyes. Mechanos' eyes never were so arrogant, cold and cruel, at least when I looked at them. And as for the Festival, obviously this was an event to be used to sent mortals into war on behalf of gods whose orders and perhaps very existence was fabricated by a 'light and smoke' show from below the floors where they rested their feet and deposited their urine. I looked at the youngest soldier who had the uniform that fit most badly and watched him as his kind face turned into that of a tyrant in the attempt to obtain that extra two bitefuls of meat for a week and extra three cups of grain for his family as if they were worth the treasure of King Midas. Then again, perhaps in his world such was. I only imagined how much shiny gold and how many 'copulatable' virgins this young 'warrior's' commanding officer would get, and how much more wealth the Dukes, Princes, Kings and Priests above him would get once Mechanos was 'found', and 're-established' in his place in his home town during this state of emergency.

But I had my own state of emergency. My war was about finding Wandelina, getting her free, and if at all possible, finding out what Mechanos was really up to, and why. And perhaps finding the young woman in the face of the doll who he seemed to care about as much as me and Wandelina...perhaps more. Yes, it was about taking care of MY family now, and still trying to avoid destroying other families to insure their well being----if at all possible.

Taking my own steps to the battlefield, and finally arrived at the place where there was inside another kind of clamor. That of laughter, levity and something that

Mechanos always seemed to avoid, and I always seemed to envy---‘fun’. The men and women inside seemed to be more concerned with the joy of the moment than the tragedies that may befall them tomorrow, and amongst the various wine-driven ‘conversations’ related in slurs and phrases, someone was singing a song. “We live for today and forget about tomorrow, for tomorrow will never come if we live today tonight!” it seemed to promise, and perhaps even deliver. Indeed, I felt myself testing that ‘hypothesis’ on and it felt like it could make sense, and even happen.

I opened the door, and the rush of the clamorous celebration inside hit my ears like a blinded mule hitting a brick wall, the stench of wine rushing into my nose like a valley stream being fed by a snowy mountaintop during an early Spring. No one seemed to care who I was, and what I was doing there. They were all concerned with their own celebrations, or sorrows, from the lowest ranking soldier to the highest level Priest. All were paired up with ‘something’ else, that something being beautiful women in most cases, young boys in others, and goats dressed up like goddesses, though I dared not look to see if those animals’ genitalia were more appropriate to being gods. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the ‘conversations’ between their eyes, mouths and extended tongues. Then someone who wasn’t paired up tried to engage me in a conversation, which was not intended to be enjoyed.

“Get out of here, now! Come back later!” a hunch-backed old woman who walked with a limp slurred to me with a stammer and stutter to her crackly voice, pushing my face downward, and my body out the door. Her voice that was deeper than most old woman who had scolded me for one reason or another, and face that looked familiar.

“You look different without your beard,” I said to her. “And where did you get that hair on your head?” I continued regarding the multicolored mane flowing down the sides of her headscarf, surmising as quickly as possible the answer to my own inquiry. “This would explain why Linata and her mate had full tails yesterday and half tails the last time checked in on them.”

“And now you are checking in on me?” Mechanos whispered to me, looking around him to see if anyone was watching. And they were, with more attention to the cart of wine, cheese and bread behind him than on him. “I’m working here,” he told me as a soldier of some rank of importance summoned him over with a whistle, a snap of his fingers, and a movement of his index finger pointing to his empty mug and plate.

“I’m cccommiiiiinnnggg,” Mechanos said in his best old lady voice with an accentuated hunch in his back as he turned around to tend to his duties.

“Not with MY man’s cock in any part of you, old hag,” the Officer’s ‘goddess for the night’ said loud enough for everyone around her to hear.

It got a big laugh from everyone, including Mechanos. But not me.

“They are laughing at you,” I warned my friend as he tended back to his ‘maidenly’ duties.

“And while they do, am will be listening to them,” he whispered to me as he pushed the cart of food towards his ‘masters’. “Just like you were probably listening to so many people who were laughing at you in your home. And you are slowly remembering what they said to you then, so that you are becoming more informed than they are now.”

As Mechanos poured wine and served food to those who tripped him up and tried to make him spill them, there was something he said which hit me like a bold of Promethian thunder. “Becoming more informed” was what he said, not ‘being smarter’ or ‘becoming wiser’ or ‘getting more clever.’ Both my ears and Mechanos’ would hear enlisted soldiers sharing secrets about their new heroic exploits to come with their rented companions for the night. And their Officers talking about the places where they would be going, and what things they were promising to bring back in a month or two in exchange for extra favors delivered tonight. And the Priests and High Level merchants talking about the new weapons that would be using against the enemy, which were to be built in a few days by ‘inspirational messengers who got instructions from the gods themselves’.

I looked at that ‘inspirational messenger’, who above all people didn’t believe in any of the gods. Who maybe still believed in godlike potentials within us mortals. But would they be for good or evil? Probably both, unless there was a God which was beyond both good and evil that was about...well, maybe that word called ‘love’, with a capital L. I hoped so. And prayed so.

I turned my head and found myself face to face with a lower level Priest, or maybe higher level Monk. A large man endowed with big arms, thick muscular legs and a small head with a sloping forehead. By his clothing and demeanor, he was the kind of man who enjoyed following orders more than creating them, but even more than that, he seemed to enjoy giving commands to people most. “Tell me who you are!” he barked at me, demanding an answer. “And what your business here is!”

Before I could fabricate some kind of answer that would satisfy his well armed bosses, or his intoxicated brain, a small framed woman next to him, with the hard face of an experienced whore and the body of a young virgin, grabbed hold of my robe. “And where did you get this!” she said of the garment Rachel had given me.

“Somewhere East of here,” I said with an accent that I hoped matched this locale. “From a trader who came to town.”

“What did you pay for it?” the soldier demanded of me in a very ‘male’ way.

“My lamest mule and my most dried up goat,” I boasted. “To a vender who was as dumb as a sailor from Crete . As ugly as a Cypriote. And as weak willed as any

‘soldier of honor’ from Rhodes,” I continued, having pieced together the places this city hated, and feared, and ridiculed most.

“For a garment like this!” the woman said, seeming to see money in my pockets that was not there, and breeding in my pedigree that certainly was not there either. “That can’t be so. This robe is---”

“---Yours now,” the soldier said, taking the robe off me and handing it to his woman with a breath reeking of cheap wine and rancid pine rum. “And in payment, good Sir, from this fair and honorable city, I give you...” He looked around at the men under his command around him as I huddled in the rags that would give away my real identity and clad me with one of the women who was with them. “Her!” he said as I felt myself clothed by a half-naked woman who seemed more like a mistress than a slave, or an escort. She was very smart behind the eyes, smarter than any other woman in the room, and a lot more clever. Worse, as she hugs my neck, I could feel every part of her be able to manipulate my mind, heart and soul to do anything she desired, and what she desired most was money. And fame. And to officially be something other than a whore, or a slave, or whatever her official role was here. The kind of woman whose eyes I could get lost in, and forget about everyone, including MY woman, Wandelina, who I came here to find in the first place.

“Noooo...” I heard in a female voice behind me, as if coming to MY rescue. A woman coming to my rescue. This was odd. Stranger was what this woman said afterwards after she pushed the seductress aside. “Heee issss mmmminne,” Mechanos said, hugging my torso, licking my neck, then looking straight into my eyes and saying to me with all sincerity. “Finally you have come back to me.”

While he kissed me, on the lips, we became the center of attention as bets were placed as to ‘her’ relationship to me. The most wagers were put on the old hag being my wife. The next most popular was my mother. Then came ‘sister’.

“You are all wrong,” I said. “She is my goddess for the night,” I replied and whisked my paternal taskmaster and perhaps maternal savior out the back door before anyone, including us, could figure out what was really going on.



## CHAPTER 20

Behind the tavern was a horse trough, and behind the trough, a pile of manure dropped off by the horses, and behind that, a clump of trees benefiting from the manure through a small stream that I saw go underground, and heard with the soles of my now bare feet. It was there that Mechanos invited me to sit on one of those ancient branches. I remained standing. He accepted my answer and proceeded to push aside the dirt between the trees into a sandy papyrus role, which he scribbled something on with a stick provided by the bushes between the trees. Choosing to look at who was looking at us rather than what he was writing, I noticed that we were alone. From this vantage point, one could see the entire city, but not be seen by anyone in it. Or so I hoped anyway. But there was something about this city. This place where people, some good, and some bad, and many inbetween, lives. This place that seemed to be where Mechanos called home.

I opened my mouth to ask him a question before he could inflict the same gesture on me. “This city is like many of the other towns I have been to with you. Mothers seem to love their children. Children seem to love their mothers, and fathers. The slaves are not beaten any worse than any place else we have been. The animals for the most part look well fed and cared for. And, if your fellow citizens lose this war, all of this will be destroyed by the enemy. Is this home of yours not worth defending, Master Mechanos?”

“By killing every man in the enemy’s city on the battlefield, then raping all of their widows, then enslaving all of their children, and chopping up the bodies of the elderly and the wounded to feed to out pigs, or ourselves my dear but deluded Brother Apprentice?” he countered as he sat down, thinking about what he wrote in the sand. “This may be the way the world works, but it will do so without me helping it to do so. The madness has to stop sometime.”

“But this is the way of the world, and there is no other world in which we can live unless we can fly to another one,” I reminded Mechanos.

Mechanos adjusted his skirt or rags and head of horsehair and pointed the stick at the what he had written, partially in Greek words and partially in ‘mathematics’. “Me does not equal them” he translated. “And never will!” he asserted. “I will not construct another catapult, war chariot, spear, or exploding fireball for my own city, or anyone else’s.”

Another idea came to me. “Maybe you could invent a machine that would be so horrible and terrible that NO one will dare use it! Like a catapult that sends out fireballs from chariots that are shielded with armour that no one can penetrate. Fireballs that create flashes of light and winds of fire that destroy everything within a mile of where it hits. Maybe give it to everyone, so that no one will ever use it.”

“Deterrence,” he said. “An interesting theoretical idea, but all you need is one person who has taken leave of reason or conscience, and everyone will be using this ‘god hell fire’ weapon you speak about.”

“Which maybe you have already invented?” I said. “And drawn on the papyrus sheets that are still unopened?”

“And inventions with far more destructive and constructive potential than that,” he said. “Like taking the power from the sun and turning into fire that never goes out, and can always be intensified, and concentrated into a beam of light no bigger than a finger. A beam of light that can cut down a tree like this one and cut logs into planks to build a house for homeless people without anyone ever having to take out an axe or saw. Or make air into matter, and matter into food to feed the people in that house. Or...”

“...Cut down walls of cities so they tumble down on people whose food you make vanish into thin air,” I surmised, and said, feeling myself getting ‘smarter’ again, but more sad and worried about...everything.

“So,” Mechanos said to me. “Now you understand.” He sat on a large tree trunk which embraced him like a ruler who was as much as a servant to his people as a master. But where REALLY was his kingdom, and what were the rules by which it operated?

“I understand everything except the truth about you,” I said. “Like where you really come from.”

“A question of, irrelevance, for now,” he said, refusing to pursue the issue any longer.

“Like what you really expect from me,” I pressed.

