

## **Part I: What You Need**

Better a womb than a tomb.

—*Anson R. McDonald, Admiral of the Fleet, USN (retired)*

## *1. The Seven Against Thieves*

15 August 1972

“The Seven Against Thieves—you’ve named us, Susan,” said Dyanne, at the head of the table. “We’re all part-Olympian, which I’m sure is a surprise to most of us. *Someone* has seen fit to put us in charge of their entire operation. And I’m supposed to be the top dog.” As she bent over the document, her pale blonde curls would have drooped before her eyes, were it not for a goodly supply of pins.

“Better you than me,” said plump little Susan. “I can manage mixing boards and tape decks just fine. Not people.”

“I don’t know about thieves,” said red-haired Rosamund, Dyanne’s mother-in-law. “This piece talks about ‘cultural collection,’ not theft. Copying, not stealing.”

“It’s theft, the way they’re going at it,” said Doris. Dyanne’s mother was an elder image of her daughter. “Copying our works of fine art and selling them far and wide in our galaxy. If I read this correctly, the market’s even larger—they’ve trade connections throughout the Local Group. There’s supposed to be an escrow account for our—Earth’s—benefit, but there’s also suspicion that someone has been tapping it.”

“Why would anyone do a thing like that?” This from Cynthia, Susan’s wife, a tall Swedish blonde. “If I read this right, our planet’s a cultural jackpot. A mother lode. Never mind Croesus, the usual profit margin ought to make the Olympians richer than the Rockefellers.”

“There’s always greed,” said Doris. “I’ve seen ‘gold’ fever strike often enough in boardrooms.” The other women nodded; they knew Doris to be one of America’s leading plutocrats—and philanthropists.

“As I read this,” said Eloise, a younger edition of Rosamund, “we’re supposed to slap this ‘Terran Cultural Collection Expedition’ into shape, and then complete the Contact process. That process is supposed to establish open trade between Terra and—everybody else out there, with the Olympians switching from unseen grabbers to artists’ and authors’ agents. How in the world are we gonna do *that*?”

“Especially with the election coming up,” said Cynthia. “Nixon’s trying to unseat Bobby Kennedy, and we all know Tricky Dick is out to shove the Olympians and their Contact right back into space where they came from.”

“That makes it a double-tall order, kinda like the order Eisenhower was given for D-Day,” said Susan. She stood to speak, her black beehive smooth and towering. “That went, ‘You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.’ But Ike was a pro, and knew what he was doing.” She sat.

“Perhaps we’re being set up as a catspaw for something else,” suggested Doris. “We fail, the existing expedition loses its contract to collect from Earth—or plunder it, if you will—and someone else from the Olympians’ civilization pulls a hostile takeover. So, we seven might be up against a different brand of thieves. I’ve seen this kind of nonsense before.”

Esther—who alone was dressed and coifed as an everyday housewife—indicated she wished to speak. “Before we get out of hand on speculating about who is against us, or might be waiting to pounce, we ought to apply a little common sense. We have a problem we don’t understand. I think we ought to find some part of it that we do understand, or think we do, and work on that. Then we can look again at the overall puzzle and see if we have a better grasp of it.”

“In two days,” said Rosamund, “we are to move to Olympus to begin work—and to begin our schooling in how to safely use all those paranormal talents we seem to have inherited from our Olympian forebears.”

“Which is one more than three bears,” Susan interrupted.

“Never mind,” Rosamund continued. “We’ve all done work together as a circle—and we’ve no real idea what we’ve been doing. At the moment, I think our primary job is to learn that material and treat our management problem as a longer-term project. I, for one, shudder when I think of what we did, running on instinct. It’s a wonder we didn’t kill somebody.”

“It’s a wonder *I* didn’t kill somebody,” said Dyanne. She hesitated. “I, uh, could’ve done that. Several times. With my talisman.”

“I hope the Olympians have a way to control that thing,” said Cynthia.

“I doubt it,” said Dyanne. “What I want to do with it is take it to Mount Doom and chuck it right into the lava.”

“Won’t work,” said Susan. “It wasn’t made there.”

“I know where it was made. And I’d really rather not go there again. I might not return alive. I wish I’d never come by it.”

“If you hadn’t, I’d still be male—which I really wasn’t supposed to be,” said Susan.

“And my husband would be dead,” put in Doris.

“We really should concentrate on matters closer to hand,” said Rosamund. “I suspect anything having to do with Dyanne’s kazoo-talisman will come with our advanced training in our paranormal skills. I’m sure they know all about that kind of thing—it’s probably common among them.” There was a shimmering in the air near the table.

“Dyanne, I thought you set wards,” said Doris.

“I did.”

“Then what’s that?”



“Much as I want Dyanne here in Olympus, where we can all keep an eye on her and teach her what she needs to know, I have to veto bringing her here.”

