

L. D. Alford
1704 N. Cypress
Wichita, Kansas 67206
(316) 636-9514
pilotlion@aol.com

65,880 words

Enchantment of the Hearth

by

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Genesis 6

¹And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, ²That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. ³ And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. ⁴There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. ⁵And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

“Jack, are you sick? What’s that sound you’re making?” Phillip Ryan called from his cot.

“I’m just reading from my notebook, Phil.”

Phil lay more comfortably on his arm. He didn’t raise his head or open his eyes, “It sounds like a bad Greek spell.”

“That’s because it is an ancient Greek incantation.”

“Great. Now my tent mate has become an evil Greek conjurer.”

“There’s no evil to it Phil. It’s just words. The words of an ancient Greek guy who thought he could make myths come true.”

“Considering where we are you might have a little more respect.”

“Respect for whom, dead Greek guys?”

Phil covered his eyes with his arm, “Yeah, that and my nerves.” He rolled over, “We have an early day at the dig tomorrow. Why don’t you turn out the light and let one of us get some sleep?”

Jack picked up his notebook and kerosene lamp and moved out of the tent. The evening was soft and pleasant. A gentle breeze shook the tops of the laurel trees and unsettled the warm sweet air that collected under them. The ground beneath his feet was uneven and filled with stones, but over it lay a deep cover of laurel leaves that silenced his footsteps. The earth felt almost springy under his boots and that was unusual since the summer heat had baked it everywhere to a solid firmness that broke shovels and blunted their picks. He had cursed that ground too many times to count. Well, it was all worth the work when they finally opened up the town center and found the hearth.

He stepped over the tiny stream that ran beside the ancient Greek town and, in the dark, misjudged its width. Jack let out a curse as his boot sank into the muck. His leg submerged past his knee into a pool of mud and trickling water. The stream was almost dry and he stepped in the only wet and muddy part of it. While he raised his precious notebook and the lamp high above the muck, Jack stuck both boots in the sucking mud then stepped out with one to get enough leverage on the steep bank to drag his feet out of the streambed. He cursed again and shook his head. He would find the only mud hole left in the county—with both feet.

On the other side of the streambed, the trees suddenly opened onto the ancient Greek town site they had excavated all summer. As he squished out of the trees and stepped onto the ancient pavement, the moonlight was so bright, Jack squinted for a moment. He walked over to the raised hearth and sat on its worn edge. His body settled into the slight depressions on the stone as though he sat in exactly the place and position the original tender of the hearth had rested in ancient times. With a smile at such thoughts, he placed his notebook and lamp on the seared surface of the hearth and reached down to untie his boots. The air was warmer than comfortable, but he was happy to shed the slimy, wet, and muddy footgear. He laid them at the foot of the altar hearth and pulled off his dirty socks. These, he hung across the top and side of the stone. The dirty water dripped in a dark runlet from his socks down the face of the altar to his boots where it puddled and finally ran between the paving stones.

Jack pulled a glass water bottle out of his backpack, took a sip, and placed it on the hearth. He picked up the notebook, and it fell open to the pages he had been studying for the last week. On the moon-bright, college ruled pages was his personnel copy of an ancient and, as yet, untranslated, Greek manuscript. It was difficult to determine the era of the original document from which he had made his copy. It appeared to be similar to the “so-called” Mithras Liturgy found in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris. That was from around the year three hundred of the common era. This manuscript appeared much older, and there were distinct differences between the Mithras Liturgy and this manuscript. But in content they were extremely similar. Both the Mithras Liturgy and this document were archaic liturgies or incantations that were intended to be spoken aloud and acted on to achieve some kind of spiritual result. They both described similar noises, recipes, magical rites, amulets, magical words of power, and breathing

techniques that, along with the words and directions, were supposed to result in a divine revelation.

The difference between the Mithras Liturgy and this document was that the Mithras Liturgy purported to result in an experience of immortalization where the soul communed with the highest god, Mithras. This Greek document was simpler, and its purpose and results were lost in the missing beginning and end—only the middle fragment, the actual liturgy, was left. Jack had mused over his translation and meaning of the document for the last week. It seemed to be a liturgy to Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth. If it was that would be a new discovery in itself. Little was said of Hestia in Greek myth. She was the goddess of the hearth and family, but almost no myths spoke about her person or character.

With a shrug, Jack turned back to the beginning of the writing and started to read aloud the cryptic Greek words. It was much easier to break out the individual words and meanings when an ancient document, like this, was read aloud. “This is the invocation of the ceremony: first origin of my origin, ἀετιουω.” The last “Greek word” was an intonation of the Greek vowels in order—it was supposed to be a magic word. Jack felt silly speaking the meaningless sounds, but he did a credible job saying it. He spoke fluent modern Greek, but this was ancient Greek—no one was sure what the language really sounded like.

