**Three Sisters**

***Rhea - sister and wife of Cronus, mother of Zeus***

The law allows it, so how can I fight? The stories are all the same; not just ours, but of all traditions. Brother and sister become mother and father; their children brothers, sisters, cousins.

When Cronus comes for me the sky is still black - it is before the constellations are born. He has killed our father, and his hands are bloody from dismemberment. *Blood drops into the ocean, and onto earth, where ash saplings spring. I hate him. I hate him, even though he is my brother.* When he comes for me I know I cannot resist his strength, but look to the dark dark sky, leave my body behind, drift to my own Elysium so far away he can no longer reach me.

***Adra - foster sister of Zeus, daughter of Adrasteia***

There’s an entrance hall in Westmorland House, with a large mirror positioned in between two doors. The walls are yellowed with nicotine.

To the left is the entrance to the residential bit of the children’s home. We call it Tartarus, after the Greek underworld, because into this chthonic system small children are swallowed, to be released years later ready to fight. What they fight is unimportant; teachers, old ladies, bank clerks, bus conductors, nightclub bouncers, therapists, job-seekers allowance administrators. Everyone is in the firing line. Sixteen years incarceration is usually enough to learn a trick or two about warfare.

To the right is offices. The beating heart of the social services system. A filing cabinet for problematic cases. And so it was in one of these dank-green wallpapered pits that I first met Zeus.

Like so many of the other children that pass through the yellowed walls of Westmorland, Zeus had been rescued from the clutch of his violent father. His mother had brought him in, less than an hour old, greasy-grey with vernix and sticky with the stink of meconium. I was barely a toddler, yet to be weaned, cross to have to share my mother.

My mother’s name was Adrasteia. She was often called for emergency placements, as the social workers knew she was a soft touch and would be unlikely to say no, no matter how un-ideal the situation. Years later, in therapy, my psychoanalyst asked “How did you feel?” Therapists forget how quickly fashions change. That in the seventies adults were Gods.

There was something odd about him though. Why, of all the children thrown into the syphon of Westmorland was Zeus filtered through the right hand door? Why, among all those children with raging parents and abusive grandparents was this scrawny specimen the chosen one?

From Westmorland we moved constantly - they changed our names; I became Alison, Abbie, Becky; Zeus was Zack, John, Dan. Abusers are devious when they want to find someone; they can be as good as any private detective. As a result we became a close unit, Zeus and I. Eventually after four moves they found us a place high on Bodmin moor, surrounded by tors and swamps. There we joined a commune of environmentalists; self-sufficient women and their children who loved nothing better than knotting macrame and baking bread to a soundtrack of the New Seekers.

Our Auntie Io joined us in the commune. We loved her, because her hair was soft and curly, and she gave us honey. We followed behind as she puffed a smoker into the hives, her white suit garnished with the hurdy-gurdy song of drowsy bees. We helped her put sticky propolis supers into the extractor and turned the handle to milk honey from waxy frames, shedding sugar-drunk drones on the brown lino floor.

At the commune we made friends with other children; our closest was a boy called Jonathon, but in the casually cruel manner of children, we always called him Stinky-Pan. He was the son of Heidi who kept goats and fed us rancid yoghurt drinks and foul tasting soft cheese. Pan always had ringworm, itched constantly, but he could find birds-nests in hedges, lizards in stone walls. And he knew his way around the swamps and where to enter mine adits, so was our guide to finding the best secret places.

Those were halcyon days. Zeus showed us how to fly, jumping between shed floors onto straw, climbing up asbestos roofs, balancing on slippery terracotta tiles, sliding down the telegraph pole. We lit fires, made pools in streams, smashed rotten eggs against barn walls, watching as rancid yellow yolks slugged liked snot over the lichen flecked slates.

In the commune there were few rules. Children were free to roam - all day and even all night. Routine was orange squash and biscuits at eleven, lunch at one and tea at six, but beyond that we were free. Often there were so many of us we could go missing without anyone noticing. Once I took my dog to the woods on a camping adventure early in the morning, and returned long after the stars were up. No-one seemed to notice or mind.

At night reading behind the red sofa I would wait until the adults went to bed before creeping out and making my way upstairs. I sometimes wondered what it would take to create some sort of welfare concern. But for my brother Zeus they were ever watchful. He was the golden child. “Have you seen Zeus?” They’d ask.

Once in a while a battered green Citroen would rattle up the potholed drive and Miss Bowen, the social worker, would alight, taking girls to the little bedroom to ‘check everything was okay’. Some of the older girls would hide, or cry, but what went on behind the flaky sunset-orange door was never mentioned.

