DATE BOOKS



DARK MOODS

A Novel By Charlee Jacob

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PART ONE

"Shadow-maker create me everywhere Dark spaces (your face is my chosen abyss), For I said I have come to possess your darkness, Only this."

"The Shadow-Maker" —Gwendolyn MacEwan

DARK MOODS

PROLOGUE

"But look on that which cannot change—the One, The unborn and the undying." 'Hellas'—Percy Bysshe Shelley

Alali shivered, trying not to look for what might be in the mirror. The full length oblong of highly polished bronze had been a gift from a Sidonian patron who carried it across the wide ocean on a ship. He couldn't understand that a mirror wasn't an object of vanity in Kur. Alali's people were made depressed by reflecting surfaces, constantly showing them what they didn't have: faces of their own.

Dayan, the brothel master, insisted she keep it hanging in her room. They never knew when this patron might visit the house again. For it to fail to be there would be an insult.

Alali tried not to look but eventually her gaze strayed into it. Right now the image floated, gradually changing into forms that made no sense: monstrous and subtle torsos, multi-limbs and limbless, skeletal/carapace/invertibrate, hairy/scaled/smooth. Which were her true self? Were any?

The shift was ever-moving, non-stop without an outside idiosyncrasy to give her a focus. What would her clients give her from their moodscapes, what tragic forms would turn and twist her this evening?

What was tonight like to Alali as she turned from the mirror's confusion to gaze out of her window? It was only a mixture of impressions gathered from her clients of the night before. One was of a rainbow moon and shining plains of ore. Another was of fragrances roseate or necrotic. All were of fantasies or terrors that came with the setting of the sun. She had memories that belonged to them, not to her. Just as the form she took was their idea, not nature's.

She was glad she was no longer hungry. The cat she'd been given by Dayan's servant Huddissi would last until she earned more refreshment just before morning. Dayan made certain that his Kura dined before the doors were opened for trade. It wouldn't do to have a starved harlot draining blood from its patron. Some of the client moods were so dark that it was easy sometimes for a hungry beast to slip from its rigorous training. This was bad for business. The Kura could be profitable at a suitable risk but never if outright lethal. A little danger was tantalizing to some people as long as it wasn't really probable.

Alali half-closed her eyes, seeing the city landscape beyond the brothel courtyard. Architectures from several nations were in evidence, everything from ziggurats and pyramids to crude stone dolmens. Many were made from white and pink marble quarried in Anatolia. The Amaki brought it overseas on barges to be erected into the varying styles which would hopefully appeal to all. Every building in sight was hung with gay red streamers. Festive for a place where dreams were manifested.

Beyond this were the ruins of ancient Kur. She couldn't see the blackened stone from her window but she felt it. With this sensation of presence came memories of running there, of hiding in shadows and dreading dawn. Of the miserable flow of arms, legs and wings, fangs, beaks and toothless maws. Too many. Oh, helpless, unabated starvation! It had been impossible to hunt well without identity or plausible function. Alali didn't remember what caused her and the others to be in this predicament, only that it had not always been thus.

But what exactly had it been before? It wasn't likely that she could reach that far back, before so many hallucinations in her flesh. That she'd witnessed some one hundred and seventeen thousand full moons since was deeply imprinted in the part of her mind that clicked off such numbers without pairing them with a time knowledge. She'd crouched on all fours and howled at that moon, or tried to fly up toward it—falling always. It had called her, taunted her, blinded her.

The first Amaki ship landed on their shores scarcely—what was it?—six hundred and fifty full moons ago. A droplet in so much time; a single precious tear of years. It was the event which changed the destiny for all the Kura. It had been dark as the Amaki disembarked. Men had built fires at strategic points along the coast. Alali had trembled, running from shadow to shadow to spy on one of them. She crept along the umbra edge of a ruined temple, watching him as her body spun and altered. She rewove herself a dozen times as she smelled heat. Salt and iron. Sacred odors; life odors. She quivered so much with lust for it that the night seemed to turn inside out. What else had she smelled? Seasoned pork, fat running into flames, pungent sweet. The man who had come from the boat was singing.

She'd known singing. Birds sang, and Alali had been many birds.

She knew now what a man was, but did she know it when she spied on him? She saw only a tall, upright-walking creature, sea foam staining his loincloth. He was mostly hairless, muscles rippling along his shoulders as he moved a few bulky crates to make himself a seat. He bent and was limber and solid. He stretched his fingers to pinch a piece from the greasy meat. He blew on it to cool it before eating.

Tall and walking but not an ape. She tried to access if she had ever seen the like before and gave it up in confusion. If she ever had, it was too long ago.

He chewed the meat thoughtfully and she was hungry, closer all the time. She slid in and out of any number of curious, predatory beasts.

Suddenly there was an alley Aphrodite, intimate in this sailor's thoughts as his mind strayed to another port where spices were thick in the streets. She was slender in lavender gauze and bells, leaning from a doorway with candles glowing behind her. Alali felt this female in his mood as she smouldered along his senses. Her shifting paused as she drew the mood up and replicated it. She took a few steps forward.

"Alali?" he murmured when he saw her. His eyes and mouth softened, arms opened to embrace her. Then he stepped back, shaking his head as it occured to him that he was on a totally foreign shore. "Who are you?"

She no longer knew. She wasn't Alali. She was in flux, running away. The lavender veils shifted to rags of unformed flesh as she disappeared into the woods.

But she returned the next night, drawn to his singing voice and the smell of his dinner. He thought of the beauty he'd met in the other port, and Alali couldn't help but respond by sculpting into the clean-limbed, green-irised redhead. She actually maintained this body for several minutes as he sat at his fire and contemplated this cherished assignation. He saw her out of the corner of his eye but pretended not to. He let it slowly dissolve in his mood. Then he swiftly swung about to watch the shy beast flee.

The next night the man slaughtered a deer. (It might have been a Kura in deer shape. Were there any real deer left?) He had it hanging from a tree, not forty paces from where he tended the simple fire. The blood smelled too delicious for Alali to resist. She'd been starved for a long time.

He was making no attempt to protect it. Maybe he didn't really want it. Maybe she could help herself before he could stop her. It might be worth the risk. She slipped from the ruins, still keeping to the shadows as much as she could. She fastened herself to the wound in the deer's fresh carcass. She sucked it dry with long savoring gulps that made her mewl with pleasure. Her figure shifted constantly as the hot fluid scorched down her throat and entered her withered stomach. Her heart began to pound in her ears as it hadn't in thousands of round moons.

He stood where the flames brightened his face from beneath, creating patterns on his cheeks that were like carved tattoos. He stared in awe and not a little revulsion. He had a sword in one hand but only held it as a precaution. He didn't brandish it.

"What are you?" he asked. The words meant nothing to her. Did her race even have a language? Now or then? "Are you Ishantu? You can't be. I've seen Ishantu drink but their manners are clean. I have never seen one change before."

He observed from a respectful distance as she drank the blood.

"If you're an animal, why is it you don't eat the meat?"

She finished the deer, eyeing him warily, listening for other Kura to come as they smelled the blood. None did. Good. She didn't want to share. It was vital she have it all. Her body screamed to have it. She finished, slinking back, equidistant of the ruins and the woods, both avenues of escape available should he attack.

"You must be a vampire but one such as I've never seen nor heard of," he said.

He smiled. It was a grimace that appeared to be no worse a threat with bared puny teeth than his shown sword was.

He closed his eyes. And thought of Alali.

It flowed from him, directly channeled into her as surely as the blood had gone from the deer's corpse into herself. Her shifting interrupted. She became the voluptuous female of his pining. Every signal she required came from his mind to hers and seemed as if these were the natural gestures to come from herself. She glided to him, toe to heel, copper waves of hair falling back from her shoulders to lift and fall in the breeze. She knelt at his knees, all her fangs withdrawn. Deft fingers she had in place of clumsy paws unwound his loincloth. She sucked at his penis while he stroked her head and wept.

This began it all: the Kura had been captured, divided among the crew of this first ship. There were twenty-five men to start twenty-five houses with twenty beasts apiece. They created a guild and agreed that none should ever be taken from these shores. They built a separate Kur, apart from the haunted ruins. It was a city of pleasure. Her race was employed as adept prostitutes under shaman stars. They turned too fast to fully experience all the sensations inherent with the forms they adopted. Travelers came from everywhere in the known world, especially when they heard the Kura wouldn't transmit any venereal diseases—all disease healing in them upon contact.

The Kura didn't starve anymore, and each bright or dark mood they took from a client gave them a brief respite from the constant shift.

Alali turned again to the mirror, finding it irresistible, finding no harmony in it but drawn to its haunting of her. This more than anything hinted to her that she was more than animal. Animals paid little attention to reflections. As soon as they discovered there was no identifying scent, they lost interest. But there were strangers in the bronze each time she dared a glimpse. Wraiths and horrors, harlots of powdered or bloodied countenances, varied eyes seeing the night in its confusion of guises. And which of these whores, which of these nights were beautiful?

She thought, what were we before all of this started? Not able to articulate it on her own. She must have been able to speak before, ages ago, but she hadn't until Dayan put words in her mouth back on that beach. The Dayan who was now the master was his grandson. She turned—yes—fully toward the bronze mirror and watched her lips as she pretended to speak. She watched the raw teeth, her beak moving soft/thunderous/clattering/ululating whimper.

(What gods were we made in the image of?)

This was a Hebrew notion from the Semitic tribes in distant Palestine. That of a god actually seeking to make creatures after a heavenly design.

Memories were vague and painful. They were part of a chaotic tapestry too swiftly transforming to be sorted out. How could they know what their race was before, when they didn't know what it was now?

She went back to the window and touched the drape. A simple thin white muslin was air on the fingers. Her first client of the evening was coming up the street, escorted by a scarred dwarf. She felt him out there by his mind. It was in the jumble of those outside on the cobblestones. It was mixed with

others coming from nearby rooms that shared walls with Alali's. She'd become even more proficient at picking up vibrations, even if at this distance the moods weren't precisely clear. Her impressions from the evening before faded. This night's wove into her nerves' images in fluid sights. She had an oleo of sensations together in the space of three seconds.

Alali became a faraway Loyang woman, saffron-skinned, romantically comparing the sight of stars with the jewels she had latticed through her fingers. A tincture of spice in the corner of each eye made them tear slightly, giving her an eternal dewy glaze and also turning her pupils a soft gold. She held a stalk of civet incense between her thighs as she conjured a lover while chanting toward Ursa Major.

Alali was a gazelle, a butterfly, a stream nymph—all things of change and beauty to the scarred dwarf. He stood just beyond the gate every night, having led people to see her. She was a strange distant hope to him, not unlike a candle flame which burned as love inside him.

Alali was at the same moment a distant Cyprian Galatea, fleshed through incarnation and greased pliant with attar of roses. She bent forward over a mound of tassled pillows, unimpressed by the lambence in heaven. She was only a stone doll.

Alali was a wife left buried on some distant continent. (The mind didn't supply a name for the country.) She still carried the embryo she'd been two months pregnant with when she fell. She scrabbled from a grave of soil that magically velveted into exotic petals—kinder than the dark, stagnant dirt—her serene arms and face lifting up to gaze at a man (who was now almost to the door). There was no grave rot. She was only a little sleepy. And she longed for him.

Alali was the great wolf from a campsite on the Isle of Delos. Embers glowed faintly where a family had cooked their dinner. It smelled the scraps of their food, scented the blood and entrails of them that it had ripped apart. It saw a moon round as a medal, genital silver. It felt the desire to merge with it, nuzzle it, run with it through the endless black field overhead, bleed it dry in hot swallows not unlike the mouthfuls of burning meat from the breast of the woman, the belly of the man, the tender brain curds of the child. One howl, less than a heartbeat in length, drifted toward the moon. It was a yip really.

Alali was another Kura harlot-beast standing in the courtyard below the torches. Its face was in transition in the shadows. She didn't know which it was; none of them recognized each other. It watched the widowed stranger as he opened the door and entered the brothel to be greeted by Dayan. The Kura face moved, seeing stars, frothy nebula without colors, picking up such subtle things as chromatic variegation but color blind as a cat. The wealthy Magadha woman next to it loved cats and had a fantasy of desire to be played out with a tiger god. The stripes slid, curved like scimitars.

Did Alali ever see the night as Alali? Without being painted a fresco by someone? Needing to be convinced of its majesty or mundanity, science or emptiness? What were her first memories of night?

There were none.

There were millions of them.

Spread among almost one hundred and twenty thousand round moons that she couldn't possibly compute into years such as humans measured them. For what animal had a use for such figures? Yet, wasn't one hundred and seventeen thousand a number?

The client knocked lightly. Why did they feel the need to do that? She knew when they were out there. She'd already begun to assume his mood. At close range it was easy to block all other influences as long as his own image didn't wander.

She opened the door and he entered, not as a round-eyed pilgrim who was in a Kura brothel for the first time. This one had already been to the other Kura in this house, seeking comfort through magic. He'd visited every night this week, coming so close to the scenario that would cleanse him.

He looked at her squarely. Tragedy etched deep creases at his mouth, mapping his eyes and forehead. Alali wisped, smoke at her edges, and started to assume the form of cherished Ara, his dead wife. There was no more head wound from having struck her fragile skull on the rocks she'd fallen down. Her hair tumbled in a shower of fresh rainwater, so blonde it was almost transparent. She wore nothing but the damask veil she'd been buried in, draped carefully over her head and around her shoulders.

"I'm here, Bahn," she said. Her lips were red, parting in the too-white face as she slowly lifted the veil like a Vedic bride. "I've come back to you."

It was as he'd dreamed she would say it. As he'd wished Ara was. Not poor, mortal Ara of the Kels but of the Ishantu, able to return from the dead if they were buried in the earth. The ground healed Ishantu, regenerating them in its cocoon of element. Providing their bodies hadn't been sundered, if they hadn't been burned, if someone waited for them.

Bahn had waited for Ara.

With every sunrise and wasted day. With every nightfall and empty darkness. Seeing her fall again a thousand times a dream, clasping her belly in a futile attempt to cushion the baby growing there, bending her body at that impossible angle in her descent down the hill. She'd worn a new face at the bottom, one streaked gray and red that would mend if she were put into the earth.

Would mend if she were Ishantu. Shattered skullbone and ruined brains weren't much for the earth to heal in an Ishfntu. They dug through again days later, soil under the nails, songs for their goddess on their lips. Their neighbors cheered them with a party and goblets of honeyed blood. They would be dressed in red, the color of life.

But Ara was only a Kel. Death came once to her, unmending, unfixable, not rising to feel the sun. Save in Bahn's desires.

"Bahn, do you remember the festival of the spring when we danced to the pipes? I became dizzy and fainted in your arms. Then when I opened my eyes, I told you I was going to have our child? He's here, husband, inside me and alive. Won't you put your hand on my belly and feel him?"

Alali whispered as Ara, feeling as Ara, full of life in her womb, recalling the sound of woodpipes and every step of the traditional spring dance. Alali even knew the dizziness that had come and the fainting spell that made her think she heard crickets chirping by her ears. She even knew the color of his eyes in the shadows as these were the first thing she saw when she—Alali/Ara—regained consciousness.

He stepped forward and placed his hand on the slight swell of abdomen. She'd been only two months pregnant but this had been long ago. She'd risen and the baby within her was growing again, waiting for his time to be born. The swell was larger than a scant two months would be. It was rounder, fuller. She was a model of the goddess carved from fertile stone but here in flesh. There was a light pulse gently throbbing beneath his fingers. Ara's own heartbeat perhaps, thrumming through the veins and arteries. Had he sensed a small kick, a turning over in her waters?

Bahn buried his face in her bosom, inhaled through a sob the marigold she'd always smelled of. She leaned against him as he clasped her with one hand around the small of her back, the other pressed against her firm buttocks. Familiar and perfect as only a treasure of the memory could be. It was a voluptuous form, pillowy but strong, the bones full of fire.

He carefully guided her backward to the mat of straw and furs. He drew the damask veil from her head and shoulders the way one would open a curtain to reveal the light. She helped him loosen his clothes, pulling aside his tunic to free his half-hardened penis. Alali bent to take it in her mouth, not quite withdrawing all her teeth. In his memory were the hard edges of Ara's teeth, softly nibbling, teasing the muscle without breaking the skin. Her tongue darted across root and testicles, scarlet, the entire mouth the bright carnal red of the Ishantu. The heat there immediately made him fully erect, ecstatic as he lifted her to her feet and embraced her. She pressed her lips and laced her tongue over his. His beard was nest-soft. Ara had loved to run her fingers through it, and Alali did so as delicately as if she were pulling snarls from the fringe of a favorite shawl. Her supple skin radiated warmth as Bahn circled her breasts with the tips of his fingers, making the paths smaller until he enclosed the hardened kernels of her nipples.

She lay back on the mat and spread her white legs. He knelt between and let her take his rigidness in her hand again to lead him into the incandescent bud that needed him. Near where their child moved. She wrapped her mobile legs around his hips as he slowly penetrated, his body reddening from her heat. The Kels were fire dancers, leaping conflagrations built upon wicker and oak, temperamental and passionate. All these things flowed from Ara against him in a tide that raged surrounding his loins. She caressed his back savagely with her fingernails. Her mouth was a cup of bubbled wine and herbs.

Re-uniting. Sacred bonds.

They would never be parted again. Death had been conquered. Death was but a dream they could wake from, clean and joined to those they loved.

In the welding of his body and mood, Alali drifted, even what memories she had dimming. Ara reigned in a blaze of remembrance, surely what she was and had always been, moments of identity. Ara at her best had been ardent, almost too hot to touch.

As were all the Kel women. High temperatures.

Bahn shuddered as he felt his climax gather, semen pushing to the spilling point. He tried to fight the small truths that edged into the fantasy. As they always must for anyone who was rational, who knew the facts even if they could manage to ignore them long enough to dream.

The Kel were a hot blooded race. But the Ishantu were cool to the touch. Like the earth, like the dead but not-dead.

Ara had been a Kel and could never return to him, not after she died. The heat was the flaw in the story. Ara couldn't be as he remembered and be as he expected she would have to be in order to have come back from her grave.

Bahn sagged, his erection withering. His joy turned gray. Where was he? What was he doing? Playing a game that was unworthy of the wife he'd loved. Seeking a lie in the body that even now was responding to the shift in his mood.

Alali caught the fluctuating image, readjusting to each slip in the details. He hadn't let go of Ara but he had changed his perception of her.

Bahn cried out, struggling in the Kura's arms. He tried to disengage himself from the legs that twisted around his hips. For Ara hadn't risen, couldn't be pliant flesh and damp lips of spice. Ara was dead and had been in her grave for over a year. She was rotted, decaying into stinking paste where vermin squirmed.

As under him, Alali/Ara did this, without the animation of her limbs but with the movement of tiny creatures extant within the pulp. She couldn't move. Every part of her relaxed, fallen numb into disorder. She barely sensed—as perhaps the dead did—what crawled through her dust but she couldn't summon enough presence to be repulsed by it. It was natural, wasn't it? She no longer shifted for the message was of mortification. She was unraveling. She'd been corrupted.

Bahn started to scream, feeling worms. He jerked left and right as he tried to get away from flesh that wilted under him. It cracked open, letting him slip further down into grumey fragments. What was even the child in her now but a shriveled insect, lost in the mould of a dessicated vessel? He was no longer merely trying to pull himself away but out. A blind worm crawled across his hand and he shrieked.

(Knowing that no one would come as they heard him. Screams were common here. Such were the songs of many a client's dreams, either from their own enraptured lungs or forced from their Kura harlots as part of their

personal dramas. No one would come until his time was well up. Even if he begged...)

It was the chance you took, coming to Kur. Everyone said it was a thrill, rivaling even the best in Babylon.

But had any of them felt the gasses of their loved ones exploding from fissured guts into their faces? Had they discovered what love became when it couldn't rise? When it must rot?

Alali was immobile. She was experiencing death. It was not only a moment of surcease from the vigilance to his mood, it was a metamorphosis—even though it wasn't the shift. Instead of vibration, every cell of her slackened, undergoing retrograde. The honeycomb of the Kura nervous system spoiled like tainted meat. It didn't hurt. It was only a suspension, a drifting down of the frenzy her life had been.

It didn't bother her. Alali had done this for clients before. Many came to Kur grieving for departed loved ones, and necrophiles came to cherish the oozing corpse. There were cults of the dead across the world who came to Kur to worship and not be outcast. It had only frightened her the first time she'd been swept into this particular dark mood, the instincts of all her many animals snarling to defend themselves. She'd nearly killed a patron that night, and Day...n punished her terribly.

Now death was simple, much less work than grand design. One day real death might come, after the countless centuries. She would be ready to ease gradually into the blight that was moving so swiftly to carry her down.

Bahn was hysterical, floundering in her oils, choking on Ara from her grave and all the worst this might be. Did she resemble anything he would have considered? Could Ara have ever been this? Yes, for this was what the dead became.

He suddenly rolled away, drenched in bitter ichor, sticky, slapping his bare limbs that seemed covered in grave lice.

Think! Bahn concentrated, forcing his mind to turn to those truths again. It isn't Ara! It's the Kura harlot! Ara is over a thousand miles away in the urnfield!

He babbled, seeing the liquified body on the straw and furs. His mind stretched toward snapping. Especially when he beheld the miniature skull rising and falling in the wash that had been the pregnant mound. But he'd been through this every night for a week, holding his wife alive again, holding her dead, feeling her split in his embrace. He'd seen what she became, what their child inside her became.

The Kura are what we make of them...think! Think of something else!

All he could imagine was his lovely Ara. White-haired and brightly hot in her marigold perspiration. He shivered from the clammy touch, the wet greasiness from contact with the carcass on the floor. Ara. Ara dancing. Ara smiling. Leaping a bonfire.

Ara, at least asleep in her damask veil which he'd bought for her from traders, so much softer than their tribe's homespun. It hid the hole in her skull. Serene. Lovely because the wound wasn't visible.

The remains on the bed began to knit. They flowed together in pools of shimmering liquid, losing the rainbows of decomposition. Smooth and gently solidifying into seamless white limbs. A mass of glass hair. Even the damask veil wove from the jam and shards of bone. Breasts rose, frost-nippled, and a belly swam to even out into a dewy pregnant mound, the navel replete with the Kel sun tattoo. The hands blossomed into pale marigolds.

Ara? Ara, this is the last time, darling, Bahn thought, willing himself to believe it. He'd tried. Some things weren't meant to be.

Or perhaps they were but only by degree. He did believe now that she was dead. That only the memory could be inviolate, and even this was obviously only as sacred as he was foolish.

The rotted stickiness across his flesh where he'd touched her vanished, as did the sense of vermin. Only his own sweat remained.

Ara opened her eyes and sat up on the mat, languidly pulling her legs under her. Her eyes were the same shade of blue that he'd known so well. They brimmed with tears but the tears didn't fall.

He willed it thus. He'd imagined tears for they were right for this moment, for the parting that was overdue. Had the tears fallen, he wouldn't have had the strength to let her go.

"Goodbye, beloved," she murmured.

"Goodbye, Ara," Bahn said.

He left the room. The picture of her dissolved.

Alali felt it wither. She gave it up with a twinge she couldn't identify as regret. Shivering again, she glanced meekly toward the mirror. The image there was a goddess—surprisingly silver considering it was a bronze mirror. She was naked and lunar. The object of love of the lone wolf from the Isle of Delos who padded to her door.

CHAPTER 1

"Bolt the seven gates of the underworld.

Then, one by one, open each gate a crack."

'The Descent Of Inanna' — Mesopotamian

"Good morning, Met'impta," said the vampire as she opened her door to the neighbor.

Emana Hathor had just finished washing her hair and was shaking it dry down her back. Her bronze skin still held a sheen of droplets that made it seem even more luminous. Her husband Rasal sat crosslegged on the floor, grinding myrrh with a mortar and pestle. The rich smell filled the air, an unburned incense that made the Ishantu household as fragrant as a temple. The Hathor's dog Memyt sat up as the young mother scurried in, clasping a tiny bundle to her chest. He started to wag his tail but whined instead.

"Mito's sick, Emana," Met'impta informed her. From within the bundle came a high wheeze, then a strangled cough. "Look."

She unwrapped the blanket. Emana looked into the chalk white face, scrunched up and gasping.

"My mother says all he has is croup but I don't believe that. I think he's dying!"

Emana shook her head as she examined the infant's eyes which were clotted shut with yellow gum. "This isn't croup. It's good you brought him to me."

Rasal stood up from his chore and came over, touching the neighbor gently on the shoulder.

"Place him on the floor, Met'impta," he told her.

As the woman knelt, Emana slipped a chain from where it nestled under her robe. At the end was a gold needle, blunt until she pushed the end where it joined the chain. A hidden spring brought out a sharp point. Emana jabbed this purposefully into her forefinger and then bent to place it between the baby's convulsing lips. He first turned away, squirming, puffing out but unable to breathe in. She held his tiny head and forced the tip of the finger into his mouth. In seconds he began to suck the blood dribbling there.

Met'impta trembled and moaned. Rasal put his arm around her. Memyt made a similar sound in the back of his throat.

The infant slurped, red pooling at the corners of his mouth. He reached up with miniature hands and clasped the vampire's finger. Color started to return to his face. He began to kick his feet under the blanket.

Rasal fetched a cloth, and then cleaned the baby's eyes. Emana fed him until he went to sleep. Then she pulled the finger away, made a protective sign over his face, and whispered a blessing.

Met'impta bundled him back up and lifted him to nuzzle into her bosom. The baby snored lightly, a much better sound than the choking he'd been doing when she brought him into the house.

"A miracle," she murmured to the Ishantu.

"No," Emana corrected her. "Poison."

The neighbor's lips formed a circle of shock. "What? How?"

"Your mother didn't want you to have this child because the father is of the nomads. This is true?" Emana asked though indeed everyone within walking distance knew it. Ishantu didn't gossip but they heard practically everything. Her eyebrows raised slightly. Water from her hair lazed down her face, looking either like rain or tears.

Met'impta bowed her head and nodded, ashamed that she should have borne a child without a husband. Only low women did such things. But she'd met Nayar at the festival when many tribes gathered in Vira to celebrate the summer solstice. Wine and his good looks had swept her away. He could ride a horse like a young general. In a song, he compared her eyes to pools of cool water. Was anything on the desert more prized than water?

"I don't say this to pass judgement on you, dear," Emana said kindly. "Love should require neither laws nor constance, only a mere true spark. Your mother has fed this little one belladonna. He'll be all right as long as she can't get near him again."

"But what can I do? I haven't anywhere to go," Met'impta asked. "We must have a roof. A home to go to."

"Do you have relatives in Vira?" Rasal suggested.

"None that would take me in. I would have to sell myself on the streets," she said. Then Met'impta added bitterly, "I haven't the beauty or the connections to become a temple harlot."

The baby hiccoughed. One tiny fist swam out of the blanket. The young mother kissed it tenderly.

Emana smiled. "The baby's father is Selem. His people are presently camped at the Chala Oasis. Go there and show him this fine son. The Selem are very proud of their children. He'll want this flesh of his flesh. He may even take you. It's better than waiting for your mother to turn her anger on you. Her codes are too severe for someone who needs the protection of family. Go to him. Remember, your eyes are pools of clear water."