“On what grounds, Hephaestus?” asked Zeus.

“Electronic safety vs. Dyanne. Most of our personal gadgets aren’t hardened, likewise parts of the central information system. Hestia says it’ll take several weeks, possibly as much as two months, for her to educate Dyanne to the point where she’ll be safe to enter here. This is if she devotes all her time to the girl—there are six others who need training, too.” Hephaestus sat down, pulled a small hand tool from his pocket, and fidgeted with it.

“Point well taken. We’ll have to clear it with those busybodies in the Association. What would it take to set her and her council up as our, uh, new leaders?”

“Hardened computer terminal, duplicate of the one in your office, with Dyanne given your clearances (I’ll have to revoke yours, sorry).” He tapped the tool on Zeus’s desk. “Six lesser terminals, same clearances as your fellow councilmen, for the rest of the members. It’s a good thing, by the way, that the telepathic interfaces for Olympicomp are automatically hardened against anything other than ordinary telepathy, clairvoyance, and clairaudience.”

“Never could figure out how those psi interfaces worked,” said Zeus. “Use ’em all the time, of course.”

“And with electricity, you throw a lot bigger zap than I do. Someday, I need to drum Maxwell’s Equations into your head. Theory hones practice! Business, though. Transporter, for personnel and freight, linked to the main unit here and nowhere else. Power station for all of the above; we’ll be setting up in Stinson Beach, California, and I don’t think that village’s power grid will stand the strain.” He tapped to emphasize each item. “Say, is it true what Aphrodite tells me? They’re all living in a haunted mansion?”

“It’s called ‘The Station of Doom.’ Don’t know about haunted; someday we ought to get Hades to sweep the place. It’s big. Forty-nine rooms, not counting the cellar, baths, laundry, and other utility spaces.”

“Big joint. Agamemnon would’ve called it a palace and tried to sack it. My wife tells me she has two agents-in-place there, couple of maids. Clytemnestra’s daughters, she says. Hope *they* haven’t sacked it.”

Zeus chuckled. “They’ll stay put. Idea is to not tip anyone off as to who they really are. Iphigenia is a good source of inside info, especially about social

matters and how Dyanne feels about this and that. Electra is useless; she does nothing at all and reports like a clam. I'd sideline her, but her sister's too useful where she is, and pulling one but not the other might create suspicion."

"Let sleeper agents lie, eh? Even if one's in an operational coma?"

"That's it. Besides, they're Inanna's—Aphrodite's—direct employees, not mine. How soon can you be ready to transport over to the Station of Doom with your gear?"

Hephaestus tipped back in his chair. "Two days to prepare. Installation in the field might take as much as three days, including testing. I'd best get over there right now, though, to announce this."

"Go to it. I'll square things with the Association. Oh, and until that new Council settles in—keep your nose clean, will ya?"



"You mean we don't move, after all," said Rosamund, after Hephaestus had his say.

"Sometimes, the Association doesn't think things through," he said. "They conveniently forgot that Dyanne is automatically french-frying all our electronics, unless they're hardened—and most aren't. You ladies are lucky; you're getting your home trekked up like the *USS Enterprise*. Or part of it, anyway. I need to know where to put things. I'm thinking of the cellar."

"Plenty of room there," said Dyanne. "There's one room I use for an office and lab. If one of those terminals you mentioned is for me, that's where it should go."

Doris rattled some papers. "All of us will have offices or workrooms where we want our terminals," she said.

"This is gonna take a lotta co-ax," Susan put in.

Hephaestus looked slightly pained. "Ma'am, we don't use cables, coaxial or otherwise. Everything's wireless."

"What about people who tap into the frequency?" Susan asked.

"Interesting. Someone told me none of you were conversant with informatics."

Dyanne smiled proudly. "We have a PDP-11, latest model, installed in the basement. It's mostly used by people from the Warlocks for research. It's not connected to anything else, just several terminals scattered through the house—when you see co-ax, that's what it's for, so please be careful. Is there any way you can hook it up to your power supply? Stinson Beach's grid gets flaky sometimes."

"Oh, and it would be poor form for you to put the transporter in the Great Hall," said Cynthia.

"It will be near the elevator—can we trust that contrivance?"

"I know it's not a turbo-lift, but it *is* brand-new," said Dyanne. "I paid Mr. Otis a pretty penny for it, and I'd rather not have it messed with. There are annual inspections of the machinery; you'll need to put your devices where Otis's inspectors won't see them. For that matter, you don't want the PDP users

seeing them, either. One thing about your terminals—I want a good set of manuals for your system, copies for every user, and that goes double for me.”

“Anything to please the customer,” said Hephaestus. His manner reminded Rosamund of a garage mechanic, of the “honest master” variety.

“I’ll also need to know the security hoops, since I’m Expedition Leader.”

“Same clearances as Zeus.”