He went on to the second line, “First beginning of my beginning,” and made a popping sound with his mouth, followed by a hissing sound, a raspberry, and a short whistle. He shook his head at how silly all this sounded, but it meant something to the people of the past. It was significant to them—could it have some significance to him?

Okay, the third line, “Spirit of spirit, the first spirit in me,” with a concluding long hum—like an extended mu. He reached back to bring the light of the lamp closer to the paper. The smell of

kerosene wafted out of the clear globe and formed rising eddies in the moonlit night. “Fire given by god to my mixture of the mixtures in me, the first of the fire in me, ευ εια εη.” Another meaningless sequence of vowel sounds—kind of like ehy ehy oh.

Jack’s throat was already dry. He reached back to the bottle of water and took a drink. Some of the water escaped his lips and dripped near his bare feet. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

The next line, “Water of water, the first of the water in me, οοο ααα εεε.” Again repetitive vowels. He accidentally toed his muddied boots with his bear feet, “Earthly substance, the first of the earthly substance in me, υε υοε.” More vowel sounds, “My complete body—I, Jack Martin Agnos whose mother is Maria Eleni Agnos,” without thinking, he added his and his mother’s name in the blanks. “Which was formed by a noble arm and an incorruptible right hand in a world without light and yet radiant, without soul and yet alive with soul, υει αυι ευοιε.” Another meaningless set of vowels. “Now if it be your will, μετερτα φοθ—μεθαρθα φερτε, in another place—ιερεξαθ.” These were Greek “magic words” too, at least the author moved on to more than vowels. “Give me over to one of immortal birth and, following that, to my underlying nature. So that, to remedy the present need which is pressing me exceedingly, I may gaze upon the immortal beginning and the immortal spirit, ανχρεφρενεσουφριγχ.” That was the first time while reading the document that he didn’t stumble over the Greek version of the strange mixed Egyptian name.

Jack continued, “...with the immortal water, with the most steadfast air, thus you may be born again, and the sacred spirit may breathe in you, νεχθεν αποτου νεχθιν αρπιεθ.” More magic words—these were like random sounds.

The kerosene lantern seemed to dim. Jack reached back and twisted the wick's adjustment knob. He fumbled a moment with the hot metal, and with a jerk overturned the lantern on the hearth. The kerosene spilled out on the low altar and roared into flames. Jack debated for only a moment whether he should reach out to grasp the lantern and right it—he wasn't about to put his hand into the inferno on the stone. In the bright light of the burning kerosene, he read the next line and was surprised, "So that I may wonder at the sacred fire, κυφε."

Absently, Jack reached for the bottle of water, now blackened on one side by the burning fuel. When he touched it, the glass bottle was unusually hot and slippery so as a result he knocked it over on the hearth too. The water flowed from the open bottle and down the front of the hearth. The burning fuel on the hearth blazed through the thick glass of the water bottle and illuminated the front edge of the altar with a blue and white light. Instead of righting the bottle, he marveled as he read the next line, "That I may gaze upon the unfathomable, awesome water of the dawn, νυω θεσω εχω ωνχιεχωα."

Suddenly he couldn't stop reading. The words tumbled from his lips whole and exact, "And the vivifying and encircling aether may hear me, αρνωμεθφ; for today I am about to behold, with mortal eyes—I, born mortal from mortal womb, but transformed by tremendous power and an incorruptible right hand! And with immortal spirit, the immortal Hestia and mistress of the fiery diadems. I, sanctified through holy consecrations! While there subsists within me, holy, for a short time, my human soul-might. Who I will receive to remedy the present bitter and relentless necessity that is pressing down upon me. I, Jack Martin Agnos whose mother is Maria Eleni Agnos, according to the immutable decree of god, ευε νια εει αο ειαν ια ιεω. Since it is impossible for me, born mortal, to rise with the golden brightnesses to the immortal brilliance,

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ὦεν ἀεὼ εὐα εὐε ὑαε ὠαε, stand, O imperishable nature of immortals, and at once receive me safe and sound and remedy my inexorable and pressing need.”

In a sudden thunderclap, the air all around the hearth stone was gone. Jack gasped and dropped his notebook. He fell to his knees and clutched at his throat. Unexpectedly, the fiery kerosene blazed with new light. The moment lasted a long time. Jack’s heart began to beat slowly and thud in his chest. As though from a long distance away, a thin sound came to him and filled his ears. It was like the rushing of water mixed with the roaring of fire. He fell to his face on the ancient paving stones, and behind his closed lids, he perceived a brilliant flash grow from a tiny spark to an unbearable light.