“That, is a brilliant insight. A wise question,” he admitted, with the kind of pride in me I had never seen.

“And what you WANT from me,” I asserted.

Mechanos’ smile assured me that I was on to something very important, and innovative. It was the same smile that my mother gave me when I figured out something that was beyond what my father thought I was capable of, and my brother was afraid of me knowing. Indeed, in his old hag costume, he looked like my ‘mother’. Perhaps my mother’s ghost inhabited him all along. It was one of those things best imagined than thought about. But like all accomplishments, climbing a big hill required you to ascend a mountain as your next commandment, or dare.

“Tell me something,” Mechanos said. “You and Wandelina. Before she was taken away, were there more things that you don’t talk about than that you did talk about?”

“Yes,” I replied, with shame and regret.

“And between us?” he pressed, looking straight into my eyes. “Do we not talk about more than what we do talk about?”

“You tell me,” I challenged, sensing the answer was ‘yes’ from him too.

Mechanos got up off of the tree trunk that had been his arbor throne and paced around the ‘writing board’ between the trees. He went to one side of the sheet of sand and threw me a stick while I was on the other. “It is time that we had the kind of conversation that I should have had with my daughter’s mother, but didn’t.”

“The daughter whose face was on the doll the priest was going to cut open,” I surmised. “Whose throat will be cut open for real in five days if you don’t make the gods appear at the festival so they tell the people of this city that it is their duty to go to war,” I surmised.

“With weapons that I would of course build for them so they could vanquish their enemies,” he added, his eyes seeing the horror of the massacres.

“And bring back to gold and riches from the sac of their homes to the Priests, King and Generals here,” I added.

“Or, according to some of the Princes, and Priests, riches taken in war on our enemies that would be delivered to poor commoners here,” he said. “Maybe. Possibly. Perhaps.”

“I have never met such Princes and Priests,” I said.

“No, neither have I,” he said. “But before we do what we have to do to save my daughter, your Wandelina, and the world that is now frustrating us both that we are cursed to care so much about, we have to do some writing in the sand. Make our mark in and on this world,” he said with a gentle laugh. “But to make the first statement like I should have made mine with my wife, and which you will, when we find her, make with Wandelina. And the first part of this procedure would be for you to turn your back on me and me to turn my back on you.”

“That’s a logical choice for a trusting relationship,” I blurted out with sarcasm, an emotion that Wandelina said was a sign of intelligence, and I still felt was an expression of cruelty and insensitivity.

“As a matter of PRACTICALITY,” Mechanos explained to me. “You see, the brain wants to keep things as they are, be they good or bad. It blocks out what the Mind perceives as the highest and most right Truth, preferring to live with comfortable lies than liberating truths. You DO understand this...”

“Yes,” I said believing that my answer was truthful.

“And even though we are selfish creatures whose biological instincts are to preserve ourselves, a survival instinct as it is called, we do not want to harm others. So when you tell someone face to face a truth that is painful to their brain, and heart, they make expressions of pain with their face that makes you stop telling them truths. So, you say nothing, or worse, tell them lies to make them feel better.”

“So how do we tell each other truths?” I asked.

“By me writing down in this sand what I want of you, and what I expect of you, with my back turned to you. And you writing what you want of me, and expect of me, with our back turned to me. And in words that are clear, honest and accurate. And which are about commandments and demands rather than feelings. Not words that hide or ignore facts. You understand?”

“Yes, I think so,” I said, and turned my back and proceeded to write in the sand. As for what to write, my ability to read was still...developing. But I wrote clearly in the sand as to what I expected of Mechanos...”I expect you to respect me. And not tell me any more lies.” As for what I wanted from him, my mind and brain had to consult with my heart. The first words to come out were, “I want you to love me.” But then I thought about that word, ‘love’. What specific things would I want from Mechanos as proof that he did ‘love’ me? I was at a loss, and lingered there with my stick in the ground, then up my nose, then scratching my ass. I thought about turning around to look at what Mechanos was writing, but dared not do so. Then, a flash came to me as to how I wanted Mechanos to ‘love’ me. What behaviors and actions did I really want from him which would register as ‘love’ in my Soul, and Heart? I knew the words in my mind, but did not know how to write them. My knowledge of written Greek was not yet at that point, but my ability to write in mathematics was far more advanced than I realized. And as time was of the essence here, and we had to work effectively together, I wrote down the specifics regarding the wants as “Me plus Wandelina plus Mechanos equals infinity. Me without Wandelina equals zero.” Thank the gods that there were mathematical words for infinity and zero. Right now, the numbers in between didn’t matter.

I turned around to show Mechanos what I wrote, and let him turn around to let me see what he wrote down. I boldly went over to his scribblings in the dirt and saw, to my amazement, relieve and joy, the same wants and expectations. They were in words that I had to ask him to translate, but they meant the same. It was a good start to the next stage of our friendship, and alliance, which would be tested by the world in the next few days in ways that I was unable to even imagine a few days earlier. A good thing, and a bad thing, but a thing that had to be dealt with effectively if the survival of me and my family, nay ‘our’ family was to be manifested as reality.

## CHAPTER 21

Mechanos insisted on going back to Rachel's shop, claiming that he was having medical problems that needed more tending to than he had 'calculated into the equation that was about to solve itself or be dissolved'. And from the sound of the girgling in his lungs that came out through his laboring breath, it was more of a factual statement than another attempt to make me think infinite metaphysical concepts rather than focus on getting direct answers from him about the world that we 'mortals' labored and loved our way through day to day on the 'lower planes'. While pretending to be Mechanos' 'son', I escorted my stubble-faced, sickly 'mother' through streets that were now occupied by people who were wearing nothing but uniforms. Military ones for the soldiers that were shiny and boldly colored, as they emerged from their houses and kissed their families 'goodbye'. Freshly cleaned plain white garments on 'Clergymen' as they came out of their huts with proud smiles from their wives, children and more clandestine relations. And waiting for them, Priestesses in white robes who greeted and spoke with them as...equals, as they strolled in their felt-lined boots towards the temple.

"I didn't know this city had Priestesses who were so valued by Priests," I commented to Mechanos. "Do they work together?"

"The Priests make special offerings to the gods on behalf of the rest of us, the Priestesses communicate with the goddesses. Officially anyway," he informed me.

"And unofficially?" I asked as the conversations between Priests and Priestesses seemed to be more about matters personal than professional, their frowns turning into smiles. "Oh, I see now," I said, answering my own question, yet again.

"Is there anything else you want to ask me that you don't know already?" Mechanos inquired, impatient with me, and fearful of something a lot bigger than our relationship.

"Yes," I said. "Why did you ask me to come back to the tavern later, as if it was wrong to come on time, or earlier than your expectations? Did I not excel your expectations? And is it not a student's obligation to excel his teacher's expectation, and eventually, his teacher?"

"True enough, 'Apprentice Socrates'," Mechanos said, mocking my attempt to sound autocratic, and like the philosopher to whose wisdom and humanity I now aspired. "But as for the matter of what I was doing, I was listening to conversations about secret things that one of the Temple guards was telling a rather independent whore who he wanted to enslave with admiration for how important he was. And I almost found where Wandelina was."

"And your daughter?" I pressed.

“You are answering your own questions, once again, Juriatis,” he replied, his smile telling me as clear as any words that I was not only correct, but Right about the answer.

“Juriatis?” I asked. “Which means...”

“Fellow tortured Soul,” he replied, his eyes looking back into his worried mind and guilt-plagued soul.

“In a language I of course am not supposed to know about, for my own good?” I shot back to him with a defiant smile.

“Yes,” he said, warmly, and compassionately. As if I was more important to him than this missing daughter who the Priests were holding hostage, or for that matter, any daughter or son he had ever had.

“And this daughter’s mother?” I asked as we turned to corner, coincidentally at Rachel’s doorstep.

“---Is not me,” the ‘earth healer’ had said as she opened the door and whisked us in, instantly tearing off Mechanos’ shawl and dress, putting her hand on Mechanos’ jaw and looking into his face with the lovingness, caring and rage only possible between husband and wife.

“Though I wished it would have been so,” Mechanos replied, kissing her wrinkled hand lovingly, as if it were that of a soft-skinned goddess. “How have you been, Rachel?” he asked.

“Better than you are doing,” she said, listening to his chest, then taking his pulse, then opening his mouth, then looking at every part of his tongue, then rushing to her jars of powders and liquids, grabbing four of them with haste and certainty. “And you aren’t doing so well either,” she said to me while she poured the essential medical ingredients into bowl, then cored open an apple, and poured it into the hole.

“You know I hate apples,” Mechanos said. “It’s the only fruit I can’t stand to eat.”

“Which is why you must eat it now,” she replied, offering it to Mechanos with her outstretched hand. “Eat it or die,” she proclaimed. “It’s all the same to me,” she asserted, in a way that, for the moment anyway, seemed to be true.

Mechanos took the apple smelled it, then tried to drink out of its core, which was now empty, the elixcer having been absorbed by the fruit.

“The whole thing,” Rachel insisted. “You have to EAT the whole apple.”

“Because it has special ingredients in it?” Mechanos said, his stomach already feeling nauseous before a single bite of the fruit entered his mouth.

“Yes,” she said to him with assurance and sincerity. “Now close your eyes and do what you have to do.”

As Mechanos closed his nostrils with one hand and pushed the apple into his mouth with the other, he closed his eyes. Rachel smirked with satisfaction as he bit into the fruit, finding its taste as putrid as death itself. Even more putrid than anything he had cooked for me or Wandelina. When I asked Rachel for an answer as to what was going on with my eyes, she winked to me, letting me in on the muse.

“This tastes terrible,” Mechanos said after swallowing the first bite, putting the life-promoting fruit down on a table top.

“And the next bites will taste worse,” she assured him, giving him back the ‘medicinals’. “And was it not you who said that ‘pain and suffering is a small price to pay for Life and the ability to spread Enlightenment to others?’”

“And ‘only when you are beyond being moved by pain and pleasure, can you move beyond the shadows of illusion and falsehood,’” I added, recalling the words he would say to me when I wanted to quit working early because of being tired, or because the opportunity to have a lunch which Wandelina presented itself earlier than noon.

“Fine! I hope you are enjoying this, Rachel,” he said to his, well, beloved, in ways that he would perhaps tell me one day. He bit into the rest of the apple, doing his best to swallow it before it could convey its flavors to the tongue that wanted to spit it out. “And you too, Juriatis,” he said to me as he noticed me enjoying the ruse.

“Juriatis?” Rachel said.

“Yes, it means, ‘fellow tortured soul,’” Mechanos replied, having swallowed the entire contents of his ‘medicine’.

“In a pig’s eye it does,” Rachel spat out.

“It depends on how it is translated,” he insisted, red fire coming back to his formerly white face, being blasted out at Rachel.

“It depends how it is ‘lived!’” she insisted. “Not that you were ever really Alive when it comes to the Soul,” she continued raising her large, hairy eyebrows.

“I have Passion!” Mechanos asserted.

“But not COMPassion,” she retorted, tenderly, turning around, sadness within her angry eyes.