We were too close in age, Zeus and I. At first we did not notice it, but gradually Zeus’s anger could not be contained. I was in the firing line. I was the birth child of our mother, and though she adored us equally Zeus started to gripe. He would have been better off without us. With someone different. Every year his birth-mother Rhea sent presents on his birthday. Said that as soon as things were sorted at home he’d be able to return. That it wouldn’t be long now. With every correspondence Zeus grew more and more angry.

Things started to go missing; my Minnie-Mouse pen, my porcelain monkey, a penny farthing found while searching for fool’s gold on the slag heaps across the valley. Zeus always denied it was him. In time Zeus’s anger grew less subtle. He told me everyone hated me. How they all knew I was dopey, fat, stupid. That no-one wanted to be my friend. One day he took my doll Nancy and jumped up and down on her head, shards of brittle plastic sticking to the rough hessian carpet.

I was not alone in being in the firing line. Zeus was cruel to our mother Adrasteia. He refused food, lived on a diet of Mars bars bought with stolen money. He raged war with her, kicking, screaming, hitting. Said she was only doing it for the money, that he hated her. Gradually, like me, our mother retreated into her own shell until her only advice was useless; *turn the other cheek. Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me.* She sobbed quietly in her room, I in mine.

To all the world Zeus was charming, delightful. No-one would believe he was anything else. My mother tried to confide in Io and Heidi. “That can’t be Zeus” they’d say. “You’re exaggerating. It’s just a young boy thing - his hormones are probably all over the place. He’ll soon grow out of it. I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt you.” In the upstairs corridor he pushed me to the ground and stamped on my face. As I held my bruised cheek under cold water I was chastised. “You really shouldn’t goad him.”

I wanted nothing more than to be friends so one day, when Zeus apologised and said he would show me a secret place, I jumped at the opportunity to go with him. It was just as before. We were proper brother and sister again. The secret place was another Tartarus he said. We could see where the children went. What was behind the left hand door of Westmorland House.

We crossed through the yard and past the chickens. We dipped our fingers in the cattle’s molasses bucket and licked black treacle from our fingers. We picked up sycamore airplanes and raced them. We bumped shoulders, laughing. I looked at Zeus. He looked at me, smiled in his disarming way.

We were now way beyond the reach of the house, in a quiet place where elder trees sheltered a concrete tank, partially filled with water. We climbed up the gnarled branches and laid flat on the top, looking in through a small entrance hole. I don’t know why I’d never noticed it before, but it was well buried among the undergrowth. The sides were all equal, about seven feet high. It must once have been a reservoir for the farm buildings. We gazed through the opening in reverence.

“Look inside” Zeus whispered. “I’ve been using it as a den.”

Below us blue plastic oil drums floated on a scummy green soup of stinking water, about two feet deep. On top were Beanos, their pages wrinkled with damp. A rope ladder, coarsely constructed from pieces of kindling and bailer twine, led downwards into the murk.

“It’s great, isn’t it. And all echoey. Listen.”

Zeus put his head down into the cavity, calling *whoo whoo whoo*. I did the same. Our laughter ringed from wall to wall.

“Do you want to go in? It’s easy look. Just use the ladder. You go first. I’ll follow.”

I descended into the gloom. Light from above formed shafts that flickered off the sheen of old Mars bar wrappers. The shadow of Zeus’s head swelled against the walls and rolled softly in the water. He was smiling.

“This is brilliant. I love it.” I could hear Zeus scraping something above my head. It was loud and heavy. The den was suddenly much darker. “Are you coming down?” I called.

The light had became dusky, like a partial eclipse, then suddenly it was properly dark. I put my hand out to reach for the ladder, but it was gone. Above my head the lid of the tank had been dragged over; the only light was pinpricks where the concrete was chipped. Zeus’s skipping footsteps were getting quieter and quieter. I screamed and shouted, but knew there was no point; I was too far from the house to be heard by anyone. I tried to sit on the drums, but they bobbed hopelessly in the water and I had to steady myself on the rough sides. I couldn’t reach the top - it was too high. I had no choice. Tearfully I jammed myself in the corner of the tank and waited. And waited.

Hours later he returned. I was so cold I could barely hold the twine ladder as he threw it down. My soaked feet slipped off the splintered wood. Zeus exasperatedly pulled me up, my hair green and dusty from the concrete walls. “Tell anyone and you’re dead.” He hissed.

We were getting older. I was swelling like a toad in rain. My breasts became soft. Zeus prodded them as I passed him, groped and stroked. Whispered “we’re not really brother and sister. I can do what I like.” The bathroom locks were broken and replaced, broken and replaced. I sat fearfully on the toilet, waiting for the door to burst open. Stopped washing in the morning. I feared him. I hated him.

Eventually in desperation I cried a confession on Stinky-Pan’s shoulder. His skin was rough and calloused, sunburnt from days on the moors moving goats. He had grown tall and strong, fit from jumping between reed tufts and climbing tors. Although he still stank of billy-goats he was kind and good-looking in a hairy kind of way. He challenged Zeus, chasing him through cotton grass and twisted hawthorn until he was trapped in an area of blanket bog that only Pan knew well.