Suddenly Jack could breathe again. He inhaled a deep sweet breath and let it out slowly. He was giddy from lack of oxygen, and his head ached. Through the swirling in his brain, he heard from his thunderclap dimmed ears a voice call to him. The voice was close to him, but he could not understand it. Then with a mental click, the thoughts came together in his mind, and he realized the voice spoke Greek. The words and sounds were strange to him. He opened his eyes to even greater brightness than he realized. The cold blaze seared his sight, and he could only slit his eyes. He still could not see anything.

Jack realized he lay flat on his face at the foot of the hearth. The paving stones pressed against his cheek and hands, and he unaccountably faced the hearth. The voice was incessant. It broke in and out of his understanding. It was a heavily accented Greek. A Greek dialect and accent he could barely understand. He realized only later, it was ancient Greek, classical Greek, but as he mulled over the syllables, he heard his name, and he could finally comprehend, “Jack Martin Agnos, Jack Martin Agnos, why did you call me? What is your need?”

Jack lifted his head. His eyes felt swollen shut. The world was so bright, he couldn't open them. Slowly, Jack lifted his upper body and pulled his knees under himself. In modern Greek, a poor facsimile of the voice calling to him, he called out, "Who are you?"

"You called me, and yet you ask who I am."

"I didn't mean to call you. I don't know who you are." Jack paused to catch his breath. He gripped the side of the hearth to lift himself up, but that was burning hot. He cried out and fell back to his knees. A thought wound through his mind, "Where did you come from?"

The voice sounded amused, "I don't think that much matters."

He didn't notice he had not spoken the last. Jack finally pulled himself shakily to his feet. He squinted his eyes against the brightness, "Who are you?"

"You called me, but I am not so arrogant that I will not answer you. Such mistakes are not unknown. I am Hestia, the goddess of this place and this hearth. If you have made a mistake, you are lucky you called me and not one of my brothers. What is your need?"

Jack rubbed his eyes. Before him, the source of the brightness that now thankfully dimmed, stood a woman in a long Greek tunic with sleeves—a peplos. A veil loosely covered her braided hair. She was handsome, but no great beauty. She wasn't much more than five feet tall and thin. She appeared like a woman in her twenties. Her hands were empty, and a look of amusement and surprise filled her cocked features. The light dimmed obviously and the woman gazed past Jack. Her face filled with anger and concern, "The hearth fire is going out. You did not build it right."

"What?"

"You mortal fool! The hearth fire must not go out while I am corporeal. Build it up—quickly!"

Jack could not refuse her demands, he felt compelled to obey her words, but there was nothing at hand to build up the fire, and the hearth itself blazed with heat. In another moment, the kerosene was finally all burned up and the light of the hearth was gone.

The woman before him launched herself toward him, and with a cry he jumped out of her way. But she had not aimed herself at him. She grasped the edge of the hearth without regard for the heat of it, threw herself over the top. It was too late, and her disappointment dropped thickly in her words, “You fool, you fool, you fool. The hearth fire has gone out...” She lifted a mud streaked hand, “...and you have fouled my hearth with earth. A hearth can only be stone—not earth. I am held corporeal, and now, I can’t return.” Like a tiger she turned on him. Her tear streaked features were obvious in the moonlight, “What do you have to say about this mortal man? You called me here to a barren hearth with this trick of burning, and you polluted it with earth. I have no enemies. I know of no enemies—are you my enemy? Who told you to invoke me corporeally and to trap me here? Who are you Jack Martin Agnos?”

Jack didn’t know what to say. He still felt groggy from his mind twisting experience and this unusual woman. He couldn’t believe what he heard. “This is a joke—right?”

“A joke?”

“My friends at the dig knew I was coming out here to read—surely they are behind this, this, prank.”

“I assure you Jack Martin Agnos, this is no joke. The forces you have loosed are no joke.”

“What forces have I unloosed?”

“I told you. I am Hestia, the goddess of this place and this hearth.”

“So you said. I really don’t believe in such things.”

“What do you mean, you don’t believe—you called me.”

“Phil, Dr. Adams, Dr. Matheson! You can come out now. The joke is becoming stale.”

“Who do you invoke now?”

“Wha...what?”

“You are calling names in a sacred place—who are you invoking now?”

“I’m invoking the people who put you up to this trick.” Jack walked to the edge of the stone and was about to step off to search through the brush at either side.