“Which is expressed effectively with the MIND,” he insisted as he got up from the cot and found firm footing on the floor with his feet again, pointing his still shaking hand at his head.

“And felt with the heart,” she said, through a window within a wall that only she could see, or feel. “But, both of us are ‘special cases’,” she admitted. “And if we had come together when your gods or my God intended to, we would have killed each other,”

“Even worse that we are doing to each other now,” Mechanos surmised, and said, painfully. He pulled off the horsehair wig from his head and ran his worried fingers over his bald scalp. “If one of us can get to the Temple Guards again, I think we could...”

“...get information that is wrong, and too late even if it is right,” Rachel said.

“So we should ask the High Priest himself?” Mechanos challenged.

“Or maybe give him something in your potions here that will make his tongue tell us the truth about where Wandelina and Mechanos’ daughter are being held hostage?” I offered.

“Easier formulated than done, Juriatis,” Rachel said as she looked at the walls, each one of them filled with shelves, each of the shelves with jars, labeled in languages that only she could read. She went over to the ‘brain changing’ elixirs, looking at each with the kind of fondness that Mechanos did with his discoveries---the inventions that can be used to benefit common people’s needs rather than rich people’s wants, or power-hungry people’s demands. “I can bring low spirits up,” she said of ‘child one’, an herbal mixture that seemed more like something that would emerge from a goat’s belly than her imagination and Mind. “Bring manic spirits down,” she said of the next progeny. “Make men see beauty in women. Make women see beauty in men. Make people see beauty in themselves. And make sane, responsible people into Visionaries,” she continued.

“Who see and hear illusions they believe are fact,” Mechanos said, guilt returning to his eyes.

“An elixir which has specific uses in specific people ONLY. And which was taken from here when ‘theives’ broke into my shop a week ago, and left most everything else,” she said.

Following my gut, and heart, and letting Mechanos and his ladyfriend follow whatever argument they were having between their warring eyes, I opened the jar and smelt it. The elixir seemed familiar, to the nose and the tip of the tongue. This time, I had to say what I was thinking and saying. “This was in the wine that was passed around at the arena during the show when the gods talked to us. Well, to everyone else, anyway. I know Wandelina was very thirsty that night, and she enjoyed the show a lot. And felt especially touched by the gods.”



Mechanos' face said it all. And he wanted me to say it for him, I think. But Rachel did for me. "I hope that you didn't give any of the second generation of this elixir to anyone, Mechanos. With those special mushrooms that---"

"No. I didn't!" he affirmed. "The Oracle of Delphi got them from someone else! Not me!"

"And not me either," Rachel shot back. "No matter how much the priests or priestesses offered me. Or how much money I got to develop 'good elixirs' for 'good people' Or how much fame they said I would get if I cooperated with them. Or how much---"

"---We all have to make compromises, Rachel!" Mechanos blasted out.

"And devise strategies to make them work when things don't work," I suggested, trying to get Mechanos and Rachel to deal with matters of the present than those of the past. Like who did what to who. And who Mechanos' daughter's mother really was. Or what kind of family life could happen if he, this daughter who he never named, and Rachel were to ever have a life together. "Like how to find out from the Priest what he doesn't want to tell us. And not the oracles at Delphi who, I now know, thanks to you, are nothing more than old women whose brains have gone mad because of eating bad mushrooms!"

"So, who DO we ask? The Priest himself?" Mechanos inquired. "Nicadius is guarded by many men who are a lot smarter than us, militarily anyway. And even if we can capture him, and use pain or persuasion to make him tell us where Wandelina and my daughter Trintina are---"

"---Nicadius, you say?" Rachel noted. "Whose wife came here on many occasions to save her children, and pleasure herself."

"And her husband?" I asked.

"Who she is very much in love with, and he in love with her, so it seems, Juriatis," Rachel said, an idea incubating in her head, and mine.

While Mechanos was still reacting to his having named his daughter, Trinitina, for the first time in my presence, and maybe Rachel's, a third mind was materializing between me and Rachelina. One that was far smarter than Mechanos. Far more clever than Wandelina. And, perhaps, in the long run, more wiser than Socrates. Maybe this was the manifestation of that saying 'when two or more of you think of or hear the Great Spirit, It is there with you.'

"We tell Nicadius' wife that his husband is in having sex with Wandelina and Trinitina," I put forth.

“And make Nicadías’ beloved son, who loves his mother, believe that his father is in LOVE with Wandelina and Trinitina,” Rachel said.

“The son who chose a career in the Army rather than to inherit his father’s position as High Priest,” I advanced.

“And a son who is still a junior officer, in the special ‘prisoner management and coercion’ division of the army, who can’t be trusted any more than Nicadías can be trusted,” Mechanos said.

“Or you can be, my dear, God help me, still beloved Mechanos?” Rachel felt, and said. “If my instincts are correct, there is to be virgin sacrifice at the festival in 5 days. And the mathematics of Nicadías’ beliefs, or politics, is that if sacrificing twenty lamb pleases the gods, then offering up two women will assure their favor, and blessing as this fair city goes to war, and beyond.”

I don’t recall how much I believed Rachel’s hypothesis but it had to be taken into consideration. At stake was....everything.

## CHAPTER 22

How and why Mechanos could not figure out how to manipulate information from Nicadius was beyond me. He could make metal, wood and leather do ANYthing for him, but as for manipulating people---with the exception of me and Wandelina, that was far beyond him. Maybe coming up with the plan of twisting around Nicadius' love life was something beyond his mental abilities, perhaps because it was about people, or perhaps because it was about love.

As for that 'artifact' of 'interpersonal human experience;' Mechanos' daughter seemed to be at, no pun intended, the heart of the matter. I decided that it was not necessary right now to find out who Trinitina's mother really was. I was after all trying to find out who I really was. Maybe we all were in these times of change that were about to come for mortals, gods and everyone in between.

As I recalled from Mechanos' teachings, that is when he had no real idea as to how to get an idea out of the muck and moving, the first step was to be 'logical' about it. Rachel felt, and believed, otherwise. Before deciding how I should go out into the world, she looked at me cross-eyed, then from head to toe, then asked me to turn around several times. I wondered what kind of character she had in mind for me to be, and prayed that she would be right about it. When I was done, and my dizzy feet finally stabilized themselves on the floor, she said to me. "You should visit Nicadius' son and his wife as...hmm..."

"Not another monk!" I said. "Anything but a monk. Make me a blacksmith this time. Or a beggar. Or a shepherd who loves his sheep too much. Or even a slave girl, if you have to. But one that doesn't know very much."

"Or a slave trader, who knows a lot," Mechanos suggested, his intuition connecting back to his Mind, and gut.

"And what do I know?" I asked.

"It's WHO you know," he proclaimed. As for that 'who', he and Rachel were already preparing lists in their heads as they smiled at each other.

I understood why people bought and sold other people as slaves, but never understood how. Cruelty was not something I was good at understanding, and I heard my father say once that I was 'a good soul because I was bad at being bad'. He did not mean it as a compliment. But if I was to befriend Nicadius' son and his wife, so they would make him tell them where Wandelina and Trinitina were, I had to be someone who my father was proud of. A dealer who was good at selling people as if they were pieces of meat, and defective ones at that. A MAN who knew the value of an attractive woman in the marketplace. A master manipulator of rumors so others could believe them

as fact---the exact opposite that Mechanos, as a seeker of Truth, had been, and to my best assessment, still was. The gods were with us, as it was Nicadiaz' birthday that night.

Later that afternoon, Rachel made a special delivery of herbs to Nicadiaz' wife, claiming that if she put a pinch in her tea, and a spoonful in his wine, it would be a night of Eros that would rival any carnal bliss they had on their honeymoon. She then went to the Temple and left a note with the guards for Nicadiaz' son, saying that there was a special formula elixir waiting for him that night that would make him more powerful than any god and more knowing than any Seer. The place was to be an old abandoned tavern that she had reopened for a special occasion---a surprise birthday party for Nicadiaz, an offering of peace she was making for 'the benefit of all' during this time when all of the citizens of the city must 'stick together for our mutual survival as we go to war'. She informed Nicadiaz' wife and his son that everyone of importance in the city would be there, along with some 'special guests'. As for Nicadiaz, Mechanos had put a small ball of red and yellow clay into a hole between the stones on the wall outside the temple walls that led to the chamber where Nicadiaz routinely spent the late afternoon 'praying', alone, so he kept overclaiming. When lit, it gave out a small puff of smoke. When the smoke moved, it put into a deep slumber anyone or anything that breathed, for at least six hours.

When the time for the party came, Nicadiaz' son, Sintilias, and his wife, Venutia, were the only guests present in the hastily-redecorated tavern. Sintilias complained about the chairs falling down when he sat his fat ass on them, vowing to put his sword through the hand of whatever carpenter did the work. Venutia commented snobbishly about how the dirt on the floor had been swept under the table rather than cleaned up. Both wondered where the other guests were, as the tables were filled with food. Venutia, her aging body clad in her most seductive purple-trimmed dress, talked about how she wanted it to be a special night. Sintilias, his Herculean physique outlined by a military uniform finely tailored for his looks and comfort, asserted to his mother once again that he CHOSE a career in the Army rather than was given one because he was no good at being a Priest. When conversation came to Nicadiaz, the only thing they really had in common, both praised his virtue. I was outside the wall, listening in through the wood with a cone-like device that connected to tubes that fit into my ears, made by Mechanos which he shared with no one else. How I wanted to merely get information from them rather than provide mis-information to them.

The moon rose above the darkening horizon and held its place in the black sky---my signal to 'educate' Nicadiaz' family about who he was, or what we were making him to be. I needed more time, and thought to delay the plan so it would have a better chance to work, but my collaborators had other ideas.

As for those collaborators, they were well paid to look the part and say nothing about it. "This is very strange," one of them said to me. "But if you are paying for it, I will provide what you need. And want. But not for very much longer." The half-naked, succulently built 'madamme' who looked half her age turned around to her employees.

“Is that not right girls?” she said to the young ‘harem’ that came with her, as a ‘package deal’.

The young women and aging girls who earned a living being whatever a paying man, or woman, wanted them to be, all agreed. “We are your slaves, Master,” the one with long blonde hair flowing down over her exposed breasts said. “But other Masters later tonight have paid more for us that you did.”

“And if you want us to lie for you, I hope truthful about how much we will get after this is done,” the one with the long black hair flowing down her back informed me.

“Or we will cut your balls off, Master,” the third, whose red mane covered most of her face, but not her very assertive green eyes.

“Fine,” I said, conceding to the slaves in my harem. “You agree with what I say in there, until the people inside believe it.”

“And who are the people inside?” the madame asked, demanding an answer this time.

“Good people who you...questionable people don’t need to know about,” I said, pulling a sac of coins from my pocket and jangling it in front of them.

As they bowed to me in rented reverency, I reflected on the fact that the chant which evokes the most obedience and faith is the clanking of coin against coin. Little did my harem know that some of those coins were bumping against pebbles which Mechanos had coated with a substance that looked, tasted and chipped like gold, but was not. Whatever real gold Mechanos had earned, or smelted, or synthesized, was needed for other parts of this ever-changing ‘plan’.