“I’ll also want to know what parts I shouldn’t monkey with, lest I blow the whole system higher than up. Not so long ago, I got good at making PDPs crash in novel and interesting ways.”

“Not to worry. I have what you need.”

Rosamund recalled one of the short stories in Anson’s collection, titled “What You Need,” author some guy named Lewis Padgett. A horror yarn, Rod Serling later adapted it for *The Twilight Zone*—she hoped Hephaestus didn’t mean it that way.

Her darned prophetic sense kicked in. No, Hephaestus didn’t mean it that way, but something else did.

She hoped Dyanne would be careful. For once in her life.

## ***2. The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet***

1 September 1972

“That is how elementary clairvoyance works,” said Hestia, after nearly an hour’s private lecture. “I can see you have done a few things with it—you must review all I’ve told you, along with the chapter in the *Standard Manual*. Perform all the exercises I’ve assigned to you, and then we may go forward.”

After a week, Dyanne was disgusted with Hestia. She’d been using clairvoyance for darn near two years now! She knew her way around the astral!

She settled down in her basement lab/office, willed herself into a semblance of calm, grounded and centered, and ran through all of the Hearth Lady’s dorky exercises in a twinkling. There was no challenge whatsoever to this stuff! She’d once moaned about Inanna spoon-feeding her; Hestia was doing that with pabulum! Why the bleep go back to basics?

Oh, she could see a bit of that in the group class, where all seven of them learned together—they had varying talent and experience levels. But in private tutorial?

Now at her Olympian computer terminal, she logged in as Expedition Leader Eyes Only, which (per manual) not only got her into everything in the system but blocked everyone else from tracing her work. That would keep Inanna, Hestia (she was sure that old-time schoolmarm would be nosy), and even Zeus (who had lost his EL clearance anyway) from snooping what she was up to.

She was after information on Reality Mastery. The two times she’d raised a question about that with Hestia, the old biddy cautioned her about the dangers of such knowledge—since she was actually one of those, they would get to the topic eventually, but not without much preparation beforehand.

She quickly found the general-knowledge article on the subject; it was maddeningly vague. Reading it was like reading an article about the Wars of the

Roses, only to come away unclear as to whether the subject was a period of civil strife in England or a competition among rival rose-growers that got out of hand. It did include a list of the known actives, all dead but one; it interested her that her name was on the end, with the notation, *Disposition: Yet to be resolved.*

Accurate, that. However, if she could destroy that kazoo, she would resolve that entry quickly enough! She had to dig much deeper, a tedious task even when using the Olympians' wondrous software application called a "Search Engine."

After the better part of two hours of chasing down blind alleys, she located several files of detailed data. Their hidey-hole was fenced about with dire warnings. Of course, she knew the blasted thing was dangerous! That was why she was here, to learn how to destroy it!

Even so, it did help to gain a better understanding of how Reality Mastery worked, how talismans functioned. Of the thirty resolved cases, perhaps five survived their (usually brief) careers that ended in the forced loss of their talismans. Most were slain before such loss, three had created new talismans (they all died), and a few destroyed the things themselves. Those last were the cases she wanted to study.

In all cases, those adepts had returned to the situation that had activated their talent and created their talismans. Then they ran a programmed routine through the device which destroyed it. Easy as pie.

Except that three of the seven who attempted this perished. After all, the solution to the One Ring was also to return it to its construction place and chuck it into the only forge-fire hot enough to melt it. One of the three hobbits who climbed Mount Doom died, and another was maimed for life.

She memorized all the info she'd found (the useful stuff, anyway) and logged off.

It occurred to her she might need the kazoo for her next step, so she tucked it between her breasts. Then she lay down on the napping couch she kept in her lab, entered trance, and picked her way down into her own unconscious mind. It would not do to think further about any of this stuff. Not consciously. Inanna, Hestia, or somebody else might snoop her, and the game would be over.

She had vague recollections of having been here before. Not déjà vu: she had a good idea of what that was, and it didn't fit here. She knew of one time she had visited these regions—that awful vision quest. She had a gut feeling that what worked in computer software would function well in minds, so she tried her well-honed Unix skills. The Unix grep command, which located things, was as useful here as it was in the PDP-11. She used it to find a door marked ACCESS DOWN. If Inanna hadn't dismantled the staging for that quest, it ought to be here somewhere.

It was. Gingerly, she opened the door and peeked inside. Low-power light showed the steep, metal-mesh staircase. Using clairvoyance, she found the progression of seven doors at the bottom, ending in an empty room. In other words, the same place she'd gone last year, before the Contact.

This was the place she'd made her kazoo real.

Shortly before she arrived at the Underworld Door, she saw a message written on the wall:

7 March 1971

Dear Dyanne-of-the-future,

This is Dyanne from right after that disastrous tea party. I just put a permanent (I hope) block on my—our—vanity. I didn't do anything else. If you find this, it means you found your way down here again, for some reason. A warning: Don't do *anything* here. You could ruin yourself; you might even die.