“Stop! You will not leave this place until I give you permission—I do have this much power left me.”

Jack suddenly could not move beyond the pavement. “What is this?” He prowled around the edge of the stones. He didn’t need to move beyond the pavement—he didn’t want to go beyond the pavement. He could tell there was no one near them. No one was hiding, could hide, for yards around the place. Could they have hidden a camera or microphones? He couldn’t see anything obvious—and nothing not so obvious. “Is it possible this is not a joke?” he said out loud to himself.

“I told you this is no joke. It is certainly not a joke to me. For your audacity, my brothers would have killed you over and over again. If they knew what you did to me, they might do it anyway.”

Jack ran his fingers through his hair, “Now, you are just being silly. How can your brothers kill someone over and over?”

“It is not silly. Can the gods not control life and death? Can they not kill you and bring you back to life over and over again? I myself might do that to show you what you have to fear.”

“Who are you really?”

Hestia sat on the edge of the hearth. She rubbed the tear streaks from her face, “Why can’t you believe the evidence of your eyes? You sat right there.” She pointed to the indentations in the stone, “and made the great invocation. You called on the forces of fire, water, air, and earth. You brought all the elements necessary for the invocation. You kindled the hearth fire—a grossly insufficient hearth fire, and you polluted the hearth with fresh mud. Each of these things was deliberate and purposeful. These actions brought me here, made me corporeal, and then sealed the way back.”

“But, I didn’t know. I didn’t do it purposefully.” Jack paused, “What am I saying? I don’t believe any of this. I think this is still a silly joke, a trick, a prank...”

“How can you say your actions were not purposeful?”

“Look, Hestia or whoever you really are, I just read the words from an ancient manuscript. Look at it,” Jack held out his open notebook for the woman to see.

Hestia studied the notes for a long time then she said, “Yes, this is my invocation. I could even tell you the words before and after, but I certainly will not. You should not be told the power you have over...”

Jack put both his hands on his head, “I can’t believe I am speaking to you like this. This is certainly not at all what you are making it out to be. I don’t believe any of it. It has got to be a trick.” Jack called out into the darkness, “I know this is a prank and I am going back to my tent and to bed.” He turned toward Hestia, “Good night, whoever you are.”

Hestia laughed, “I told you, you will not be able to leave this pavement.”

Jack walked rapidly to the edge of the stone and tried to put his foot across it, but he could not step past the periphery. He could not make his foot cross a millimeter over the perimeter.

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No leverage he could apply would make any part of his body move past that visible demarcation on the ground. “Why can’t I step off this pavement?”

“You cannot because I will not allow it.”

“I don’t believe any of this. Maybe I am dreaming.”

“You are not dreaming because I am not allowing you to dream. I have never had to prove to anyone who I am before.”

“Surely you jest.”

Hestia looked annoyed. In any other woman, Jack would have said her look was a pout. “I can tell you that, in the history of the world, no one who has invoked me ever required proof of who I was.”

“Certainly there have been times when you encountered someone who did not believe in you.”

She put her face in her hands and sounded like she was about to cry again.

Jack was struck dumb for a moment, then he said, “You can’t be serious. A goddess, if you are such a being, is a serious creature who must be absolutely certain of who they are. A goddess has godlike powers.”

Tears dropped between her fingers. Where they touched the pavement they burst into brightness that dissipated slowly away. After a while she wiped her eyes with the back of her hands and scrubbed her face. She spoke with a tremor in her voice, “I am not good with confrontation and judgments, laws and punishments. That is why I am the goddess of the hearth and home. I don’t demand much—I give much.” She sniffled again, “I am not beautiful or desirable. I am purposely an old maid. My brothers protected me and left me alone. I care for

those who are alone. I care for those who are together and yet alone. I care for the hearth and all those who center their lives on the hearth. I am Hestia, the goddess of this hearth and this place.”

Jack sat down beside her on the hearth, “You mean of every hearth and place.”

Hestia put her head in her hands again, “Something has gone wrong in the world. I have not been invoked in so long a time.” She drew in a sobbing breath, “I am weak. Does no one believe in me anymore?” Her head fell on Jack’s shoulder, and she sobbed against him. She stopped crying for a moment and rubbed her eyes again. She turned her face toward Jack, “Why am I saying this to you?” She bared her white straight teeth, “You don’t believe in me.”

Jack stared at her with an apologetic look, “I don’t believe in anything.”

Hestia’s jaw dropped, “Even Socrates believed in me. Surely you believe in one of my brothers or in my nieces or nephews?”

“I don’t believe in any of them.”

“You believe in something?”