I knocked on the door and introduced myself to Sintilias as a ‘friend of your father who speaks very highly of you’, and to his mother as ‘a man who does business with your husband very regularly’. I introduced my slave girls by names which sounded good, and said that they were the ‘entertainment’ for the night, offering ‘every kind of delight imaginable by man or woman’.

“Entertainment for who?” Sintilias said. “The roaches and worms in this ‘tavern’?”

“Yes,” Venutia added. “We were told that there would be many people of importance at this gathering.”

“As soon as the sky got dark,” Sintilias noted, looking out the window.

“Or midway into the night, maybe?” I said, producing the ‘invitation’ to Sintilias, then to his mother. “Perhaps you both came here at the wrong time.”

“Or the wrong place?” Sintilias said, kicking another hole into the floor with his bootheel.

“No” I said, pulling leather parchment with more writing on it, confirming the directions to the tavern from the slave market and temple next to it. “Nicalias will be here,” I asserted. “And I apologize that all I can provide for him are these specimens for his pleasure.”

“He gets pleasure from serving the people,” Sintilias asserted.

“And me,” Ventulia added, with a warm and fond smile.

“Maybe, or...maybe not,” I said, pretending to care about her. And, finding that I actually did. “You DO know about his favorites. Who he spends time ‘working with’ late at night. I thought that both of you had an ‘understanding’.”

“He works with Mechanos and his fellow Priests and the gods,” Sintilias proclaimed.

“And plays with...well. Wandelina says he is...gentle, and Trinatina says he is...colorful. Both women have been possessed by demons who pretend to be angels.” I said. “Ask these girls behind me if you don’t believe me.”

My ‘girls’ told Ventulia about the virtues of Nicadiaz while engrossed in the most colorful and carnal of vices. Never had I heard lies sound so much like truths. And, maybe they were real, as whores know more about men than they know about themselves, or their families ever will. After several attempts to deny the stories, Sintilias, experienced ‘conqueror’, was shocked. Venutia, kind soul and more loyal than any donkey, dog or goat I ever knew, was...hurt. Connecting shock and hurt into action, such was up to me.

“I...If all of this is true, it is my obligation to forgive him,” Ventulia said, tears of grief streaming down her angry eyes. Eyes that seemed to blame herself more than anyone else.

“I am sorry that I had to bring this news to you,” I said, gently laying my firm hand to her shaking shoulders. “But in defense of Nicadiaz, he is a good man, but a weak one. Perhaps if I could find Wandelina and Trinatina, and make them PAY for making such a virtuous man into such a corrupt one. In ways that you, his trusting son, can’t, and you, his loving wife, won’t...”

“We will deal with it,” Sintilina said as his mother embraced him, desperately holding onto the only family she still had, or could trust. “Our family honor is at stake. My father and his father were High Priests. This is a private matter.”

“Not if Wandelina and Trinatina talk to anyone else,” I said.

“Find them, and punish them,” Ventulina said, her rage .

I feared the plan had gone wrong! Now not only confinement, but torture awaited the woman I loved, or hoped I loved, and the daughter who was Mechanos’ only connection to love. I prayed to the gods for an answer, hoping they existed, or could be created for just one more ‘favor’.

“They will be dragged out of their cages in the abattoire along with the cattle, goats and pigs, and deposed of their demons,” he said.

“A service the Jewess earth healer can provide?” I suggested. “She does have the power of the gods in her hands.”

“And I have the power of the gods’ army in mine!” Sintilina asserted. “Even if this Earth Healer can de-possess these temptress, they will sacrificed!” Sintilina asserted. “But not before the day of the festival. So that my father can see what harm he has done to my mother, His Order, and me, who will have to become a priest myself to take his place, and live the kind of honorable life he...has not seemed to do.”

It was good news and bad news. Bad that torture would take place. Good in that I now knew where they were being held---in Abattoir in the deep valley rather than the Temple up the mountainside. And, for the moment, we had time. As long as we could get into the facility. As long as I could, anyway.

## CHAPTER 23

When I first heard the stories by Homer about the deeds of Ulysses and all of the other heroes that every father could never be but expected their sons to be, I said to myself ‘this will be easy’. After all, if you take on doing a good thing, the gods will help you do that thing, and the gods are all powerful after all. But, as I now knew, the gods and the Righteousness they would make happen were just another story told to us by the Priests. And from what I remembered about conversations with Wandelina, she believed the gods to be very real indeed. I recalled how on the way back from the arena where I saw the images of the gods projected as lights, with the faces of the Priests by the way on them, I tried to tell Wandelina about what I saw under the floor. And how she didn’t want to hear me saying that the gods were illusions. Even when I told them how Mechanos’ machines were creating those illusions. And when I described how those machines worked with more details than Mechanos ever described how any of his other machines worked. And how with every detail I described, she would say that I was seeing things, or imagining them, or worse, making them up as some kind of evil lie. And how she prayed to the gods that she just saw that they would forgive me for denying their existence, or worse, defying their authority.

But we would have those discussions, and arguments, later. For now, I had to get her out of the Abattoir. And the only one around to help me was...me. When I had arrived at Rachel’s shop to tell her what I found out, she was gone. Not only from her post behind the dispensing counter as a feared, misunderstood but very needed Medicine Woman with the strange One-God religion and even stranger writing she did in His service, but as from the world she loved, and hated, both at the same time. Her body lay on surgical table where she had stitched up so many cut open bodies, and removed so many lumps that sought to take over the bodies they tried to take over. Her eyes were still open, and still defiant, but also open was her belly, the contents of which were exposed, having been partially eaten by visitors who were let into the shop through the now unlocked window which she had always kept closed. And the stagnant air was permeated with the stench of blood, metal and odors that could have come from nowhere but Hades itself.

“So, I suppose you have to eat too,” I said to the crows who were still dining on what looked like her liver, according to the drawings my mother did of Prometheus when I asked her to show me what the god who we mortals owed the gift of fire and thinking to looked like. The god who defied his fellow gods and chose to make mankind independent rather than more dependent on the ‘heavenly fathers and mothers’ atop Mount Olympus. “But there is one question I have of you,” I asked of the crows, as I heard many old, wise and feared people say they were the only birds that could talk to people. “Who did this to the woman who you used to dine WITH before she became dinner? What do they want? And are feathered mortals really smarter than us two legged mortals? And if so, is it not your duty to help educate us, your inferiors, as to the extent and practical application of your wisdom?”



The crows seemed to be as disinterested in having a Socratic conversation with me as the slayers of Rachel were in her humanity, wisdom, or love. Something in me went numb, then went, as Mechanos would say, 'kinetic'. Like I became a machine inside, whose job was to do, and not feel. And one of the things to do was see where Mechanos was. Thankfully, his footprints were always very distinctive, bearing six toes on each of his small feet, which he always covered with cloth on top and soft leather on the bottom. I followed them in the moonlight away from the shop, into the muddy grasslands behind it, then to a cliff where they stopped. Around those footprints were, to the best of my reckoning anyway, other footprints like his, in a circle. Five different set of prints, as I could best make them out, each a different size. And they just appeared, from nowhere. Nowhere on the ground anyway. Around the footprints there were pieces of metal that I didn't recognize by sight, feel or smell. Thin light silver and gold colored sheets that were stronger than any thick sword or hard rock that I had ever seen, or been shown anyway. And on them, some kind of writing that was not Greek, not Rachel's Hebrew and not anything I recognized. Indeed, it looked more like a 'number' language. I felt myself sort of understanding it. But then again, I also could feel myself understand foxes, owls and field mice talking to me as well. I looked up the sky and felt a circle of the stars come closer to me, a particularly bright one between them moving away slowly as it pulsed some kind of 'message' to...someone. Maybe to me? I took in a breath of cold night air and my nose was reminded of the stench in Rachel's shop which still lingered in my nostrils, and mouth. "Yes, maybe someone did accidentally spill the special mushroom powders that the Oracles at Delphi had taken by accident, or on purpose, to see things that were not there. Hear voices within the silence. Feel ghosts from other places that were visiting..."

I reached out to the air, thinking that I could, if fast enough, grab hold of something, or someone, from the realm that I could not see. Perhaps such a find could tell me what I could do in the world I COULD see. But, alas, all I caught was empty, cold air. And as that odor in my nostrils disappeared, so did the pulsating star above me, while the other stars just...lingered there. Perhaps it was just a coincidence. Things that happen at the same time that have nothing to do with each other. But there was thing that was going to happen if I didn't become...Promethian. Wandelina and Trinitina would be sacrificed to the gods, their flesh to be mixed with that of other expendable 'beasts' for the masses of devout followers at the feast afterwards unless I found Mechanos and returned him to the High Priest, or somehow found a way to rescue Wandelina and Trinitina. The first job I had to do on my own, with no one telling me what to do, and no one to TELL what to do. And no gods to ask for assistance except perhaps some kind of Spirit inside of me, which I hoped DID exist as I started to share my plan with it.

## CHAPTER 24

It made sense to see what was left in Mechanos' hut to see if there was any trace of the madman anywhere around it, but it made equal sense, I suppose, for him to be gone. There was not a scrap or writing left inside. What had been a well-organized workshop with everything lined up in arrangement of threes for some kind of tools I could use to rescue Wandelina and my departed friend's daughter was a pile of mangled metal, wood and twine. I salvaged and reassembled what I could, considering what I would need to listen to what was going behind thick walls, cut apart chains and scare the crap out of whatever shithheads and assholes were holding the women hostage.

I don't know why my brain was still intact, or why the wagon still was. It was empty now, but there was no one around to pull it. Perhaps I could burrow a few horses that were to be sacrificed to the gods to make our getaway, I thought. But just as that idea and the mathematics of the morality of it all was calculating in my head, I heard a whinney from the bushes. It was Linata giving me that 'feed me, you stupid human, don't you know that it is my dinner time?' She emerged from the brush, this time, followed by Wandelina's stud, whose gait and lowered head made him look more like a servant than a stallion. The stallion had scrapes on his legs, a rope burn around his neck and cuts on his back end. Linolita had gashes in her neck, all facing forward. "Yes, I know, you defended your family well," I said to her as she approached me and nudges my chest to get my attention, then pushed her way under my robe to search for food. "Which, perhaps is now a family of two others rather than just one?" I asked, looking at her belly which looked a bit bigger than the last time I checked it, and felt 'fuller'. I lifted up some grass from the ground. "Eat this while I look for some grain to feed you and that life inside of you." I said. "We'll all eat very well tomorrow. But I'm going to need you both for a very important job tonight. Something you can tell that child inside of you someday. And he, or she, can say that she was BORN a hero," I said to my beloved beast as I kissed her mouth, neglecting to say 'IF we survive it' as a condition.