Love,  
Dyanne

So, she'd been here before on her own. She now knew a lot more than she had at that earlier time, although even then she'd somehow known how to leave a message visible to her mental eyes alone. She must have overlooked the message a year ago, when Inanna had sent her down here—but Inanna, who could not see the message, had guided her directly to the Underworld Door; it wasn't visible from there.

She remembered the trouble her vanity had once made for her; it didn't bother her—or anyone close to her—now. She knew this zone was dangerous, but far more so was the Kazoo of the Underworld. She was here to prepare its destruction.

Nearby, she created a storeroom, entered, and sat down in the chair she put in it. This would be her place of planning. It might even be her place to execute some plans, those that didn't require a trip to the Underworld.

She had one plan in mind. The next time she came here, she'd need the storage locations of several important files in the Olympian system.

Something she also needed she could create here; it ought to work. She placed a spirit analogue of a PDP-11 computer in the room, fired it up, and ran a few C programs on it. It wasn't good for real-world work, but it ought to assist her in simulating what she wanted to do, without running it through her talisman.

One important bit of info was that any logical computer language could be used to program a talisman, and so could the non-runnable simulated instructions most programmers called "pseudocode." Presumably, this included C, a language she had mastered back at Sanford College. There was a way to schedule program execution, too, analogous to the scheduler in the Unix operating system.

She used the PDP's "printer" to run off a list of notes to herself, as she intended to forget all about this place as soon as she left. She would leave a tickler upstairs in her conscious levels to remind her to get those storage locations and return down here in three days. She must also bring the kazoo, although she hadn't needed it this time.

She "powered down" the spirit-PDP and locked the store-room door behind her when she left.

On rising from her sofa, all she could recall was needing certain storage locations. She'd dig those up tomorrow.



Electra observed Dyanne's latest go-round with Hestia from a vantage point inside Dyanne's mind, which she'd entered via her secret trapdoor. Her intent had been to disrupt the lesson; she found that was unnecessary.

She'd long since dismantled the control tube; since the incident with Eloise, the device was now known. She knew how visible the tubes were, if one was looking for them—and several people were. Her old trapdoor into Dyanne was sufficient.

There were things she dearly wanted to do, but she was blocked by her inability (so far) to make use of Dyanne's kazoo-talisman. At first, when she discovered the Association's intentions for Dyanne and her circle, she thought her next step might be to sow dissension in that circle.

It would be simpler to take it over. To do that, she must take permanent control of Dyanne and her talisman.

She watched from "behind" as the girl dug into the Olympian central information system, using security clearances formerly granted only to Zeus (and to Hephaestus, the system's administrator).

Her first target was boring—manuals on the theory and practice of various common devices. Why were things like how starships and transporters worked of interest to anyone but the geeks who operated them?

Now, Electra observed Dyanne changing focus to something more important—Reality Masters. She eagerly lapped up the same info Dyanne did, noting special interest in how talismans were destroyed. No doubt, that girl wanted to make sure nobody could destroy hers. This was most useful to Electra, as when she took control, she'd have to ensure the safety of that talisman herself.

The talisman—now she knew with certainty what that blasted kazoo *was!*

The last Reality Master—he'd erupted hundreds of millennia ago—had dealt the Olympians' civilization "the most unkindest cut of all," considering they'd been the cultural and entertainment brokers to the Local Group for many millions of years.

Electra would be careful not to do anything like *that*. She wanted power, not destruction. A plan clicked into place in her mind.

Take over Dyanne. Then, she could use the talisman to shove Dyanne's spirit into her, Electra's, original body, and enslave her in the process. Never again would that creature of hers have a will of her own.

Ever since she first awoke in Olympus to discover her true father (and then have to keep that relationship a dead secret), she'd been his agent, a servant working behind the scenes for his purposes, never hers.

If she had the talisman and the talent to control it, she would become a Reality Master herself. She could take power and reign.

Seizing their overall civilization would be too difficult and chancy—other such Masters had tried, failed, and died.

Not her! She would be practical and set her sights lower. This planet would do, assuming she could isolate it from the rest of the Local Group's network of

peoples. She would set herself up as the Queen of Earth—and to make her rule appear natural to the natives, she would change their societies, all of them, into full-bore matriarchies.

She was fed up with patriarchy. Although their over-culture was not such, the Terran Cultural Collection Expedition had developed into one under the leadership of Zeus and his brothers, who had learned the bad habit from the locals.

Terra was all patriarchy. Soon, the men would discover what it was like for the shoe to be on the other foot—and treading upon their necks!

The first step she could take care of immediately—*isolation*. That was, after all, the goal she'd worked toward for Poseidon, in fouling up the Contact. If completion of the Contact process could be prevented, that would suit both Poseidon's aims and hers.