“Nothing.”

Her face regained its fierceness, “You must believe in me now.”

Jack smiled down at her, “Why is that?”

“Because, no matter what you think, I am really the goddess of the hearth and home.”

“How are you going to make me believe?”

“What would make you believe?”

Jack shrugged.

Hestia, her chin on her chest, thought for a long time. She looked back up at Jack, “You respect life and death. These are a thing you admitted are within the power of the gods.”

“I guess.”

“I don’t have the power over life and death.”

Jack almost laughed. He stifled himself just in time, “Then what powers do you have?”

Hestia looked at her feet, “I can bless the hearth, make childbirth easy, make children happy, make food taste and smell delicious, bless matrimony, bless the home, make brides beautiful, and bless a city-state. I am the keeper of the hearth and the sacrificial fire.”

Jack thought a moment, “Can you make fire?”

“I can make a hearth fire, but I need fuel.”

He did laugh then, “I can make a hearth fire with fuel.”

Hestia held her head on her fists and stuck her tongue into the corner of her mouth. Now, she really did look like a pouting young girl.

Jack thought about this fantastic joke being played on him. This young woman was part of the whole thing. They were all laughing at him, “You know, for a goddess, you really are pathetic.”

Her eyes scrunched up, at first, as though she would cry again, but instead, she glowered, “That may be true, but you are the one who cannot leave the pavement around this place.” She made a symbol with her fingers that left a bright track in the air, “Indeed, I swear, by the head of Zeus that you will not leave here, magician, until you have returned me to my rightful place.”

“Look Hestia, I don’t know who you are really, but...”

As Jack spoke, Hestia stood up suddenly and turned to face the hearth, “I am tired of speaking to you. When you are ready to send me home, light my hearth fire.” She raised her hands and spoke a strange word that reverberated in the air—and she was gone.

Jack blinked then he blinked again. Where did she go? “Hestia. Uhm, Hestia. Where are you?” He searched all around the hearth. He checked every slight shadow around the pavement.

She was gone. Joke or dream, Jack had no idea, but it was late and his cot would feel really good right now. He glanced at his watch then he stared. His watch had stopped. He shook his wrist. The second hand wasn't moving and the hands stood still at exactly the same time Hestia first appeared to him. He firmly told himself, "She wasn't real. She was a joke. She was a figment of something. Yeah, that's right." Jack laughed out loud, just his imagination. He walked to the edge of the pavement and couldn't step over the boundary.

He turned around and ran his fingers through his hair, "This cannot be real." Jack sprinted toward the edge of the pavement and involuntarily twisted himself into a pretzel and fell to the ground before he could cross the invisible boundary. He dropped heavily onto the rough rock portico. Slowly, painfully, he stood and examined the air above the edge of the pavement. There was something. He couldn't feel it. He couldn't see it. Why couldn't he take a simple step past the edge?

The morning sun leaped up across the hills and mountains surrounding the dig. It was blazing by the time it fully illuminated the hearth and pavement at the dig.

Morning found Jack, haggard. He leaned against the edge of the hearth. He had tried everything he could think of to leave the pavement—everything.

Long after the sun came up, Phil came along the trail with Dr. Matheson, "Hey, Jack." Phil raised his hand. Phillip Ryan was a lanky graduate student with shaggy blond hair. He dressed in jeans and a khaki shirt. A fleeting smile always seemed to be poised on his face.

Dr. Angela Matheson was almost Phil's opposite. Petit and dark, she was dressed appropriately for the temperature, but to a tee. She wore fitted khaki shirt and pants. Her black hair was pulled primly and exactly back from her pale features. A big floppy hat covered it. She

was known for her fieldwork, and though she always started the day spotless, she closed it with more ancient dust and dirt on her than anyone.

“Phil, Dr. Matheson,” Jack waved unenthusiastically back.

They walked up to the ancient hearth and Phil said, “Jack, you look like you stayed here all night.”

Jack raised himself unsteadily to his feet, “All night.”

Phil and Dr. Matheson traded a look.

“Okay, I know this will sound strange, but I came out here last night to study the manuscript copy Dr. Adams let me make last week. You remember the one?”

Phil and Dr. Matheson nodded.

“This is where things get really weird. I read the document out loud here at the hearth and something happened.” Jack stopped speaking and grasped for words.

Phil made a face, “Are you trying to tell us something happened that you can’t explain?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Go on,” Dr. Matheson pulled at her hat.

“I thought you guys were playing a prank on me.”

“Why would you think that?” Dr. Matheson stared at Phil.

“I thought it was a joke or a trick, but you didn’t...you couldn’t.”