Thankfully the wounds on Linolita and her, as designed by accident, or perhaps Mechanos, 'husband' were more damaging to skin than muscle, bone or tendon, though those three classifications of tissue were all exposed. After emptying the hut of anything edible by horses and while giving it to my four legged 'suicide squad', I cleaned the wounds with Rachel's 'disinfectant' elixir, stitched them with thread and wire, then using Mechanos' all purpose glue to close up the gaps. I didn't know that I was such a good doctor, and felt accomplished. Maybe because the sense of urgency made me become accomplished. More thoughts passed through my mind as I envisioned the various ways I could, or would have to, get the wagon close enough to the no doubt heavily guarded Abattoir and I hoped that whatever 'potions' I gathered from Rachel's hut would be enough to render them ineffective. But there were various ways of doing so. One would be a permanent state of 'ineffective', and it struck me that I had never killed a man. For that matter, I had never even hit one. Though I had killed animals to feed my own species, killing one of my own species to save another was something new. It would, perhaps, be another skill I would have to learn. So would being on TOP of a horse rather than behind it, as when I got the wagon moving, it stopped dead in its tracks, one, two,

then three wheels breaking apart, no replacements around, and no time to spare before dawn would come, and getting Wandelina, and Trinitina, out would be even more impossible than under the cover of darkness.

I treated myself to an examination of the wheels that were designed to never break or bend by Mechanos, and noted that someone, or something, had found a way to fall apart. How they did so, I could not figure out. It became a mystery to me that felt needed investigating. "Maybe we could make this thing move on one wheel?" I proposed to Linalita, and I could hear her raise her eyebrow in condescension at my very dumb remark. But, Wandelina and Trinatina would probably be in no condition to place their damaged bodies against the raw flesh of the mule-horse and the stallion, and even so, they would not be able to hold on, particularly with their legs. Instantly, an idea came to me as I remembered what caused me the most problems when I tried to learn to ride on top of horses.

I did know that putting a saddle on a horse distributed the weight of a man, or woman, in such a way that it made it easier on the rider, and probably on the horse as well. But as for the feet of the rider---what if they could be made stable by ropes tied to the saddle and places at the bottom of the ropes to put your feet so they could stay in one place, while your bumping ass could stay in one place as well? I quickly found the raw materials to make this, my very first 'invention', and crafted, pulled or rammed them into a design that was in my head, but not on paper. What my eyes saw after completing it was sort of what was in my head. I'd put it on paper later, perhaps. I'd have to test it now. And when I did, testing it on the stallion first, as Linolita was still weary of the devise...I discovered that I could stay on the horse, at a walk over smooth ground, a trot over bumpy ground and a run on ANY ground. Such a run would be necessary to get to where we needed to tonight, and make a getaway by morning. Such was the plan anyway.

## CHAPTER 25

I thanked the goddess of greed and the gods of gluttony for allowing me to feed sentries around the Abattoir. And the gods of drama to allow me to play the role of ‘gift giver spirit’ so effectively, or more accurately that god’s messenger, clad in the Monk’s robe which I had worn when making my rounds for Mechanos in town several days earlier. Such made it possible for me to leave bowls of aromatic stew in within a whiff of two, then three, then four large-nostrilled and hungry men who seemed twice my size and three times my strength, and make them eat it. It was a home recipe my mother made which was irresistible to everyone. One of those dishes that NO one disliked. Of course I added my own ingredients as well, most notably one of Rachel’s ‘anxiety reliving’ herbs. Within three bitefuls the gruff, foul mouthed grunts had turned into sleeping babies in a Paradise dreamland, rendered ‘ineffective’. How long that ‘ineffective’ would last I did not know, and I dared not feed the sleeping infants any more ‘happy weed’. Besides the risk of killing them, I feared what they would do if they woke up prematurely. So far, my plan was working, and I assured the horses when I tethered them to trees within bush that I hoped would conceal their bright eyes from the moonlight, that I would be back for them soon.

Mechanos was great at inventing things. Thankfully I was...adequate at building them, and fixing them when they were broken. Maybe it had something to do with what my head could remember, and tell my hands to do without my mind knowing why or how the process took place. It was a necessary gift from the gods, or perhaps some other creatures from the sky, or perhaps the Spirit of the Earth that made putting together a ‘stethoscope’ possible. With that devise, one could hear what was going on behind a wall without being on the other side of that wall. Rachel had used it to hear what was going on underneath the wall of the chest and belly, and I was not using the hastily reconstructed devise to listen to what was happening on the other side of the wall at the Abitoire. I first heard sound of not pain, but unrest and worry, from pigs, sheep, chickens and horses from one wall. Then when I moved to another, sounds of pain from creatures whose language I understood more clearly. By their voices, they were men. Maybe slaves who disobeyed their masters by trying to be kind to the sacrificial animals. And at the next wall, jibulant voices of men, singing---master Priests teaching monks how to chant. Songs that gave thanks to the gods! Praise to mortals who aspired to become heros! And assurances to those who just wanted to stay alive that the gods were on their side! If I didn’t know what the words were about, I would have sung with them, then observed that under my muttering, cold and terrified lips---I was! How well these tunes were composed to make people sing words with their mouths that would make their Souls repulsed if they were spoken rather than put to music! And if told while images of gods, glory and goodness were projected, with the help of some herbs as well, no doubt a thinking and independent man could be converted into a stupid and obedient one. Like the ‘war intoxicated’ citizens of this city were. And like...I was, back home.

Thoughts of home overcame me. Simple times when simple things pleased and fulfilled me. And when, during private times I shared only with myself and the animals I was relegated to sleep with in the barn, I was...happy. And able to appreciate and

like...simple things, without having to complicate or expand them. Like being able to look up at a clear blue sky in the morning and enjoy breathing in the clean, fresh air, instead of being obsessed with figuring out why the sky was blue and what 'element' in the air made it smell and fresh. And enjoying a drink of cool water from a mountain stream without thinking about what body parts inside of me were allowing me to absorb it and quench my thirst and what organs decided on what makes urine. And being able to just feel emotions when hearing music rather than dissecting out what part of the ear and brain the notes go into. Such was what overcame me when I listened to what was behind the fourth wall. Wandelina's music, for the first time, was just...notes. I recognized that it was a happy tune played with her hands on the lute and her voice through the damp air, a gleeful one in fact. And I felt...nothing. Then she played a sad, sorrowful tune, which I recognized as one that revealed the yearning in all living creatures who wanted to be Alive. But I felt...nothing. Yes, I know my concern was more for the musician than the music, but something in me died as I became more determined to save Wandelina, then Trinatina, then any other two or four legged creature inside from being killed as a sacrifice to the gods, or their 'protectors', the Priests. A class of men who I once admired, often dreamed about becoming and now feared more than the gods themselves.

## CHAPTER 25

As I told you, and I hope you are still listening, I observed a lot from the outside of the thick walled building that had no windows in it, at least those that could be looked through from the ground from outside. And I had planned everything very well. I was sure that if High Priest Nicadius saw me in the Monk's robe in which he had that 'talk' with me, my flesh would be burned and eaten long before the fire for the sacrifice to the gods would be lit. Indeed, the smell of smoke coming out of one of the chimneys was frighteningly reminiscent of the time back home when the blacksmith's wife had an argument with him, and left in the middle of the night. All that was left of the shop that made the best horseshoes, plows and daggers was smoke coming up through the dawn fog around what had been his kiln that smelled like...chicken. But not the kind of chicken I had ever cooked, or eaten.

Three smokestacks emitted such 'chicken' now, the billowing fumes of white smoke pulsing with the chants of of Priests, and Priestesses, from inside. I heard monks and Nuns repeated the phrases, none of them doing it in harmony of course. Then I saw the walls of the building open up through a pit which was a concealed door just beyond a clump of trees. Four Monks and three nuns, all in clean white robes, emerged from inside and greeted a wagonload of young women in white robes and young men in rags. All had chains on their feet, dog collars around their necks, and heads 'liberated' from the burden of having hair. The driver of the wagon gave a sackful of locks to a Priest, bowed, and allowed the Priest, who on closer examination was Priestess, to choose which of the specimens, that had not an ounce of excess fat on them, she wanted and gave him a sac for his trouble. Their mouths, genitals, hands and feet were examined by the hooded Monks and Nuns, then painted with on their chests and forehead with a mark that looked very artistic. The others remaining on the wagon while the wagon driver, an overfed man with a straggly beard and ugly, bulging eyes, went into the bushes and helped himself to the contents of the sac, three large pieces of meat, two loafs of bread and a jug of wine as I saw it under the still-bright moonlight. He dined alone, choosing to leave the cropped headed young men and women in the wagon, ignoring their desperate pleas for just a biteful of food.

I looked at my dagger and contemplated a plan, which complimented my own. I had brought with me two of Rachel's robes with which to cloth Wandelina and Trinatina once I found them. If I could render this wagon driver stationary with a show of my dagger, and then 'ineffective' after mouthful of her anti-anxiety potion stuffed into his mouth, I could get them out amongst the sacrificial lambs. Of course this would involve sheering them first with my, but such would be a small price to pay.

After the Priestess, whose long blonde hair flowed down to her ass, went inside, and while the door was still open, I snuck in amongst the 'clergy', who chanted some more things, and seemed more concerned with what the gods were hearing than what was actually going on. As part of the inspection committee, I escorted one of the emaciated, hairless 'servants' inside. Her head was bowed and her face looked painfully familiar

when it met my eyes. “Mother!” I thought, silently as I was met with the vision of what my mother would have looked like before she had the burden of giving birth to and raising me. As a matter of painful fact, all of the faces of these ‘servants’ looked familiar, like members of my own family. I made a pledge to all of their downturned faces and glossy, drugged eyes, that I would free them all, somehow. Someday. Hopefully that day would be before the sacrificial festival, which was in two days.

Breaking ranks with the Monks that I had joined, I roamed over to the sound of Wandelina’s singing. As the walls were thick and echoing, it was hard to hear where she was, but I took each step as if I knew where I was going. And to each passerby who was also hooded, I gave an bow of reverence. which was tainted with enough arrogance to make me look and seem to be important. And, I was...important. I was in charge now of saving lives, not merely pleasing people. And with each step in this heroic epic I was writing with my deeds, actions and thoughts, I was inspired by Wandelina’s music. Indeed, if anything in this world was worth saving, it was that music, which came with, of course, the singer of such. And, of course, Trinatina, whose liberation from here, wherever she was, was a debt I owed to Mechanos. Though he was gone from this world now, rendered ‘ineffective’ by parties who, for now, were irrelevant, I owed it to him to save his daughter. Perhaps, I thought, Trinatina would tell me who Mechanos’ beloved wife was, or had been. And I could finally find out where he came from, and where he ultimately wanted to go. Maybe such a place would be where me, Wandelina, Trinatina, and whichever of the bald-headed young ‘servants’ were able to come with us could make a home.

After five wrong left turns and three miscalculated right turns, I finally found Wandelina’s chamber. The door was made of hard wood, the only opening in it a slit on the bottom through which food could be passed in and, hopefully, manure and urine taken out. I took out one of my Mechanos tools, a small machine made of hard rocks that could turn light from a torch into concentrated lightening that could cut through any metal. But the lock on the door was unopened. It fell apart in my hands as soon as I grabbed hold of it. I grabbed hold of the pieces as best as I could as it fell to the stone, hard floor, but two large pieces of metal made a clanking sound. The door opened, from the inside. A hand from inside motioned me to come in, then said as loud a whisper as possible ‘shhh.’