Even if she couldn't manage complete isolation, making the over-culture also matriarchal might take the Association's big noses away from Terra. A second step to consider, once she had the talisman . . .

She had made one powerful suggestion to Poseidon as to how to foil the Contact, but he wouldn't act on it—the man had “ethical qualms.” Alas, she was unable to talk those qualms away.

He'd often said that Richard Nixon was their best friend in the American government. If he were president, he could stop the Contact process cold, and insist the Olympians go back to how they were operating before.

If she controlled Dyanne and her talisman . . .



Wait and see. The Observer knew Electra was up to no good. Unlike in the field—the Station of Doom was now a branch office of the Expedition—he was circumscribed here in what he might do to eavesdrop, so he couldn't discern details. He did know that she wanted to take over Dyanne's mind permanently. A megalomaniac impulse—funny—Electra had always had a number of loose screws, but megalomania hadn't been one of them, not until now. The Shadow? Probably. That meant it was no longer dormant in her, but awake—and potent.

He also knew that, if she followed through on this Shadow-induced megalomaniac impulse, the end result wouldn't take the form she'd planned.

Just as Richard Nixon, with or without assistance from Poseidon, might not have the presidency he planned.

RFK might not have the presidency he planned, either. A puzzler. Those *were* the only two candidates worth mentioning, after all.



When Dyanne entered her unconscious mind, Electra was on her toes. She shadowed Dyanne's astral form, far enough away to be unseen.

Dyanne apparently knew what she wanted to do down here. There was none of the fumbling about and self-destructive action that had characterized her first foray into this realm—*that* had come within weeks of the Changeover. First, she located Inanna’s old door to the Underworld, evidently left over from that vision quest. Electra wasn’t too surprised that remained; Inanna (who’d created it) was often untidy after she’d finished a piece of work.

It was good that Dyanne retained some interest in the place. That gloomy hole made for an ideal trap.

Then, Dyanne created a new space and locked herself inside it for a while. Electra could only guess that she was doing some kind of work in there—it was shielded as long as the door was shut. She dared not try to jimmy the lock; that would give her presence away. She waited patiently in the shadows until Dyanne emerged.

On leaving, Dyanne set a reminder to herself to return here. Once she was gone, Electra adjusted it to remind her, as well.



4 September 1972

“I wish Dyanne wasn’t so busy with extraneous things,” said Rosamund. “She’s the EL, after all.” She sat in her office with Doris, her Olympicomp terminal before her.

“We could bring in one of the other four,” said Doris.

“We’d best whack through this baloney on our own. Eloise dislikes business matters, those darn Lassen girls are more interested in each other than work, and while Esther’s great at common sense, she has to have business information digested for her before she can make any sense of it, common or otherwise.”

“For that matter, Dyanne’s one of those musicians who likes to leave all the hard work to her manager.”

“Meaning it’s us again,” said Rosamund. She sighed, wishing for a stack of papers to shuffle. Apparently, most Olympian “paperwork” was done inside their mysterious computer system.

“Don’t you wish we were back in Seattle, keeping the Puget Sound socially organized?”

“Near as I can tell, this expedition isn’t organized at all. Socially, economically, or any other way. Have you read all the way through the Association’s audit? I get swamped by the figures.”

“I have,” said Doris. “The awful stuff in it isn’t what they told Zeus about directly—which was bad enough to get him fired, all by itself. The Terran Escrow Account stinks. It isn’t dishonesty—any crook could do a better job—it’s sloppiness, ineptitude, and ignorance. It’s as if someone took a kid with two community-college semesters of accounting and put her in charge of Chase Manhattan’s general ledger.”

“Oh, dear.” Doris came up with the oddest similes at times.

“One positive I get from the audit, at least for my peace of mind, is that the Olympians use the same Generally Accepted Accounting Principles that we do. Which means that we can, at need, get a second opinion on these books from a local source. Say, the accounting firm I use.”

Rosamund was a mite surprised by this, but thought that perhaps numbers were numbers, and business was business. “I take it there’s a lot of back royalties, or similar, on Terran art.”

“Enormous amounts. It’ll take a regiment of accountants to straighten out these books. Not to mention a battalion of intellectual property lawyers. Did you know these people don’t employ any?”

“I’m starting to see the problem. This expedition is something like a gold-rush prospector who’s discovered and staked claim to the biggest lucky strike of all. He knows how to do small-claim mining, but he’s no businessman. He can manage his mule, but not people, and has no idea how to run a large-scale mine or the business structure to support it.” She hoped her own simile was wide of the mark, for if it was not, there was more trouble in the offing.

“It’s easy to understand why many of our leaders are looking askance at the Olympians. I’ve looked at what they’ve been trying to sell to the State Department. It amounts to, ‘Let us in with full diplomatic and trade relations, and you’ll get rich quick.’ What they should be saying is, ‘You are already rich, but don’t realize it yet. We can help you establish yourselves in the galactic community as major owners and producers of wealth.’”