Rasal laughed and winked at his wife. "The Selem are known for their kindness to their women, much more so than many nomads to whom women are little more than slaves. Why, the Selem are almost as generous with their wives as the Ishantu are with theirs."

Emana twisted her lips ruefully. Met'impta patted the sleeping infant through the blanket and said, "I'll never be able to repay you for this."

"Nonsense," Rasal replied. "We've just repaid you for all those sesame cakes you've made for us in the past."

Emana walked the neighbor to the door. "Fahd Goren is driving a wagon to the oasis this day. Go to his house, and he'll take you there."

When Met'impta had gone, Emana turned to her husband.

"So? How generous are you feeling toward me this minute?" She purred as she slid her arms around his muscular shoulders.

"Oh, about so much," he said as he pressed his body to hers and thrust suggestively from the hips. "I love the way you smell when you've just bathed."

He inhaled deeply of her hair, already beginning to curl into dizzy knots of ringlets as it started to dry. She scented it with clove until it filled him with aching dreams. He brought his hands to her waist and started to untie the cord that bound her robe closed.

She embraced him, opening her mouth to taste the oranges on his tongue. She slowly raised one leg and drew up the damp foot behind his calf, wriggling it at the back of his knee. She slid it up his thigh, angling her leg like a dancer.

Within moments they would fall into each other's spirits as Ishfntu did when they made love. He'd run through the landscape of her subconscious; she'd sink into his like rainwater into the earth. There was almost nothing they didn't know about one another.

Memyt barked. They heard a horse galloping up the road and into the yard. Chickens squawked and fluttered to get out of the way. The couple pulled apart. Emana snatched her robe closed and ran to the window.

She frowned. "Important visitor. He's a prince of clan Hila by the insignia on his cloak."

"What could clan Hila want with us? They have their own physician," Rasal wondered aloud, hoping to will his erection back down so it wouldn't be rudely apparent to their visitor. He finally sat crosslegged on the floor and pulled a prayer rug across his lap.

She smirked as she bent to pat the dog's head. Then she twitched her perfect ass at her husband and ran to answer the door which the stranger was pounding on with knuckles covered in gold rings.

"May we help you?" she asked the anxious young man at the threshold.

"I'm Eno Hila. I've come to commission your husband, Lady," he replied. He was even paler than the sick child from moments ago. She gestured for him to enter.

"I'm Rasal Hathor," her husband said as he stood, clutching the rug in front of him like a security blanket. He extended his other hand palm up to indicate he was willing to hear the stranger's proposal.

Eno Hila stared in confusion at the rug.

"I'm here on behalf of my brother, Tash Hila," he said, half out of breath. His hair and eyes were wild, suggesting he'd ridden hard for two nights and a day to be here this morning. It required that he cross the mountains of Ragau, separating the southern coast of the Caspian Sea from the great salt desert.

Rasal's brows knitted together from the wash of emotional pain that came from the man. He asked, "And what may I do for your brother?"

"Tash has always been a hothead. He once knocked a fisher urchin unconscious in the market for walking too close to him and rubbing the stink of sturgeon onto his robe. He threw scalding tea in the face of a maid because it tasted bitter. It blinded her. These are terrible but not weighty when a man belongs to a house such as ours. Our father tosses a few coins to assuage the damage and then cuts off Tash's allotment for a while. We're not proud of his temper. But now he's committed murder. He's been betrothed for a year to Ghia Anut, of clan Anut. A few days ago he saw her smile at a man in the market. I was there; it was nothing. It was the sort of smile that says 'good day' to a stranger. But Tash flew into a jealous rage and killed Ghia in the street," Eno explained. The prince's expression when he spoke of bribes being given to victims intimated that he hardly approved of this elitism. "Clan Anut can't be appeased with gold trifles. They insisted on the courts, and now my brother is to be executed on the law altar."

"And what exactly is the service you wish from me?" Rasal asked tentatively. He knew what it had to be. He didn't want to hear it but he had no choice. He gritted his teeth amd waited for the formal request.

"Clan Hila asks you to drink my brother's sin," the youth replied, looking hopefully at the Ishantu's face. Afraid to ask but knowing the vampire couldn't refuse.

The Hathors traded Eno Hila a fresh horse for the exhausted mount he'd ridden. They also mounted horses and started to Vira. Eno could barely restrain himself from galloping back.

"I understand your desire to hurry but we don't want the horses to tire before we even make it to the mountains. You rode last night when it was cooler. Now the sun is hot," Rasal said to him.

The Hilan Prince slowed. "I'm sorry. I suppose I'm afraid there won't be enough time. It's three days there and back. The Anuts pressed for a quick execution date after sentence was passed. They grieve for Ghia and want justice. I believe they did it so that there would be less chance of bringing in an Ishantu. There used to be Ishfntu not far away on the coast but the last flood drove them inland."

"You must love your brother dearly, to attempt this journey across the mountains twice in such a time without resting," Rasal said.

Eno was red-faced. "Actually I don't care for him. He doesn't have my sympathies. But he is my brother even as he deserves to be punished for what he did to Ghia. She was very..."

Eno fell silent. His mouth was set into a grimace. He was obviously fighting emotions.

Emana knew then that he'd been in love with his brother's betrothed. She could hear his heart beating faster. His breathing changed every time he pronounced the victim's name, the way of anyone who inhaled from the poppy. He was in a dreadful position between the two. Emana sympathized. He was

doing what he had no choice but to do. Just as Rasal was doing a duty he couldn't refuse.

The Hathors lived just into the Dasht-e-Kavir. It wasn't long before they reached the mountains. From their house these were a sculpted stone frieze on the northern horizon. Once among them and they had the scattered grandeur of hills piled upon hills. Each was a mass of gray rock reared block by block, beginning with massive boulders that seemed to pulse directly up from the naked wasteland.

A severe sight, they had a power that rose up with them. Emana felt as if she were over a great grave, gods from an ancient war buried within. She knew that many religions had tales of this holy battle for dominance. The people of Sumer had the saga of Tiamat and Marduk, the Egyptians had Osiris and Set, the Mycenaeans had Zeus overthrowing Kronus, and the Semitic tribes had angels led by Helel ben Shahar in a revolt against their exalted Jehova. Something had happened, and there were places where this was a tangible morbid power.

She wished they could stop for only a little while so she could stand barefoot on these grim stones, the energy creeping through her soles to give her dreams. Such dreams were always prophetic.

At least they were for those such as herself. Those who weren't human. Nomads had gone mad in this place when blowing sand from the desert forced them to stop here, huddled under cloaks and wrapped in tents. They appeared at the gates of Vira babbling nonsense, having cut strange tattoos into their own flesh and sewn stinging insects into their own skin.

Once a Hebrew had stumbled to the Hathor's door after a great storm. Emana had knelt to give him water where he'd collapsed in the yard. He'd been trying to sing with his ravaged throat. No sound would emit through the sand he'd swallowed. He looked up at her, eyes widening with the memory of his visions there. He died with a strangled scream.

Emana's horse stumbled halfway across these charged stones.

Rasal grasped the reins of his horse. "Whoa!"

"Are you all right, Lady?" Eno Hila asked as she almost fell off the animal. Eno cursed under his breath, afraid her horse was damaged. What if it couldn't continue the journey? She couldn't double with either of them as the additional weight would be too much for an animal to carry across the mountains. And Rasal couldn't leave her even if he was bound by tradition to go with Eno.

If worse came to worse, Eno decided, he'd give his horse to her so that the Ishantu could ride on together, as it was necessary for Rasal to be at the execution but not Eno. Eno could walk back.

Then he wouldn't be there in time to see Tash. He didn't want to see his brother again.

Emana dismounted as Rasal came to examine the horse.

Rasal gently lifted the leg, bent at the joint. "Let's hope it hasn't cracked the hoof."

She quietly pulled off her soft boots and stood on the rock, hot under the noon sun, burning her soles. She closed her eyes, needing only moments to attune to the rhythm of the earth.

Oh, goddess, I am open. Fill me with whatever beats here.

The rush up from the stones was icy, as the press of earth around flesh. When she'd died from being thrown from a horse that had been frightened by an asp—four years ago—the earth surrounding her buried body was just this way, soothingly cool, a balm of elemental, grounding her back into total healing as Rasal sat vigil for her above ground. He was chanting to the goddess of the world.

Beneath this was something harder, liquid but relentless. An underground sea? No. Pools of untapped oils? No.

Spirits, ether waters, a grave. Yes, huge. Of a monstrous city older than humans. Of gods and the gods before gods. These gray blocks and ornate sullen boulders were all that remained of it. Their slow essences still moved in the crushed streets, through semipermeable ruins, the manner of some bodily fluids through membranes. They chewed sluggishly through the grit and slabs that had been temples, swallowing down throat tubes of utter darkness. What digested from this in their stomachs was sent out as nightmares to men.

Emana put her hand to her belly, feeling it turn, full of pulverized bone and stone. She felt the powder of it filtering through her bowels, taking shape, being born in her rectum. She moaned as it started to chew its way out through her asshole.

"What's wrong with your wife, Rasal?" Eno Hila gasped as he saw her swaying on her feet. Beads of sweat dotted her face. "Is she ill with the sun?" "No," Rasal whispered. "She's having a vision."

Rasal remembered sitting crosslegged on the ground, mourning, weeping, regretting the pain she'd had to endure when the horse threw her. It had crushed her as it fell atop her, its foreleg bitten by the asp. He'd watched for three days and three nights, murmuring her name woven with that of the goddess. He cried for joy as he saw her fingers through the dirt, digging up to him, scratching runes into the soil of her grave as she clawed her way out. And then she'd pointed at the sky and said, "The sun's gone dark. Everything is too quiet!"

No more than an hour later the sun disappeared. The sky grew black. All the birds were still, all the chittering locusts mute.

"Is it the end of the world?" he'd asked her as they held one another. He was caressing her healed and scarless body. She wiped his grieving tears away with her hair.

She'd smiled. "No, the darkness will pass, briefer than night. The moon's covered it. Brother and sister embrace in the sky. Perhaps a new star will be born out of it."

He nodded, kissing her as the orbs embraced overhead. He let her black hair fall across him in eclipse. He understood, having seen many darkenings of the moon to watch it return in scimitars and wedges, red as a vampire's tongue. He'd even seen a few partial solar eclipses, just never a complete one before.

"Give her a moment and we'll go on," Rasal told Eno.

"The horse will be able to continue?"

"Yes, there's no damage. It merely stumbled. Perhaps because Emana was meant to stand where she is."

Emana went further down through the shattered pressed streets where giant gods had done seismic dances. Below them to the caverns which yawned all lightless, where the earth ceased to be cool and nurturing. This was where the worm which had crawled from her ass had gone. Was she now consciously riding on its filthy wings? In these caves there was a constant movement, furious flight, rasping against each other, snapping flint-sharp beaks. They screamed all the time, screeching at top volume, darker than the caverns were. Emana shuddered, knowing what they had to be.

Soul crows. Carrion-voracious and sniffing the heated rock for a passage out, cracked open by the stench of horror.

But what moved on two legs among them? Bird's legs but with lean thighs. It had a woman's breasts. Its hair cascaded out in bloody knots, and its shriek was louder than all the crows put together.

Was that a crack into the upper world? The crows would smell it out and fly, terrible, relentless. Mindless as to whether it was day or night. Day held no troubles for the soul crows. They could exist in it.

But it couldn't. She couldn't.

They could only come out through the crack, summoned by the stench of horror. It/she could come out every night. And she did.

(Or would.)

Emana pulled back before she could glimpse totally the hideous face as claws reached to part the hair from it. What was this creature, this hybrid woman/bird that earnestly awaited night? Who dreaded night, beating her breasts in misery until they bruised and bled? Emana didn't know, having never heard of such a creature. She knew only that she didn't want to see any more of it. The very idea of glimpsing its features filled her with terror.

She pulled back, up through the cavern's blind ceilings into the massive crush that had been the city of gods older than the gentle goddess of the Ishantu or the clay idols of the Virans. She thought she felt their languid tentacles paw her as she flowed past them. They were of no consequence; their time had gone. Her mind took on a frantic speed as it rushed through rock and cool earth and rock again to the jolt that was the act of returning to her body.

Her legs trembled. She fell before she could open her eyes.

Rasal caught her before she hit the ground.

"What did you see?" Eno asked urgently. "Was it about my brother?"

He couldn't ask, was it about Ghia?

Emana blinked, then slowly shook her head.

"I don't think so. I don't know what it was," she whispered. Then she chuckled nervously as she admitted, "I saw a monster."

Eno clutched his throat. He was an educated man but there were demons. The supernatural world was always a murmur away.

Rasal smiled with humor. "Was it dreadful, my love?"

The Ishantu didn't believe in monsters. There was only that which was helpful or dangerous, the natural and supernatural aspects of one cosmic law. Even Lilit, their goddess of earth and life, was also their goddess of death.

Emana sighed. "Yes, it was. It was very sad, too."

"Eno Hila!" the man in black shouted from the gates of Vira. "I see you've brought the Ishantu after all. You know how clan Anut feels, that only your brother's full punishment will atone for my sister's murder!"

The three riders stopped beyond the entrance to the city. Their horses pawed the road near the brick pillasters that buttressed the walls. They whinnied for water and rest. Emana's horse had begun to limp. They'd been unable to change mounts during the trip.

"I've done what I'm legally entitled to do, Lar," the Hilan replied wearily. Emana looked up at the gate as they passed through the two portals, the second set right behind the first. Both portals were flanked by enormous towers. They were constructed by bricks baked in a kiln and joined with pitch. The gate itself was covered with enameled brick, embellished with blue eyes and green trees. There was a saying that there was once a great forest here which the gods watched the world from. The ancestors of the Virans had cut down all the trees but the gods still saw everything through the ghosts of the cedars.

Lar Anut sprang down from his perch to confront Rasal. He glared, hands on his hips, one hand not too far from his sword hilt. "How do you feel about aiding a butcher to escape damnation, Ishantu?"

"I do what I'm required to do," Rasal replied quietly. He sought no argument with this man. He understood the Anut's pain, even the desire for revenge. "Because of custom, I'm not allowed to refuse."

Emana added further, "No Ishantu has ever refused the sin -drink."

"There's a first time for everything," Lar said sarcastically. "You're supposed to be a healing race. This will create no mending. It only lets a murderer go free of the fate he's earned."

"Tash is being executed," Eno argued. "That's hardly going free. He'll be dead. What more do you want?"

"His damnation," Lar replied, gritting his teeth. His jaws were so tightly pressed together that Emana thought he'd grind them into dust. It made her recall the weight and hardness of the buried city, worn to bran and chewed ceaselessly by the spirits there.

(Shitting out nightmares.)

She almost reached back to rub her backside. The vision had been intense as the foul larva bit its way out to flap away, descending, falling...

No, her buttocks were only sore from the long ride.

"I should think you—of all people—would seek to see Tash damned," Lar told Eno with a sneer. "He robbed you of Ghia twice."

Eno stiffened but said nothing.

"I'm sorry," Rasal said to the Anut. "I am truly. Should you require it, I'll be happy to council you after the execution. I'll also do the same for any member of your clan. I expect no payment for this. I only wish to help you to put aside this hatred and pain that are logically present right now. But they are sentiments that will only harm you eventually. They'll make you ill."

Lar hissed and stepped so close that Rasal's horse reared. "I don't seek your words, Ishantu! I ask you not to drink the sin of Tash Hila."

"Hold!"

The order came from a captain of the city guard. He marched until he was between the Anut and the riders, actually forcing Lar to step back. He saluted both princes as city highborn and touched his heart respectfully to the Hathors.

"Lar Anut, it's against the law to interfere with the business of the Ishantu in these matters," said the captain sternly. He was trying to remain deferring at the same time that he restrained the Anut.

"I must. He can't make things easy for that villain. It's justice that Tash Hila experience full punishment for his crime against Ghia," Lar explained, lifting his head defiantly. He hoped to cow the guard but didn't succeed. The guard might be of lower birth but he knew his duty.

"Then you leave me no choice," the captain said. He turned away to address the vampires. "Do you wish that I arrest this man?"

Lar huffed loudly, muscles tightening as he obviously considered matching his swordsman's skills against the lesser ones of the city-trained captain. But then he would've committed two crimes—that of interfering with Ishantu in holy duty and of killing the captain who was only enforcing the law. The other guards on the walls would pursue him, and he couldn't defeat them all.

"No, Captain," Rasal said. "We don't wish him arrested."

"Yes, arrest him," Eno advised. "Take him to prison where he can cause no more trouble. We delivered Tash to the authorities. We've broken no laws."

Rasal put his hand on the younger man's arm. The strength in his fingers was enough to crush it to the bone if he chose. He only applied a little pressure which was very persuasive.

"You don't wish a clan war, Eno. It's enough that I won't grant his request. I'll do my duty to your brother. Let him go free. What can he do? If you quarrel—if it doesn't end with the execution tomorrow—then many more will die in what must surely follow when each infraction is met with revenge. This man's sister has been killed, a terrible thing. Now your brother will be killed as payment for it. Let it end there."

Eno wanted to disagree. A part of him wanted to spit in the Anut's face for the other clan's insistence that Tash be executed. It wouldn't return Ghia, as much as he would've been tempted to kill Tash himself if it would bring her back.

He bowed his head, thinking of cousins and uncles who would die in a fruitless clan war. He frowned at Lar even though he tried not to. He and Lar had nearly been friends once. When he'd courted Ghia. It was an almost-friendship because the Hilan and Anut clans had been rivals forever. But then the clan elders decided to forge a truce with a marriage and chose Eno's older brother, Tash, to be paired with her.

Eno nodded reluctantly, exhausted. He hadn't slept in many days.

"Let this anger end with my brother's execution. A life for a life, and then no more," Eno said and then turned to the Ishfntu. "We'll go on to the Hilan hold. There we'll stay until it's time to go to the law altar in the morning. There will be no one at my home to annoy you."

Rasal turned to the guard. "Thank you, Captain. We'll leave now. The public quarrel has ended."

Then he said to Lar Anut, "Our deepest sympathies to your family, sir."

Rasal spoke gently as the three of them rode past. Emana turned to look at the man. He'd lost all composure, doing what no highborn did in public. He was crying.

She wondered how much grief it took to break a person so.

CHAPTER 2

"...in that thy pride is not extinct, art thou the more punished; no torment save thine own rage would be a pain adequate to thy fury."

The Divine Comedy'-Dante

Tash Hila sat in his cell, smiling. He would die tomorrow and was unafraid. He smelled a fire, lingering on its stench, but no fire burned. It was his alone. He'd treasure it, take it with him to the law altar in the morning. Its reek would sustain him.

He had done much of what he'd intended to do.

{The dark...}

His crimes for the most part would never be known. But he was famous enough to be feared.

{The dark...glorious...comforting...}

And when he died tomorrow and was not damned, then all would see that he was right. They would see that the gods and the dark were one. They would see there was no hope...

{The dark...glorious...comforting...commanding and grateful.}

And those who had died at his hands would serve him as a prince in the land of no return.

What a shame he hadn't killed Eno. The dark would understand. Eno would suffer for the rest of his life-however long that might be-for what Tash did to Ghia.

The dark chose its own. Tash used to believe he would eventually find one of these other disciples. Were they not meant to know one another? While they dwelled in the land of the light, they were intended to be alone. This increased sense of purpose. The sense of urgency to kill. And since the act itself was very pleasurable...the dark knew how to entice. Even if the dark hadn't chosen him, Tash would have discovered that for himself.

Indeed he had, when he was a boy, noticing how nice it felt to see a servant cringe, to hear a sweet scream-music. To make the red river flow. He'd experimented with animals—when damaging a slave angered his father. (Slaves costed money but animals were recreated by other animals.) He learned how to draw the pain out, because sudden endings weren't educational. They didn't serve the dark. Most of all, they were hardly worth his trouble.

He progressed as a youth, sent abroad for the education befitting a member of his family. He'd journeyed to India. There he found Kali. Not long ago had been a great war between two royal families, and the plain of Kuruksetra was still burned from mysterious weapons. He could hear the dark as it whispered in a wind over the charred land. He saw a multi-limbed beauty, ample -

breasted and with wide generous hips, dancing in the moonlight, holding dripping human heads aloft. She wore a circle of skulls around her neck that had come from her own sons. This was where Tash made his first great experiment. He impregnated three village girls. They more or less delivered within two months of each other. He strangled the infants, making jewelry from their bones. Kali saw. The dark burned in an incense.

(Would his mother find them in the box in his room? What would she think? But she was very dull-brained and would never feel the power in them. Perhaps she wouldn't even recognize them as human. And had these children of his loins been human? The mothers had twisted limbs. The rumor was that this was caused by the heat the lordly weapons had left behind. No one else had been willing to touch them but he'd found their crippled forms strangely attractive. The infants, too, had anomalies. On the third babe, the thigh bones had crumbled to dust when Tash tried to bore holes into them for stringing.)

He went to Egypt and heard the jackals howl. He studied by day and prowled the alleys of Luxor at night. He cut men apart in the fashion of Osiris, burying the pieces along the river. He dug them up at the following dark of the moon to reassemble them. All save for the penises which he tossed to the crocodiles. None rose. Even when he hollowed out the head of a cow and wore it as Isis, none rose.

Set saw. The dark bathed him in oil.

Tash went to Babylon. Never was there a place more exalted in the day. Never was there a place where the desert at midnight was darkest. The priests taught that in the beginning Tiamat and her consort, Kingu, rose up against the assembly of gods. The son of the chief god was Marduk, and he did battle with them. He slew Tiamat, and from her body he made the universe. From Kingu's blood, Marduk created mankind.

"We came from blood," Tash said in his cell. "And the universe is the vast darkness."

Tash fashioned even more darkness from the dead. He sowed the blood from their corpses into the earth. Someday...what would grow there? His own race. Born to suffer and create suffering.

Marduk saw. The dark put its tongues in Tash's ear and down his throat. It anointed him in the rust spice of dried blood, which was cinnamon.

Tash visited fabled Kur before returning home. In a theater he saw the spectacle of creation from the story of the god Enki and the goddess Ninmah. After making mankind, they had for sport made human freaks such as eunuchs and barren women, crippled and diseased persons. He twisted and molded his Kura harlot into every conceivable horrific shape. He was reminded of the three Indian women he'd had, warped by heat. This was what the gods did.

His whore had then became every god he'd learned of, part humanlike/part animal. Writhing snakes/gore-smeared/serene and creative/angered into uncreating.

She slowly fell into blood. A great amount of blood was almost as black as Kali, as the universe at night created from Tiamat's corpse. All religion was full of blood. She dissolved into a smoke that might have been the darkness seeping under a door. The lamps in the room seemed to go out as the Kura flowed around him and whispered.

The dark whispered.

Did the gods display their strongest power when they formed life? No—when they destroyed it.

He killed his Kura harlot and let her rise up. Butchered her again. He killed her in the form of Soma the bull as he was Mithras. He saw her emerge as Osiris castrated, emasculated. He slowly divested her in Inanna's form of her goddess protections. Then he laid upon her defenseless body the glance of death which Inanna's sister Ereshkergal—mistress of the underworld—had done. Then he put her body on a stake (for three theoretical days and nights). She rose also, resurrected.

The dark whispered, devolved around him.

Tash saw. The dark told him that the secret of power lay in the ruination of life.

One day soon Tash hoped to live in Kur. He would buy a palace and stock it with Kura. He'd play out all the bloody games he could devise. And wheny he finally died, it wouldn't be to go into damnation. The only true damnation was the act of creation without blood. That was unnatural. It went against the gods.

When Tash came home to Vira, the city was being terrorized by a child murderer. Fourteen children had been found over the last lunar cycle with their throats slashed. Tash was convinced that this was the work of another of the dark's disciples.

A man was caught in the act of cutting the throat of the fifteenth victim. The guards who apprehended him were anxious to dispatch him themselves. Their lieutenant knew that it would be a poor judgement to deprive the crowds of his execution.

Tash went to visit him in the prison.

He was a highborn prince of clan Hila. The guard let him linger without escort. Tash peered into the lightless cell, trying to see this other killer.

"The wide sky was made from a cadaver," Tash said quietly, waiting for a response.

What could this man teach him? And what could Tash show him?

"Children are the creation of human loins. You cut their throats. Blood soaked into the ground. Blood is also creation. You were building the race which will serve you in the afterlife. How many have you made?" Tash asked. "I have made hundreds for myself which rose from the red earth and are rising still. I hear their bones jangling when the sun goes down."

Tash listened. The other man didn't respond.

"Did you fuck them before you killed them? Why did you only cut their throats? There are so many ways to prolong the pain. There's more power in that. Or perhaps you know a secret of the power that comes from shocking a soul into sudden death that I haven't learned yet. I'm eager to hear your wisdom," Tash said.

Nothing.

Tash grunted and took a torch from a far wall, near the entrance to this level below ground. He returned to the cell and thrust the firelight into the space containing the child murderer.

Why, the man was curled up like a child himself! He hugged his body with his arms and shivered. If he'd ever had the ability for speech, it was now gone. His mouth was agape and there was only a stubble of tongue. There weren't even any teeth. He was covered in old scars until it appeared as if someone had once mistaken his flesh for parchment, trying to carve cuneiform into it.

This thing had no power. Tash threw the torch down in disgust and left.

And then clan Hila and clan Anut decided to make a pact of truce between their households by marrying Tash to Ghia Anut. Tash's brother Eno was in love with Ghia but Eno was the second son. To be of any value, Ghia had to marry the Hilan inheritor and that was Tash. Tash didn't care for her at all. He'd had the twisted lovelies that heat made and that the frivolous gods made. She was too perfect a beauty. He didn't dare harm her to make her into an image that suited him better. But it did delight him no end that it was breaking his brother's heart and hers. This was also a form of uncreation even though there was no blood involved.

It would do for now.

But how could he marry Ghia Anut if he wanted to return to Kur? All possibilities were limitless there. Oh, well. He must wait until his father died and the estate passed into his hands before he could have control over the Hilan fortune and do as he pleased. Then it would be an easy matter either to abandon Ghia or have her poisoned or drag her to Kur where she could be kept a naked bitch on a leash. Then he could remake her if he chose. With caustics and threaded needles.

But Tash had always had this temper.

It was all right. The dark had a temper. Stars blew up because it lost its temper. The gods had tempers, too, and whole races were lost. A temper was the spark of genius in the divine.

Tash and his brother were escorting Ghia through the market. The scent of imported cypress and cedar timber hung in the air. Eno tried not to look at her as her slim figure in swirling skirts paused at the booths in the bazaar.

"How much for this bracelet?" she asked a metalsmith.

He was using copper ore from Asia Minor and tin ore from the Caucasus Mountains to smelt bronze. His furnace shone as he worked a leather bellows.

Tash purchased it for her, quickly giving the smith money before he could answer to the bracelet's price. Only lowborn asked a price, as if they couldn't afford it.

"Thank you, Tash," Ghia said softly, almost with detectable embarrassment.

Tash might not really want her for himself, but it did gratify him that all male eyes in the market strayed to her. It was followed by their understanding that she was his. There was respect on their faces.

They passed men tanning leathers by soaking them in alum and gallnut. Shoes, sandals, harnesses, saddles and waterbottles made from these leathers were displayed on the ground. The smell made Eno and Ghia wrinkle their noses.

"I've smelled worse," Tash said, smiling. "It's only flesh."