My eyes were hit with the face of Trinatina, her eyes bright, green and defiant in her oversized head, her face covered by a thick, long mane of black hair which still remained wavy and goddesslike, despite the mats, maggots and debris within it. “Shhh” she said to me again, pointing to Wandelina, whose back was turned to me while she continued to play the lute, and sing to the stars beyond the small slit windows above her. My beloved seemed to be well fed, as she was standing firmly on her feet. I dared not think about what kind of scars and lashes were under her robes, though, and under her skin, even if was unblemished. When Trinatina moved her hair aside and adjusted her robes to recover her cold body, I saw her discolored face, slashed arms and bruised thighs between her shaking legs. I feared the worst for Wandelina.

“Why did you come here, Brother Monk? We were told that we would be left alone tonight.” Trinatina informed me, with a mixture of courage based defiance and smartly framed obedience.

“To give you both a haircut?” I mused, pulling out my dagger, with a smile.

“Sure, why not,” Trinatina sighed, preparing for yet another insult, and violation. “Maybe one of your fellow Monks thought that if you made me look like my father, I would be able to figure out how his machines work and make other for you. But, I am afraid, it doesn’t work like that. Me and my father, well, we haven’t talked with each other for a long time, about anything. But you...” Her lips stopped speaking, her eyes saying things that she dared not channel into voice as she looked over my face. A face which looked a lot like...hers, depending on how the moonlight hit it. “So, you are ‘him’,” she said. “Him” she repeated ten times, with as many unrestrained emotions and clandestine agendas behind it.

“Him who came here to get you out of here, Trinatina,” I said. “And her,” I continued turning to Wandelina, who continued to play the lute and sing the tunes in a language which was different than any I had ever heard, her back still turned to me. As I approached her, Trinatina assertively laid her hand on my shoulder.

“You are wondering what language she is signing in, you ask?” Trinatina said, holding me back with all of her strength with her excessively long fingers.

“Amongst other things,” I inquired. “But---“

“---It’s the language of joy, madness and...something from the other side,” she interjected, her hand now curled into a fist that grabbed hold of the flesh of my shoulder with the intensity and desperation of a mother holding onto a child about to fall off a cliff, or be swept away by an angry river, or be taken away by an enraged and self-centered man. “A language of madness and joy. Music that is beyond the beauty of any you have heard, no doubt. And, to be truthful about it, beyond anything I have heard anyway. Music that---“

“---We can all learn to sing together after I get you BOTH out of here!” I asserted, grabbing hold of Trinatina’s hand, pushing her away as I marched up to Wandelina. I gently put my hands on her shoulders as she continued to sing. “I am here,” I whispered into her ear. “And always will be with you,” I continued, daring to kiss her on the cheek. “Everything will be alright now. The nightmare is over.”

“Only after you wake up from your daydream,” she said in a voice that was not her own. From a face that I recognized but did not connect to as she turned around to stare at me with contempt, and pity. And addressed me with hands that seemed possessed by demons, which struck my jaw, stomach then groin, putting me on the ground in a kneeling position. As I tried to get up, she pressed with all of her weight on my head, keeping me on the ground, kneeling. She looked up to the sky above the ceiling and



called upon Athena, Zeus and Apollo. “I beg of you, Masters of the Universe, givers of Life, Creators of Music and Saviors of lost souls! Hear this confession from this man who has been telling lies about you! From one who told me, and who knows how many others, that it was not you who appeared to them in the Temples after the theatre performance, but illusions made by a man who was forced to do so by the Priest! Oh Great One’s, hear this arrogant and deluded man’s confession and accept him back into your hearts as he asks for your forgiveness.”

Wandelina grabbed hold of my hair and shook my head, everything from under my robes falling onto the floor. Everything from the robes I was to re-clothe her and Trinatina in, to the small Mechanos devises that I had used to get into this chamber, to the even smaller balls of powder and herbs which would create a noise of thunder, flash of lightening and a fog of mind-altering ‘sleeping powder’ which would allow us to make a safe getaway.

To my shock, and horror, Wandelina’s flesh was pure, white and unbruised. But from her mouth, there was a stench of something very man made. And remnants of flecks green, brown and yellow which no doubt were some kind of herb, which upon a closer smell seemed to be the elixir that had fallen, or been given to, the Oracles at Delphi. An elixir which Rachel had been experimenting with for ‘special ailments’ that I was sure the Jewess Healer would not have let go of voluntarily for purposes these Priests had in mind.

Wandelina stared into my eyes and commanded me in loud whispers, kicking Trinatina away from me when she tried to intercede. All the while, Wandelina’s lips were fixed in a wide, carefree smile, a gesture she had attributed in her saner moments to drunken fools, brainless virgins, or village idiots. “Proclaim your allegiance to Zues, Athena and Apollo, and all will be forgiven,” Wandelina commanded, then asked, the pleaded of me.

I looked to Trinatina for an answer as to what to do. I was given a ‘just go along with it’ nod. Wandelina then turned my head back towards her, then up to the sky. “See them! Hear them! You used to love them, and they still love you.”

“Like you still love me, as I love you?” I said to Wandelina, thinking to use the language of the human heart to break the curse of mindless happiness that the gods had inflicted on her.

“Yes,” she said with a warmth that finally broke the smile frozen onto her face. “Like I have loved, and always will love you.” She put her free hand around my neck, stroked my chin, then edged her way in towards my face to kiss me. On the lips. And with an affection that felt real. And she kept her eyes open this time. As did I, until fate pulled us apart, starting with my own neck.

“So, how do I look?” Trinatina asked me as I felt her hand tug me away from Wandelina, wearing the Monk’s robe I brought for her like it was a dress at the King’s banquet.

“Like you are trying to take away MY MAN! From ME and the GODS!” Wandelina grunted, then shouted, then screamed. Loud enough for my eardrums to explode from the inside as if ten of Mechanos’ ‘light and thunder balls’ had been made twice as small as they were and implanted into my ears. And loud enough for the Temple guards to enter when she commanded them to arrive. Followed by High Priest Nicadalis. Then his son, Sintalis. Then his wife, Venutia.

“So we have a visitor,” Nicadius said to me, instructing Wandelina to resume playing her music. Whatever Wandelina was playing seemed to appeal to Nicadis, a lot, as they both smiled at each other. However, he was not finished talking with me. “And so, visitor who comes to us in the dead of night after telling me fables and tall tales during the day, your real name is---?”

“---A bearer of Truth,” I shot back, trying to push some brains from my soon to be shitless ass into my head, and mouth. “Who, Lady Ventutia, knows about what is really going on between your husband and Wandelina. And who, Lord Sintalis, understands that the gods will only be pleased if your father confesses his love for this woman with long blonde hair who plays music for him.” I turned around to Trinatina. “And this black haired woman who---“

“---Does not want or need her hair anymore,” Trinatina said, her long hair in a clump of blood on her hand, the dagger that did it beside her, in the belly of one of the guards. She smirked with satisfaction at Nicadius, who seemed to be more angry with her than anyone else. “Your husband, my dear lady, and your father, Lord General, likes his women with long hair. So, now I suppose I don’t have to be liked by him anymore.”

Nicadius’ breath froze in his mouth. He said nothing as he looked at his wife, whose accusing eyes seemed to be reconsidering something. Then to his son who said, “I believe you father, no matter what the facts may be.”

“The facts are that I never touched these two whores!” Nicadius said, as Trinatina burst into laughter which came from her own Inner Core, and Wandelina continued in angelic song from a source that was as demonic as I ever felt.

“And if you did, you would have the right to keep it discreet?” I asked as Lady Venutia seemed to consolidate her civil and political power, and Sintalis’s eyes shifted from his mother to his father, as if he was assessing who would be the most stable and effective ally.

I pondered how brilliant it was for Trinatina to keep up the deception that Rachel had designed and I had implemented. Though without her hair, with her large forehead and bulging oversized eyes, Trinatina seemed to be the ugliest woman I had ever seen, in

some other worldly way the most beautiful creature in the world. From the top of her now scalp exposed head, to the six toes on each of her undersized feet.

As tensions in the chamber mounted, Wandelina seemed to channel the mood with a song that kept changing rytym and tone. And words that, well, sounded like nothing I had ever heard. I decided to dare to sing along, in harmony, with words of my own, and a language that I let my tongue invent as the words came out of my mouth. A mouth that I forced, then allowed, to form a wide, 'all is well with the gods, mortals and everyone in between' smile. Wandelina, the part of her that was still her, seemed to like our 'duet'. As did I. As did Trinatina, who decided to join us. By the way the Temple guards were looking at us, then backing away, we seemed to be 'touched' by something that scared them. Something which they didn't understand. Even Lady Venutia backed away, thinking that Wandelina and Trinatina were touched by some kind of allure that was...forgivable.

"Good Husband," she commanded Nicadius. "These two woman are indeed touched by some kind of evil which can tempt the best of men."

"And the most honorable, father," Sintalis said, as I saw water seeping out of the armour between his legs. "Maybe we should just let them go away. Or send them to our enemies so they can haunt them."

"Yes that would be a good idea," Lady Venutia suggested. "The gods do create magic after all, despite the rumors that say the magic is trickery made by Priests who want power and money. The Temple is a sacred place where the gods live, and always will live. And you, good husband, have been chosen by the gods as their messenger to the people. People who---"

"---Don't have to listen to any more of this singing!" Nicadius said, silencing Trinatina's 'happy song from the netherworld' with a swift and strong back hand across her left cheek.

Trinatina presented her right cheek to him, daring him to strike him again. This time, Nicadius put his hand into a fist, putting a dagger inside it. But before it could find its way to her smiling, defiant cheeks, or her throat, another hand took hold of it, from a man in a dark robe, a hood over his face. "Enough cruelty, and deception," he said in a voice that was kind, intelligent and repentant. The voice sounded very familiar.

"Deception?" Nicadius said, recognizing the voice, then pulling the hood off the man. "This from the master of deception, Lord Mechanos," he said with a grin.

"Father, get out of here!" Trinatina warned her father in a whisper. "All will be lost if you remain," she continued. Then she looked up to the sky above the ceiling, putting her arms out and forcing her eyes into maximal 'openness' like the crazy women at Delphi who had been considered by so many as Oracles. "The gods demand that you

leave here, now! Oh deceiver of deceivers! Who comes here as a ghost appearing like a man.”

“Let him go!” Venutia begged her husband. “He is a man of sorcery which he calls science, and you are a man of Faith!”

“And we can win the war against our enemies without him, or his magical devises,” Silialis offered. “With this!” he said, pointing to his heart. “And this!” he continued pulling out his sword.

“Which will make this ghost, warlock bleed and show us how mortal he really is!” Nicadius declared, grabbing the sword from his son and putting it to Mechanos’ throat. He made a small slit in his neck, putting the blood into his finger.

“You see?” he showed his wife, son and guards. “This scientist is just a man. A man who will obey the will of the gods at the festival in two days before our troops go to war! And do what he can to see that they go with the blessings of the gods, and whatever tools, tricks and weapon designed he has in this oversized head of his!”

“No he won’t!” Trinatina said, hugging her father as if he was a Savior from above.

“Yes, I will,” Mechanos said, letting go of his daughter, and allowing her to sink to the ground as her broken heart sank even deeper. “Sometimes one has to give people what they want, my dear,” he said by way of explanation with a broken spirit. One that had fallen into the depths himself.