“Hmmm. Their approach so far has ‘scam’ written all over it,” said Rosamund.

“And there’s no scam at all. Just ineptitude. These people are swell at collecting; the Association ranks them as best in the galaxy at that.”

Something clicked into place for Rosamund. The operation here hadn’t been supervised closely because of a little fact she had recently discovered. It wasn’t simply a matter of making profits and paying taxes. There was also a percentage, about half the Olympian corporate tax rate, which went to the Association itself. A small amount of this went to supporting the Association, but most was distributed among the active member companies. Among other things, this kept marginal prospectors afloat during long spells of no luck. *Of course*, no one wanted to examine a producing bonanza too closely, not unless they were really fouling things up.

“And here we sit,” said Rosamund, “charged with reorganizing them. And they name an EL who has no leadership experience and little interest in finance, administration, or anything else practical. As a businesswoman, she makes an excellent concert pianist.”

“As I said earlier, I think she’s been set up to fail. When that happens, the contract for Terra gets pulled, and the whole mess goes into receivership. What that means for Terra is anybody’s guess, but I’m certain it’ll mean long delays in the contact process. You and I are the real heads of this council—think we can get Dyanne to go along with us? Let us run things in her name?”

“I hope so,” said Rosamund. That squared with her suspicions. How she wished for papers or pencils to fidget with! Time to reorganize this office! Hephaestus’s minimalism was driving her nuts.

“Good. In the next year or two—this mess will take a lot of sorting out—we should have an assessment of Terra’s existing assets that we can use for sales purposes. The biggest hurdle will likely be convincing our government, as well as others, that existing works in the fine arts truly are assets. Easy to sell that idea in Hollywood—every studio knows about valuable properties—but hard to sell in Washington. Then there’s the wealth of talent, which is harder to measure. *And* the scale of the market out there. Copies of the Mona Lisa sell well in the Pinwheel Galaxy! Shakespeare’s a perennial hit in Andromeda!”

Rosamund was sold—on the idea she’d been hired for the toughest job she’d ever heard of. She hoped RFK would be reelected. The prospect of convincing the Republicans of the value of the extraterrestrial arts trade did not appeal to her. Nixon (and, by extension, what’s-his-name—Agnew) was deaf to the Contact, and as for Goldwater, if it didn’t promote national defense, fiscal prudence, or limited government, he wasn’t listening.



5 September 1972

Atropos, leader of the tiny Committee of Reality Monitors, looked at the report with a mixture of disgust and foreboding. Disgust for the report’s lack of precision and late delivery. Foreboding from its message: a newly activated Reality Master was on the loose.

For the first time ever, the Master lived nowhere in the Olympians’ little cluster of five worlds on the end of the Bar where the Perseus Arm grew out of it. The location was Terra, that arts bonanza out in the Orion-Cygnus Arm, a third of the Milky Way’s diameter from home.

Terra had been in and out of the news over the centuries; the Association often had difficulty regulating the hurriedly prepared, poorly organized expedition now working there. At last report, the Terran expedition had been audited (again!), found wanting (again!), and given one last chance, this time with a total reorganization—high time! She wondered how one “re-” organized an operation that had never been organized in the first place.

What bothered Atropos the most was that the auditors missed the Reality Master! Instead, one of the longest-serving expedition members, a youngster called Inanna, had detected the monster. All well and good, but she sat on her hands trying to discern whether she had, in fact, found one—and then she sent the report to the Expedition Leader. That worthy, about to be booted from his job, took his own sweet time forwarding the information to the Association.

Then Leonie, chairwoman of that body, who should have known better, delayed sending it up the line to the Reality Monitors. Her endorsement spoke volumes: “Is this nonsense for real?”

*Yes, you fool!*

But she didn’t put that in her acknowledgment. Instead, she said something really nasty: “Report not submitted in a timely manner.” Then she called for her

colleagues, Clotho and Lachesis, and alerted the Navy to provide a high-speed task unit to convey them to Terra.



8 September 1972

Electra found Dyanne's second trip into her unconscious to be utterly boring, devoid of any useful information. The girl spent her entire time in that locked room. Although the kazoo was with her, she did nothing with it—nothing Electra could detect, anyway.

However, the new reminder she set for a week hence was different. It had a “this means business” air to it.

Electra had her own business in mind for next time.



11 September 1972

“What we need,” said Pig Pen, “is more computing power in smaller chips.”

Anson was thrashing out electronic music ideas with the blues organist, for once away from the PDP. “Noyce & Moore said they can give us prototypes of this new central processor chip, the 8080, next week.”

“Uh, I've seen the specs on that one. It'll help, and I sure wanna beat the hell out of it to see what it'll do. But I think we need one that'll do sixteen bits. Or even thirty-two. Either that, or we need to lease a Control Data monster.”