“I certainly did not,” Dr. Matheson looked at Jack with some disapproval, “You should know that. I can’t speak for Dr. Adams or Mr. Ryan, but I don’t think they planned any kind of extra-expeditionary activity last night.”

Phil laughed, “We didn’t, or at least, I didn’t do anything. Not this time. What exactly are you talking about?”

Jack swallowed hard and he sat down on the edge of the hearth, "I was hoping..."

"You were hoping we had a part in what?" Phil opened his hands.

"I met a woman last night at this hearth."

Dr. Matheson cocked her brow.

"It's not like that. I... a woman, person seemed to appear here at this hearth last night as the result of my reading this manuscript," Jack pointed at his open notebook.

"Where is she now," Phil glanced deliberately around.

"Don't know."

Dr. Matheson touched Jack's arm, "Did anyone else see this, this woman?"

Jack looked down at his feet and shook his head.

Phil smirked, "Okay Jack, no woman, no one else saw her. Except that this display of imagination is not at all like you, why should you or we believe any of it?"

Jack shook his head again, this time forlornly, "I don't believe it either, only I can't step off the pavement."

Dr. Matheson sat down on the hearth, "You mean, you don't believe you can step off the pavement."

"I don't believe anything. I can not step past this pavement. I have been trying to do just that for the last nine hours."

"Wait one moment," Phil scratched his head, "What does this story about seeing an ethereal woman have to do with your not being able to step off the pavement?"

"She's not ethereal. She's corporeal."

"She's not corporeal right here and now. What does she have to do with this pavement thing?"

Jack put his head in his hands, "That's where it gets really hard to believe."

"I'm having a hard time with this pavement thing already. It couldn't get much worse," Phil chuckled.

Dr. Matheson gave Jack a grim smile, "Phil has a good point. What does this apparition you saw have to do with you not being able to step off the pavement?"

"I don't believe any of this myself. I don't know how I'm going to make either of you understand what occurred to me last night, but this is what happened. I spoke aloud the words on the manuscript. While I spoke aloud, I guess, I accidentally, accidentally mind you, did certain physical actions," Jack held up his hand to forestall Phil's comment. "You know I wouldn't do any of this intentionally, I'm just kind of clumsy."

"I'll say."

Dr. Matheson glanced disapprovingly at Phil, "Go on, Jack."

"I noticed that my 'accidental' actions, kind of followed the ideas in the manuscript."

Phil and Dr. Matheson stared at him.

Jack raised his hands, "You know, at the part about water, I 'accidentally' dripped water on the hearth. When the manuscript invoked earth, I 'accidentally' dropped some earth on the hearth. When it said something about fire, I had this little 'accident' with the kerosene lantern..."

"I'll say," Phil motioned at the broken glass, "that was the only clean-burning one too."

Dr. Matheson interrupted, "So you did all these things and said all these words, just what happened?"

“When I finished reading the words of the manuscript, a lot of loud sounds and bright lights happened. I lost my breath and had to close my eyes. When I could open them again, a woman had appeared right here.”

“Did you see where she came from?” Dr. Matheson gripped Jack’s arm more strongly.

“No,” Jack shook his head.

“Then how do you know she ‘appeared?’” Phil rolled his eyes.

Jack colored, “I don’t. I have no idea where she came from. I really have no idea who she is.”

“Did she say who she was?” Dr. Matheson asked.

“She said she was Hestia, the goddess of this hearth and this place,” Jack colored again.

“You, oh unbeliever, invoked a real, no kidding goddess?” Phil laughed.

“This is not a joke, Phil,” Jack tensed.

“It sounds like a great joke. Are you sure you aren’t pulling a prank on us?”

“This is no joke. I didn’t...I still don’t believe her.”

“You don’t believe what?” said Dr. Matheson.

“I don’t believe she is really the goddess, Hestia.”

“Then why are you sitting there telling us all this stuff?” Phil snorted.

Jack responded between gritted teeth, “Because I can not step off this pavement. If all this happened to me, and I had walked back to camp and slept in my own cot last night, I would have said it was a dream, a figment of my imagination, a nightmare, but it didn’t and I can’t. I slept, when I could on this pavement, and here I will stay until the goddess Hestia, whoever she is, says otherwise.”

“Do you really believe that?” Dr. Matheson stared at Jack.

“She, Hestia, asked me what she could do to prove she was truly a goddess, and I couldn’t answer her question.” Jack glanced wildly all around, “I think this is the answer.” He turned his gaze on Dr. Matheson and Phil, “I don’t believe—are you ready to?”

Dr. Matheson turned back to Phil, an unasked question.