"It's not the leather that smells," Eno told him. "It's what they use on it."

"Could be worse," Tash replied. "It could be soaked in blood."

The glassmakers were using sand, quartz, soda and lime. Their wares sparkled in the sun. The basketmakers rustled. A potter's wheel clattered.

"Letters?" a scribe called from his table. "Do you need letters written?"

A donkey caravan passed, causing Tash and the others to wait until they went by. They had obviously just arrived from the coast where they dealt with ships coming from India. They carried ivory, pearls, brightly colored muslins ornamented with chips of carnelian and glass.

There was a statue of Shiva the Destroyer tucked into a saddlebag. Tash stared at it and felt the dark winking at him. Was he meant to see it at this moment? All things that came and went were meant to be.

A slavetrader had a eunuch for sale up on the block.

That, too, a symbol.

Ghia almost glanced back at Eno. She turned away to touch a pair of felt boots.

"Nice," she said to the turbaned woman. "And this, too. I have never seen wool so white."

A strand of Ghia's hair blew free of her veil and floated around her face. Tash heard Eno sigh, and he wondered if his brother had ever touched her hair. A carpenter's place was ringing with the sound of chisels and saws. A brickmaker was molding bricks into wedges to line a new well with. Tash realized that it was the brickmaker who had sighed at the sight of Ghia's hair.

Ghia heard him, too, and looked at him with a sweet smile. She began to turn away when Tash struck her. Damn her! Would she have smiled at the lowborn if he'd seen her tit?

"Tash!" Eno shouted. He stepped forward, catching the upraised hand before he could hit her again. "What are you doing?"

Tash exploded. She hadn't been respectful. It was bad enough he had to be saddled with her but she should honor him, never raising her eyes to another man for any reason. She should cover her eyes. Or she should pluck them out.

Tash shoved his brother. Eno fell against a stack of the bricks. He cracked his head and sat there, stunned, unable to regain his senses enough to rise. The brickmaker hurried to help him.

"I think you require remaking," Tash said to Ghia as he grabbed a pot of pitch from the booth and splashed it on her.

It bubbled and spat as it flew through the air. It fastened to her like burning leeches. Ghia shrieked as the pitch hissed through the soft garments.

Tash lit a rod in the kiln and touched it to her clothes. She went up like a wicker woman, twisting and warping in the fire.

Better! Much better! At last, here was beauty to suit him.

He was laughing as Eno finally stood up, blood running through his hair. Eno tried to rush forward to Ghia but he would have been burned as well. The brickmaker held him back for it was too late for her. Coated with pitch, she was a human torch. Her soaked layers of veils and skirts trapped her as if she'd been wrapped in oiled paper.

Tash was still laughing when the guards came. He didn't even hear them as they rattled the chains they secured him with. The dark whispered.

It told him a joke.

Eno stopped at the door of the prison. He was there to see his brother. Why? Did he want to tell Tash that he forgave him?

(I do not.)

Did he want to gloat because Tash was going to die for what he did to Ghia? Well, he would watch him die tomorrow. He didn't need to be here for that.

Did he want to ask him why?

That had been Eno's original intention. But he wasn't sure Tash would or could tell him.

Tash was an evil man. The family had always known Tash was cruel but there were levels that none of them understood, including Eno. He'd been a swaggering tyrant before they sent him abroad for his education. Eno remembered a kitten he'd held after finding it convulsing on the floor before Tash's room. Its little bones were broken, the skull smashed yet it was still alive. Eno had been nine-years-old. He'd wept and pet it until it died. What made it worse was hearing Tash on the other side of the door, giggling.

"Cats are sacred, Tash," the boy reminded his eleven-year -old brother.

"Nothing is sacred," came the reply within a hoarse chuckle.

When Tash came back from abroad he was changed, quieter except when he flew into one of his rages. One day shortly after his return, he picked up the body of a dog that had been crushed beneath the wheels of a cart in the courtyard. He brought it into the household's temple and laid it on the altar. He bowed to it, mumbling prayers of devotion as one only said to the sun god.

Eno followed him in. "Tash, what are you doing? That's not sacred."

Tash smiled thinly, eyes slitted as he replied, "Brother, everything is sacred."

When he took the dead dog from the altar, he dragged it across first to leave a wide smear of gore.

He tossed the dog's corpse into a corner. He then looked back at the fouled altar. The dog's blood dripped from all four edges.

"Definitely holier," Tash commented and left.

How could Eno ask him why he killed Ghia? Any statement Tash made to that effect would be carefully constructed to increase Eno's suffering.

(The man is my brother. I should say something to him. I should at least say goodbye.)

He saw a picture in his mind of Ghia, wrapped in flames, veils of fire licking out from her body. Tash deserved to be damned for this. Lar Anut was right about that.

It was unfortunate that Eno had gone to fetch the Ishantu but it was his duty to his family. The picture of Ghia burned and screamed.

Eno fingered the vial in his tunic. His mother had given it to him to sneak to Tash. With just an accidental flick of his thumb, it slipped out and shattered on the brick floor of the prison courtyard. Its contents spread out and were useless.

His delivering of that vial wasn't really a duty to his family. It was illegal anyway. His dropping of it might be construed as a duty to Ghia.

The image of Ghia on fire went out, snuffed as a candle with a tear.

Eno went home.

"Do you think Memyt is keeping the birds from our grain?" Emana asked Rasal, her cheek against his stomach.

"Are you joking? I can hear him barking at them all the way across the mountains," Rasal replied.

They looked up at the stars. The main house of the Hilan hold was two-storied, with a small stairway that led to the second floor and an even smaller set of steps that led to the flat roof. Many people in the city of Vira slept on their roofs when the weather was very hot. The members of the Hilan family itself wouldn't do this. The servants sometimes did. Tonight wasn't really too warm so there was no one else on the roof but the Hathors. They'd come up to sleep because it felt closer to the world than the interior of the big house. Ishantu didn't live in cities. Their own houses were as open to the elements as they could make them and still consider them to be dwellings which protected their working tools from storms and dust.

Besides, the household was already grieving for their son Tash and for the scandal. Emana and Rasal found the aura stifling. They would have felt uncomfortable making love within the walls where a family mourned. So they made love on the roof.

"Memyt hates it when we go away for a few days," Emana said. "I think he's afraid we won't be back."

"You're certainly worried about Memyt," Rasal grinned. "You must miss him. Close your eyes and listen."

Rasal barked and growled, doing a surprisingly good imitation. Emana laughed.

"Is that better now? Do you miss him less?"

She nodded.

"You know, darling, there are one or two other things I can do after a dog's fashion," he said and then began to pant.

"I don't doubt it," she told him as she reached up to pat his head.

They heard a horse in the yard below. They crawled to the edge of the roof and looked down. Eno dismounted, and a servant took the horse by the reins to lead it away.

"Where do you suppose he's been at this late hour?" Emana asked.

"Probably to the prison," Rasal replied. He read the young man's pain, had a flash across his mind of a woman as a torch. He touched his wife's fingers and then clasped her hand, bringing it to his lips. He kissed it and added, "I'm glad I love you."

Emana, too, felt the Hilan's broken heart, seeing the afterimage of Eno's beloved in fire.

"I'm glad I love you," she said to her husband. "I'm glad we're Ish fntu."

"Yet I was afraid when you were thrown from your horse, and I had to bury you." Rasal squeezed her hand. "Even though I knew you'd come back to me."

"His Ghia cannot return."

"Actually, my love, I do believe she came back to him tonight, even if only briefly."

CHAPTER 3

"Who came to life yesterday, died today."
'Poem of the Righteous Sufferer'—Mesopotamian

A large crowd assembled in the plaza that surrounded the law altar. It wasn't often that people got to see the severest of justice meted out to a prince. Many had witnessed Tash Hila's murder of Ghia Anut in the marketplace. Stories had quickly circulated, turning his cruelty into instant legend.

If they expected to see him froth at the mouth and gnash his teeth like a rabid dog, they were disappointed as he was led by the guards to the edge of the amphitheater. He was aloof and smiling. He was composed with a frightening dignity that was certain only of the rite of execution. There would be no damnation for him. The dark was grateful.

Tash Hila was marched down the hundred steps, flanked by the law priest and Rasal Hathor. Emana stood on the top step, beyond the throngs. No one else was allowed into the amphitheater.

The vampire frowned, studying each step as they descended into the pit. The stains were many, brown to black to fresher—more recently added—reds. History said that the amphitheater had once been white but no calcimine spots gave it away after the years of slaughter. As did all his people, Rasal believed that the death penalty was useless. It had never stopped murder nor hindered the public's appetite for butchery. He glanced at the sea of audience above. They were only present to witness the carnage and be entertained, to see if perhaps the sin drink wouldn't be effective. The life goddess may have doubled in persona as the death goddess but She mourned senseless endings, weeping over each fallen child in Her nature.

Rasal tried not to wince as he walked next to Tash Hila. The man's aura was a sickening fever. The man didn't sweat but the poison in him was strong. It made Rasal's mouth dry as he considered what the sin in this creature's blood would taste like.

Worse still was the aura of the priest who killed hundreds upon this altar. He was a barrel of a man with arms of corded muscle and a neck as thick as a bull's. His executioner's robes were woven of wool and the threads of human sinew from those who had met justice here. The material glistened in the sun, rustling as if the voices of the condemned were still whispering prayers for mercy.

Rasal shuddered, wondering what it was like to know that, when death came, there was no return. To live with such a cloud of finality over one's existence must be depressing, conscious in every mortal moment. Rasal had died eight times in his century -plus and had never feared death for himself. (For Emana, yes. That was the natural concern for anyone as in love as he.)

Was Tash Hila frightened? Even with the vampire present to drink his sin? If he was afraid, he hid it well. Surely he'd witnessed executions here and understood what would be done.

Rasal should have sensed fear in him. Instead he sensed a festering heat as Tash relived precisely what he'd done to Ghia Anut. He joyously relived the splashing of the pitch, the lighting of her with the fire from the brickmaker's kiln. He saw her turn, dancing the death jig in the flames, changing into the twisted thing Tash found lovely. He imagined the heat from the fire of her that he'd stood close enough to feel. His erection had granted him an orgasm that carried him briefly from the marketplace and into temples where he danced with Kali and with jealous Set and with all the freaks of Enki and Ninmah. Tash held the memory as a constant delirious moment. He also held onto the joy of blowing on Ghia's flames even though she was dead, even though the guards had chained him and were dragging him away, blowing to make them flare and spit higher.

Even now, rampant remorselessness was what Rasal sensed. Tash was planning to relive this as he was killed—his finest, most satisfying rage.

At the bottom of the steps, Rasal asked him formally, "It's not necessary for you to repent before I release you of your eternal burden. But I must ask, do you repent, Tash Hila?"

Tash sneered at the vampire. His feet were by the gutter that would carry his blood down the drains.

He wasn't worried. The dark was grateful.

"I only wish I could spit in my blood before you drink it," Tash told him, laughter rumbling up from his gut. What did he have to lose by showing rudeness to his savior? The vampire couldn't refuse; no Ishantu did. "I hope it makes you ill."

"Not to worry," Rasal replied, unable to help smiling back. "We Ishantu do not vomit."

The priest removed Tash's flimsy robe with one ripping gesture and then tossed it like a flag up into the air. The muscles in his arm coiled and sprang, a champion's throw. It fluttered wildly and then cascaded in the engineered updraft over the hundred steps toward the crowd. They fought to possess it as a souvenir. Rasal never failed to be impressed by this. He didn't think even he would have the necessary strength to propel a simple robe with enough force to have it actually fly all the way up over the rim of the amphitheater, updraft or no. And he had an Ish fntu's superior strength.

The priest made Tash lie back on the altar, head level but his arms and legs hanging over the sides. The priest indicated he would now grant access to the vampire.

Rasal took the gold needle from the chain at his neck and cut an incision into the condemned man's throat, quickly putting his mouth to the well of blood. It pumped freely from the artery, hot and foul, full of the screams from his many sins. They rang in Rasal's ears, leapt about his skull trying to find an exit, wept down his throat. The blood was even more bitter than he

thought it would be. It hissed with viciousness until he knew that his own eyes must reflect the ferocity. He closed them tightly, sucked deeply, felt the crimes pass from the man's body, then sealed the wound with his tongue. The artery did not so much as seep a drop.

Rasal stepped back, swallowing repeatedly to get the crude taste to wash away in his own saliva. Tash paled but was uninjured. He sighed, suddenly confused.

"I thought I would feel different," Tash admitted, a wicked grin spreading across his face at last. "It doesn't bestow holiness. I only wish I could make a new sin and rip out your heart, vampire."

The priest stepped forward to bind Tash's arms and legs to the sides of the altar, adjusting the clamp around his neck so he couldn't move his head.

Rasal looked away and up to where Emana waited dutifully for him on the top step. He would need much comforting from her tonight. For several nights, as Tash Hila's sin worked through him. Such things couldn't be digested, but they might be absorbed, vanquished after they tormented his dreams for a while.

The last execution he'd contracted for was a child murderer. The man was so fetal, he'd had to be carried through the crowd. The priest had been forced to break the man's arms and legs before he could lay him flat to secure him to the altar. Rasal had drunk and then seen him as a boy.

A ghoul-faced wanderer had stolen this man at a young age. He'd cut out the boy's tongue so he couldn't scream as he was raped and tortured. He knocked out all the boy's teeth so he couldn't bite the wanderer as the fiend forced a penis into his mouth. He'd carved the names of demons into the boy's flesh with a scribe's stylus and made him sleep in the rotting carcasses of animals the wanderer had butchered. He took the boy home again and told him, "I'm coming back for you."

The boy had grown into the man who couldn't scream. He saw the wanderer's shadow everywhere. He smelled his foul breath in the streets even during the day. He knew he must save the other children of Vira. He made them scream once, a release for his own, and because no one should ever be kept from that cry to heaven. Then he cut their throats quickly, letting them die with as little suffering as possible. So that the ghoul-faced wanderer would never get them. In nightmares Rasal had traveled a landscape of children's corpses, trees sprouting branches of little arms and legs, tiny skull flowers with tongues cut out and teeth broken, a stagnant lake of blood in the middle of which a young boy drowned—his body face down and drifting. All the time hearing their crying in the wind, high sweet voices almost in song, a choir of innocent helplessness. He woke each hour of each night for a week, screaming in the boy's lost voice, sobbing into Emana's arms, needing to be nursed back by the blood at her breast which was jade and nutmeg.

That child murderer had been sick, driven mad from the singular horrific event of his youth. But he hadn't been evil. Even his cruelty had been confined to quick deaths he believed were merciful, when compared to what the ghoul-faced wanderer would do to them. Rasal knew that the man had only thought he'd seen the shadow of the wanderer again. It was the manifestation of the scream he'd never been able to make.

There was a line between insanity and genuine evil. Having tasted Tash Hila's blood, Rasal knew that Tash was evil. He wasn't precisely rational either but his intentions had definitely been wicked. And there was a voice, whispering, soaring into a darkness that was sanguine beyond anything even an Ish fntu understood. How would he ever bear the nightmares that must come from such a man's sin?

The priest withdrew the sacred blade from the scabbard and began to flay the condemned man. He made incisions at the shoulders and hips to pull the skin away from the torso. He also made cuts around the scrotum and rolled the flesh up along the abdomen, coring out the navel. Tash's arms and legs convulsed yet he was unable to move his body. He tried to fight crying out, but he finally screamed as the last tug brought the entire front tunic of torso skin away in the priest's hands. The fat and muscle beneath shone, beaded with blood. It stank where the knife had slipped, causing the intestines to protrude from the belly in a couple of purplish knots. These pulsed as Tash shrieked.

Rasal bit his lip, wondering how anyone who should be well practised at the capital scrape could be so clumsy. The stench of bile almost overwhelmed and he was a doctor. It drifted up to the crowd which leaned in to inhale it.

Yet Tash didn't faint. His eyes moved wildly, jerking back and forth in their sockets even if he couldn't move his head. It went on as each limb was peeled back in turn. At last, only his head and back still possessed skin. Only the front was ever flayed. Traditionally, this left the soul unable to face the gods. He must turn his back like a dog, unable to see their beauty.

Next the priest turned his attention to the stationary skull. He brought out the trepanning saw and began to cut a hole in the center of Tash's forehead. Now Tash sweated, pinkish perspiration running in rivulets down from his scalp, oozing in rain from the sweat glands so recently opened to the air, burning into the tender raw wounds that were his flayed torso and limbs. Tash was all fever, crying out obscenities until the priest stuffed the stripped skin into his mouth to gag him.

The crowd beyond cheered this. They had been to enough of these that most of the adjuncts to the ritual were known to them. This was the common means of silencing the condemned so that he couldn't blaspheme.

Rasal continued to look away and up at his wife, wishing only that he could be through with this and in her arms. He wanted to be away from one of the few moments in his existence when he regretted being Ishantu and vampire.

The priest prepared for the final part of the ritual as he removed the roughly circular piece of skull, tossing it up into the waiting crowd. It sailed like a small saw-toothed discus. It was no larger than a coin. Rasal couldn't understand why anyone should want to possess such a fetish. He'd seen vendors in the market selling these on thongs as necklaces, backed with

needles for use as brooches, the name of the condemned painted across in cheap gilt.

Tash's brain was exposed. He choked, strangling on the skin he'd half-swallowed in his attempts to vent his agony through screaming. Blood welled up past the edges of the gag in his mouth and was spilling down his cheeks, flowing over his chin. His eyes rolled to the whites, and Rasal doubted he would live long enough to receive the last torture.

The priest withdrew the needle from its tube, pulling on gloves to protect his hands in case there were any cracks in his own skin. The needle was coated with a highly concentrated resin of—among other ingredients—crushed nox vomica seeds from the strychnos trees. He inserted this through the trepanned hole and into the meat of the condemned man's brain.

Within seconds the convulsions started along Tash Hila's spine. He thrashed harder than before, the stricture at his throat pressing him back until it finally cut through his swollen larynx and trachea. The excised skin bunched out of the opening as he smothered, gurgled, and yet managed to pull one flayed arm out of its binding to flail toward his neck. He thrashed wildly, until the already skinned torso crackled as he broke his hips in the seizure.

These slowed eventually as Tash Hila's convulsions tapped down to nothing. There were a few more spasms, blood bubbling indigo around the lips where the gag had slipped further inside, and at the slash in the throat from the ligature. And then the murderer was dead, flies starting to light on the fleshless body.

For seconds there was only the sound of their buzzing in the air.

"There it is!" several people in the crowd shouted at once.

Everyone, including Rasal, looked as a gray smoke rose from Tash's chest, glinting in the sunlight. It took on mass as it flowed upward toward the sky. It also took on the vague form of a man, arms outstretched, reaching backward for the world, hands fluttering as if afraid to fall. It revolved until the soul faced the sky again and then it began to sail away, much as his robe had when the priest tossed it from the altar. Only the soul didn't come down into the crowd as the robe had. It went out across the city.

Everyone held their breaths, waiting. But Tash Hila's spirit wasn't to be further tormented for his sin.

The dark was grateful.

The sin sat upon the belly of the vampire who staggered in anguish up the hundred steps, seeking only Emana's gentle consolation.

"Rasal?" Emana took one step down to greet him, worry on her face. He looked so tired this time.

"It was terrible," he whispered as he neared her.

"I'll help you get it out of your system. I'll love you until the wicked blood is rendered null," she said.

His feet dragged. His eyes were confused. She knew what he was going through for she'd done the sin drink, had cried out in her sleep, seen and felt the suffering of the damned—of those who would truly have been damned if not for this holy service.

"I need you," Rasal told her, pausing several steps below. He staggered. "I don't think I can make it."

She started down to help him, outstretching her arm to put around his waist to hold him up. Rasal was close enough she could smell the frankincense that imbued his clothes and the braids of his hair.

Then someone pushed her. She fell against the cold stone of the steps.

There was a whistle in the air.

Rasal's head was separated from his body. It rolled down the hundred steps, all the way even as the rest of him only slid down the top few. His hands went up briefly for seconds after he'd been decapitated—the reflex of a body already dead. But the eyes opened and closed on the beloved face as it stared up from the pit where it landed by the feet of the executioner at the law altar. That wasn't merely reflexive; it was aware.

Emana didn't even look up to see Lar Anut with the sword in his hand, shrieking at the tops of his lungs, "They should have taken the Hilan's soul! That would have been justice! You freed him and I have you for it!"

Guards wrestled him down, disarming him easily, for Lar didn't seem ready to kill anyone other than the Ishantu he felt had robbed his sister of her due as a victim. He could have gone after Tash himself, Emana thought. That was who really killed Ghia. He could have attacked while Tash was being led through the crowd to the pit. Then he could have been assured that Tash wouldn't escape damnation.

Why had he needed to murder Rasal?

She looked at the opened eyes of her husband, terrified in realization of what had happened and what it meant. Rasal knew that he'd been sundered and couldn't rise from his grave. She watched, one braceleted arm reaching down from where she'd fallen on the stone steps—toward the head as it closed its eyes—down to touch the body already growing stony without Rasal's force to animate it.

The sword Lar Anut had used clattered only a few feet from her. She heard the guards as they fought to keep him on his face, chaining his hands and feet to carry him away. She could pick up that sword, couldn't she? Pick it up and claim the justice that everyone seemed to insist existed in death.

But Ishantu didn't kill. Ishantu didn't strike blows. They healed and blessed.

"I have you for it I have you have you!" Lar was laughing, choking against the bare ground of the upper amphitheater. The crowd babbled as the city guards forced them back.

"Stop that fool!" a guard cried to another as someone leapt the barricade and began running down steps to retrieve Rasal's head.

Emana identified him as a vendor by his garb. Yes, a vampire's head might have powers for sale, mightn't it? He could sell it hair by hair, tooth by tooth. He could sell the brain by the thimblefuls and demand only gold coins for a whole eye.

Two guards bounded down the steps after him. The executioner stood motionless with his wrestler arms folded as the vendor bent and grabbed the severed head by the braids. The guards jumped the last few steps to land squarely in the pit, blood spattering up from the gutters as their boots hit the pools. They clubbed the vendor until he dropped Rasal's head. The resulting strike of it against the stones was wet.

"Sorry, my lord," one of them mumbled to the priest.

The executioner smiled thinly and pointed up toward Lar Anut. "I will see him soon."

"No doubt," the other guard agreed.

One hundred and thirty years, over. They might have been together for another century and a half even though they would've been old by then. Soon, they might have had children together.

"You must keep back, sir," Emana heard a guard say at the rim of the pit.

"I'm Eno Hila. Let me past to help this lady. She and her husband have been staying at my home," a voice insisted.

He was allowed to pass. He knelt beside her and put his cloak around her shoulders.

"Emana," he told her gently, "let me take you home with me. You should see no more of this. My kinsmen will retrieve Rasal. I'm very sorry this happened. We could never have foreseen this. Your husband was blameless."

She shook her head in shock. "He's been sundered."

"I know," Eno replied, pale because everyone knew that even Ishantu couldn't heal if their bodies had been divided.

"We must get him into the ground as quickly as possible," Emana said as she stiffened in Eno's arms. She suddenly looked very determined. "Immediately. Today."

"Lady..."

"I'll wait for him. I'll wait and pray he rises. They may return," she said as if repeating a litany, "if someone waits for them. If someone loves enough to sit at their grave and wait."

"This is why Lar Anut should've been arrested when he tried to get Rasal to forego the sin drink. If Lar had been in prison, he couldn't have interfered. I ought to have insisted. But Rasal was also right about the threat of clan war. Is it possible that we could have found a way to avert this tragedy?" Eno groaned, his hands trembling as he lifted Emana. He mostly carried her up the few steps as she swooned.

Eno turned to a captain. "It won't be necessary for her to attend the trial, will it?"

"There were hundreds of witnesses today," the captain replied. "Her presence might not be required. They may need only a deposition."

Eno carried Emana to the Hilan litter that waited beyond the crowd. He used his dagger to open a vein in his arm so that she could drink for strength. He knew he'd had to bring the Ishantu to save Tash from damnation but he felt responsible. If he'd not been willing to bring Rasal, then another from the clan would have been sent. Eno would have been disgraced in front of his family.

He didn't know if an Ishantu had ever been murdered before. No one dared, knowing how the general population revered them for their generosity and ability to heal even the most serious diseases. Even the stupid vendor had gone after the head because he knew that every fragment would be prized as sacred.

Lar would be condemned as Tash had been. By the end of the week another highborn's execution would draw a huge audience to watch the ritual on the law altar. Maybe this would end it. One more life to even things out. To make it possible to say that enough was enough.

Chapter 4

"...I know where to cheer your spirit;
Bridegroom, sleep in our house until dawn."—Mesopotamian

Rasal was buried with his head stitched to his neck using a special thread manufactured from Indian 'sida' weed, soaked in Emana's blood. Eno insisted that his clan allow the Ishantu to be buried in the fertile earth of their rose garden. This was behind the great house between two doors: one that opened onto the small chapel where the household gods were, and the other which led down to the mausoleum under the house where the family dead were buried. They'd just put Tash down there, with less ceremony than the eldest sons of the past. He had disgraced the name of Hila.

Lady Hila stood in the chapel entrance, looking at the vampire sitting in the garden. Vira was a port on the Caspian Sea where the soil produced abundant growth. It was salty but not as salty as the land in the mountains and across the desert. Even some of the other lakes were so bitter as to not support fish. But here was the richest place in Media, even if the climate was different than across the mountains. There it was warm all the time. Here it was hot in the summer and cold in the winter. But here she could have her roses, and Lady Hila balked at the notion of having some of them dug up to bury the murdered Ishantu beneath them.

She stared out at her rows of white roses, half-expecting some of them to turn red before her eyes.

She turned to Eno and said, "I don't understand what good this may do. He was decapitated. He can't rise."

"Emana Hathor wishes to wait for him. We'll grant her this kindness since it was while doing a valuable service for this family that her husband was murdered," Eno explained. "This is decency. Who knows? Perhaps Rasal Hathor will return from the dead because she waits for him."

His mother eyed him. "That takes three days, doesn't it? Who will care for her as she sits this vigil? The family is occupied with the rituals of mourning Tash. Even if he was a monster, these things must be observed."

Eno sighed. "I'll take care of her, Mother."

"You also have mourning rituals to perform for your brother."

He didn't face her as he replied, "I grieve for Ghia. I have no more duty toward Tash."

"I was told your brother suffered greatly," Lady Hila said stiffly. "What happened to the vial I sent to the prison with you on the eve of the execution?"

"An unfortunate accident. It was broken. I'm sorry, Mother."

"It broke?"

"It fell from my tunic. The finger of a god perhaps?"

She bowed her head. She hadn't had a great maternal love for her eldest son. Indeed, it had always been difficult for her to lavish affection on any of her children. If she loved anyone, it was Eno. She hated to admit that it might be because he was so honorable that he'd likely never disgrace the family. The only reason she was annoyed that he failed to get the vial to Tash was that Tash's agony on the altar made the family even more uncomfortable. It was a public affirmation of their shame.

"Do what you must for the Ishantu," she said. "But do one favor for me." "Yes, Mother?"

"I've been in your brother's room and found a box from his time abroad. It mustn't remain in the house. It's cursed."

She didn't tell him what she'd found in it. If the contents of it profoundly disturbed her, the Lady Hila wouldn't show it.