Anson wondered why he hadn't said “IBM,” then recalled that firm was anathema to hippies like Pig Pen. “Remember, the idea is to invent something that'll pack into a little box a customer can plug into their stereo, like it was a turntable or tape deck.”

“I know. Run the costs down to the cellar floor. Hey, while we're at it, how about building a computer around the 8080? If you can build one, it'll sell, I'm sure.”

“I can try. I've had some ideas about it. It does help that your wife is the major investor in Noyce & Moore.” He continued to be amazed by Doris's wildly diverse holdings. Boeing and the Brooklyn Dodgers made sense. Odd little companies like N&M, not to mention Warlocks, Inc., Warlocks Records, and Alembic—was she a gambler, or did she have some kind of psychic nose for little firms about to make it big?

Come to think of it, her mother came by the Dodgers when they were teetering on the brink of sliding into bush league territory. Her father had been the major investor who bailed out Boeing after the firm nearly went belly-up when the Army Air Corps rejected the B-17 bomber during the depths of the Depression.

“She’s already making a bundle off of ’em. Hey, you know what she digs even more than gettin’ laid? And man, does she love gettin’ laid! She went at it with me and three maids last night! More’n gettin’ laid, it’s makin’ piles of money! And then givin’ half of it away! Anyhow, I keep my ear to the ground. Lotta cats out there are fiddling around with little computers they solder together in their basements. Most use the N&M 4004, some use the 8008. An 8080 computer—they’d pay good bucks for one.”

“Gimme two or three weeks. I’ll see what I can rattle up.” Anson knew the real problem wouldn’t be the 8080 itself, or any of the supporting circuits. It would be memory. Noyce & Moore were pioneers in the new specialty of random-access memory chips, and although they’d hammered the price down a couple of pegs, the stuff was still sinfully expensive. The main reason PDPs cost so much was all the RAM chips they needed to produce best results.

He might be able to talk Doris into throwing more money at the problem of getting her pet electronics firm to innovate faster. He wasn’t going to suggest Pig Pen try that; Doris never made business decisions in bed.

Which was a good thing. After listening to Pig, though he tended to discount nine-tenths of what he said about his wife, he knew her for a nymphomaniac. Three maids! He had an itchy feeling his pal wasn’t exaggerating.

*If* his peter still worked (hadn’t in years), and *if* Rosamund didn’t mind (fat chance!), my, but he’d love a night or five with the delectable Doris! With her pretty maids all in a row. And maybe even with Rosamund on top of the football pileup—last summer she’d confirmed what he was already sure of. Rosamund was into women.

But all these raunchy fantasies failed to get any kind of rise out of Old Peter. Old sailors could always dream.



13 September 1972

Eight days of travel! Atropos fumed at the limitations of the jump-drive. The dark-matter density within a galaxy’s sphere made navigation more difficult, requiring more hops to cover a given distance than for intergalactic voyaging.

In a few hours, they’d arrive at the Terran Expedition’s little transfer station, located among the icy worlds of the Kuiper Belt. She’d spent her waiting time wisely, though, studying up on Terra and its current situation. It was far more complex than she’d expected.

The world had been looked at periodically for millions of years, and occasional nature-survey expeditions had stationed themselves there for a decade or two. The most recent of those, a million years ago, noted a primitive sentient life-form spreading over much of the planet. The natives were now aware of their ancestors of old and called them *Pithecanthropus Erectus*. Or was it *Homo Erectus*? The existence of the early-stage sentients caused Terra to be upgraded from “harmless” to “mostly harmless, but interesting” in the brief notes column in the catalog of planets.

Six thousand years ago, a ragtag arts-survey team, after prospecting for a thousand years or more without a shred of luck, happened upon Terra. Like most such prospectors, they were a secretive bunch, and stuck to their find for two thousand years before communicating anything beyond a mere staking of their claim. They then recruited a full-size expedition centered around the extended family of one of their leaders, a fellow the locals had named Cronus.

Neither the scouts nor the expedition had bothered to inform anyone of an important datum: the natives were of the same phenotype as the Olympians themselves, with genotype matching to the point of interbreeding. This had happened but three times before. Furthermore, the offspring of the Terran-Olympian crosses were not mules, a first.

It took the first Association audit, run shortly after something called the “Trojan War,” to discover this little-known fact. Some fifty towns and small cities, led by the half-local offspring of Olympians, ganged up to assault a major city-state with whom they’d had a long-standing trade disagreement. Said city-state was also led by local-Olympian crosses. The *casus belli* was a kidnapped queen.

Unlike all the other petty quarrels of what the natives now termed “the Bronze Age,” this war between armies commanded by part-Olympians was remembered the world over.