“Sure,” Phil quipped.

“Then try to help me cross the pavement.” Jack stood up and walked to the edge of the stones.

“Okay.” Phil walked over to Jack and took his arm. Phil stepped onto the dirt and tried to pull Jack with him. As if an invisible barrier stood at the periphery of the stones as strong as the stone itself, Phil could not force Jack’s hand to cross that point. Phil released Jack’s arm and stepped behind him. Phil gave Jack a push, but as if Jack stood against a wall, he would not move—could not be made to move.

Dr. Matheson stepped around to the other side of Jack and tipped up the brim of her hat. She spoke to herself, “He doesn’t look like he is against a wall. His face and clothing don’t appear to compress against anything solid.” She walked over to Jack, “I can touch your arm across the pavement, but I can’t pull your arm through.” Then more loudly, she said to Phil, “Pick him up and carry him across.”

Phil picked up Jack, “I’m lucky you are so light.” Phil tried to move past the edge and came to a complete stop. He rotated and tried to pull Jack past the border. Phil could move to the right, left, or back, just not across the boundary of the paving stones.

Dr. Matheson gazed curiously at Phil, “You’re in on this prank.”

Phil and Jack stared at her.

“You both cooked this up.”

Phil dropped Jack to his feet, “You try then. I can’t get him to move past the edge of the stones.”

Dr. Matheson pushed Jack from behind and then pulled at him. After a couple of more tries, in the middle of a shove, she concluded, “Nothing works,” She stopped and thrust the hair out of her face, “Wait, Phil go and get the rolling cart from the other side of the dig.”

Phil snapped his fingers, “That’s it.” He ran off toward the site.

“Now we’ll find out if this is real,” Dr. Matheson looked smug, “Then, I’ll know if you two are playing a bad joke on me.”

Not much later, Phil came back trailing the heavy cart. He put the cart on the paving stones and Jack sat on it.

Dr. Matheson pushed at the back of the cart, “You can’t trick me this time.” The cart rolled freely on its thick tires. It went over the boundary until it reached Jack. At that point, Jack began to slide backward on the cart. Dr. Matheson kept pushing until Jack fell off the back of the cart. The cart rolled freely onto the dirt. “You fell off on purpose.”

“I didn’t move,” stated Jack.

“I want to try it again. Get back on the cart.”

Phil brought the cart back around. This time Dr. Matheson made him roll it near the center of the pavement, and Jack climbed on again.

Dr. Matheson said, “Put your legs over the front of the cart so you can’t slide off.”

Jack sat as she ordered, and she pushed the cart. Dr. Matheson pushed faster and faster. They moved at a pretty good speed when Jack hit the invisible boundary. Jack stopped, the cart stopped, Dr. Matheson stopped. Jack grunted in pain. His legs prevented the cart from moving

any further. The cart rolled up on its front wheels and dumped Jack on the ground then fell over.

Dr. Matheson fell against the cart and ended up on the ground too.

Jack thought he heard the tinkle of laughter, but none of them were laughing. He concluded the sound was only his imagination.

Phil cocked his head, "I guess that proves it."

Dr. Matheson rubbed her elbow then folded her legs under her on the rough paving stones and picked up her hat. She had a very pensive look on her face.

Jack untangled himself from the cart and limped over to the hearth, "What now?"

Phil still wore a smug grin on his face, "What did the goddess tell you to do?"

"She said to light the hearth fire when I was ready to send her home."

"Why don't we light the hearth fire then?"

"She said when I was ready to send her back. I don't know how to send her back."

Still seated, Dr. Matheson threw up her arms and exclaimed, "This is just ludicrous. I think Dr. Adams needs to see this. I can't believe any of it." She stood up, "I'll go find him. Don't do anything or go anywhere until I get back."

They watched Dr. Matheson climb up the faint trail that led to their camp.

Phil slipped over to the hearth, "Really, Jack. If this is a joke, you are going to be in so much trouble."

"I keep telling you, Phil. This is no joke. You saw for yourself."

"I saw it, but I don't have to believe it." Phil stood quickly and started to gather brush from the laurel woods.

"What are you doing now?"

Phil dumped his first load on the hearth, "I'm just getting ready. I really want to see this goddess—if she exists."

"Dr. Matheson told us not to do anything."

Phil shrugged and continued to gather wood.

Jack sat down at the front of the hearth, "If you are going to prepare a fire for the hearth, you better clean the mud off it."

Phil stopped suddenly, "Why?"

"Hestia didn't like the fact there was mud on the stones."

Phil shook his head.