“But there is one thing I want, and need, Nicadius,” he said to the Priest, with head bowed.

Feeling in power again, Nicadius felt...generous. “If it is in my power, and if the gods will it.”

“My assistant is to NOT accompany me,” he declared. “And is to take my daughter and his wife, who is with his child, away from here.”

“FAR away from here,” Nicadius ordered. “Far enough away so that they say nothing about you, or your various deceptions. But only after Wandelina plays music at the festival. Music that will serve the gods, and please me.”

“Agreed,” Mechanos said, bowing his head. And with that, Wandelina, Trinatina and I were escorted out of the Abatoire that had been converted into a ‘practice temple’ by Sintalis to grounds outside, where the sun was coming up and the horses we came in with were brought to us. He commented on the ropes put on the saddle which had room for the rider’s feet, noting that I and my ‘witch women’ could stay seated on them very

easily. “Hmm...” he commented. “Interesting invention, Assistant Mechanos. What do you call them?”

“Stirrups?” I offered.

“Which when I put them on MY horses for MY cavalry, will make them steady at rocks and as fast as lightening as we rape, pillage and demolish our enemies! Who have been left alone to their riches and prosperity and ‘harmonious living’ way too long!” he said. “If you wish, when the account of that glorious battle is written, I can mention your name as the man who helped us. And the man, perhaps, who can help us in victory as well. Hmm...you can be the next Mechanos!”

“The next Mechanos”, I pondered. How had yearned to be called that ever since he rescued me from my happy life as a simple minded village idiot to becoming a ‘complicated minded’ warrior in matters of intellect and ‘politics’. And how I pitied the poor souls of the city that was to be decimated in less than a week because of my ‘wondrous’ invention of stirrups, and gods, or God, know what else if Lord Sintilas figured out that I alone knew where Mechanos’ most secret manuscripts were (which I had still not laid eyes on, thankfully), and was on my way to perhaps creating works far more innovative than what were on them.

## CHAPTER 27

The festival came at its usual time just after sundown, in its usual way for this city, so Trinatina told me as we took our places as honored guests on the procession to the Temple that was, of course, up the hill from where the ‘mortals’ lived. Nicadius led everyone up at a slow, metered walk, droning out a chant. Everyone else behind repeated it, note for note, word for word, not a single soul adding another note or harmonic variation of such. All in all a boring sound for those who chose to make their offerings to the gods more ‘listened to’ by having the Priests and Priestess do it. Altogether, a very non-musical experience, with the notable exception of Wandelina’s lute, which somehow added a bit of ‘dance’ to the march for the women whose job it was to maintain the homes while their men were away, and an extra arch in the back for the men for the men who would be going to War as subsistence citizens and, gods willing, return home rich heroes. I even felt myself my own feet moving with the music, my hand tapping to it, my head bobbing back and forth as if a puppeteer above it was moving it. But if it did, such would please the guards assigned to be sure that me, now clad in finer clothing than I ever owned or burrowed, and my newly acquired slave, Trinatina, would be protected from anyone who thought of robbing us.

Waiting for us on the top of the hill was a procession of lesser Priests and two apparently very High Priestesses who from a distance looked alike, but whose rank became obvious as we approached the wooden logs that had been put in front of the temple for the entire city to sit on. And as for the town, when everyone else looked up, I looked down and saw, with whatever dwindling light the setting sun chose to leave behind, no one down below in the streets. Indeed, every man, woman and child that could walk or be carried eagerly took their seats in front of the pit in the ground and the Temple above, except for a few men in beggar robes with military issue sandals slithering into some houses with empty pockets and coming out with fuller ones. Meanwhile, citizens on top of the hill emptied their pockets with everything from coins made of gold to dolls made of straw. They were collected by the Monks and placed in metal crates which had been set upon a skillfully-carved alter.

The Priestess, whose name I didn’t remember, and didn’t really care about anyway, welcomed all of the people who were escorted by the Temple guards to the festival, then invited the gods to descend down to this ‘glorious and wondrous day’ before the city went into battle for ‘to avenge the demons’ in the enemy’s city and ‘reestablish the glory of the gods’. She raised her hands to the sky just as the blue sky turned to black and the stars made their appearance, while a light from somewhere underground, as I perceived such anyway, shone at her ‘from high above’. That night, the moon chose not to reveal itself. The only thing that could be seen was that which was intentionally lit, and Mechanos’ ability to shine light where he needed it and with the use of hidden mirrors, make it look like it came from the gods above instead of tunnels under the ground was masterful. As was the way he made the wind ‘talk’ to the Priestess as a god. Never did I hear the ‘wind and voice’ machine speak so clearly. And never did I hear Wandelina play her lute and sing so...angelically.

The Priestess offered the gifts from the people up to the gods, and the wind echoed 'acceptance' of such. The voice was a believable as it was horrifying, as it was Mechanos' own. The wind agreed with whatever the Priestess wanted it to, so it seemed, until it asked for a moment of Silence. Then Prayer, 'each man and woman to tell me what they really want, and expect of the gods, and each other'. The Priestess looked to Nicadius, whose robe and gait I recognized from the back. He allowed her to continue.

The people murmured, then spoke, then screamed their prayers to the gods. "Yes," the wind kept answering, as it seemed to appear to come from pillars of light that seemed to take on human shape, and faces that looked like Nicadius for the gods, and the Priestess for the goddesses. But one lesser goddess looked much like the person next to me.

"Your father's idea of a joke?" I asked Trinatina as I examined the lesser goddess' face, noting the features that matched hers.

"Only between us," she muttered, with disappointment, and bitterness. She rubbed her hands through her hair. "Thankfully my hair isn't as beautiful as this goddess' is. But I'm surprised at one thing. Why are they not..." she stopped talking and pointed my attention to a lesser god who appeared between Zeus and Apollo.

"My face as a god!" I said, seeing my image in a projection that I never even dreamed, and found myself enjoying the sight. "How did Mechanos do that?"

"The question is...why did he do that!" Trinatina asserted. "Maybe he wants to see what kind of man you are. Or maybe the Priests offered him more money if he would..."

"...your father isn't motivated my money!" I shot back as the crowd's devotion to the gods got louder, more expressive and appealing to every Priest and Priestess whose feet were now cluttered with people kissing them, and begging for special intervention.

"My father's Visions need money to make them happen. The ones he used to have anyway. The ones that made him want to free every man from poverty, every woman from back breaking labor, and every child from hunger. And every slave from...well..."

Trinatina stopped talking with her mouth and chose instead to speak with her eyes, which were looking directly at me. "So, what do YOU have to say about all of this, now that YOU are a god?"

"Something that I'll talk to you about, after I do it," I smiled, offering the guard to my left some of my wine.

"After WE do it!" she asserted with a hushed whisper after offering a piece of bread to the guard to her right.

“NO!” I said to her as a smile came back to her face and a snore came to the guards. “It’s too dangerous.”

“And what is happening here isn’t dangerous?” she asserted as she pointed my attention to peasants and princes alike making beggars of themselves at the feet of the Priests and Priestesses who had called up, and were talking to the gods. Priests and Priestesses who were guaranteeing the men safe passage back from the War with riches in their pockets, and assuring the women that their men would come back to them with their carnal honor clean and unblemished. All divine pledges, of course, were given in proportion to the worth of whatever the devoted had given, or promised, be they gifts of gold, livestock, or children who just wanted to go home.

Trinatina was right, yet again. We had to stop Mechanos, but how? I pulled out the final ‘inactivating’ elixir from my pocket, not sure of its potency or toxicity. She pulled out a dagger from one of the guards. Both of us agreed that one or both had to be used.

Nicadius seemed happier than a Linalita in a field full of fresh green grass with grain thrown between the blades and honey coating the flowertips. As did most of the crowd as they listened to the godlike wind, that kept saying ‘tell me what you want and expect of us,’ in a kind, fatherly voice Mechanos spoke with me, and a maternal one Mechanos has used when posing as an old woman at the brothel.

With the soles of my feet, I listened to the sound of the vibrations under the ground. Everyone else was wearing sandals, a requirement for coming onto sacred Temple ground. And I heard why with the ears in my bare feet. With those bare feet, I could hear the machines below us. And with the stethoscope that Trinatina had wisely put into her ‘womanly’ parts after I spilt it on the floor in the chamber, we were able to listen to the earth, and hear where the wind machine was coming from underneath us. And where the hot air that was keeping it going was coming from as well. Trinatina confirmed the location with the tips of her fingers, and led me to other things that deserved a ‘scientific’ listening to under the ground, and then behind the walls of the Temple as we snuck our way around the maddening crowd, walking like gods of course.

With the language of mathematics, or more accurately, geometry, I calculated where the mirrors were placed and where the origin of the light was coming from. From the cracks in the wall no more than two feet from the ground, I saw flashed which could only be generated by Mechanos’ ‘light machine’, a devise which still baffled me as to how it worked, when it DID work anyway.

Next to the crack there was a hard piece of wood connected to a metal lock. There was no way in, unless you could become a ray of light and project yourself into the cracks.



“I can pull out the answer to this from my ass,” Trinatina said as she turned around, lifted her robe, and let out a large fart at the trap door. Out came one of the ‘thunder and lightening’ balls which I had brought into the chamber where she and Wandelina were held captive. The metal was rendered into rubble and the wood into sawdust, and as the flash of light illuminated Trinatina’s ugly face, I found it, and her...beautiful. I felt...love for her. Eros as well as Philos, and Agape. Even more than, I must confess, I ever felt for Wandelina.

“Don’t even think about it,” she said, seeing what was in my heart, and mind, and feeling the same thing. “It would be forbidden by the laws of man, nature and sound biology,” she continued. “And we have other things to think about here before exploring any of our...feelings.”

She was right, as I knew, and put into effect. We scurried our way into the temple, finding nothing but metal around us. And one man in the middle of all of the devises.

“So, Mount Olympus isn’t on the top of a pristine mountain but in a hole in the ground, operated by a greedy and cowardly rat,” Trinatina said to her father as he continued to operate the machines, and I took my turn to chastise him, or if that failed, cease his existence.

I took out my elixor. Trinatina pulled out her dagger.

“There will be time enough for that later,” he informed us both through the sides of his mouth, holding us back with an uplifted hand that was firm and resolute. “For now, I need your help to make some minor adjustments in this machinery...just about...”

We froze there as he looked at a clock, ticking down to something very important, by the way he kept his back turned from us. And with that he handed me and Trinatina a parchment of paper in which instructions were written in ink. A mixture of brown and black ink that looked like blood, perhaps from one of the sacrificial animals or inappropriately curious citizens that had been killed prematurely. I dared to ponder over whose blood it was, till I noticed a recent knife wound in Mechanos’ left index finger, thumb and palm.

“I still have one good hand, which is all I need,” Mechanos said by way of explanation as I tried to read the note, and looked at the man who wrote it. “But now I have four more good hands,” he noted. “Is that not correct?” he continued, turning around to me as...himself.

“More correct than your horrible grammar,” Trinatina said, as she smiled, reading the writing which looked like Greek, but in reverse. Maybe it was a variant of Hebrew, written by Rachel, who perhaps was still alive, I hoped, and prayed. It was then that Rachel put a mirror in my face, or more accurately, in front of the instruction list Mechanos had written.