Emana sat on the ground beside the patch of turned earth. She'd been sitting there for three days and now it was the third night of her vigil. She rubbed her legs where they cramped and draped her linen gown across them in the chill of the dark, having bared these same legs to the heat of noon.

Eno brought goblets of honeyed blood to her but she refused them. This was a time for fasting. If Rasal was to rise again, she had to be very careful. She must be absolutely circumspect in her manner as she called upon all her power to draw him up again with her love.

She could see that no one really believed that Rasal would come back to her. The servants peeked as she sat in the garden. She sensed their faces as they tiptoed back and forth between the chapel and the mausoleum below the house, tending the family members in the rituals of grief. She overheard their whispering that sorrow might drive even Ishantu mad. They came near her to collect rose petals for the incense and fumigants, trying not to intrude as Emana crouched near the grave, flattening her palms against the soil. One maid knelt and laid a single white rose near Emana's hand. It wasn't a gesture of hope. It was only one of pity, for what woman couldn't sympathize with another who had lost her husband?

The soil pulsed beneath Emana's skin. There was life there. The goddess was well known here, as She was everywhere. This ground was especially fertile. But it wasn't a requirement for healing that the burial ground of an Ishantu be capable of growing delicate roses and lush mulberry. Anywhere in the flesh of the earth sufficed for She was in all places be they granite or loam, red clay or black farmland. She was even in the bitterest land around Lake Urumiyeh.

Was She here?

She had to be.

But would She mend Emana's Rasal and let him return to her?

Emana felt the throb of the ground, a planetary heartbeat. It was the spark of the womb. All that grew upon the world and in its cauldrons went into it to be changed.

It was after sunset. Shouldn't Emana be sensing stirrings?

Yes, his arms would jerk, struggling to push the earth above him. He would feel it cool on his fingers, buzzing slightly, the thrill of pins and needles as he re-awakened to senses that were no more a cold tingling than the kiss of ice crystals in winter.

It would be in the dead of a winter common to Vira but not to their home. It could get cold here in the north. While not that much farther south beyond the mountains—in the great salt desert—it warmed all the way to Sumer and the gulf.

Warm. His mouth would open. AH. Earth would tumble into it. It would be soft against the tongue and teeth. He wouldn't choke on it but would let it be swallowed like a draught of mint wine with a tincture of opium. The flesh of the throat would reweave, the severed veins and arteries would find their lost ends to join again, and the muscles would flow together.

His open mouth would whisper the goddess's name.

LILIT.

Even as Emana murmured it now, chanting it for three days and three nights. Without sleeping. With prayer in endless invocation.

LILIT.

He would grow stronger, clouds parting from his mind, blood a taste of worldliness in his mouth. His heart would beat in the first irregular rhythm that was but two syllables.

LI.....LIT.

LI....LIT.

Emana would feel this rhythm on her palms, knowing that much more than a miracle was happening here. Ishantu created miracles for the other races every day. This was nothing to ask. Because she waited for him, waited as no one had ever waited before.

"Lilit, flavor of sacred salt......soft as mixed breaths, Lilit, scent of flowers......light like sun through rain, Lilit, rocks full of ghost faces......slow life up like a tree reaching, Lilit, peace in these red mouths......arisen from the last shadow of the night, Lilit."

Overhead the moon was an opal, iridescent and afire as Emana saw it through the crosshatched veins in her exhausted eyes.

Usually the moon was a pearl. And the pearl when ground and added to lemon juice cured the falling sickness. When bruised and added to milk it dissolved ulcers.

What did this opal moon do? It shimmered in the sky, flashing pale colors as she heard the far northern skies did on occasion in distant Karn. The Kel tribes there had a ritual of making bonfires after the streaks and bands of light were seen, leaping these fires as the gods must those northern lights in order to go from earth to heaven and back again.

She couldn't even see the stars for that moon. This made her shiver. It couldn't be a good omen. But surely it was only because she needed sleep and blood.

She needed Rasal.

There was no sense of him moving below the earth.

"Lilit. Lilit?" she half-sobbed, desperate. "Lilit? Let him return. Mend him and help him rise. I abide; time beguiles me. I ask out of love on this magic night. Lilit?"

She could be sitting quietly. Many did their vigils in silence. They would remain as still as stone idols, breaths measured until they wisped to almost nothing. Their hearts were in the barely detectable beat of trance.

Some sang until they grew hoarse.

Some did a slow dance above the grave that surely must make them topple over, unconscious after three days, but which never did that. They arched their backs, did floating pirouettes, bent to brush their fingertips in reverence to the ground.

But their loved ones hadn't been murdered. They didn't lie severed and beyond the normal reach of Ishantu resurrection. Emana put her palms flat against the turned soil and pleaded, entreating that it be enough that she wait.

That special bond between two people must transcend death. It was why every Ishantu who met with accident and was put into the earth had to have someone waiting or they couldn't return. Without love involved as the drawing force, death was merely death.

Was the end.

The opal moon sparkled, fogged, spread a mist across the whole of midnight. It sank. And what was in the sky was not the fabled northern lights of Karn. It was the sunrise.

Eno was walking between the rose bushes. She knew him by his footfall. Rasal hadn't risen.

"No!" Emana cried. She began to dig down to him. It wasn't hard. Ishfntu were never buried too deeply. A couple of feet. The ground was soft, beads of it rolling between her fingers.

Eno began running up the path.

She scrabbled down, tossing the earth behind her the way Memyt did when he was digging toward a treasured bone. Her nails broke. She reached Rasal's corpse, head still stitched to the neck, the threads wet and clammy. His muscled body was nothing as she remembered. It had neither grace nor beauty now. Worms and maggots found even Ish fntu bodies. And there were many worms in this fertile rose garden. Flies had moved from Tash Hila's flayed corpse to Rasal's wound in moments at the law altar, laying their eggs.

It was too late. The sun was coming up on the fourth day after his murder, and he wasn't alive.

Only in this city with its wells and watered gardens would this body rot. She could take him home to the salt desert, and there he would preserve.

No, she could still save him. She must save him.

She dragged his body up to the surface and bit into the vein of her soft wrist. She spread her blood across his face and bloated lips.

"Drink, my love. Be healed through me. I've waited and now have to mend you myself. Drink, Rasal," she begged as she chewed to make her wound bigger. Blood ran down his dead face, slick in the morning light.

"No, Lady." Eno sighed as he knelt beside her, trying to make her face him. "Lady, it's over. He's gone. You did all that anyone could do for him, but he's gone."

Emana smeared the blood through Rasal's braids, across his eyelids, down the bridge of his nose.

"Not as long as I wait," she said simply.

Eno grabbed her hand and forced her to put it against the dead man's breast.

"Feel that, Emana," he told her sternly, knowing that he had to quickly bring her out of this fantasy. "There's no heartbeat. No life at all. Not even a sleeping trace of it. You're a healer. You would know that slumbering heartbeat if there was one. It isn't there."

She tried to pull away. Then she finally gave in to trying to sense some fragile pulse, a subtle proof of animation waiting. She hadn't really tried that hard to pull away from Eno. She was stronger than him and might have hurt him.

There was no pulse. The blood had pooled in Rasal's legs and buttocks. The texture of the skin was of flaccid bark. The delicate lines of his veins in those muscular arms were collapsed.

"Bless him and let him go, Lady," Eno whispered.

Emana made a sign in her blood against each of Rasal's closed eyes—that had watched her with such terror after he'd been beheaded. Then she leaned against Eno and wept.

It was another stifling summer night and Emana was grateful for it. It gave her an excuse not to sleep under the Hilan roof but on top of it. This was where she'd spent the final night with Rasal. It was easy to look up at the stars and remember. She would be going home soon, when a box she'd ordered for the transport of her husband's body was ready.

It had been five days since she relinquished her vigil above the spot in the garden where Rasal was buried. Lar Anut had been convicted four days ago. His execution date was tomorrow.

But that wasn't her concern. She wouldn't be there at the law altar. The Ishantu Norle Ysps would descend the hundred steps with the man who murdered Rasal.

Emana whispered to the wind, "Rasal? Where are you? Where does death take you?"

The Ishantu seldom troubled themselves with thoughts of the condition of the soul after death. They were more concerned with healing and maintaining life. Since they lived three centuries and were virtually without sin, they didn't consider judgement. That they recognized there was an underworld figured only into the manner in which they treated humans—like glass. They always wondered why it was that humans—who were so breakable and easily drawn into that shadowy place—didn't treat each other better.

Emana knew about that underworld for she'd seen it in her visions. But she couldn't believe it was possible that Rasal was in such a place.

There had to be somewhere better.

There was a noise, a rattling. Someone was climbing the steps that would bring them to the roof. Eno's head and shoulders appeared in the dark. He slowly lifted a torch as he peered across the surface of the roof to find her.

"Lady? A representative from clan Anut waits in the garden to speak to you," he said. "If you say the word, I'll send him away."

Lady Hila first refused to let him in. But Eno had more common sense. To refuse entrance to a member of the Anuts would be a serious affront at this point. After all, the first blows were struck by clan Hila. He was, at any rate, there to see Lady Hfthor. Only Emana could deny such an audience.

It was obvious why he'd come.

Emana glanced at the stars a last time and sighed. She couldn't refuse to see him. She descended the ladder with Eno and arranged the veils of her widowhood about her face, covering her sharp beauty with gauze. She went into the garden and held out both hands with the palms up. The roses all around were pale in the moonlight.

Eno stood nearby, taking the place of a male member of her own family to be present at a meeting with a strange man, not understanding that Ish fntu didn't observe such customs. Male or female, being healers they were always available to anyone. But Eno was proud to be her guardian. He was impressed by her grace, her strength when considering what she'd endured.

"Clan Anut asks you to drink the sin of Lar Anut," the solemn Cien pronounced.

Eno stiffened, even though he'd known why the man had come. It was the same thing he'd asked of Rasal not so many days ago.

But this was different.

"How can you ask this lady to drink the sin of the man who murdered her husband before her very eyes? Whose sin was that murder?" Eno asked quietly, since Emana hadn't answered.

Emana only put a hand to her throat. She drew in a slow breath.

"There are no others we can ask," Cien replied without turning to face Eno. He remained facing the vampire with eyes that were trained not to betray emotion. Eno couldn't blame him for this studied grimness. He could imagine how uncomfortable the man was, here on such a mission, caught between two crimes. Having to ask a favor of a woman who had no reason whatever to grant it. "Just as Eno Hila traveled beyond Vira to seek Ishantu aid, so did we. My cousin Dek was returning with the healer Norle Ysys when the vampire was attacked by a lion. Dek was wounded defending her. They are being cared

for by nomads and can't make it here by the appointed time of execution. It would take too long to ride far enough for another sin drinker. We need you, Lady Hathor, or my brother Lar will be damned."

Emana hadn't considered this possibility. She didn't think she would ever have to set eyes on Lar again, on the face that laughed after separating Rasal's head from his body...the sword whistling in the air...the eyes/Rasal's eyes open and horrified at the bottom of the hundred steps.

It seemed impossible that she would have to save this man who'd robbed her of everything.

Except that she was Ishantu, and Ishantu didn't refuse the sin drink.

She glanced at Eno who gazed back with compassion. She knew he wanted to say to her that no one truly expected her to do this thing, that no one with any feelings would lose respect for her if she refused. He wanted to say, One word and I'll throw him out. We'll seek to postpone the sentence so that another Ishantu can be fetched to the city.

That was an alternative.

But Lar Anut was a prince, and it was important for his sentence to be carried out before people forgot. Before the atmosphere cooled and his family found a way to have it lifted—or bribed guards to see to his escape. Not that Emana believed in such social murders. She'd always been of the same opinion as Rasal: that one life didn't bring back another. It was a useless waste of the wonderful life's gift of blood.

What would Rasal have done?

The honorable thing, same as any vampire healer.

She lowered her head and said toward the floor, "I will."

She couldn't say it to the Anut's face for it resembled Lar's too much. That brought out feelings she was ashamed of.

Cien Anut bowed.

Eno came to take her arm. Under her feet she felt nothing of the life in the ground that had been her handsome Rasal. How far had the worms gone now?

CHAPTER 5

"Go to the underworld, Enter the door like flies." "The Descent Of Inanna" —Mesopotamian

The crowd made Emana dizzy. They stared at her with such attention to every detail: the gold chain that glittered around her neck—shining through the veils, the delicate weave of the gauze itself that was almost luminous across her skin, at her very red mouth visible through the veil as it blew across it (just as the scarlet planet Lahmu in the midnight hour). They knew that she was the victim's wife. What were they thinking? Many reached out to touch her dress as she walked by with the guards as her escorts.

She stopped. Almost at her feet was a small boy who had a wound festering on his leg. The smell of this reached her before she even looked down to see him. He must have been bitten by a rat. Pus bubbled at the greenish edges.

"Please wait a moment," Emana said to the guards.

She slipped a silver ring from her smallest finger and spit on it, the saliva ruby with blood in the froth. She bent to the child and said gently, "Don't be afraid. This will hurt but briefly."

She used her longest finger to push the spittled ring into his wound, as deep into the rot as it would go. She pulled her finger out and wiped the suppuration onto her skirt. He wimpered but to his credit didn't cry. A woman who must have been his mother quickly knelt beside him.

Emana continued on with the guards.

A shout went up from the crowd. "It's healing!"

She didn't turn back. She'd known it would heal the child. His life was saved, for the gangrene would surely have killed him before another morning dawned. Moments before the taking of one life commenced, another was rescued. She didn't allow herself to linger on this. She was holding herself in tightly, afraid that the slightest wobble in her control would cause her to weep.

The crowd withdrew for a few seconds to watch the boy, then scurried to catch up as Emana marched to the rim of the amphitheater. Lar Anut and the executioner were waiting. She saw immediately that Lar wasn't haughty as Tash Hila had been. He was strangely subdued.

He's drugged, she decided.

There was a smell on him that she'd noted when Eno came home in the darkness the night before Tash's appointment with the altar. Eno's tunic had smelled of this same drug. Yet Tash hadn't been drugged. Had Eno decided at the last moment not to give it to his brother? Had his vision of his beloved in flames anything to do with it?

Yes, it had everything to do with it.

Lar would feel no pain.

It didn't surprise her but she was ashamed that it annoyed her as much as it did. Surely it was natural and understandable that any victim would wish to be as oblivious to as much of this sordid brutality as possible. A few even took their own lives in prison rather than undergo the torture of the law altar. Of course, suicides didn't have their blood sins drained away, so how much did they really save themselves?

Drugged. Emana's eyes swam for a moment, torn between her grief and memories of condemned men shrieking under the executioner's knife. If she could, she'd have given poppy to all of them. But would she give it to Lar?

Shrieks. Bitter blood full of murder. Nightmares full of victims in terrains of gore and horror. Innocents slaughtered with flowering staffs oozing the sap of blood, and those not-so innocent impaled with justice.

If Lar had Rasal screaming in his blood, would morphium in that blood soothe Emana? Would this vision be easier—sleepier—for her to absorb?

It was illegal to drug the condemned. But bribes could always be made to officials, and prison guards were loathe to search highborn visitors too thoroughly for fear of offending a clan. If the crowd noticed his stupor, then they might assume he was frightened into his state. Down the hundred steps into the pit was far enough away that such subtleties as full attention to agony were difficult to make out.

She told herself, It doesn't matter. What will scream in Lar's blood won't really be Rasal but an imprint of the past. Rasal soaked into the earth like rain. His spirit is cool and damp, and it will grow into trees of the desert.

Again she thought about the underworld. The Egyptians believed that the hearts of the dead were weighed by Thoth in judgement. It wasn't possible that—if they were right—Rasal's heart could ever be found wanting for purity. No, she wouldn't think of him in the shadows.

They took the ritual walk in descent to the altar. Lar didn't once look at her or the priest who was to torture him. She knew that Tash Hila had said something rude to Rasal at that execution but she'd been too far away to hear it. She stared at the stains on the steps, the layers of dried red that curdled in the gutters, clotting the holes of the drain. The most recent had been Rasal's—spilled not by sentence of law but by sentence pronounced by this fool, who was so drugged that he'd scarcely feel the flaying. He'd suffer no more pain than the patients whom Emana drugged so they wouldn't feel the extraction of ruined teeth.

The priest turned to her at the bottom and nodded for her to commence her part of the rite.

(My feet are touching the blood in the gutters. That's Rasal's blood, mixed with Tash Hila's, flowed together as if meant to be one river, where perhaps the good and the evil meet and cancel one another out. I have my husband's blood under my sandals. I can smell it. All of the blood here reeks. It's full of screams! It doesn't cancel out. It is not redeemed in the gutters. Only Rasal's

blood isn't putrid. It stands apart from the rest. There! The scent of oranges and frankincense.)

Emana's eyes were half-lidded. She inhaled the familiar scent of her husband's blood. Hadn't she shared it with him many times, even as he'd tasted hers? It was laced with sweetness and melancholy.

She said to Lar, "It isn't necessary for you to repent before I release you of your eternal burden. But I am bound to ask, do you repent, Lar Anut?"

He didn't seem to hear her. He swayed slightly on his feet, his face bemused as if on a faraway couch in a dream. He wouldn't suffer here. He wouldn't even suffer as much justice as had Tash Hila—with or without damnation to follow. A thread of drool slipped from the corner of his mouth and glistened down his chin. She realized that his feet were approximately where Rasal's head had come to rest after going down each and every step—alive and aware in the core of the brain—to stare up at her.

"Very well. I see that you don't repent. That's all right for I won't drink your sin. I refuse to save you from your damnation. You may not feel this priest's ministrations but you will know what follows," Emana told him, her eyes flashing through the veil as the priest's jaw dropped in shock. "It's too late now to find another like me to perform this task. Perhaps there is no other like me, an Ishantu who demands that justice be done. My husband rots in his grave. Will this help him sleep there? I don't know. But it will help me sleep."

The priest wasn't sure if he should detain her with a hand to her shoulder or not. Should he try to persuade her? Was there a law here? He babbled, "But no Ishantu has ever refused the sin drink."

"There's a first time for everything," she replied bitterly.

She turned to climb the hundred steps.

There was no law. Ishantu had always done this upon request but they weren't bound to, were they? The custom was so old, its origins were unknown. Where was it written? In what book or heart?

The crowd buzzed, watching her ascend to the lip of the arena. They saw her turn as the priest began his binding of the condemned. They grew excited for it could only mean that they would get a rare and fine show today. The guards looked questioningly at one another but the captain shrugged. She couldn't be forced.

And yet...what did this mean should one of them ever commit a blood crime? Would they not be saved?

Eno stood across the amphitheater from her. He wished he was closer. Emana seemed coldly alone. Did anyone know what was going on?

He did. He was certain of it. It made him sorry for her because he knew she was caught. No matter what she ended up doing—saving or damning Lar—she would have trouble living with herself. Nothing would ever be the same again for humans or Ishantu after this. It didn't matter how or when the custom of the sin-drink originated. The long-standing tradition had ended. The Ishantu would no longer be viewed as perfect. They were reduced to the

level of human only. And all because the love of one lady hadn't been enough to raise her husband from the dead.

Eno noticed Lar was drugged. His body didn't even twitch as the priest made the incisions around his ribs, the extremities, the scrotum. As the tunic of flesh was pulled from his torso, it might have been an autopsy instead of a rite performed on a living man. Lar's eyes were glassy. He didn't cry out—not when the flesh was peeled from his arms and legs and not even when the trepanning saw was used on his skull.

Eno began to slowly make his way through the crowd, trying to get to Emana before the end. She would need him. She would need someone.

He tried not to think of Lar. They had nearly been friends. He tried not to think of Lar's sister, flashing in and out of his mind, turning in flames. The fire's edges seemed like the ends of delicate scarves teasing in a breeze.

Tash had caused this and had escaped his damnation. Wherever he was, did he see this and laugh? Nothing is sacred; everything is sacred. Ruined holy places and the many twisted gods Tash called upon—or the gods that Tash had twisted for his own reasons. Yes, he'd view this from his special darkness and laugh. He would howl like a demon.

The stench rising up from the pit was nauseating. The drug had an adverse effect on Lar's system. He began vomiting after the disk of bone was removed from his head. (It was thrown to the crowd which went mad for it, fighting each other to claim it. This one was definitely going to be worth something, being the first from a refused sin-drink.) Since Lar was bound upon the altar with his neck secured, he couldn't turn his head. The bile began choking him.

The executioner put on the gloves and took the venomed needle from the tube. The Anut projectiled onto the priest's robes; it matted in his hair. He wiped his eyes and aimed the needle into the brain. The condemned man's face passed from beet red to blue.

"That's mine!" someone shouted as they grasped the bone disk.

"I touched it first!" another protested.

There were noises of fists landing squarely to soft faces. Blood from a smashed nose splattered Eno's cloak.

A third voice cried, "Let go of it or I'll kill you!"

"And go to the altar to be damned? That Ishfntu won't save you!"

Eno weaved in and out of the onlookers, trying to get through in the press of people. Everyone was mesmerized by the gore they witnessed, drunk off the scents rising in visible mist from the pit. No, not all. More were starting to quarrel over the possession of the skull fragment. Eno saw one man crush another's hands beneath his boots. He then had half his teeth knocked out by a woman wielding a rock she'd prized from the street. The wave of hysteria rippled though the crowd as they pressed forward for a chance at the souvenir.

Eno saw Cien Anut, the one who commissioned Emana to drink his brother's sin. Eno wondered if Cien would try to rescue Lar's bone fragment to return to the family. But his eyes were fastened on the sight of his brother's body as it shook from puking, trying to gasp at any breath as Lar strangled with a total block to his air passages.

The needle had gone in and been extracted. There was only one instant when the man on the altar seemed to have any consciousness in his eyes. It was a flicker that said he at last remembered where he was and what was happening to him. Perhaps this happened to all people when they died, no matter how swift the accident or how potent the hemlock. Perhaps there was always a moment when they realized the end, either with terror or simple acquiescence.

The quest for the skull piece was growing into a riot. The guards began to draw their weapons, brandishing them to force the mob back. Cien was jostled but didn't lose his footing. Eno slipped into the crowd briefly, trying to claw his way out of it to reach Emana.

Eno managed one more look into the pit as Lar realized his final moment of terror.

Then Lar died. He must have even though Eno didn't see it. Fists were flying in the crowd, people were biting each other, kicking, scratching, not even sure where the skull fragment was anymore. Eno saw the little boy whose wound Emana treated. He was shrieking on the street, holding his leg. A bearded man in skins had just yanked the silver ring from the wound, digging it out with the tip of a knife. Yes, this also would be worth something, being the final healing done by a race before its honor was gone. How much will you give me for this?

The boy's mother had tried to defend him but she'd been pushed down. She was being trampled. And was that debris in the wind or a woman turning in flames? Eno blinked and yelled out Ghia's name. He yelled out Emana's name.

It was a wisp rising from the pit, trying to fly up.

"There it goes!" someone shouted.

All at once the chaos halted so that everybody could watch. A guard who'd just beaten someone over the head with the flat of his blade stopped to point. In between the sky and the earth was a roar, of thunder before earthquake. The air began to shake. In the distance was a smear of black, of storms, of sudden nights approaching, crackling as it rolled toward the plaza.

Lar's soul spun, looking out from cankerous eyes—unshriven and unsaved. His sin leaked out from the fissures in his web of clouds. His horror had been released. The crowd below saw it on him plainly and knew he was trying to fly quickly. But it had cracked the stones down to the caverns below antiquity. The soul crows smelled it and were coming, booming and hungry. In a black rush across the sky, their flinty beaks opened, they swooped down and took hold of him in hundreds of mystic places in the many dimensions of death. They started to rip his soul to pieces above the plaza. Rustling furiously among themselves, they bit each other to snag a part of him—just like the people had been doing to get the skull piece. The crows skreed until everyone covered their ears.

The soul crows feasted, a whole of Lar Anut conscious in every bit that went down into greasy dark gullets to join the others before him. No drug could shield him now. No family could protect him from the ceaseless appetites that pinched off the diseased bits of his spirit.

Eno pushed through the ogling mob, looking for Emana. He saw Cien, saw the turning form of Ghia-on-fire near him. Both living brother and dead sister watched as Lar's soul was shredded, fizzing in the sky and winking grayyellow stars. They lit up the sky which had gone black with the crows, bright as sparks from willow wood on a hearth. The crowd was jumping, dancing, singing songs about death that were more carnival than religion. The wounded boy was no longer crying. Maybe he'd been trampled along with his mother.

Emana looked up, shivering. She'd wrought this. It was hers, a vileness no Ishantu would have permitted. Rasal wouldn't have indulged what she'd done, even fully understanding her reasons. She watched Lar Anut's soul ravaged, worse than merely sundered—eradicated. She knew where they'd take it, where they would go with him in eternal uncreation inside them—to the caverns below the earth, below the stones in dissolve and the gods of the ancient city. Where there was no light in the feculent bowels of the underworld.

And had Emana ever seen Thoth down there? Ready to sit in judgement and weigh men's hearts? No. There was no judgement down there. It had already been passed.

A man put his arm around her and suddenly she thought he was Rasal, strong and tall, muscles etched in bronze, hard but gentle, rippling upon the stomach that pressed against the small of her back. There was a scent of incense, myrrh, sweet above the stench of the spirit-slaughtering soul crows screeching above. But myrrh hadn't been Rasal's perfume.

He lifted her out of the way and stepped before her, drawing his sword to catch another broadside with it. The ringing was sharp in her ears. It was Eno, meeting Cien Anut's attack.

Cien swung again heavily, both hands gripping the handle. His blade cut the air with less a whistle than a serpent's hiss. It might have been the crackle of fire from the shape she saw the ghost of: feminine, twirling in flames over his shoulder.

Eno bent, his knees almost touching the stone steps, and the edge passed close over his head. He raised himself quickly, feinted left with his lighter weapon and then dove to jab toward Cien's side. He sliced in but his blade deflected off the close row of ribs instead of piercing anywhere between them. He, too, still saw Ghia's ghost, burning brightly, trying to—what?—encourage her brother to this? No, trying to dissuade him, even as she had appeared at the prison to keep Eno from giving Tash the drug. Her face was a twisted mass of melting flesh but her eyes were whole, pleading no more. The Anut stepped back gingerly, slapping his free hand to his scraped side. He brought his sword in a roundhouse from his back, straight-armed over his shoulder

and down in an arcing chop. Eno threw himself aside, slipped down several steps, regained his stance lithely, and lunged. He missed as Cien spun, coming around in a backstroke that caught Eno in the thigh. Eno began to fall down the steps again, heavier than before. He heard Ghia cry out.

He heard Emana cry out, saw the Anut rush her with his sword high. A young guard leapt over the rim to intercept him and was swiftly cut down with a slash across the belly. A loop of striated intestine spilled through the gash like a necklace of pink sea coral. It splashed warm soup down the steps. Cien stepped aside and knocked the guard's body further down into the pit and out of his way. He advanced on the Ish fintu woman.

Ghia's coil of fire flared, and Cien paused to look over his shoulder at it.

Eno stopped his own descent by windmilling his arms and one unwounded leg out. He struggled to his feet, pulling off his cloak and swinging it as he sprang toward Cien's back. The man heard him and turned away from Emana, away from the sight of Ghia-on-fire. Eno flung the cloak. It settled in a net over the Anut's upper body. It fluttered out wool and tassles to catch his arms. Eno leaned in to plunge his weapon into the man's breast, through the dense folds of the cape.