It was there he made Zeus promise to leave me alone. That if he didn’t he would walk away and let him sink through the mossy cress and into the pitch dark peat, a black hole swallowed by the sky. Zeus cursed at Pan, claimed he had dreamt that one day the sky would be his weapon, that he would strike him with lightening. Once Pan had stopped laughing he held out his hand and led him back to safety. But from then on Zeus never did bother me again. Not in that way. Only with brutality and cruelty. I could handle that.

As the years had progressed, Zeus’ rages had become ever more frequent. Plant pots whistled their way towards us, ketchup dripped down the walls. Social services were as ethereal as will-o’-the-wisp when we needed help. Sometimes we couldn’t contact them anyway - the phone was ripped from its socket or smashed at source. “Please take him” pleaded our mother. They knew she was no quitter, didn’t have the heart to throw him out, would stick through anything. That was her nature. They did offer one thing though - a passage to the underworld.

It was then that we got to know the hidden children of Tartarus. We were now a problem family. Zeus a problem child. We began to be offered privileges accessed only by those utterly trashed by the system. A youth club for the good and the bad, the incarcerated and the free. We went fishing with the rough kids, learnt how to smoke, to kayak, to drink, to sail. Stan, an adult in charge, newly on parole and finishing his community service, taught us how to somersault on the trampolines and fight on the streets. Upper-cut, right hook, left hook, over the belt, under the belt.

And then suddenly we were on the run again. After a few years in Broadmoor for GBH, Zeus’s father was back on the scene and searching for him. Once again our names changed as we packed up our possessions and roamed from a bed and breakfast in Stonehouse, to a flat in Bedmister, a dingy basement in Peckham.

In London the stars disappeared and were replaced by the dull glow of street lights. The noisy hedge crickets that formed the soundtrack to evening strolls along cattle tracks were replaced by sirens and joy-racers. In the park kids roamed with Rottweilers or skidded helmet-less on stolen motor bikes. In Peckham there was no Tartarus or Westmorland sorting hall, the whole community were hell-raisers.

Zeus rounded them up, became the gang leader. He told them he had seen in a dream that he would soon be fighting. He would kill his father, free his mother, crush the social system that incarcerated children in Westmorland Homes.

I too dreamt of killing. Of killing Zeus. Night after sleepless night I worked out ways in which I could do it; snapped brake cables, a poisoned mars bar, suffocation as he slept in his fold-down bed. I knew I was capable, but the desire to act was counterbalanced by the fear of disappointing my mother. I saw her tearful as I was led down to the docks and away. Her shame. Her regret. I never considered her grief for the loss of Zeus. That was beyond my imagination.

In the end I left. I fled London and went once more to the moors, leaving my mother behind. I hated her too. I blamed her for the situation social services had landed us in. I blamed her for the violence of my childhood. I didn’t have the foresight to thank her for my nervous creativity, my independence, my stories. I went back to cricket songs in the evening, and walking with Orion at night.

Zeus did all right. He studied economics at UCL. With his suit, his charm, and his well paid hedge-funding job he was rapidly seen as a beacon of reform. Taking a briefcase of legal jargon he turned up at Westmorland, where the hall had been transformed by a make-over of magnolia paint and a no-smoking sign pasted to the door. He demanded to see his paperwork, and discovered a whole load of brothers and sisters stowed away behind the left hand door. Legal guardianship was straightforward, and in no time at all he had a houseful of smart young deviants ready to run the county lines.

In the end he did kill his father. Cronus was living in Devonport slums with a posse of alcoholics and addicts, frustrated at his failure to track down his son. Zeus’s connections made slipping pure heroin into the supply chain an easy fix. It was a much less cruel end than the castration Cronus inflicted on his own father, after all.

Among the paperwork was another twist - one too long for this story, and one I know few details about. Turns out that Zeus has a twin called Hera, who was sent to a different foster home on the Isle of Wight. Zeus has decided only one of his own blood will be pure enough to be his lover. It’s their tradition - brothers and sisters. He couldn’t have me, so now he’s going to have the real thing.

He’s charming. A chameleon. A psychopath. And charmers get what they want. I know in my heart that Zeus will find her, but I don’t have the energy to care any more.

***Hera - daughter of Rhea and Cronus, twin sister and wife of Zeus***

When Zeus came for me first I fought him, but he was cunning and came in disguise. Who could not be fooled by a shapeshifting cuckoo? I could not resist him; he was too strong and hurt me too much. I hate him. I hate him especially because he is my brother. I look to the constellations in the dark dark night. Pass into the stars. Pray to them that I might be the last sister in this brittle helix, that mortality will save me from my shame.