Dr. Matheson came at a run through the ruins followed closely by Dr. Adams. Dr. Michael Adams was a tall spare man and thin as a post. He bore thick rimmed glasses and had a pink face made all the more brilliant by the close razor shave he accomplished early that morning. He wore heavy work boots and his jeans legs only reached as far as halfway down the laces. His short sleeved shirt was a faded blue with fraying epaulets on the shoulders. Dr. Adams spoke with a Midwestern drawl, "The boys are surely pulling the wool over your eyes. What you've told me about this apparition and Jack's 'problem' is just, just unbelievable."

Dr. Matheson responded between clenched teeth, "I assure you, no one has pulled the wool over my eyes. I didn't believe it myself until I saw it."

Dr. Adams turned to Jack and Phil, "Come clean you guys."

Jack and Phil stared at one another.

Dr. Adam's voice was cajoling, "Phil, this sounds just like one of your stunts."

"Don't look at me," Phil raised his hands, "This is all Jack's idea."

"Jack, this isn't like you. It isn't like you at all."

“It isn’t like I had a choice,” Jack mumbled under his breath.

“What’s that?”

“Dr. Adams, I can’t step off the pavement. I assure you.”

“Come on. Get up,” the doctor sounded exasperated, “Come over here and let me pull you across.” Dr. Adams tugged at Jack and pulled, but he couldn’t get him to move a millimeter over the edge of the pavement.

Dr. Matheson sat down on the hearth, “We tried that.”

“Okay,” Dr. Adams went around and tried to push Jack across the edge of the pavement.

This didn’t result in any success either.

“We tried that too,” Dr. Matheson quipped.

Dr. Adams picked up Jack and leaped at the unseen barrier. Jack rebounded from the lip of the pavement and tumbled back toward the hearth. Dr. Adams fell in a sprawl in the dust outside.

“That too,” said Dr. Matheson. “Why don’t you try the cart? We already did, but you might as well do that all over too.”

Dr. Adams jumped up red faced and beat the dust from his clothes. His efforts made small clouds that rose for a bit then settled slowly in the heating day. He breathed hard and his nostrils flared for a moment then he calmed, “I don’t understand what is happening, but I agree this is inexplicable and incredible.” He glanced around at the dispirited group, “What do you recommend we do?”

Dr. Matheson looked lamely up at him, “We kind of hoped you would have an idea.”

Dr. Adams shook his head in frustration.

Phil touched the small pile of wood he had stacked on the hearth, “I suggest we try to call this Hestia back. She told Jack to light the hearth fire.”

Jack stammered, “But only when I was ready to return her home. If she can prevent me from moving from this pavement—what else can she do?”

“I agree,” interjected Dr. Matheson, “This situation is completely outside of anything I understand, but we don’t have much choice, and we don’t have much to go on until we speak to this Hestia person.”

“She’ll really like this,” Jack mumbled, “now you all believe in her.”

Dr. Matheson frowned at Jack, “What did you say?”

“Nothing. I think we should try to call her back. It can’t get worse for me.”

Dr. Adams said, “What do we know about this Hestia?”

Dr. Matheson stared at Jack, “What did she tell you?”

“She said she was the goddess of this hearth and this place. But we know, in mythology, that Hestia was the goddess of the hearth and home. She said that she can bless the hearth, make childbirth easy, make children happy, make food taste and smell delicious, bless matrimony, bless the home, make brides beautiful, and bless a city-state. She also said she was the keeper of the sacrificial fire.”

“Doesn’t sound too dangerous,” Dr. Adams remarked.

“She stuck Jack to a forty by forty foot square, and we can’t unstick him,” Phil brushed his hands.

“And she is very emotional,” Jack added.

Dr. Adams said, “I can barely believe I am saying this, but I think someone should stay out of sight. That way if we are caught in the same way as Jack, someone could go for help.”

“What help,” said Dr. Matheson. “If we can’t do anything—who’s going to help us?”

Dr. Adams drew his hand over his chin, “Alright, anyone want to leave.”

All of them looked unenthusiastically up at Dr. Adams, but resolute. Jack raised his hand.

Phil laughed, “You don’t count Jack. You can’t leave.”

“No need to rub it in.”

Dr. Adams crossed his arms, “Light the fire, Phil.”

“One thing,” said Jack.

“What’s that?”

“We have to clean the hearth. Hestia didn’t like the mud on the hearth.”

Phil glanced down at Jack, “Do you believe?”

“Just hedging my... our bets.”

They scrubbed the mud off the hearth and washed it with fresh water and Jack’s now ruined socks. Phil built the pile of wood back up and lighted a match.