But not before Cien's sword arm had torn through the material to thrust his blade into Eno's shoulder, near the neck. It withdrew greasily, slickly, and with the slightest resistance. Then Cien dropped back. He let go of his sword but continued thrusting—back and forth—with his empty hand until the message of death reached it. Eno toppled as well, seeing as the last thing before he passed out the soft fire of Ghia's flames reflected along Cien's iron blade.

Emana ran to Eno and pulled him into her lap. She chewed into her vein as she'd done to try to revive Rasal. There was nothing more powerful in an emergency than a vampire's fresh blood to initiate healing. She'd almost died here because of her refusal to do as her craft demanded. Two more men were dead because of it. Eno was nearly gone as well. If he didn't survive these injuries, how would she live with herself?

How would she live with herself even if he lived? Was there no end to this? Ghia's spirit swirled in fire nearby. Tiny, sparkling, blackened arms that were really just stumps reached out for Eno. They reached out for Cien as her brother's soul smoked, lifted, was snatched and torn to pieces. The guard's soul had already filtered through untouched, having committed no blood sin. And if Emana had been killed by Cien, would her soul have been beset? No Ish fntu had ever suffered the soul crows.

Into the earth like rain...like Rasal...an invisible spirit...where had death taken him?

She hadn't spilled Lar's blood, not pulled the flesh from him nor twisted the needle in his opened skull. She hadn't killed him. This wasn't her sin.

Then what was her sin?

Overhead and out the soul crows flapped away, their horrible noise being the sound of stones ripped apart at the core. Within it were the distant shreds of Lar's and Cien's voices in damning rupture forever. She remembered seeing Lar weep in public for his murdered sister. (Nearby, that burning spirit shrank and went out.) He'd committed another murder for the sake of that pain.

And Emana had let him be cursed for the sake of her own. Carried away in conscious gobbets into the darkest place anywhere.

CHAPTER 6

"On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves— I sought him but I did not find him."

'The Song of Songs' -Solomon

Lady Hila clutched her throat as Eno was carried in on a litter. A runner had already told her what happened at the plaza but she was unprepared for the sight of her son's wounds. She also saw the red smear at his lips which wasn't his own blood.

"I see you've already given my son your blood," she said as she faced Emana.

"Yes. I believe I can heal him with a dozen more treatments of the same," the Ishantu replied as she hovered over Eno.

"Does your blood still have such power? I wonder," Lady Hila told her bitterly. "What makes someone's blood pure if not purity? You are as sundered as your husband was."

Lady Hila snapped jeweled fingers at a servant. "Bring the clan's physician. He'll be in charge of my son from here on."

Emana withheld her gasp as she stood up from Eno's stretcher.

"But I can treat him faster, and with less chance of infection . . . "

"You've caused enough trouble. Surely there will be a clan war. How many lives was your husband's head worth?"

Hundreds, thousands . . . Emana thought with a flash of anger, with a burning pain that fairly exploded in her head. Her strong hands curled into fists but she kept them folded secretly into the material of her skirt.

No, she couldn't make such a statement. She shouldn't even think it. But she would give them all on the altar—even wield the law knife herself—if it would bring Rasal back.

She calmed herself behind the widow's veil.

(If all life is sacred, then all life is sacred.

Love is built upon such sacred stones as these.

I will dishonor him no further with such appeals to death, that shatter every tradition he embraced.)

"I'm sorry. I meant no harm to your family."

"I wish you to leave us," Lady Hila said, her voice so low that none save Emana could hear it. Eno was unconscious; she wasn't worried he would overhear since he'd never approve this. "The Anuts will take offense with every moment you remain under this roof. I don't think I can blame them.

Tonight they bury two sons under their house. I may yet bury my second son under ours."

Emana half-closed her eyes, aware that the other woman couldn't see them clearly through the veil. "Let me prepare my husband's body for the journey, and I shall leave."

"No. That will take too long. You must leave immediately. Rasal Hathor's body will be sent to you in the desert." Lady Hila was stern, not to be pleaded with.

Emana was shocked that she should be driven out like this, without her rights to her husband's corpse recognized. But she sensed the turmoil in Eno's mother even if the woman did present a solid facade (though not an altogether gracious one). It was also true that Emana's lingering increased the inevitability of a reprisal against the Hilan stronghold. Emana was in danger herself from the Anuts as long as she remained in Vira. The Hilan clan was honor bound to protect Emana since Rasal had lost his life in their service. But Lady Hila was a woman, and more concerned with the lives of her family—willing to sacrifice hundreds, thousands if need be . . . something Emana could only acknowledge sadly. The woman knew that if Eno regained consciousness, he'd never let Emana be dismissed this way.

She wanted to ask that she at least be allowed to go to the garden between the two doors a last time, where Rasal was buried among the white roses. She only wanted a moment to stand on the spot where she'd hoped he would rise. She didn't ask it. Lady Hila was adamant and would have to stay adamant, grasping at anything she thought might bring a kind of peace—no matter how tenuous—to the two families.

Emana bowed her head and walked out of the grand house, through the courtyard, past the guards who stepped aside to let her exit through the gates. As soon as she set foot beyond the hold, runners were dispatched to let all who needed to know that the Ishantu who wouldn't do the sin-drink was no longer on their grounds.

People stopped in the street or leaned from their windows as she went through the city. They stared, curious, disbelieving. No one spoke to her. No one jeered or attacked. The guards kept their hands on the hilts of their swords and had their eyes moving, as if expecting another riot like the one in the law plaza that day. As if waiting for a member of clan Anut to try to kill the vampire. Emana also expected this, not sure she had the heart to defend herself.

There was no riot and no Anut presented himself for revenge. Everyone only looked at her, too surprised to yet feel betrayed. Well, the gods did things to hurt the world: plagues and storms, curses that rose commanded from the land in summer insects or descended from the sky in fire and ice. Why should the Ishfntu—who had always been regarded as akin to the gods—be any more dependable?

It took her more than an hour to reach the edge of Vira on foot. In all that time no one came forward to ask her for a blessing, nor to timidly reach out

to touch the edge of her gown, nor to even breathe in her direction. They were witnesses to her departure, nothing more. It hurt her to see the dawning in their faces of the suggestion that the gods weren't to be relied upon—but that the Ishantu had always been constant as the line between what was right and what wasn't.

She glanced at the eyes painted on the gates of the city and was drawn to look at them again. Perhaps the brick was cracking with time, or maybe the eyes were bloodshot.

She went back across the mountains. She paused over the same spot she'd earlier had the vision on. She stood barefoot on it and seeped down, past the deities who chewed their fallen city, down into the caverns where the soul crows waited for blood sins to call them through a new crack. And there was the fierce and sorrowful half-woman/half-bird with her gory hair dripping over her face, waiting for the sun to go down, for the darkness she both needed and hated.

Emana hailed Ishantu neighbors on the road through the salt desert. They nodded but didn't smile. The word was already here, even though they were coming from the opposite direction. They pitied her but, Oh, Emana, why? why? None of us has ever been so tainted.

She would remain outside them. A healer who wouldn't heal. A savior who withheld her blessing out of vengeance.

Memyt was chasing birds out of the field. The dog heard her as she came up the road. He barked and bounded out of the grain to greet her. He paused, wagging his tail, confused when he didn't see Rasal.

"No, he's not with me," she said to the dog. "He's not with us."

Slinking around her feet, he was aware that something was wrong. He whined as Emana reached down to stroke his head and the short fur along his backbone.

"I missed you," she said. She immediately thought of Rasal teasing her about it, his mimicked barking.

Memyt sniffed her fingers and she tensed. Was her treason apparent in her scent? Was she very different now?

The dog began to lick her fingers. Then he put his paws on her knees and stretched up to lick her face.

(no treason here, love you, love you)

She wished it could be as simple as that.

She bathed at home, ginger and salt in the water, scrubbing herself raw with prayers, remembering Rasal's fingers of magic. A breeze came across the wasteland full of cool night, and it was his breath against her cheek. Shadows crossed under the cedar trees. Cedar wasn't growable in the salt desert but the couple had successfully tended these for years.

The shadows were his stride, his dance of turns and leaps.

She slept with the dog at her feet. The dusk in her dreams was Rasal, his face emerging through the rushes of the bed, through the dirt floor of the

house where he was remade. When he stood up, there were roses snagged in his braids as if woven there, fragrant as those in the Hilan garden. When he clasped her to him the thorns tore her flesh, and yet she wouldn't let go. He embraced her and the flavor was sour, worms pressing against her teeth. One of his eyes moved, turning slowly like a yellow egg. Then it fell from the socket in a gasp of gas.

"Rasal," she sobbed, "I waited. I waited."

His head fell off, the remaining eye blinking in terror.

The next night when she dreamed, they only made slow and perfect love. When she woke, her body was flushed and swollen with pleasure.

The following night when she dreamed, Rasal spread his arms. They feathered out into the stinking shags of a soul crow. His body was greasy from having been shit out by an old god. His mouth split, pointed into a beak, and he opened it to screech like night birds of prey.

He said to her, "Go out into the darkness and unbless. The terror of the wilderness has given the greatest gift. To heal, one must sometimes swallow poison."

And it was his own voice of music blended with the discordant caws and skrills.

Then he was Rasal again. He slipped into her arms and between her legs. But in the rapture of sensuous rhythms, his seed was rank with the spoiling of a thousand pieces from a thousand souls.

CHAPTER 7

"Behold the wild beast with the pointed tail, that passes mountains, and breaks walls and weapons; behold him that infects all the world."

'Divine Comedy'—Dante

Rhetorics of war. The Lydians were an evil people. They didn't have the same respect for life that Mysians had. They ate impure meats, practiced pederasty and had no honor on the field of battle. There was no common decency in the whole of Lydia. It was almost a duty to go to war against them. How such a vile race managed to hold their own against Mysian warriors was a mystery to Busparta, who'd always believed that right must inevitably triumph over wrong, once the gods had been properly petitioned.

Mysian commanders had offered up the entrails of many fat goats, steaming meats of entire flocks of sheep, the hearts of their most cherished maidens to secure Heaven's blessings. At least they didn't fail but neither did they win. The armies clashed almost daily in the mountains both shared but never was there was a decisive victory or defeat. Men fought, fell and died on both sides about evenly. Strategies were formed, manuevers accomplished, ground taken and lost without meaningful progress.

It couldn't go on forever, could it?

Busparta squatted before the fire and examined the blood that dyed the lines in his hands, caking under his nails. It was a smell he'd never get out of his nostrils.

The two men who huddled around the fire with him looked as exhausted as he felt. A fourth stood at the rocky perimeter, looking down to where he could see the pass, back into the mountains a short ways, and then into the woods where their quarter of the army was camped. This fourth man was Pergamis, Busparta's best friend. He'd grown up with all of them along the same swept avenue in the town of Cnythos. Busparta was trained from early on to be a wrestler. Pergamis was apprenticed to a smith, and when the war came he personally made the spearpoints for them. Usakus was going to be a breadmaker and Khio a shepherd. It had been such a long time since those untroubled days. It was hard to believe they had already spent almost a third of their lives in this conflict.

Usakus had his head bent to his chest at the fire. His hair fell across his face to conceal from his tired eyes the burnished light of the setting sun. Strands of that hair drifted out with each sonorous exhale. He wasn't supposed to be asleep; none of them were. But Busparta knew that Usakus couldn't help it. He'd had no rest in four days. Khio dozed but constantly jerked himself awake, clutching his cloak tightly around his shoulders even though it wasn't yet too cold. Once the sun was gone and the moon rose, it

would truly be freezing. Each of them could feel winter coming in every injury they'd received in battle.

Pergamis leaned on his spear and squinted into the dusk. He noted how the campfires from their army in the woods weren't as bright as the ball of the red sun, even if they seemed warmer.

The points of recognition on the world always seemed warmer.

It was a tiny guard post up in the rocks. The four of them were infantry so they had no horses to try to get up into the enclave. The pass they watched wasn't much larger. It was so narrow that scarcely two men could go at the same time. And no chariot ever could. It wasn't a good place for an invading army to cross into Mysia.

Yet the Lydians might well attempt it, thinking the Mysians would consider it too slender to be worth guarding. It was the sort of thing they would do, sneaking up to attack at night instead of meeting at an appointed place and time to clash honorably.

It was about a mile hence that this portion of the Mysian army was camped at the entrance to the cypress woods. The smell of burning green branches was distantly fragrant, moreso than the thin bark of the spindly mountain trees the four guards made do with.

"Tomorrow four others take our place and we'll be warmer," Busparta said to Usakus when the man stirred and peered through his hair.

Usakus smacked his lips. "Food."

Khio smiled. "To hell with food. Camp followers. The best flesh to eat."

Busparta raised a bushy eyebrow. "I thought an army traveled on its stomach."

Khio grinned. "Don't be naive. An army travels on its balls. By the way, how many Lydians does it take to impregnate one woman?"

Busparta shrugged as Khio spat on his gold ring to shine it.

"None," Khio replied. "They're all too busy screwing the sheep."

"Know why? Ever see one of those Lydian women?" Usakus asked.

"I see Lydian women every time I'm in battle," Khio told him.

"Really? Next time I kill one, I'll have to look under the helmet," Busparta said.

"You can't tell there. Like I said, they're really ugly." Usakus laughed. "Peek under the tunic."

Pergamis turned from his watch and winked at Busparta. "Remember that woman in Fahor? Her hair smelled like cypress and smoke. I miss her. She was a Lydian slave. You can't tell me they're ugly. She was beautiful. Her skin was soft. Cypress and smoke. Just the way the campfires smell down there."

Pergamis was always the romantic one. As Busparta recalled, he tried taking up a collection to buy the Lydian woman's freedom. There were murmurs that maybe Pergamis was a traitor but Busparta used some of his best wrestling holds to quickly stop that nonsense.

"Maybe she's down there. With the army," Khio snickered. He blew a couple of kisses at the air. He mimicked a falsetto female voice as he tittered, "Hey,

soldier! I don't care if you carry a pike, a spear or a sword. As long as you know how to USE it!"

Pergamis threw a stone at him, pretending to be offended at the blow to the lady's honor.

"What if all you know how to use is your mouth?" Pergamis asked tartly.

"Oh, soldier! I definitely know how to use that. But it'll cost extra!" Khio twittered.

Busparta shook his head. "I wish I'd married little Myria before I joined up. I'll bet she has six children by now. One for each year we've been fighting."

Usakus smirked. "She was little then but we were all only fourteen. I'll bet her ass isn't so little now."

"Come to think of it, her mother was the shape of that boulder Pergamis is standing on," Busparta said. He rubbed his chin above the place where the trumpet of warning hung on a thong around his neck. "Maybe it's better I didn't marry her. As it is I now sleep on a mountain. I wouldn't want to have to sleep with one."

Khio poked him playfully. "At the rate this war is going, we'll go as long as Troy did and she'll have borne ten children. She'll be as wide as the whole country. A man can lose an entire flock of sheep in a country. And only a king may fuck a country."

Pergamis tilted his head and frowned. He looked down at the pass, lit by reddish streaks from the sunset.

"Did you hear something?" Busparta asked, rising to walk over.

Pergamis nodded but shrugged. "It was only a whistle."

Khio nudged Usakus and they also got up.

Busparta cocked an ear. "It's an animal howling. It sounds wounded."

Khio shook his head in disagreement. "I hear a hiss. There's a serpent or a pit of them down there.

He shivered at the idea of them crawling, intertwining sleek tubes of venom.

Usakus put his hands to his face to wipe the hair from his eyes. He trembled. "I hear a screech owl. I can't believe you don't hear that. I was just dreaming of one flying overhead, its wings gray as ash."

He looked up as he remarked on it, grimly searching the sky. The moon was a sliver in the east, barely appearing over the hump of mountains. When it rose fully, it would be waxing, full and round. But for now it was merely the top of a shield. The stars didn't shimmer yet. What few had come out were chips of dull glass.

Busparta fingered the horn. Should he blow it?

Why? To alert the army that there was an animal in the pass? A mile from them and whistling or howling? It seemed foolish.

Suddenly the air went stale, as if all the sweetness had been sucked from it. It was warm, too. Had the wind changed? Yet there was no wind and no clouds overhead.

There was one small cloud on the eastern horizon. It obscured the scimitar of the moon briefly, then disappeared, not going up but swooping down.

Soon the bushes and sparse trees below the rocks shook. They heard the same sounds down there only louder.

"What is it?" Pergamis asked as he raised his spear.

"I'll go down and find out," Busparta said.

Usakus blinked. "It's only an animal."

The campfire flared, rising up several feet. It spat red and white sparks. Then it went out, as if a Titan's foot smothered it. The men jumped and stared. The twilight seemed twice as dark now that their light had been taken. Down below and through the pass: a whistling howling hissing screech. It was nothing they could see. If it was dark in the rocks with the fire out, it was blacker down there.

"I don't think that's an animal," Busparta said.

Pergamis scratched his head. "Should we blow the signal?"

"It may be a demon," Khio suggested fearfully.

"Or it may be merely a night spirit—a harmless ghost. We'd look stupid setting the army on alert for a wandering soul," Busparta pointed out.

He'd never been one to believe in demons. He'd never seen a demon but he once glimpsed a spirit, passing in and out of the trunks of willow trees and braiding knots into a billowing of water-hair. She'd been nothing to fear. Her eyes had been the color of Median limes.

Busparta eased over the crusty lip of rocks and slid carefully down the side of the mountain. It was almost vertical, the incline so gradual that any of the others would have lost their footing in the shadows to fall. But Busparta had excellent night vision. It served him well to reach the cleft of the passage without accident. He was glad he'd bothered several days ago to wrap cloth around his legs and sandaled feet to protect them from the rocks.

He listened and heard a faint whine that might have been a wheeze or a rustle. It was already beyond the pass, clearly traveling fast as the noise it made retreated from him. He followed as quickly as he could, using his hands to guide him safely between the two mountains where the boulders stood so close together they nearly crushed him between them. This was definitely a strategic hold. It must be only an animal. No enemy would try to enter here.

The air was more parched than up in the rocks when the fire went out. Busparta gasped to get enough to fill his lungs. It stank of roasted herbs and altar offerings. He choked.

Whatever it was, it moved toward the woods where the army was camped. It wasn't anything a wild animal would do, deliberately heading for a large group of men, unless it was starving and smelled the horses. Busparta trotted across evener ground, able to make out shadows of bushes and shrubs. But it was as if he saw them through coastal fog.

Yet he could see the sky when he looked up. The ground baked under the soles of his wrapped sandals. He paused and touched a branch, watching his fingers pass through muted mist. It was almost luminous in the twilight. He

snatched his fingers back. It was smoke. The bushes and branches were burned. They crumbled upon contact.

Busparta peered forward. It was only a narrow band of blackened vegetation—a straight line of it toward the camp. There was apparently nothing to the left or right where he made out glossy olive leaves, reflecting what little moonlight there yet was.

This is unnatural, he thought. I should blow the horn.

He ran a few more feet and saw the two deer. If it hadn't been for the horns on the stag, he'd never have known what they were. They were burned and fallen apart. None was scattered as they would have been had a predator killed them to eat. Or as carrion eaters who'd have come later once the carcasses had softened with rot. The stag and—what? its mate?—lay in positions of proper sequence of legs, tails at one end that had burned to a handful of shriveled hair. Not so much as if they had been ripped but as if they fell apart whole where they stood, touched by something of fire and violence. Maybe by a dragon that didn't even pause to dine on what it casually slaughtered.

Busparta heard a bleat and saw the fawn convulsing a few feet away. It was badly burned but wasn't torn. Had it merely been brushed upon passing by the barest edge of whatever killed the two adult deer?

It hurt Busparta's heart to hear the pitiful sound it made. The blackened patches across its hide smoked the way the brush did, leaking fats which stank. He looked away, at the moon rising over the mountains. He turned toward the camp which the sun had set behind. The moon's light glowed; he could at last see the cloud. It was no longer black the way it was when he and his three friends saw it crossing the moon, coming from the mountains toward the pass. It was pink, not as a rose but as the frothy ale the Ish fntu prepared, made from milk and their own blood. It roiled as it began filtering through the outer trees of the wood.

Busparta jerked the horn up from its tether to his lips. He blew as hard as he could. Just as the hollow blast of the horn's bronze shook the air, Busparta heard screams from the encampment and the splintering of the cypress. Trees didn't fall but burst apart in flames.

What of the soldiers?

Busparta ran. Why? What could he do now?

Nothing.

He blew the horn too late to warn them. Would it have made any difference had he blown it sooner? Wouldn't they have prepared to meet a human enemy with swords drawn and chariots mounted? It was too late when it was heard whistling or howling into the pass. It was too late when they spied it across the rising arc of the moon.

Then where was he going?

To see it. What could it be? It wasn't a ghost of harmless lost wanderings and tangled curls. It was a cloud, scorching down into Mysia like a breath from some Oriental underworld.

He came upon ruin. The camp ground had seen a split-second holocaust as the cloud swooped down in a tempest of flame. He ran into a scene of what must have been an inferno although there was no fire now.

The landscape of blackened trees, tents and corpses glowed as if making up a single solid ember. Everyone and everything that had been in the cloud's direct path as it flew and cut an ever-widening swathe through the center of the army had been pierced like a red-hot bolt. The cloud crackled and roared beyond, sucking all the flames back into itself as it fled. It left nothing but charred remains. It had been here before Busparta's feet could carry him. It had been here, low to the ground, and had flown up again.

He saw husks, charred ribcages and skulls, meat fallen apart, caved in, crumbling to ash. The temperature of the air was so intense that Busparta's tunic and cloak smoked where he stood, turning among the carnage. His sandals were sinking in what he first took to be charred earth. He was again glad he'd wrapped his feet and legs. It was probably all that protected them from the heat.

Then he understood that what he stood in were the remains of hundreds of men who had completely incinerated in the very heart of the cloud. These hadn't been the men he heard screaming, no. Their lungs must have filled with fire as they instantly ignited, falling apart as roasts overcooked on spits. It was the many men on either side of the camp who screamed. They were still screaming.

They were horribly disfigured, twisted lumps of open sores and bacon flesh. Some had pressed their faces into the soft cypress on the ground and were already dead. But so many more were alive and unrecognizable, fused together by heat. These were writhing nests of skinless arms and legs. Busparta remembered Khio hearing a nest of hissing serpents.

Some had thrown themselves into troughs of water set out for the horses. These men boiled to death. Overhead were the blackened shreds and frame of a large tent sagging in the high branches of an equally blackened cypress. It must have soared up through the trees a hundred feet in the wind and then exploded into flames above the camp. Busparta thought he saw bodies hanging in the toasted branches, also not much more than scraps of cloth and frames. They must have been sleeping in the tent, exhausted from the day's battle.

Busparta walked in shock toward the injured men, seeing that a few might have been women because of the melted glimmer of dancing bracelets shining from where they penetrated ankle flesh. There was a furious shuddering and something tried to sit up. It struggled, the spine snapping it upright onto its hips in the ashes. A hole opened in the top lump, and a wail issued forth so unearthly that Busparta felt his blood pound in his ears. It had to be the heat making his blood bubble in his head.

There was a resounding clap of thunder. Busparta fell to the ground in terror, looking up to see it was returning. It billowed out in a great whirlpool, undulating like the fury of a cyclone spawned by a storm. But it was now blood red. It was higher up. Far above the line of crisped, hearthstick trees he could see the swirling underbelly.

For a second he thought he saw a huge bestial face there, opening many eyes and not seeing him as they glittered molten copper.

He realized it was going back the way it came, toward the slim passage through the mountains.

Busparta slipped in the porridge of fat and cinders. He ran through the trees which splintered against him. A few horses had fled their pen of ropes and were rearing wildly. He grabbed for a stallion but it kicked at him, nearly trampling him. He managed to catch a terrified mare by her mane and swing himself onto her back. He turned her with difficulty out of the woods and galloped toward the mountains.

He raised the horn to his lips to blow a warning to his friends. Could they take cover before this thing whirled through the pass again? It was bigger than when they first heard it and saw it across the moon. It was huge and scarlet, foaming across the face of the fully risen moon, waxing bloated as a boiled eye. The horn burned his lips but he blew it until he choked on the hot air and stench.

He pulled the horn from his mouth. Blisters on his lips and fingers tore as they adhered to hot metal. He howled the names of his friends as he dug his heels into the ribs of the mad horse. He still wasn't as fast as the cloud which rushed toward the pass. It no longer whirled or hissed or screeched like an owl. It crackled and snapped, tendrils of it whipping out as the mass of it boiled toward the narrow rift between the two mountains.

He saw the cloud mesh into a long wedge to sift between them. It sparkled red in the night, red even though in the night such a color should have appeared black as all else did. The spindly trees it hadn't touched when it came through the first time—lower down and smaller—ignited into torches. The flames then snuffed out to be reabsorbed by the beast.

He tried to gallop through the pass but the mare stumbled. She threw him and stomped through without him astride her. The heated ground hurt her hooves and long legs. Her hair stood on end.

Busparta jerked to his feet, not seriously injured by the fall. He started to climb the rocks toward the enclave. They crumbled at his fingertips, slid out from under his feet. Their very surfaces burned his hands. Here, too, it glowed faintly in the dark.

"Usakus, Khio, Pergamis!" he cried hoarsely, rasping out their names.

He listened for a response.

Moans. Whimpers of pain.

He put his fingers on the lip of the rocks and hauled himself up.

It had been here. Of course it had. It didn't fly over the mountains for it wasn't really a cloud but a demon. It burned as it went in order to feed. It was enormous, spreading itself out to go through the pass and touching the entirety from base to summits.

Busparta didn't recognize the men in the guard enclave.

One of them was on the ground, near the place where the campfire had gone out. There was no hair, no clothing left to identify him. His eyes were melted right out of his face. All four of his limbs had fallen apart, rended by the beast. There was only the torso and the head.

"I'm here. Busparta is here," he whispered as he knelt down beside the injured man. He reached out to touch him and give some small comfort. But where could he touch that wasn't an open and charred wound? Where would a touch not be agony?

Incoherent noises babbled out of the ragged hole of a mouth, the lipless skin pulled back to reveal blackened gums within, the tongue a shriveled leaf.

Busparta couldn't understand a word of it but he murmured, "It's all right, friend. It's gone."

Far away—a mile away to be exact—he heard the manic rustling in the air and knew the soul crows were descending into the woods. What took them so long? Did the ash confound them? Were the spirits of those soldiers harder to smell out because they were burned?

The horrible cawing stung his ears as they swept down through the mangled trees and snatched up the confused souls who tried to drag themselves from the shells of their bodies. And did this man—this nameless compatriot of his—hear them? The charred head cocked, and a scrap of charcoal ear twitched.

Then did the burned man let out a gargled scream and die.

Busparta saw a second huddled in a dark corner of the enclave. Who was it? He hurried over. He could barely make out the gold ring melted into the finger, the fingers of that hand also melted till they made a single flipper as he'd seen on dolphins in the blue Aegean Sea.

"Khio," he said softly. "By the gods, can you hear me?"

There was but a little breath, full of bubbles and flaking tissue. He seemed to be trying to exhale a song, a prayer that would seek absolution for whatever sins he might have committed in the name of war. Grease poured down his carbonized cheeks in lieu of tears. He couldn't cry. The moisture had burned out of him.