“Reverse handwriting?” I said, able to read very clearly all of words and numbers on the parchment. “That is brilliant.”

“Necessary,” Mechanos said. “As is what you went through last night. What they are going through up there now. And what we are about to do now.”

“And you planned on us coming here to help you. Or rather, calculated it,” I said, not really sure about what I was being instructed to do, and why I found myself agreeing to do it.

“I prayed, and hoped, that you would,” Mechanos said with a warm and inviting smile. “Now,” he said, looking again to the clock. “We had all better hurry if this is going to work.”

I rushed over to my assigned station, pushing aside the former operator of it. A low level Priest who was sleeping very soundly. Trinatina walked over to hers, finding the previous operator in a more sound and permanent slumber. She looked to her father for an explanation.

“‘Above all do no harm’ is a very good ideal, which is sometimes not possible,” he said sadly regarding the lifeless body of a boy Monk who would never grow up to be a man.

“Because you ‘miscalculated’ the medicine you gave him?” Trinatina challenged.

“He was getting too curious, and too dangerous. It was a necessary miscalculation, though an unfortunate one,” he explained with genuine sorrow. “But we have to save those we can save now!” he barked out with as much command in his voice as Sinaltas and as much self-righteousness as his father, High Priest Nicadius.

And with that, Trinatina followed her instructions, as I followed mine. As I listened to the wind machine change gears, and saw the light machine becoming even more glowing, and heard the voice of a man who indeed now sounded like a god. Or at least someone from another place.

“Now!” Mechanos said into the pipe that had his voice sound like anyone else’s, this time coming from Zeus himself with a tone and rhythm that sounded much like Nicadius himself. “Now that you all have asked us, the gods what you want and expect of us. There is something we want and expect of you.”

From above, the clammer of devotional banter came to hushed silence. Mechanos smiled, as if seeing a victory to come that was not yet materialized. One that was inevitable, and which would change the rules of the game forever. “We want to tell you who we are, and where we come from,” he continued as the voices changed from one god to another. “We are mortals, just like you, who came here from worlds that circle the

stars in the sky. In ships that fly in the sky. It was no big accomplishment to make or fly those ships. It is a bigger accomplishment being a kind parent. A loyal husband. A loving wife. And a compassionate human being. Yes, we, who mistakenly allowed you to call us gods, provided you with food, shelter and various kinds of protection that you needed, while we took what we...wanted, and didn't need. But it is time for us to try to regain our humanity, which you have so much of. And to give you your freedom, independence and dignity. In the hopes that you use them to help rather than harm each other. And find the Truth about the Spirit within you that is something far greater than us, the gods, and far greater than any god most you can right now imagine. But, please, keep imagining that Truth because when you independent of us, you will find it. And when you do, and if you can build your own flying ships, please bring that Truth to us where we live! And where we are going back to tonight. All of us. But as our final command, and wish, to you...Please take care of yourselves better than we've taken care of you, and better than we've taken care of ourselves. Prometheus was right, and we were wrong. Though we were instrumental in creating you and your world, that world and your lives are rightfully yours and yours alone. From this moment, and forever more."

Mechanos flicked on some more machines, as I pushed the levers he requested me to push, and nodded to Trinatina to rotate the wheels that churned more machines, that created something which Mechanos showed me through the 'monitor' as he called it, a series of mirrors under the ground which showed me what was going on above the ground, and in the sky.

"The gods are...leaving?" I said with my mouth open, finding myself almost believing in the illusion which I know was created by my own hands, and my now trusted refound friend, and his daughter with whom I found a kinship that I wanted to pursue more than anything else

"They are going up to the sky in their ships," Trinatina smiled. "But will they, we, come back again?" she asked her father with a whimsical smile.

Mechanos laughed, as if a slave released from lifetimes of bondage. I asked, then begged him for an explanation for it all. But he said nothing. I looked Trinatina for an answer, who did not seem to be laughing. She pointed me to what was happening above. "You hear that?" she said.

"Mumbling. Confusion," I said as I saw citizens questioning Priests, then taking back jewels, livestock and children they had offered to them. Then disobeying the guards when they tried to help the Priests keep the gold and their authority. Then the guards disobeying their commanding officers when they were ordered to kill civilian villages storming the sacred Temple, which was now nothing more than a building made of stone and rock, accessible to whoever dared to boldly walk inside and open their eyes to the reality of...what really is.

“Chaos,” Trinatina asserted, as the ‘revolution’ continued, the poor extracting their revenge on the rich in ways that was often as bloody as it was loud. “Mob rule! By ‘human beings’ who are as vicious as animals.”

“But not as vicious as us,” Mechanos said. “And me,” he continued.

I didn’t ask about the details of the non-verbal conversation that was going on between Mechanos and Trinatina. For the moment, getting both of them, and if possible, me, out of the Temple was necessary. After, of course, something of more primary concern.

“Wandelina!” I said. “We have to get her out of here!”

“Already taken care of,” Mechanos assured me, providing proof of such by a view of her being whisked away and placed in a large sac by what looked like trustable slaves and loaded onto Mechanos’ wagon, to which Linolita and the stud who I didn’t bother to name were hitched. “The elixir inside of her will wear off by morning, and she will be yours again,” he said. “If you want her,” he continued, sensing that something was romantic had started between me and Trinatina.

“Yes, he does want her,” Trinatina said, answering the question going through his head.

“Yes, I think I do,” I replied, my head downward looking at a future behind my eyes. “No, I KNOW I do,” I continued. By the time I looked back, Trinatina had started gathering manuscripts, while Mechanos used his own ‘lightray’ daggers to blow holes into his illusion machines that converted them into rubble.

I knew that there were many questions to be asked, and little time for them to be answered. But there was one inquiry I HAD to ask with my mouth as my body tore down what it would take centuries of inventors to re-devise. “Mechanos,” I said. “There is one thing I want to know, need to know, and think I deserve to know.”

“What ‘star’ I’m supposed to be from?” Mechanos mused. “And how to build a flying ship to get there?”

“NO...Something of THIS world. Your wife. Who was she?” I inquired.

Mechanos stopped dead in his tracks. He looked at me with a proud smile. “Your mother was a very special woman, who gave me a very special son,” he said. “Ask your sister. Or rather, half sister,” he said of Trinatina.

My jaw dropped as all of the pieces found themselves put together. The mystery of why of all the villages and village idiots Mechanos chose to adopt was answered. And why there was a ‘Mechanos’ inside of me that only came out when this real father came out of nowhere. But why would such a father who was so intelligent be

so...insensitive, and leave his son? He answered that question without delay, or any deceptions. "Your mother loved me very much, but knew that I loved my work more. And that this work as important for many mothers, and many sons."

"So you let me grow up with this...body?" I said to him, my soul still encased in a vessel that had two mismatched legs, the right and left sides of my face being different from each other, and a back which was painful everytime I tried to hold it up straight instead of allowing it go be hunched like it was when I was an 'idiot' child. But there was something else of even more concern. "And you left me with a father and brother who sold me into slavery!"

"But a mother who taught you what freedom is all about, so you could bring it to others," he replied. "Now, if there aren't any more questions you have, I have to be going."

"Where?" I boldly asked.

He pointed up to the sky, then down to the ground, then put his finger on his chin. "I don't know, I'll find out when I get there I suppose." With that, he gave me a hug of maximal compassion, took in a deep breath and let out another that spewed blood on the floor. Life left his body a few moments latter. I looked into his eyes for an answer as to the 'why' of it all.

"Hemlock," Trintina said, having picked up a small vial that fell out of his pocket. "The way Socrates died," she noted, holding back her tears, for now anyway.

The mob was about to find its way into the underground chamber that made the illusion of the temple possible. I looked at the rubble on the floor, thinking that someone would be able to piece together the truth of what it was used for. After all that is what Mechanos wanted...for the Truth to be told. Even though a lie or two along the way was necessary. But Trinattina had other ideas.

"There's no way back home for me, in this world or the one in the stars, if indeed what Mechanos told me when I asked him to tell me a bedtime story was true," she said.

"And is it true?" I inquired, demanding an answer this time.

"I'll tell you when we're both out of here, safe. And you do with these what you have to," she said, throwing several parchments into my sweaty and blood soaked hands. "I haven't looked them. And father said they are yours to use, or be burdened with. I'll take care of things here while you take care of things, well...elsewhere."

With that, Trinatina pushed me towards the exit door to the Temple Laboratory as a plank of wood, then several boulders of stone fall between us. "Take care of them! Please!" she said as her last remarks, just moments before the mob pounded another hole in the floor above, and she lit their way to where she was by throwing oil on top of

Mechanos' body and igniting it, her own flesh taking hold of the 'fire-light' as well, or so it seemed. She and Mechanos blew up in an explosion that left nothing behind but air, or perhaps ashes below the rubble. I wanted, nay, needed to get a closer look.

"Come on!" I heard from behind me. "We have to get out of here," the slave turned wagon master said as I heard Wandelina moan, then curse, in protest to her being held inside a sac. Linalita confirmed the sense of urgency. And with that, I chose to serve the living than investigate the fate and destination of the 'dead'. Our getaway was fast, urgent and took us to places that were as far away from this city as possible.

## CHAPTER 28

As for the rest of what happened, or didn't happen, Wandelina came to her senses, and I found out that I really did love her. Even more than she loved me. Part of making that solution possible came from my writing down on a piece of parchment what I wanted and expected of her, and she doing the same with regard to me. "Having a family that is sane, Alive and, if possible, happy" was one item that was on both of our lists, though in different verbiages. Keeping that list honored was maintained by my making the same list for the God which I felt, or wanted, to be inside of me, and her and everyone and everything else. Though I wrote what I wanted and expected of such a God many times, and often screamed it to the sky on starry nights, and sunfilled days, I never got an answer from Him, or Her. Maybe because He or She was an It, and beyond any personification I felt comfortable using or necessary to employ. But, that relationship with the Beyond what can be perceived still continued, and somehow nurtured the other relationships I had. With Wandelina. With my first son who became a manly man. With my first daughter who would become a womanly woman. And with my third son, who wanted to become a girl, for reasons I didn't understand but was required to accept.

As for the city which we left in haste, Mechanos' earthly home, to the best of my calculations, the war with their rival city did not happen. And a new form of government established itself there. "Democracy" it was called, but this time the women could vote and the slaves were allowed to earn their way in to freedom in ways that every one of them could access. That city didn't become very powerful, or very rich, but it survived many conquerors and because it remained unknown, and unimportant, it survived for many many years. I will not tell you its name in the home that it can survive many more.

As for Mechanos' inventions, the ones he wrote on paper, I kept them with me till my dying day, using them when I could, improving them when I had to, but not sharing them with anyone else except my own son, daughter and 'son-daughter' as my youngest preferred to be called. But I warned them that until humanity and REAL Spirituality kept up with science (as you probably know it today), we Promethians have to be careful who we give fire to. But we always must know one can never give too much Light to anyone, even those whose eyes are closed. Here is hoping that your eyes are open, and the Fire in your Soul is Alive as it became for me, and could be for everyone else.