The important thing to Atropos was that the hybrids were not only fertile, but vigorous. By now, nearly everyone on the planet contained at least a smattering of Olympian genes, and some inherited a lot more than that.

Atropos’s examination of the genomes of the original scouts and the expanded expedition yielded the probable reason for the new Reality Master. Cronus and Prometheus, to use their current local names, possessed complementary halves of the Dangerous Sequence, the one which granted the talent of Reality Mastery.

Under ordinary circumstances, the descent of the lines of Cronus and Prometheus would be discouraged from having children with one another. This was the closest the Olympians came to the ethically questionable practice of eugenics, but the perils of allowing the Dangerous Sequence to express itself fully overrode all ethical qualms.

Atropos noted that the Terran Expedition had at least some sense. In only one case did the descent of Cronus marry the descent of Prometheus—the union of Inanna (also called Aphrodite) and Hephaestus—but that couple chose not to have children together.

The indiscriminate broadcasting of Olympian seed created a genetic Pandora’s Box (useful local metaphor), and some nitwit had opened it. It took no effort to isolate said nitwit, either—it was the normally-thoughtful Prometheus. Apparently, the man thought genes were a local style of trousers.

More idiocy—Leonie should have known better! The leader of the Association had named this Dyanne, this new Reality Master, to head the replacement council running the Terran Expedition!

The Odd Gods of the Galaxy alone knew what might come of this concatenation of lunacies. Atropos hoped she and her colleagues were in time to head off a catastrophic fate.

Terra was no longer “harmless.” Not even “mostly.”



15 September 1972

On the day when Dyanne “meant business” down deep in her unconscious, Electra was ready. After breakfast, she dressed her for the occasion. It helped that Dyanne had informed everyone she’d be busy with research in her lab most of the day and didn’t care to be disturbed.

Because she, Electra, would become Dyanne today. To begin her plan to make herself queen of the planet, she arrayed Dyanne in the most regal manner she could, given what was available.

In Dyanne’s immense wardrobe, there were a large number of period gowns, some old, some recent reproductions. She brought out the most ornate one, a recent product of Anita Wembleson’s dressmaking shop, which trailed a long train supported by an enormous bustle.

Dyanne didn’t mind getting into it at all—Electra had long since brainwashed her into gladly accepting anything done to enhance her appearance. That Dyanne was perceived by all who knew her as the vainest woman they’d ever met was entirely Electra’s doing.

Clothed, coiffed, and painted as if for a court reception, Dyanne took the elevator down to the cellar, where her lab was. She had no idea she was carrying a passenger.

Electra remained behind, lying down in her room adjoining Dyanne’s, the better to pursue her usurpation.

*[Chapters 3-7 omitted]*

## Part II: What You Fear

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”  
—*Philip K. Dick*

“Reality is what you can get away with.”  
—*Robert Anton Wilson*

*[Chapters 8-15 and Interlude omitted]*

## **Part III: What You Know—and About Whom**

When phantom ships with phantom sails set to sea on phantom tides, and the enemy fleet sees them and scatters, to whom goes the laurel wreath of victory?

—*Rita McDonald, Admiral of the Fleet, USN (retired)*

*[Chapters 16-26 and Epilogue omitted]*

## No Maps or Diagrams This Time

There aren't any in this volume, as almost all scenes take place inside the Station of Doom. The few brief exceptions are inside Olympus, in Camp David, in Jerry Garza's home, and in an office park in San José.

I chose not to draft a plan of the Station of Doom. Instead, imagine a multi-floor mansion of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's smaller than California's famous Winchester Mansion (and not nearly as architecturally disorganized, either). My original inspiration was a mix of *Downton Abbey*, Gormenghast in Mervyn Peake's series of the same name, and Inverness Castle in *The Fourth Tower of Inverness*.

For those who might be interested, *Downton Abbey* is a great series to watch, and is available on DVD. The Gormenghast series—*Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, *Titus Alone*, and *Titus Awakes*—are a grand fantasy series and well worth reading, if a mite slow-paced and ponderous at times. They are also currently in print.

As for *The Fourth Tower of Inverness*, it is an old-fashioned radio serial. When I was a broadcaster at Whitman College's KWCW-FM in the early 1970s, we got a copy of the serial on tape. I and others played it on the air, and it was very popular with our audience.

Disclaimer: My only connection with any of the above properties is as a paying customer. *Downton Abbey* and the Gormenghast books are available from the usual online retail outlets for such things. As for *The Fourth Tower of Inverness*, it can be purchased directly from its original producer and publisher, ZBS, in either CD or MP3 download form. They have been in business since 1970, keeping audio fantasy and adventure drama alive and well.

ZBS's site: ([https://www.zbs.org/index\\_new.php](https://www.zbs.org/index_new.php)).

## Appendicitis

*These do not constitute a medical emergency, so there is no need to call 9-1-1.*

*[Appendices omitted]*