He mumbled and Busparta leaned close. "What is it, Khio?"

"Ring . . . mother," Khio managed to articulate, the fin of a hand limply fluttering. The whole body quivered as the heated air around must have been excruciating to the exposed nerves.

"Yes, I will, Khio. I'll do it," Busparta replied.

Then this friend died, too. He reached out to carefully pluck the heavy gold ring from the mess of bubbled skin and bone. His stomach flopped as the flesh sank, spongy and hardening at the same time. Fluids flowed across his own hand. He closed his fingers around the still-hot ring and tugged it free of the soldier's body.

He remembered when Khio took it off a Lydian officer after facing the enemy charging down on him from within an armored chariot. Khio had received a sword's cut to his side before putting his own weapon into the horse's neck. The chariot tumbled and the rider was thrown to the ground. Now he and the Lydian officer were both on the same footing. Khio received another blow to his thigh. Lying wounded in the dirt, Khio upthrusted his spear through the officer's helmet visor. He then took the valuable ring off the Lydian's body.

"Wasn't that nice?" Khio joked at the time. "The Lydians have awarded me a pension!"

The ring would keep Khio's mother fed for the rest of her life.

Busparta pocketed it and wiped his hand on his tunic. He ran his trembling fingers through his hair.

Only he had no hair. His jaw dropped in surprise as he found it was singed off. Probably as the cloud flew back overhead to return to the mountains.

He was lucky it hadn't burst into flame.

He heard a shriek of agony. Where was the third man of the guard? Usakus or Pergamis. He saw no one else in the enclave.

Busparta heard it again, racked with torture. If the cries of the dying in the camp had boiled the blood in his head, this froze it. It came from above, in the rocky mass that led up the mountain. He began to climb, and it was barely twenty feet before he found the last man. He'd tried to get as far as possible to escape the cloud, wedging himself between two boulders to be protected from the fire.

The cloud hadn't touched this one with its flames. The boulders that shielded him became so hot that he'd baked among them as easily as an apple in an oven. His entire skin puffed red, splitting itself in places even as the seams of his clothes burst to allow the flesh to swell through. The threads had then shriveled and disintegrated. The bloated body looked as if it ought to have belonged to a fat man.

The eyes were open, starkly white against the crimson face, livid as wet oysters.

"Busparta," he croaked out between lips so inflated they almost wouldn't permit words through them.

Busparta knelt and slowly pulled the man out of the cleft. He cried out, the white eyes swimming with bloody tears. Busparta tried to recognize him.

"Remember that woman in Fahor?" the baked man asked.

"Pergamis!"

Busparta covered him with his own singed cloak to protect the blistered body. Pergamis had no blackened burns that he could see. Not like Khio and Usakus. That meant he would recover, didn't it? They treated such burns as blisters with ointments of aloes and honey.

"It'll be all right," Busparta promised, believing it more than when he'd said the same words to Usakus.

Pergamis screamed and then had a seizure. His head snapped around on the goitered tube of the neck. It wouldn't be all right. What cooked his body also cooked his brain. Likely every other organ as well. It was impossible that he'd lived even till now this way. But fire was cruel, seldom instant.

(Fire was a demon.)

Pergamis looked at his old friend with wild eyes, strangled sounds pushing past the inflamed lips. The bulging loops of intestines that had been cooked like fat strings of sausages pressed inside the distended belly.

"Kill me kill me kill me kill me!" Pergamis ranted.

He thrashed until his skin peeled in ribbons.

Busparta wept as he pulled his knife.

The body seemed to burst as it was punctured, then sagged as if it had been filled with air.

He climbed back down to the floor of the pass. He caught the horse as she pawed the ground not far away. Busparta heard the soul crows coming.

Would this agony never be over? Not without salvation. For what soldier didn't commit blood sin? The Ishantu—who rode with the army and went through the battlefield drinking up the sins of the fallen—must have perished when the cloud swept the camp. And those traveling with the other three parts of the Mysian forces were too far away to be of help.

Busparta looked out over the mountains that led into Lydia. Under the light of the massive moon swimming in the darkness overhead, he saw the path of burning. It would be easy to track the cloud by walking in its smoking spoor.

It was a small body of a cloud no larger than a puff of smoke, an exhale of bitter oils from a white almond. No, they saw it over the arc of the moon as that moon crested the horizon. Well, a dove would have obscured that bit of moonlight.

Now it was a flock of doves. Or phoenix fleeing nests of regeneration, flames trailing from their wings.

It had eyes the color of blood metal.

There were rabbits roasted against the trunks of scraggly olive trees as if they'd been skewered by lightning. There was a massive bear in a blackened heap at the entrance to a cave. Its jaws were still open in a roar of either challenge or torment or both.

(Hearing the sound of a wounded animal . . . had it matched the cloud in howl?)

He'd seen an entire herd of mountain goats cooked against the stones that scattered in jutting heaps from the cliffs. Their curling horns wisped smoke from the tips, smelling of a ruined feast. Here and there, the very rocks were turned to glass.

Busparta's skin was red and sore. It sweated from the heat left by the cloud and by a fever that came with an all-over burn. The horse he rode still troubled him, occasionally attempting to bolt, trying to throw him. She stopped wherever she was at odd moments just to turn round and round.

When he crossed the mountains and saw the campfires of the Lydian army like a thousand stars in the dark, Busparta tied her up, fearing she'd make a noise that would give him away.

Though how the enemy would hear it over their own racket was a mystery. They were celebrating. He didn't even see sentries posted anywhere. What could make them festive and careless? Amid the campfires men were singing Lydian war songs and riding chariots in circles like Hector of old. Here the charred path of the cloud stopped.

He guessed from the position of the moon high overhead that it must be near midnight. He left the horse, tethered and grumbling softly to herself, and began to pick his way over the rocks until he could see the cloud. It wasn't close to the army. It couldn't be and not harm them.

There was a natural wall of smooth stone and an alcove of a semi-circle of granite that shut away the sight of the partying camp. It even dampened some of the noise. Here Busparta saw the demon cloud hovering, crackling the air.

He saw the sorcerer who held it under sway. He wasn't a Lydian. Busparta guessed him to be from Ashken z, famed for its magic. The magician also had no hair or eyebrows, as having summoned up this evil had singed it off. The feathers that adorned his ceremonial robes were crisped and curled.

"Aleh Ashnatis," he intoned as he tossed a measured handful of stinking herbs into a fire that smouldered—flameless—in another semi-circle of stones at his feet. "Reenah ban raneenah."

The sorcerer clutched an amulet in his fingers tightly and thrust it toward the crimson mist. It didn't glitter as a talisman made of precious metal but was hard and shiny-black as volcanic glass.

"At'n ftah ueer. You will go to the city of Aldrua and there consume all that you find."

Busparta trembled. This was where another quarter of the army was camped in Mysia. It was about forty miles from the cypress woods. He blinked and shrank as the cloud boiled away to do its task. He could never travel as fast as it did. There was no hope that he could warn them.

Thousands of men. The population of the city in tens of thousands of men, women and children. He recalled the twisted, screaming soldiers he'd seen burned. The faces of the friends he'd watched die appeared in his head, still moaning. Still asking him to kill.

The Lydians had found their edge. But who could do this?

Men weary of war. Had not both the people of Troy and Agamemnon of Mycenaea beseeched the gods for the upper hand? But their own deities didn't have the demons the wizards of Ashkenaz had, coming from such a deep antiquity that Hades Himself hadn't heard of.

Busparta heard the roar of trees and brush bursting into flame. He heard the roar of the fire being sucked back into the cloud, traveling toward Mysia like the blackest thunderstorm full of incinerating cyclones. It flew at a different angle from the one it had taken to destroy that part of the army Busparta served in. It didn't go toward the pass near the woods.

Busparta sank against the rocks, defeated, miserable. What could he do? It was over.

A Lydian commander appeared cautiously from the boulders. He didn't wish to come out if the cloud was still close enough to scorch him at its edge. The gold ornamenting his expensive cuirass flashed under the moonlight. His helmet sported a bright transverse crest.

"How unfortunate you can't hold it past dawn. Then we might have burned them all. We could have made certain this war was over forever. From sunset to sunrise," the commander said, sighing. "And you're sure He can never be called up again?"

"Not for a century," the sorcerer replied blandly. He scratched his balls with jewel-encrusted fingers.

"I suppose it doesn't matter. With half their army gone, we'll easily march across the border in the morning and take the country. It's been a long time coming. It's difficult to defeat a people who don't fight fairly and have no battle honor. I've heard they're pederasts and begin to stretch the anuses of little boys with ivory pegs by the time they're six years old." There was indignation in the commander's face. "Such a culture must be stopped at any cost. It's indecent. Don't you agree?"

The magician rolled his eyes and said nothing. The rubies on his fingers and in his earrings spoke for him of the cost of this. The strategy had been expensive.

Busparta was appalled that the enemy believed such lies about his people. The Lydians were the evil ones. They were the ones who had no regard for life. Didn't this prove it?

"In another life I was a prince in Sodom," the magician said to the Lydian, eyes narrowing as he baited him. He had no use for these moral killers. They'd known full well what they were hiring. "I remember clearly the squeak of a virgin boy's rectum, the first dewy pollen squirting from his little flower. I recall wanting to violate an angel. One loves the fire from each existence to the next only if one isn't all wet."

The commander lifted his head in disdain, sniffing. Then he shook his head wearily. There were circles under his eyes. "But so many lives. It must mean something."

Even in the bare illumination among the boulders, Busparta could see that the commander was really asking himself these questions. It was obvious that the magician from Ashkenaz was deliberately needling him. Still, it was a depth of philosophy he hadn't thought a Lydian capable of.

The sorcerer's own face was indifferent. Perhaps it was stone.

"Don't ask me about morals. If I didn't bear godly ancestry, not even an Ishfntu could save my soul from the crows. By my mother was impregnated by the midnight moon. I have no fear."

The commander disappeared back into the rocks to rejoin his celebrating troops. Soon the dawn would bring a stupendous triumph. And peace of one sort or another.

Busparta squeezed his eyes shut, trying to blot out the faces he saw before him. Usakus with his eyes burned right out of his face, Khio and the legacy of the ring melted into his hand, Pergamis swollen like a dumpling and screaming.

Eventually there was a great flash of light in the sky. It throbbed, pulsing for seconds or for minutes. Then it went out as quickly as it flared. Aldrua? Busparta listened, certain he could hear them: those who died with no warning and those who lingered, perishing by the square inch.

It was too far away. He couldn't have heard. And yet . . .

So many lives.

Busparta crawled from hiding when the sorcerer became engrossed in tossing augerer's bones on the ground. As he leaned over to read their meanings, Busparta crept up behind him. He put his massive wrestler's arm in a choke hold around the magician's neck. He pulled and squeezed until the man's windpipe popped wetly. He squeezed further until the spine snapped. He dropped him and looked into the man's eyes. They bulged as if trying to leak from their sockets, as Khio's had. The sorcerer's hands flailed uselessly for a few short moments, the rubies jittering gobbets of meat. He stripped the body and tumbled it down the mountain. He cupped a hand to his ear and listened.

Was this sorcerer a god-spawn?

The soul flew up. The crows came after all.

Busparta smiled. "Your mother lied. Your father was probably a camel driver."

He donned the amulet and the singed robe, his nose twitching at the scent of burned feathers. It had to be his imagination because the insides of his nostrils were scorched. He smelled nothing. Not even the reek of wormwood, antimony, bitter white almond and gall as he tossed a handful of it on the embers smouldering in the semi-circle of stones.

It was just before dawn when the cloud returned.

Would it work? Or would it destroy him when it saw with its copper eyes that he wasn't the sorcerer? Did this require more of power than the trappings of the spell? And could such a man as the magician was have power or had he only possessed some dangerous knowledge?

The demon was already summoned. The hardest part had been calling it forth. Now only the bidding remained.

Busparta shuddered as its heat hovered close. Huge! It entirely blotted the sky. The tops of the mountains lay spread in its noxious fog until they, too, were gone. It had fattened. The heat that came off it in visible shimmering waves was intolerable.

If it weren't for the amulet—for whatever worked in it to shield him from the full force of its furnace—then Busparta would have surely perished on the spot.

He thrust the talisman forward. Its gleaming obsidian burned.

"Alah Ashnatis," he repeated, recalling what he heard the sorcerer say. He was thankful it was a brief incantation. "Reenah ban raneenah. At'n ftah ueer."

His cracked lips rasped. His tongue had grown to twice its normal size.

The red metal eyes regarded him blindly.

"Cross these few boulders and destroy the Lydian army that is there. Consume all that you find."

He was amazed at the ice he found in his heart. He'd raged upon the field of battle, stormed city walls to overcome the enemy hand to hand. But he'd never before been capable of wiping out many thousands with a few words.

The cloud hesitated and Busparta shivered. Was there a protection laid on the Lydians? After all, this was close to their camp and yet its hunger hadn't driven it to them. It was close and yet the cloud hung back toward Mysia, as if there was a barrier.

Would it know now that he was not the sorcerer from Ashkenaz?

"Gods have no need of morals," Busparta said.

The cloud flowed toward the Lydians who must at this moment be preparing for their easy march to the border. Yes! The damned magician might even have done this as his final act, for he despised them himself.

There wasn't much time before dawn would perhaps wisp it away but there must be enough. Looking east, Busparta saw the slightest difference in the violet of the sky and the paler indigo at the horizon. Soon it would go to rose, then lemon.

He scurried away, opposite the direction of the doomed men. He hurried down and untied the mare. She was still spooked, feeling the heat like that which presaged earthquake.

They rode quickly away, the shrieks of the enemy beginning over the mountain.

CHAPTER 8

"With all the silent or tempestuous workings By which they have been, are, or cease to be, Is but a vision;—all that it inherits Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles and dreams." 'Hellas'—Percy Bysshe Shelley

Alali looked into the mirror, and the image there was of a silver goddess, naked and lunar.

This was the object of love of the wolf from Delos who entered the bordello. She inhaled a pale jasmine, watching as the breasts rose and fell, round and glowing. Cratered deeply as was the moon. The hair floated around her head in a shimmering nimbus, like the circle that puffed around the satellite as an omen of rain.

Dayan stopped him and began to question him. She couldn't hear Dayan's precise words but his thoughts read,

What are you doing here?

Where do you think you are going?

You are not welcome here

Growl ...

The wolf snarled, baring teeth. His mood shifted wickedly.

She couldn't see what Dayan saw, only the picture in his mind. This thought-replication wasn't of a wolf but a worm. This was what Dayan always pictured when feeling contemptuous. It was an image that worked well when Dayan dealt with the Kura. The wolf didn't read his mood so the wolf wasn't daunted.

Dayan rose to block his way, sword in hand, the edges of the bordello master's expensive red cloak too regal to flutter. They swept back elegantly, trembling with lightning.

The wolf bristled in reaction. The moon goddess faded from his dreamier, cubbish mood. Something hissed . . .

... against his ear?

He produced a small sack of coins. Silver-white. Radiant and cold.

Dayan was anticipating silver as he lowered his sword by an inch. But he still curled his lip in disdain.

(We cater to a special clientele. Better than you much better not base not low not weird.)

Alali almost shriveled at the strength behind this contempt of Dayan's. But the wolf's projection was stronger.

The wolf was angry, very offended. No sleek silver princesses danced in the night sky above his world now. It must be the waning, the full dark of the moon. Only other wolves prowled the slick grasses and dripping trees. Perhaps this was all that had ever been there.

{-hisssssssssssssssssssssss.}

Alali waved a hand against her ear.

Was that a fly? Droning, something with a striped stinger.

Her hand was changing. The smooth skin and tapering fingers blunted, closing like buttercups for the night.

She felt sorry for the wolf, knowing that look of arrogance in Dayan's face and hating it. It was good the wolf couldn't read moods, couldn't be browbeaten by the Amaki. Perhaps he would show the brothel master a thing or two.

Alali always thought it too bad that Dayan couldn't read the moods of his customers. He'd lose his grand picture of himself. He would understand that he was nothing more than a procurer. Not even the prince of pimps.

Chinkle.

The wolf opened the bag and dumped the coins out onto the table. They weren't silver at all. They were pure gold.

Yellow as sunny harvests and thrones. Warm.

Dayan's eyebrows arched as his jaw dropped.

(How does a worm like you come by so much gold?)

(Doesn't matter. I have no more questions to ask.)

Rat of pimps.

Dayan stepped aside.

But the wolf was no longer musing. He no longer thought of a remote queen in a dusky heaven. What he sought was as bestial as himself.

He padded to her door. It made her hackles rise, filled her mouth with fangs in trenchant rows, as of the jaws of many wolves trapped behind a single pair of lips. She couldn't even close her mouth, there were so many teeth. They grew through her jaws and up into the bones of her skull. Saliva ran out freely because she couldn't hold it back, overlapping in braids down her neck. She smelled blood in his mood, hot and steaming. Very fresh. Her eyes turned scarlet from the scent of it.

In the bronze mirror, Alali saw herself as a great furry monster standing seven feet tall. Her broad flat head pressed back its pointed ears. Her eyes fairly bulged at the sight of the magnificent claws she generated. She had talons as polished as volcanic stone, obsidian black. If raked across flint, sparks would fly from such as these. If raked across a throat, the spine would sigh as it severed without protest, making the head a bowl to be drained in a gulp and the body a sponge to be squeezed dry.

Alali's heart beat in sympathy with the Delian's, thundering in her breast, shaking her ribs until they thrummed. Here was a creature who understood the dark, who wept for the glut of moonlight, who could barely contain the wildness that twisted its soul down a spiraling blind road. At her door, ideas

of a true mate in rut beneath his body, moving in a run that was a mad rhythm of muscles and passions. Seeking a symbiosis, a merging with a creature of transformation as he knew he was. He'd fed on blood, torn flesh, fled the dawn, raged at the brutality of the light that touched the seams of his cavern. He knew loneliness because he was, after all, a shifter. There was no lonelier nor more wretched beast upon the earth than the shifter.

Yes, she'd read that precise definition in his mood.

That he was actually a shifter. As Alali was. But she was bound to take on a thousand forms. He only became a wolf. Her limbs and features burned and cooled by vibrations from any passing person or creature. He only turned by the grace of that full and sacred moonlight. He knew every inch of what he was within: feral, carnal, movable.

He was male and sure of it. He wasn't resigned to a sex that was convenient because it was the one most called upon to deliver. Or, as in Alali's case, because it was the first human mood she'd picked up.

Now she hungered for this great Delian male shifter who was about to enter her room. She had teeth buried in softest black silver fur. She had a moist and musky vagina that ached and itched. She curled and uncurled claws, twitched her tail, snarled over the flashing knives of her teeth. No garden of roses had as many thorns. She howled out for him, a bitch on fire.

Voices purled near her ears, whispering in a hiss she sometimes understood, sometimes didn't.

{Listen . . . }

 $\{Ssssssssoooooooo hhhhhhuuuuunnnnnnggggrrrryyyyyyyy.\}$

{The night is sex the night is redredred the night is silver angry kill.}

{Kill. You are god, not as good as shining Apollo kill.}

{We voices of the dead sing, hear? Bitefuckstabfuckwoundsing bleedfuck singthedeadkill.}

{Kill. Zeus father Leto mother born in hiding bitch milk.}

Every neuron buzzed down her spine, across her sweating haunches, sparkling out her anus. Alali believed there was mist that must have come through the window, swirling in shapes which turned with every word that pressed into her ears, sensuously with every pulse in the blood that filled the wolf's erection. Her skull was too soft, brain meat too hard, pain shoving against the backs of her red eyes. A scratching fire ran up and down her belly and in and out of her womb come in! come in!

The door opened; he was there. Apollo Artemis Lyko triplets.

Alali's adopted form fluttered because she was confused. He wasn't in wolfshape.

He had outlined his eyes and cheekbones with red paint. He wore a tunic of wiry, stiff hairs and there were strange false gloves on his hands that sported long prongs of pointed obsidian from the ends of the fingers. These clattered together as he reached for her.

In his mind was a wolf tearing meat. It leaped onto the body of a mother at the campsight in the valley. It killed her before the father could come to her rescue armed only with a clumsy club. Breaking the man across his knee, the back creaking before it cracked. A child running across a shallow creek, not getting very far, the sweetest and slowest of his murders that night. The child shrieking in a sparrow's voice under the wolf's rape, squeaking as a mouse before the fangs severed the fragile throat. The moon was a taunting woman's face, cratered with gore, pressing her luminous tit down to him through the sky and the milk there.

The voices in his ears chattered kill kill sing kill.

But he wasn't shifting. He was just a man, a huge muscled man in a mangy wolf pelt. His eyes weren't red but too-pale gray, yellowed, reflecting almost no light. Spittle flecked his lips.

He'd paid Dayan so he was allowed to enter but . . . ?

Gold. Warm. Chinkle.

What was he if he wasn't the full image of the creature in his mind? Other clients had betrayals of their true selves in their thoughts, flashes of reality interspersing their fantasies. Here in his dark mood was all wolf, all writhing torment of transformation, blood lust, and meat sure-of-the-night.

He opened his mouth and growled at her, gruff but deep with the quiver of invitation. His teeth were small and filthy, crooked. He had obviously attempted to file some of the ones in the front into points and had only succeeded in breaking a couple off. His breath was a wall of rot that curled the hair in her nostrils. Not that predators didn't have meaty breaths but this was full of sickness.

She growled back at him. She paced back and forth on her side of the room, keeping her distance, holding the wolf in her shape because this was the only signal that came from his mind.

But where was the wolf she read in him? The wolf that ought to be standing in front of her?

Was it only in his head?

The voices which pressed into his ears and thus rang in hers were a riot of threats and vile suggestions. As if he also suffered from dark moods foisted upon him from another source. He moved his tongue in a circle around his greasy lips. He let run through his mind a dream of cherry nipples that crunched between his teeth like the seeds of soft fruits, of tight anuses between baby cheeks that still smelled of milk, of jerking his semen onto a heap of freshly spilled intestines until there was a rope of red and a string of white—and stars exploding under his stomach. All whispered in his ears by the dark moods of some demonic shadow.

He strode forward and spun Al...l; around, just a man but a giant of one. He bent her forward, clasping his puny rotted teeth against the back of her neck until she submitted. Not that these were any real threat to her. She could have violently shaken her head and the force of it would've popped the teeth out of his mouth. But submission was raging through his mood and so she submitted. He roughly kicked her hind feet apart and forced himself into her with a growl that pressed hotly, thickly against her neck. She was still

wet from the anticipation of him before he'd entered her door. She was a feral bitch in heat and was ready for a mate. He smelled it on her and grunted.

She read the picture of herself in his head. She-wolf, sister, with a pearl of the moon up her cunt that he had to prick.

The false claws chopped at her stomach and hips as he grabbed a tighter hold. Alali was nauseated, chained to the image of a wolf, but the damned voices and this unnatural beast were nothing but insanity. Something in her own brain was loosening in this diseased contact. The Kura weren't sane, no, not in their state of perpetual flux. They were mad as a race but they weren't rabid.

This frothed at the mouth and crawled from within, pestilent through the veins.

This rolled in cold shit upon the ground to cool his fever while skinless faces pressed close around him, buzzing between wasps' wings. He knew what he was, had no doubts whatsoever about what he was. He knew his father Zeus had fucked Leto and that Zeus's wife Hera had gone after Leto with a vengeance, swearing Leto would never give birth where the sun shone. Leto was turned into a wolf by Zeus, and she delivered her litter while in wolf shape on the island of Delos. Thus had been born the god of day shining, Apollo, also called the Lycian or Wolf-God—and Artemis, goddess of night shining, Lady of Wild Things. And poor Lyko, forever in his brother's shadow and fleeing the sneering day's light, wanting to fuck his sister, kept from the company of the other gods because of his wolf-shape. Yet they whispered in his ears all the time, reminding him of his wolf-doings, that he must kill for his wolfhood even as Hades must rule the dead.

These voices seeped into the wrinkles in Alali's brain. She couldn't silence them, couldn't ignore them. As the Delian wolf—the pretender loon—pumped her from behind, his vile breath wrapped around her head, she felt the impact of those voices gibbering in her ears. She knew she could be greater than this misguided beast. She could slaughter everyone in this house in minutes. Then she'd leave the brothel and go through the city. The red streamers that decorated the walls would drip real red . . .

 $\{Kill crack suck marrow.\ Twistsnap jelly spit.\ Dead sing voices.\ Rotin the moon.\ Be one among godskill\dots\}$

Someone had whispered this before, in a litany similar and familiar. It had promised godhood years ago, one hundred seventeen thousand full moons ago. Said the world belonged to the mighty who ruled it. Destiny. Fate.

Heaven.

Such were lies, tricks. One lost their identity in them.

Alali had never had much control. The sponge that was the Kura mind pulled in a suggestion of form, plied with ghosts. There was a danger here that even she sensed. Her survival instinct clicked beyond the command to submit, pulling her from the overpowering need to follow the lead of the nearest mind mood. She grasped the gloved hands that held her, cutting herself on the razor-sharp claws. The little wounds didn't matter because

they'd heal in the next form. She jerked herself forward until his phallus popped out of her. She spun around with dizzy speed and knocked him sprawling with the back of her paw.

He roared in a fury and sprang forward to grab her again, clenching the obsidian talons into screwed fists of knives. His mood bellowed the command that she become the compliant bitch. The pack leader was dominant, the shewolf a passive vessel.

(One little weak link: he wasn't pack leader. Even his brother God of Shining Apollo had the title Wolf-god . . . not poor Lyko.)

{Voices . . . hugerippingtowering sing-we-dead-champion-of -sucking-wounds growkill.}

His voices. Or hers now?

Alali hissed back, her height swelling. Her shaggy head shook back and forth, foam splattering from her jaws in arcs that drenched the walls. It lathered across his tunic and matted in his hair, not unlike the threads of his semen would have congealed on her, had he been able to ejaculate. She bent forward as her head scraped the ceiling.

His confused eyes grew wide as his face upturned, watching her become bigger than he was. Her paws ballooned with the talons gleaming wickedly. On her hind feet these claws scratched the substance of the floor; on her forepaws they hummed like shaped reeds as she slashed them through the air to ward him off.

The ceiling cracked as her head began to push through the roof. She smelled night air. She crashed one powerful foreleg through it again, and that part of the roof fell in on him. The wolfman scrambled out from under the thick fretwork of branches and crumbled baked mud. He howled once in defiance and then fled from the room.

She felt his complete terror, tail-between-his-legs, convinced he'd just met in personification the greatest deity to ever murmur threats in his ears. The she—She?—was that evilist of voices she'd heard herself, at the edge of Alali's ears, so how could it be Alali?

No matter. Let him think it so he'd never return. He'd never get things straight anyway. If he did read moods, and she could summon him, he'd probably kiss her ass. She could create balls for herself and make him lick them in alpha compliance. She'd show him a Lady of Wild Things.

Now all of it was fading with his panicked departure. Her own rage, fear, mania was leaving as he ran out of her range. The voices weren't even a whisper. She stuck her head through the rent in the roof and stared in surprise at the heavens, her fury a bewildering haze as milky as the thickest spume of stars in the sky. And the moon wasn't full at all. It was the rainbow moon. A rainbow was only an arc. But the man believed the moon to be full.

Why had she done this image? Why had she attacked a customer? It was the most grievous sin a Kura could commit. Why had the situation gone out of control? Dayan stomped through the doorway, kicking debris aside from the fallen roof. He was furious. Not only because of the damage to the building but because patrons saw the monstrous head jutting through the roof. They saw the bloody Delian as he ran shrieking down the street, bending to lope on all fours. The customers were backing away from Dayan's courtyard. They were going to other houses for their pleasure—if they even sought pleasure this evening.

"Alali!" Dayan cried, his voice shrill.

He looked up, defiant of her even as she towered. He squinted, placed hands on his hips, and drilled a command into her. One thought that was shriveling, sniveling, oily and coiling. Not big with fangs and claws, not strong, not confident or even mad with power.

Timid, meek, daunted by a formidable world.

Stinking and skinny. Cowardly.

Alali moaned as she withered, shrinking down below the busted ceiling. Stars disappeared from sight because she was a creature that probably never saw them. Never saw them because she crawled through the mud and fungus and mounds of dung. She was blind because she didn't deserve to have eyes. She had no arms and legs, for helplessness was her curse through life.

Dayan concentrated. (Vile Creature! To be spit upon would be a favor!)

(Despicable in the eyes of all gods! Even the demons despise you and wouldn't bother to shit a pox on you!)

There was a pang of self-loathing as Alali grew smaller, shrinking down to level with Dayan's face, dwindling down to his chest, his waist, thighs, feet. Snapping around on the littered floor, she was a whip of invertibrate finger.

A worm.

Dayan pinched his cruel thought at her relentlessly.

(Foulness! Shiteater! You should be ground beneath my heel!)

She shuddered close to his sandals, trying to inch away before he might really put this crushing threat into motion. She flinched as he stooped to pick her up at one end that was precisely identical to the other end. And thoughtless except for the knowledge that she was the most useless of the world's animals. The most puny and yulgar.

(Crush you! The earth would feel nothing in your nothing passing!)

Alali cringed, shivering as he swung her in the air. He carried her from the ruined room, down the hall past cubicles where other Kura harlots quaked, feeling his dark mood, ghastly and savage. They were also compressed by his viciousness. But it was only Alali he took into the space below the house, below even the lightless room built under the first floor. This was lined with stones until no crack of dirt was available to squeeze out through. No light, no escape. A heavy door with a massive lock to which Dayan held the only key. He threw her into this, her maggoty body arching as she spun through the air and rolled in a twist, hitting the stone floor.

He slammed it, locked it, then sat next to it with his head pressed to the door. He thought about how horrible she was, how meaningless.

(Small!)

Hungry soon.

He sat the night there, letting his servant Huddissi take care of the hole in the roof. He stayed until morning, then left her starving. He didn't send Huddissi with food. No one came at either sunset or the next sunrise. When Day...n did return, it was only to denounce her.

(Insect! Slimy boneless hole!)

Let me out, she thought back. I'm hungry let me out hungry.

(Teach you to defy, to dare not to bend to dare to refuse to become what you're commanded to! Whoreworm! If I could make you disappear completely, I would, for you're worthless! Starve!)

He went away.

And she tried not to think about the moon, in a rainbow arc, and with compassion in the craters of its face.

PART TWO

"I am descending to the kur, the underworld.

If I do not return,

Set up a lament for me by the ruins.

Beat the drum for me..."

'The Descent Of Inanna'—Mesopotamian

CHAPTER 9

"Why has your heart led you on the road From which no traveler returns?" "The Descent Of Inanna"—Mesopotamian

Rains came which washed the air clean of salt and dust. They came across the wasteland from the Caspian Sea, were dark on the horizon in a storm-of-the-dunes, blacker than soul crows. But the smell was fragrant as the rare rains usually were. The ozone was sharp.

Winter came—even rarer for the salt desert. Sleet shimmered in it and the wind howled out of it like a wild thing. Emana found two of her chickens frozen on the floor of the coop, the eggs in all of the nests turned to stone.

She and Memyt slept huddled together for warmth.

She patted the dog's head and said, "Dream of dryness."

The dog shivered as water dripped and sometimes ice slivered through the flimsy roof.

Emana dreamed she was swimming in rainwater as it flooded the plain, rising up to defy the tops of the mountains. Planks and rafts—that seemed wooden enough—drifted close until she could tell they were actually the bodies of animals and people. Her legs scissored in the freezing water as stiff forms bumped against her, floating between her legs. She watched the waters grow pink, then red, scarlet as the inside of her mouth. Past still went a camphor chest carved with images of winged beings, spider-faced bats. In it was a knot of worms, coiling into intricate love-sigils, chewing through decaying buds of white roses.

Emana put her hand on the side, heedless of the vermin. She was anxious to pull herself into it and be out of the chill flood.

No sooner did she touch the worms than they solidified, smoothed, gentled out into a familiar flesh.

"Come and I'll warm you," said Rasal, sitting up in the camphor box. He was as beautiful as an Egyptian king in a royal sarcophagus.

She took his hands and let him pull her aboard.

And he navigated them away to the top of the tallest peak where the melted ice of the world couldn't reach them. His body wrapped around hers like the worms around one another, like two dead lovers in a tomb waiting for rebirth together. The flavor of the nurturing soil was on each other's dark breaths.

She awoke to the dog licking her face.

"Has it stopped raining?" she asked Memyt.

She could hear that it still was. Half the yard and the desert beyond were gray with sheets of water. The other half was strangely bright with rays from the sun in splinters through a tangerine gauze of clouds.

She looked into her mirror, copper out of India.

"I'm getting too thin, Memyt," she said.

The dog only cocked his head at an angle and watched her. Then he wagged his tail as if saying, (yes, thin, but I love you fat, medium or skinny.)

She washed her hair and some of it fell out in her fingers. She tried to scent it with clove but it only reminded her of madder root.

She outstretched her fingers for the dog to smell. The dog wrinkled his nose.

"Is it what you smell like, too?" She sniffed but Memyt's fragrance only resembled salty rainwater and salt desert sand.

The rain stopped for a while. She tried to work in the garden. People passed; none visited. None ever stopped. Travelers glanced toward the house, then quickly turned away. Neighbors pretended they didn't see her, didn't hail her anymore. No one brought their sick to be healed or sought blessings for their endeavors. No one came to buy charms. No one sought her services with gifts of blood.

"They don't even come as near as the icy bodies in my dream," Emana told Memyt as the two of them watched a pair of shapeless nomads going by on the road, burnooses up so they wouldn't have to acknowledge her and couldn't be recognized.

Memyt barked and bounded a few feet toward the road. (I could bring them back for you . . .)

The hooded figures hurried.

Memyt stopped, looking back at Emana. He weakly thumped his tail and then hung his head in imitation of his mistress.

She dreamed again of the flood, of its turning scarlet as her mouth. It was blood, fruity and incense, sweet the way Ishantu's blood was—not salty and metallic as a human's. When she tried to swallow some of it, it changed inside her, wrestling behind her lips to take on a solid and queasy form. It choked her, sour as vinegar. Emana spat it out and a soul crow flew from her mouth, shaking her spittle from its wings.

In the very early spring she decided to go to the village of Bash't'gai. There was a little market there that the Hathors had visited every year.

She set a basket of pomegranites on her head as she bent to stroke Memyt's ears. "Defend the field. When I come back, I'll have something for you."

Normally the fruit would be bartered for cloth so that Emana could make new robes for Rasal and herself.

"I'm going to get myself a goat," she said as she stood straight again. The dog went with her as far as the field. Then he sat and watched her go up the road alone.

She would get herself a nice fat goat she could take a little blood from, mixing it with its rich milk to give her some new strength. Most of her chickens had either died or been weakened in the cold rains. Besides, it wasn't really possible to take blood from a chicken without hurting it. They were too small. And the horses already had scars on them from too much letting. They

swished their tails and thought Emana was a fly. They didn't give very good milk anyway. If they grew too weak, they couldn't be used as journeying animals—provided, of course, that travelers ever began stopping again to trade tired mounts for fresh ones.

(No one stopped anymore. They went past, past.)

It was a long walk. She had to stop to rest several times. When would she ever have needed rest before? The basket grew so heavy she thought her neck was going to break. When she came to B sh't'gai, she stopped at the first animal pen she saw.

"No goats for sale," said the proprietor.

"There are many in the pen." Emana stared in surprise at the number of fine animals. Her tongue felt swollen in her mouth.

"Yes, but not for sale," he insisted stubbornly.

He avoided meeting her eyes. He continually fussed with a harness, the buckles on it jangling and their noise hurting her head. Her head was so sore. She set her basket down and he squinted at it as if it was full of snakes.

"You're a merchant," she told him patiently. "Why do you have so many goats at a market if they're not for sale?"

"I don't need pomegranites," he replied. He eyed the basket, hoping she'd move it out of the way.

She sighed, almost wishing the pomegranites were serpents so she could induce one to bite him.

"I have money as well. I can pay silver," she said, fishing coins from her sash. Her fingers slipped on the knot, shaking because she was empty. "Name your price."

Would he now claim he didn't need silver?

"These goats have been sold. I'm only holding them until the buyer can come to collect them." The man huffed, turning away from her. He wouldn't turn around again. He kept wrestling with the harness as if the banging buckles was a noise he couldn't hear her over.

All of the goats in the market had been likewise sold that morning. Apparently all the sheep, too. And the apothecary's was out of blood removed from sacrifices where signs were taken from entrails.

(But she smelled it there. Why were they lying to her?)

And. And. Everything she could possibly have bought was sold. Not available. Out of reach.

Odd there were no other Ishantu at the spring market. There were people coughing, limping, shivering everywhere as if no one had gone to a physician in months. As if none of them had been willing to seek out the Ishfntu aid available to all of them.

Emana left the pomegranites by the village well where the poorest children played. She walked home.

Memyt barked with delight to see Emana approaching. He'd been chasing birds in the grain field. She watched from the road as wings shook furiously

among the golden stalks as he sprang in one section, settling down again when he bounded after others in another part.

The smell of the grain was heated, radiant. This, too, reminded her of her husband, stripped to the waist, cupping soil and sheathes of wheat in his hands.

This, too, reminded her of life, growing and full of blood.

She was so hungry. She almost fainted on the road.

"Rasal?" Emana asked aloud.

As he turned in the field, stripped to the waist, muscles gleaming. He smiled and waved, grain flying from his fingers like sparks.

Then vanished.

Emana straggled into the yard and sat down on the ground with a thwump that hurt her backside. Memyt bounced along beside her, nipping at her hand and skirt. His tail wagged until she thought it would break off, flying across the yard as a stick for him to chase.

(you're home! skinny and all love you love you! see how I protected our field from invaders?)

Emana crossed her legs in a lotus and beckoned for the dog to come to her. He padded eagerly, stepping halfway into the nest of limbs. She stroked him for a few minutes.

"Memyt, my puppy," she cooed.

She took a firm hold of the scruff of his neck. She had her gold needle ready in her hand, its point coming out with a hiss. The sound was a threat that burned in her starved brain. Or had she hissed?

The dog thumped his tail hopefully, not fighting at all. He expected no pain from his mistress.

"Memyt, don't be afraid. This won't hurt much."

The dog whined as the needle pierced his skin. He wriggled as he tried to free himself. She'd surprised him with the discomfort. He turned his head this way and the other to extricate himself from the fist at his neck.

"Hold still," she growled, frightened by the rumble in her own throat, nearly overcome by dizziness.

The needle slipped and cut him deeper than she'd intended. Not dangerously. But the flow was very bright.

She bent to drink, her shoulders quaking. "I need it. I won't take too much."

She held him as still as possible in her strong hands. The poor animal's eyes were wild, ears laid flat against his skull. His tail stopped wagging and was tucked between his legs. His whine was half-strangled. She felt him shudder.

She remembered Memyt as a puppy, all ears and paws, wrecking everything in sight. He'd been a gift from Rasal one solstice, bartered for with pomegranites at the same village market she'd been shunned in today. Memyt grew up sleeping at the foot of their bed of rushes. Adoring and faithful. Clumsy and clownish.

Terrified of her now because of this betrayal. Could he even breathe as she tightly held him? Emana couldn't tell. Her entire focus was on the blood.

It eased the ache in her head, made her dulled limbs seem lighter. The blood of friends, yes, was always best.

(Providing it was given, lady.)

But when she was finished—restraining herself to only that smallest portion—the dog jerked away from her and ran out of the yard. He stopped at the entrance to the field of grain, turned and barked, growling. His eyes shifted left and right, suspicious as to this rearrangement of the world.

(why did you hurt me?)

Emana wiped the blood from her red mouth. She licked it clean from her fingers, not wasting one precious drop. Then she sobbed.

In her dream that night, the flood waters were a cold, sanguine rust. Her fingers crept over the rim of the camphor box. Memyt was within and bit her hand as it stole inside. She woke and went to the doorway, looking across the yard and past the road to the field—a curious brass under the moonlight.

In the field she saw Rasal, naked, his body straining upward from the ground. His face was upturned. He was howling at the lunar sky.

When she blinked, he was gone. She could hear Memyt baying from somewhere in the wheat. Howling at a moon he no longer trusted.

Emana heard the bells before she saw the caravan. It came much closer before she could hear the laughter of children. It was closer still before the strange raspy bray of the camels was audible. Sometimes sounds moved in the desert as if they came from a wholly different direction, or even as if they were reaching the ears of the listener from the past. The caravan might have come from another time, she mused, as she watched the figures on the distant dunes waver. They hovered between shadow and light, sparkling as sleet in the odd rains that had fallen this year.

Under their gray and white headresses, the people's faces were serene, set in semi-trance. Their cheekbones were high and glass-sharp, their eyes intelligent. Their skins were dark to ten times the color of the sand. When she saw that the men carried bundles the same as the women and that only children went unburdened, Emana knew that these were from the tribe of Selem.

Great black-fleshed horses pranced with them, bridled in seed pearls purchased from Phoenician traders. Unlike many tribes who kept jackalnosed hounds beside them, the Selem had cats. Their tails were up in furry necromancer wands, yellow eyes slitted against the sun. These kept away from the feet of the camels and horses, sometimes falling behind, rolling in the sand to suffocate their fleas. The Selem believed that cats were sacred and that the spirits of children who died (in the multitude of illnesses that stole little ones from their parents) were then reborn into cats. It seemed to explain their playfullness and the look of enigma they had when they gazed to points

in space. Even the way they twitched as they slept, for what child could ever keep still? And what child didn't wonder where it came from?

Emana saw Met'impta walking with her baby in her arms. There was a strikingly handsome man beside her. Emana was glad, knowing she'd given her neighbor good advice. Met'impta's lover from the festival had accepted both child and mother. The couple sneaked shy glances at each other, smiling every time the baby hiccoughed or burbled.

"Emana!" Met'impta cried, waving when she saw the vampire on the road. Emana shifted her bundle of belongings onto her other shoulder. It had been a long time since anyone greeted her.

The tribespeople started, visibly jerking upon hearing the infamous name. So, even the Selem knew of Emana's sin. What did her name mean now? Did its sound equal that of the word 'traitor'? If a traveler from another land asked what the word Emana meant in the language of the wasteland, would they answer back "Ah! Faithless One!"?

Met'impta's husband raised his eyebrows when his wife paused to clasp the vampire's hand in her free one, the other balanced beneath the bulk of the boy. The child was more than twice the size he'd been when Emana had last seen him.

(On the day the clan came to hire Rasal. Just before Rasal was murdered. Had so many months passed? In a century would it still seem this fresh?)

Met'impta saw how the others were reacting but she didn't care.

"Are you well, Emana?" asked the young mother. "I heard about Rasal. I'm sorry."

Indeed, who hadn't heard about that?

People on the far side of the world perhaps.

"I'm well," Emana replied, not feeling she was being very honest about her condition. She was reed thin. The baby looked well though. He had good color and his eyes were alert to every movement. He grinned and stretched gummy fingers toward her. She let him grasp her little finger. "I'm leaving to journey to Kur."

Met'impta nodded solemnly. She understood that Emana couldn't be going to Kur for any of the frivolous or depraved reasons that many went there for. The widow traveled as a pilgrim in deep mourning, to a sacred well where she might hear her beloved's voice speaking from the water. But in Kur one might call up more than just the departed's voice.

Emana stared across the sand, facing a point she felt she heard Rasal calling to her from. He was summoning her from Kur, and the sound of him using her name rushed across the countless miles. It was a roar, full of salt and water, not distinct as it howled over mountains and sea ports.

"Yes, I'm coming, Rasal," she said, nodding, running a trembling hand through her braids. She caught some of the sand flying in that air, humming with the noise of his voice, and brought it to her tongue.

Met'impta and her husband exchanged frowns. This was the great healer, the Ishantu lady of blessings? Mad now.

Met'impta covered her eyes with the flat of her palm and gazed off toward the sun—a little to the west of where Emana was looking.

"You're traveling alone? It will be night soon."

Met'impta snapped her mouth shut after she'd said it. Of course, the vampire was traveling alone. She was a pariah. She'd only said it because she needed to say something, to put a wedge into the awkward silence of watching her friend's insanity.

"Nayar," she said to her husband who stood aside, hands folded around a string of pots, "this is the lady who saved Mito's life when my mother poisoned him."

Suddenly he stood a little straighter, beaming with pride at the mention of the baby. He bowed slightly and the pots clanked together.

"We're forever in your debt," he said. "Met'impta is right. The sunset will arrive before you reach the shelter of the next oasis. You're welcome to stay with us through the darkness."

Nayar's tent was pitched that evening near a group of milk camels. The meal served was simple food, such as was the common fare of most Asiatics. Mostly dates, grapes, olives and figs. Emana nibbled only a little. She knew she'd acted as a fool, seeing the image of her dead husband, speaking to him in front of the others who, of course, hadn't seen him there.

She tried to feel normal, whatever such a thing was. She was among people again. There were tambourines and aulos being played. Someone had an eight stringed lyre and played with the accomplishment of a court musician. Adults beat on drums of cow hide and goat skin while their children pounded on the bottoms of pots. The atmosphere was festive, totally family. Yet she still felt outside them.

Well, she was outside them. She couldn't belong here (even for just a night) or anywhere else again. Only Rasal could understand this. And wasn't he trying to say how much he understood? From each spot where Emana beheld his ghost?

There was a child playing with a cat in an open triangle of space, between where three fires were lit against the encroaching night's chill. Emana tilted her head as she watched them.

"Both are spotted," she said with mild surprise.

The boy had a surplus of freckles, and the cat's entire fur was as dappled as a leopard's. They patted and batted and frisked like two of a kind.

Met'impta noticed her interest. "That's Let-amon. His twin brother died two years ago. Let-amon believes the cat is his brother reborn."

Emana nodded. If it was possible for a cat to look like a boy and a boy to resemble a cat, this is what the result would be. They seemed as close as siblings. She wondered if Rasal might eventually return to her in some other form. He might be reborn as a stallion she could ride across the sand. Or he might be a raven—the tips of the feathered wings of which would seem to be braids. He could come down from the mountains as a lion, and she would be

his Inanna. She was going on a long sea journey. Would he emerge from the waves?

"He is returned now," she whispered, sensing him in every shadow. "He doesn't have to come back when he's already here."

When they retired to the tent of woven goat hair, Emana took a spot in the corner, away from the mats shared by the married couple. The baby had fallen asleep during supper and Met'impta wrapped him in a blanket. Then Met'impta stripped off her robes, kissed her husband, and walked across the tent. She knelt naked next to Emana and kissed the vampire on the mouth.

"Take out your needle. I'll share my blood with you."

Emana looked nervously over at Nayar but he was merely watching. If he disapproved, there was no sign of it in his features.

Met'impta caressed Emana's cool face with a pair of smooth warm hands that made the widow swoon. She closed her eyes to let dizziness pass, then slipped the gold needle from under her robes.

Met'impta made only a small sound, a delicate intake of breath that was less of pain than of anticipation. She'd given blood as a gift to Emana before so this piercing was something she was used to. But never had she felt the other woman's need as great as she did now. And for more than mere blood.

Emana put her mouth to the well of scarlet that Met'impta had gestured for her to make—not to the wrist or the back of the shoulder as was traditional, but on her bared breast. Met'impta wrapped her arms around the Ishantu, holding her as Emana drank and sobbed. She felt Emana's dessicated body coming to life against her own. She helped the vampire remove her volumes of traveling clothes and the two women embraced again, flesh to flesh.

Outside, most of the instruments had stopped playing. The musicians had gone to bed. Only a single pair of cimbals came together from somewhere in the nomad camp, two thin pieces of silver bound by slender thongs to fingers. These only struck once, making a single high sweet sound.

Nayar had undressed quietly and now padded over to the women. They came apart and let him between them.

"I wish to share my blood as well," he said, a little uncertain. He was clearly aroused by having watched Met'impta and Emana kiss and stroke each other, but his people didn't have liasons of more than two. Orgies were reputed to happen in royal palaces in the depraved cities but they didn't happen here. Surely the great chieftains who owned harems might occasionally be joined by two wives at once.

"Do you have a preference as to where she takes it from?" Met'impta asked him, giggling.

The woman brazenly stared at his erection.

Nayar blushed.

"Isn't that dangerous? Sticking a needle into it?" It made him so nervous that his scrotum crawled, shrinking him by inches.

"Lie on your back and I'll take it from your inner thigh," Emana suggested. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to perform a circumcision. And if at any moment you are uncomfortable, simply say it and I'll stop."

Nayar slowly leaned back, thinking that this was how virgin girls must feel. The vampire knelt between his legs and lightly touched the golden needle to the flesh very high up, close to the groin. Here was a major artery, wasn't there? He'd seen a man take a sword point in this spot in battle. The man bled to death in short minutes.

Her breath was cold, causing a ripple of chilly delight to go up his spine. Her lips were moist, soft as lamb fleece. And the gentle sucking of his blood created a heat below his stomach that caused him to moan. Before he could get the noise all the way out, his wife put the nipple of her full right breast into his mouth. She was still nursing Mito and tasted of milk. Her hair fell across his face as he blindly reached out both arms, fingers tingling, and grasped for whatever parts of the women he might touch. When he felt both hot and cold, he knew he must have made contact with each.

Outside the tent, someone screamed. Women moaned. A man raised an angry voice to the gods. Nayar hurridly slid out from between Met'impta and Emana. He dashed from the tent with his sword brandished. Was the camp under attacked? They'd heard no hooves coming across the sand.

Met'impta and Emana rose quickly and draped robes around themselves before going out. A crowd had gathered, parting to let them through. The boy Let-amon lay very still on the ground between the three dead fires, a few embers glowing in the pits like dull stars. The spotted cat was licking his face and mournfully meowing into the night. There was a wound on the boy's hand, so swollen that Emana was unsure whether it was the single touch from a scorpion's stinger or two punctures from the fangs of a serpent. She would have to get close to him to examine it before she could be certain.

Not that she could treat him. Whatever attacked him had killed him.

The boy's mother crouched next to him, tearing out her hair in slow motion-fistfuls. A woman closely resembling her (her sister perhaps) wailed in sympathy. Let-amon's father was cursing the destiny that took both sons from him. This man glanced at Emana and pointed his finger.

"Ishantu! This is your fault. You've brought trouble to us because you're cursed yourself."

The crowd turned as one and began nodding at this logic.

The priest of the tribe held his beard in both hands as he glowered at her. "She who refused salvation to a man and thus condemned him to the soul crows must be followed by all manner of demons. She speaks to spirits we don't see. She's haunted by ghosts. Even if she didn't deliberately cause Letamon's death, she's responsible for what followed her to us and killed the boy."

"She had nothing to do with it," Met'impta protested. "I've known Emana Hfthor my entire life, and she's never done anything but help people. She's cured many who would have died. And she isn't haunted. She grieves."

The priest turned toward Nayar's wife solemnly. "You're not Selem. You have no voice here."

Met'impta shrank. Nayar frowned and stepped in front of her.

"I'm Selem. I have a voice. This Ishantu saved the life of my son who is Selem also. She was with us when this boy was killed. I've seen nothing that doesn't belong in her shadow."

The priest looked at Nayar's nakedness, the trickle of blood from the letting place on his upper thigh, and the drawing circle where Emana's mouth had been. Both women were only barely covered with their hair damp and lips swollen. The priest dismissed Nayar with a wave of his hand. "The Ishantu has you bewitched. And your wife."

The crowd seethed. Emana knew they were dangerous. One word from the priest and they would tear her apart with their bare hands.

Instead he said, "Put her alone into a tent. Post a guard outside. In the morning we'll execute her. We'll cut off her head so she can't return. We'll leave her body above the ground, away from the core of the earth she has forsaken."

"What about them?" The boy's father gestured to Nayar and his wife.

"The vampire saved his son's life. Such gratitude to her is natural. They've done nothing," replied the priest.

A burly nomad came to lead Emana away, his burnoose up so that she could only see the slits of his eyes. He roughly took her by the arm. Her grip on the robes she held around her slipped. The garments fell to the ground. She was completely revealed. She tried to hold her free arm across her for some modesty. The tribe stared, the subtle differences of Ish fntu from human illuminated by what few fires still burned around the camp. There was no pubic hair and the folds of her genitals were as bright a red as her mouth and eyes. The navel was on the back, where the umbilical linked mother and child of her race. The nipples of her breasts weren't rounded nubs but petaled like rosebuds, also very red. These were said to open when an Ishantu nursed her infant, the blood milk rising to the surface of the blossom resembling dew.

She heard Met'impta scramble to collect her clothes before the crowd could take them to burn them. The woman clutched them to her chest and then folded up on the sand as angry tribesmen tried to pry them away from her. Someone pulled hard on her hair. She cried out but didn't give up the garments. Nayar stepped forward and knocked down the man who'd done this.

Emana heard a sword being drawn, scraping along its sheath. The other man's, obviously, since Nayar was unclothed and had his sword but no sheath.

"Enough!" the priest exclaimed. "Let her have the vampire's robes. Do you think demons hide in cloth?"

Emana turned to make sure her friends weren't further harmed. She saw the spotted cat howling mournfully up at the moon, sitting atop the body of the spotted boy. Then the guard wrenched her away again, dragging her to the tent that would be her prison for the night.

In her dream, Rasal was dressed in leopard skins. In between dreams—when she'd wake up shivering—Emana cried for the boy Let-amon. She wept for the cat who might have been his reincarnated twin. Would Let-amon return as a cat?

Rasal returned but he took many forms. She couldn't be sure it was her husband at all until she saw his face shining from whatever body he was wearing.

Was the priest right? Was she haunted?

Or was Met'impta right when she said Emana only grieved?

(Which was a polite way of saying that Emana was insane.)

She knew she really saw Rasal. Her eyes couldn't be that deceived. Would his spirit find a way to rescue her?

In the morning they'd come to cut off her head. She'd be left above ground. Only the carrion eaters would wait for her. Would she be conscious within her corpse? In both sections or only in the head? Would she know here what Rasal had known when Lar Anut killed him? Would she feel the sun as it rotted her by inches?

If she truly committed a sin by refusing to help Lar, were the soul crows going to come for her? That would be a first among her people.

The spotted cat cried all night. Emana heard it, padding around the camp, scratching at some of the tents. She heard the lost boy in its voice.

She went to sleep again. She dreamed that Rasal came up from the ground and covered her in sumptuous furs to keep her warm. He sang a strange rumbling song into her ears.

At dawn's light, the tribe came to see her executed. The guard let the priest enter the tent. Nayar brought Met'impta who had convinced the priest to let Emana have her robes before her death.

"Look!" Met'impta cried. She pointed to where Emana lay sleeping, surrounded by every cat and kitten from the tribe who had curled up, over, and around her during the night.

Emana woke up and rubbed her eyes. Surprised, she stroked the backs of several of the cats, rubbing them under the chins. They purred against her.

"What does this mean?" asked the priest, unable to take more than three steps into the tent because there were so many cats. Even the spotted twin of Let-amon was there.

Nayar smiled. "The reborn of the Selem children declare Emana to be innocent."

CHAPTER 10

"What thou seest Is but the ghost of thy forgotten dream . . . " 'Hellas — Percy Bysshe Shelley

The Amaki fashioned their ships after the Phoenicians, great curved galleys with intricate carved heads to guide them. The Phoenicians did most of the trading by waters but the Amaki discovered a wealth to be had by taking passengers to and from Kur. They had, after all, discovered the ancient city and were the ones responsible for its profitable rebuilding. Let others transport copper, frankincense, and cedars from the forests of Lebanon. The Amaki would ferry people.

Not that it was as grand as lazing on a barge on the Nile, but it beat sharing quarters with a cargo load of rough logs or cattle. And unlike all the other sailors of the seas, the Amaki weren't afraid to travel the waters at night.

From the Phoenicians to the ships of Israel (which were still provided the king of Jerusalem by Hiram, king of Tyre and Phoenician) to the Assyrians, every other sea-going people beached their ships at night and went ashore. Thus every other vessel traveled about thirty miles a day. The Amaki could nearly double that, although they had to stop often enough to take on supplies to feed their passengers.

This ship left Biblos two weeks ago. Other than the Lady Hfthor, there were three people from Babylon and four from Jerusalem aboard.

There was little to do to occupy them. Travelers sometimes swapped stories of the places they had been but they couldn't get in the way of the crew. It was stifling below deck. At Cyrene they added a pair of Egyptians to the list. The Egyptians kept to themselves, telling deliciously erotic stories that kept them giggling and sighing in turns. The Babylonians did this, too, until one day by accident they discovered that all five of them had a penchant for tales of sexual exploit. Afterward they spent the days together on deck, seeing the positions of love outlined in the waves. Nights they stayed below deck and were somewhat noisy. The Israelites were aloof from the idolators and a little suspicious of Emana.

The Jews had never taken to Ishantu, believing them to be followers of a goddess considered unclean—Lilit. They abhored the medical methods the Ishantu used, seeing it as enchantment. The fact that they subsisted on a diet of blood was abominable.

Two of the men from Jerusalem were young. They kept their faces averted whenever she passed them. The third was older and didn't even seem to take notice of her. He barely even spoke to the others in his party. He was silent and wrapped in solitary thought most of the time. He kept his face partially

covered. The fourth was a boy of about nine. This child sneaked glances at Emana until one of the younger men said something to him.

The Babylonians and Egyptians avoided Emana as well, but theirs was relegated to mere disapproval—as opposed to the downright dread the Jews exhibited. These two younger Israelites went so far as to go widely around her—to keep their shadows from being touched by hers. The older one noticed. He rolled his eyes slightly in amazement, then went back to his unapproachable repose.

Of course, Emana wanted to be alone; she was mourning. She sought Rasal in every sign that could be given her. But she missed the brief sharing she'd experienced with Met'impta and Nayar. It didn't have the spiritual merging that came with Ishantu and Ishantu—that could only happen within her race. Yet it had been a touching she'd likely not have again for a long time, perhaps not for the rest of her life. And, in her case, that might be another two centuries. The fact that this couple had permitted her blood from their veins was a gesture which deeply touched her.

Wasn't she journeying to Kur to be with Rasal again in the only way she could be? Then it would not be forever. And who knew what might follow? Some sort of transformation perhaps. Into what, she couldn't guess. It must be something which might save her from this abyss she'd fallen into.

She stood alone on one side of the deck, looking out across the water. Her eyes made out the shapes of creatures below the waves or breaking the waves. She watched the distant coastline, many of it desert beaches, mountains dry and sere. Occasionally there were islands with citrus groves sparkling green under the sun. She kept her shoulders square, not turning to see the stares from the sailors who also mistrusted her. The ship's captain would close his eyes, trying not to wish that he'd never let her book passage. Amaki didn't refuse money from anyone who could afford to pay. They might have become a rather arrogant people since finding the lost city of Kur, but they knew the intrinsic value of gold.

The two young Israelites were conversing on the other side of the deck. She had Ishantu ears and could hear them even though they didn't know it. It gathered back in rasping consonants and lilting vowels, folding in the salt breeze, tangling in her braids.

"The cousin of a friend of my sister's lost her child in the desert during a storm," said one of them. "It was lured into Lilit's nest of stings. She never saw it again."

"She saw the nest?" asked the other.

"No, but the child vanished. In the desert. It was night and there was a moon. There was a kind of music in the wind."

"One hears music in the desert at night."

"Yes, but if you hear this music and go to find it, you'll find Her and be torn apart and have your liver eaten."

The boy with them gasped. Did the older man chuckle?

One heard voices while at sea, too, Emana thought as she considered what she'd overheard. The waters were blue, clear as ciphering crystals. Spirits swam beneath the surface which rolled faceted edges like quicksilver.

Earlier she paid a sailor for some of his blood. The hunger subsided. He eyed her strangely as he gave it. It wasn't likely he'd have refused, being Amaki and seeing the color of her coin.

Now it was very hot. She peered down at the dolphins leaping near the ship. It would be easy to join them, to slip into that cool blue water and stay. Rasal was there. She'd seen his face on a dolphin the day before. Or had it been a couple of days ago? Time out here was nothing. She could see clouds on the horizon. Perhaps a storm was coming, and she'd be able to measure time in flashes of lightning. That would be good, for it was terrible to lose time.

She drew a hand across her face and wondered what it was like to perspire. The other passengers were dripping with sweat, bundled in robes they normally wore for the desert. The sailors were stripped to the waist, their skins gleaming. Was it hotter than usual for this part of the year? Even the ship's crew panted. They stopped to drink more water from the casks brought aboard at the last port. It was still—no wind blowing. The sail had flattened and was doing no good in propelling the ship.

There were brailropes attached to the sail's bottom edge and going straight up the front side. These were fastened at various points to the cloth and went over the sail's top, also going down to the deck. The sailors were drawing the sail up like a linen blind over a window Emana had seen once at Ninevah, gathering the material to fold it at the yard arm. They would have to resort to rowing if they were to make any progress today. The sailors were grumbling about it since it was too hot to row. The stillness made everyone want to lie down and sleep.

Except for the boy. He watched the men roll the sail up the short mast. He got down on his knees and examined the mast step it was set into, going below deck to investigate the slot in the ship's bottom where it came to its final stop. The ship had a hull with a strong backbone designed into the heavy wooden keel. The mast butt could rest in the step without a danger of going through the hull bottom.

"I want to make ships when I come of age," the boy told the captain. "I want to shape them like dolphins."

The captain smiled and ruffled the child's dark curls.

"Azariah," one of the young Israelites chided softly, "this man is busy. He has no time for your dreams."

"Yes, Uncle," the boy said obediently.

The dolphins were skimming the tops of the waves. Emana sought desperately to find the one among them with Rasal's face but he wasn't there. They murmured. Emana concentrated to hear what it was. It rose and fell on the water like a chant.

(Azure, turquoise, lapis lazuli. So in the water, so in the sky.

Flutes and chimes together weave, to make a dance in which you grieve.

Half-close your eyes until the sun becomes the moon for death undone.)

It was magic from these little gods. Emana turned to see Rasal behind her. He took her in his arms. He began to move her in a slow dance that glided with the sound of the flutes and the chimes which came from the sea below and beyond.

Very few cultures allowed men and women to dance together. Most dances were rituals of once sort or another, performed by only men or only women. Or they were done by slave for master, steps of seduction within class consciousness. But the Ishfntu danced as one, lover to lover, touching as equals in a manner uncommon for any race among humans.

The dolphins repeated their song over and over for them.

"My love," she whispered as he smiled.

Somewhere there was a drum, beating once—two beats, once—then two beats, once—then two beats. A heart's pattern.

He disappeared.

"Rasal!" she cried in terror.

He returned, enfolding her in the suffocating air.

(Azure, turquoise, lapis . . .)

He vanished.

Emana screamed, looking everywhere around her.

Another beat and he was again with her in the dance.

(in which you grieve . . .)

"Husband, I've missed you," she said. Then she laughed and kissed his lips. His lips parted—as did hers—and orange-sweet tongue twined about clove-flavored tongue. She pressed the fullness of her breasts against the hard muscles in his own chest.

Another beat of the sea drum, lapping at the ship rhythmically. He was gone.

Emana tore her hair. A braid came free in her hand, as intricately woven as one of the brailropes that held up the sail.

Beat. Rasal in her arms.

(becomes the moon for death undone . . .)

She half-closed her eyes and sang it back to him, "becomes the moon for death undone."

And then he was gone. The drum stopped beating, becoming as still as the dreadful air. Even the flutes and chimes ended with a piercing skreek that forced Emana to her knees with her hands over her ears.

"Throw her overboard before she curses us all."

A sailor said this, nervously fingering a dagger worn over his loincloth. Others squinted, nodding, mumbling prayers to keep her madness from insulting the gods who governed the seas.

"This is why there's no wind," said another. "Throw her over."

Emana looked up, realizing she was being stared at by everyone on board. Many of the passengers made defensive hand passes from the protective arcana of their own religions. What just happened? She'd had a dream. A dream of dancing with Rasal.

She'd had the dream in front of everybody and made a fool of herself. She held the braid she'd wrenched from her scalp. Her bright fragrant blood dripped from the end of it and trickled across her skull.

No, it stank of salt and bitter herbs. It hadn't been fragrant in a long time. She knew that smell. It was the stench of madmen and madwomen.

"I let her drink my blood today," one of the sailors admitted, rubbing the spot on his wrist where her needle had pricked him and her mouth had been. He was clearly frightened of what she might have passed on to him.

"Let's do this quickly," said another as he swiftly moved toward her with one of his mates. "That we may appease the gods and then wash her curse from our bodies."

The older Jew stepped in front of her. With the folds of cloth still wrapped around the lower half of his face, his voice was muffled. His eyes flashed as he said, "Is this how the Amaki treat paying customers? Surely, Captain, it won't be our turn next for such an unprofessional handling!"

The two younger men from Israel gasped, apparently astonished at his boldness. They stepped up to stand next to him, one on either side. It was evident their intention was to protect him and not the Ishantu.

A big man, the captain grasped the two advancing sailors by the scruffs of their necks. He jerked them backward. He said to the Israelites, "No Amaki ship has ever harmed a passenger. We won't be the first to give ourselves and our country such a reputation."

"But she and her demons have stolen the wind!" one of the sailors in his grasp protested.

"If you'll look at the clouds on the world's edge, you'll see why there's no wind," the captain growled. "The wind will begin soon enough. The gods are storing it up to hurl it at us full force with a storm. Don't make us weaker with bloody hands. Now get back to work."

The sailors reluctantly turned away. The Babylonians and Egyptians continued to stare. They had become too listless during the sea-calm to tell each other the usual tales. This at least must have provided some diversion for them. Were they hoping for more?

Emana started to say something to the Israelite who had come to her aid. But he turned away, his remote facade back in place.

The other two Jewish men exchanged glances and nervous sighs of relief, following him to stand close by without hovering.

Who is he? she wondered.

Some rich man traveling incognito. These other two were attendants. And bodyguards. She doubted if the captain even knew the man's identity.

The boy asked this man, "Is it true what the sailors said, that the gods would kill us because of her?"

The forceful eyes glanced down, softening. "No, there is but one god. Verily He knows the difference between tears and transgression."

"Azariah!" the child's uncle snapped. "Don't bother him!"

"Perhaps you'd be more comfortable resting below deck," the captain suggested to Emana. "You're tired, Lady Hathor."

Of course, if it was suffocating on deck, it was a crucible down there. But she understood him. He was trying to keep the situation from getting out of hand. She couldn't blame him. What was he to do with an insane woman? Bind her to the mast so she couldn't harm anyone?

Not that Emana would ever do harm. She was troubled but she was hardly dangerous, was she?

Emana stood on the deck and listened. It had been hours of barely getting breath below deck. But the wind started again as the captain predicted. Slowly at first. A salty breeze coming across the water like a kiss. It grew cooler as it grew stronger. The sun set. The ship had a platform with a sand base where a fire could be lit for cooking. The passengers and crew shared a lentil stew and flat bread, dried figs and dates. An oversweet wine spilled red across the robes of the travelers when the ship jerked in a sudden gust. Now they were pleased to stay below deck. Emana was relieved to go above.

She was certain she heard Rasal's laughter in the rumble of thunder. When the rain began, it pounded down on her where she stood. The captain didn't come over to tell her to go below for her safety. If she was washed overboard from her own nonsense, it wouldn't be the fault of the Amaki—for no one would have laid a hand on her. He was too busy anyway, casting orders about for the managing of the ship during the storm.

Emana thought the rain would beat her down into the deck, into the grain of the wood that must house the souls of the trees it came from. That wouldn't be a bad a place to be, in with the spirits from a forest. At least it was contact with land and with Lilit. But if she yet stood and wasn't beaten away, maybe the rain would make her clean again.

She stared out at the rising waves, hoping to see the camphor box. Surely it would drift down from the drowning sky. Rasal would be inside it, ready to carry her away. She inhaled, smelling the camphor wood which was a warm scent—not as nice and round as the odor of cedar but just as evocative to her. The storm made the air cooler than it had been for many days, but it was warm compared to the temperature of her body. The rainwater was heated and sizzled on her naturally cool flesh. It boiled inside her red mouth. It fell for a few minutes in hailstones that sloughed off her skin as the sailors cried out around her, scurrying to save the sail from being torn.

And it seemed that it rained forever, even if it didn't. She counted the flashes of the lightning, finding them unreliable for reckoning the passage of time. It stopped raining, the clouds boiling off toward the opposite rim of the world. She didn't feel cleansed. It neither purged nor saved her. The smell of camphor had been unreal.

Leaning over the rail, she saw the dolphin people gliding near the ship. They jumped to the surface, murmuring messages from Rasal, saying, "The others didn't see him but he was there, Emana. He danced with you. Don't ever doubt the truth of your own eyes."

She leaned over perilously as they whispered an orange and frankincense poetry. Then she knew truly that Rasal was with them.

She opened a vein on her wrist and drank some of her own blood. She knew the sailors wouldn't sell theirs to her again. And none of the passengers would consider it. Not that her own blood could enrich her; only another's could do that. But it was all she had.

She caught the boy Azariah watching her solemnly. His eyes were very round and had flecks of gold mixed with the brown.

She stopped drinking and regarded him, tilting her head to match the quizical angle of his.

She said, "Don't fear me."

"You would drag me into a sting-nest and devour me," the child said.

She swallowed her laughter. She didn't want to offend him.

"My people don't do that," she told him. "Neither does our goddess."

"My uncle has told me She does," he argued politely. "He wouldn't lie, would he?"

"No," she replied, "but I'm afraid he might be zealously misinformed."

He didn't have an answer for that but took a few steps closer.

"Why do you speak to the dolphins?" he asked.

She hadn't been aware she'd talked to them but she must have. Emana wouldn't be surprised at anything she might be told she'd done. Save for dragging children into sting-nests to eat them.

She must have been speaking to the dolphin with Rasal's face. She glanced at the waves. There he was, skimming the top, leaping and smiling up at her. His braids gleamed in the water.

"Rasal," she whispered. She said to the boy, "My husband visits me in the shape of one of them. He died almost a year ago."

"Is he there now?" Azariah asked with amazement. He hurried over to the rail and looked into the water. "Which one is he?"

Emana pointed. Rasal's slim body arced down to disappear in the water, silver in the emerging moonlight. Then it leaped back up, the moon glow catching him full in the face. "There he is."

The boy sharply inhaled. "Oh!"

He stared hard at the dolphin and then looked back at Emana.

The dolphin vanished below the water and didn't come back up.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

"Lady, I saw the dolphin."

"But you didn't see the face on him?" Emana was only mildly disappointed. Who ever saw what she did?

"I saw the face on the dolphin, Lady. But it had your face."

The boy lowered his eyes as if ashamed for not seeing what he'd been expected to see.

"It's Rasal's face. The face of my husband," Emana protested.

The boy shook his head. "Lady, I'm afraid you are zealously misinformed."

It was very late. It was very early and the sun would be up above the water in two hours. Emana was virtually alone on deck. There were a couple of sailors watching over the ship as it smoothly ran along the coast. They also kept an eye on her but maintained their distance.

She rubbed her eyes. There were roses everywhere. Roses from the Hilan garden. She saw their thorns and shuddered, for they were wriggly worms gorged on bits of vampire flesh.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed softly as she knelt down. "Rasal! The three days and nights are up. You must rise. I'm here. I've been waiting."

She felt soil beneath her fingers, the throb of the ground. This was the spark of the womb, for all that grew upon the world and in its cauldrons went into it to be changed. It was time and the earth should be stirring as Rasal struggled to push the soil settled above him. But what had these worms fed on? Her beloved husband?

She began to dig him out, dig him out. She would bring him back to life from the ground. She'd open her own vein and give him her healing blood. She tore at the roses until white petals flashed everywhere. The thorn-worms bit her fingers. The blood flowed into the dirt as she clawed at it. The rose bushes somehow became ensnared around her arms.

"Lady! Lady!" It was the boy Azariah. He grasped her shoulders and clung to her like a monkey. "Wake up!"

Emana was on her knees on the deck. There was no throbbing, womb earth. Only planks of salt-soaked timber. There were no roses. Seaweed that had washed aboard in the storm manacled her arms.

"It's all right," the child said.

"I'm insane," she said simply, tears in her eyes.

"You've had a nightmare," Azariah told her, repeating what his family always told him when he acted strangely in the night. Perhaps people could have bad dreams at any time. "You just have to wake up."

"Wake up?" Emana felt the tears on her cheeks. Would she ever be really conscious again? She was submerged in visions. But, unlike the dolphins, she couldn't leap from the waves.

The boy smiled. "Yes. See the dawn?"

The sun was coming up. Where had she been for the last two hours?

"You must see the sun. You must thank God you're alive through another night to see that glory."

The city of Kur was near. The light brushing the white and pink marble turrets and scalloped walls made it look like a religious sanctuary.

She stood and said, "I respect all gods. At this moment I thank this boy's god for this glory."

Azariah beamed and said a prayer in Hebrew. Coming from the lips of this child, she thought she'd never heard a more beautiful language. The morning

reflected from gold inlay and flecks of mosaic until they were the cloisters for the holiest of people. She'd survived the night to reach Kur.

Here is where the dead could be spoken to, could be touched again. Here were the palaces of final chances and tender reunions.

CHAPTER 11

"Do not question the customs of the underworld . . . "
"The Descent Of Inanna"—Mesopotamian

Busparta wasn't accustomed to luxury. He was a simple man, a wrestler and soldier. He was never certain how he was supposed to act around the wealthy and privileged travelers he met in Kur.

The Mysian people had given him good clothes to wear here: a fine white tunic bordered in gold thread, a pleated cloak with a copper brooch in a pattern of swirling flames (to denote his battle with the fire), a bronze circlet for his head set with a fiery garnet. They gave him armor and weapons befitting a richer soldier who could afford greaves and a well-made helmet, a shield and sword.

It was hard for him to raise his eyes to the glittering, jaded crowd he found in the city of the slippers-of-images that his generals had sent him to—as a reward, on a mission. He was embarrassed that his hair hadn't grown back, that his beard returned only in patches, and that his lips and fingers were scarred from being burned on the horn of warning.

He heard people ask, "Who is that strange fellow?"

As if all of Kur wasn't filled with strange ones. It was the gathering place for the world to send every mutant and monster there was.

"That's the hero of Mysia," they were told. "There would be no Mysia if not for him. He single-handedly defeated the Lydian army."

"How . . . interesting," they would say softly, regarding him with hungry eyes.

Men and women alike pursed their lips, wondering what it would be like to bed such a scarred and delicious hero. The ridges of disfigurements had an erotic texture in close embrace. They had a flavor of their own.

Women brushed up against him and offered him everything with teasing flicks of their tongues. He was grabbed as he strode through the crowds in the streets, hands groping him. Someone actually had the temerity to walk up behind him and lift his tunic. He felt warm fingers hastily caressing his buttocks.

Enraged, Busparta reached back and clutched that hand, spinning to glare furiously at the man attached to it. The man giggled like a heartsick girl and gasped little sighs at him.

"Firm as bronze!" the man interjected, not trying to pull his hand back even as Busparta squeezed it. "And so rough! You're hurting me. What else can you squeeze that hard?"

"Let's see," Busparta growled, crushing the fingers until he heard them pulverizing in his grip.

The man shrieked. Busparta snapped his fist out and took hold of the man's penis, clearly outlined by erection under his own tunic. It repulsed him to handle another man's phallus but he wasn't trying to be playful. He gave it the same grinding treatment he'd given the fingers. It popped like a bag of pig's knuckles. The man didn't make a sound at all but just collapsed to the ground.

"That rough enough for you?"

There was fire in Busparta's head, making him dizzy from rage. He could barely walk away. The crowd of people who had seen didn't seem horrified in the least. There were snorts of laughter and someone asked, "Is that how he defeated the Lydians. They did say single-handedly, didn't they?"

He expected guards to come after him. None did.

It was difficult walking around the streets, sitting in his room at the inn, trying to waste the time away. Putting off the inevitable. Putting off his visit to one of the brothels.

Whichever one, it didn't matter.

He was supposed to be here to relax, to enjoy himself. And once, what seemed like another incarnation ago, he'd enjoyed the company of women. The scents in their skins, their hair. The flavor of their mouths.

He didn't smell or taste anything anymore. The touching of flesh reminded him of how much of it he'd seen incinerated.

He was expected to visit one of the houses.

He was there as a reward.

He was also there on a mission.

He must go sometime. He couldn't just say he went and that it was only a rutting, better than most or not as good as advertised. No, he was too good a soldier for that. He had his orders.

Busparta finally drank a great deal of wine (that he couldn't taste a single fermented grape of) and staggered to the nearest Kura house to get it over with. His stomach sloshed until he felt as if he'd swallowed half of the Aegean Sea. His bladder ached. His head felt even hotter, and much sweat came away when he put his hand to it.

Couldn't he have come here in the winter? No, for Busparta was recovering from his burns during the winter. He wasn't sure he'd have survived at all had he been forced to go through the summer with those burns. The winter had cooled him a little. He was no longer swollen from head to foot, no longer as red as the alkanet root that painted women smeared on their cheeks. Yet he was always hot, as if a great fire still soared overhead, or lay smouldering in caverns just under the surface of the earth.

"Do you have a preference?" asked the brothel's master, stroking a lush black beard.

"How could I? I've never been here before," Busparta replied dully.

"Many of our clients come to us with recommendations from their friends," the master said. Busparta's friends would have loved coming to Kur. Especially Khio. He saw their faces in the back of his mind, ruined and in

torment. He could almost hear their voices in the still air, as if sizzling from a great distance. Sizzling and screaming. How was Busparta ever going to get himself up for this task?

"Do you have a room that's cooler than the others?"

He was directed. Busparta climbed the stairs, unnerved by the strange sounds coming from behind closed doors. Noises of recognizable passion, yes, but also whistling, howling, hissing, screeching. Too much like the sounds he'd heard in the pass that night, as the demon first made its way toward the army camped in the woods. This was a strong suggestion of evil in those bayings, susurrations, air/animal breaths. Nothing (that wasn't truly those creatures of sparrows, bears, serpents and owls) could make or pretend to make such noises—even in mimicry—and not be beasts of abnormal threat. What made them so very different from the fire demon?

And yet they must be different. People came to Kur from everywhere and obviously weren't slaughtered, weren't burned or devoured or raked apart by a passing violence. They came for pleasure.

Pleasure.

Busparta paused at the door. He was supposed to have in his mind what he wanted. But what did he want? He wondered if he could think of Myria, the girl he'd grown up with in Cnythos and had thought of marrying. He would picture her as she was then, slender as a sapling, not pale skinned like one of those royal women who never saw daylight, and who made their faces artificially paler by rubbing white lead paste into it. She'd been brown as a fawn (freckled as one, too.) She had an easy smile and lips that always seemed to taste of peaches. Her dark eyes had flecks of gold in them.

He'd seen her again, after the Lydian army was cremated. He visited home a hero, making sure to call on Khio's mother to give her the gold ring—his friend's legacy for her old age. And Busparta almost didn't recognize little Myria. She hadn't had six children as he'd guessed but ten, eight of them coming in four sets of twins. Her hips were as wide as Mother Earth Herself. At only twenty, her breasts were soft bags that hung to her waist. She'd lost almost all her teeth and the gold flecks in her eyes were turned to flint.

Oh no! Don't think it or you'll open the door and that's what you'll see! he told himself with a flinch.

Busparta thought of Pergamis's long lost woman of Fahor. The beautiful Lydian slave had been his friend's treasure. There had been a lovely female. Perhaps it would be a tribute to Pergamis to think of her.

"He loved her. It would be like cheating him," Busparta said.

There had been this truly gorgeous Ishantu who traveled with the army as a battlefield sin-drinker. Her eyes had been the color of two red stars, two red Mars planets bright and gentle. (No, Mars wasn't gentle. Mars was war.) As two candles set in the window to light the way of weary travelers.

There was never a traveler as weary as Busparta.

He opened the door and there she stood, as tall as the wrestler but with muscles as elegant as those of the fabled bull dancers of the former Minoan Empire. Her black hair was unplaited and fell to her hips in ripples, adorned here and there with glazed blue beads. She moved in a dress made of them, clean dark limbs flashing through the bead strings that rustled around her like wind chimes.

He stared, frankly admiring the perfection of her beauty. Down to every detail as he remembered, with a few of his own ideas mixed in: the ornaments, the somewhat larger breasts than she'd actually had. He inhaled, certain there would be a rush to his nostrils of honey and lilies.

Busparta smelled nothing. She was the one who could change, not he. He couldn't even salivate at the prospect of penetrating her cool thighs, her Ishantu flesh taking his fever away for a while. He'd put his tongue to those petaled carmine nipples and taste nothing. The fire demon had dried up his mouth forever. He licked his chapped lips and wished for more wine to wet his palate with again.

The Ishantu turned gracefully to pour him a goblet from the jar of wine on the table. Reading his desire for it, obviously.

Busparta heard a twitter coming from another room. A nightingale song. From another came an unsettling sliding sound, crisp and sibilant. And then a bleat, yip, and grunt altogether —and who knew what thing that was supposed to imitate?

He couldn't help thinking of the pass in the mountains just at sunset, with the moon only beginning to rise and then something flying across that bit of risen light. The chase after it, the camp of horror with dead and dying, the desperate return to save his friends—too late. Pergamis pleading with him to be killed for mercy's sake.

Eyes melted right out of heads, rings melded into sunken flesh, torsos swollen and split.

And there it was, the goblet of wine sloshing as the hand that held it out to Busparta dripped like wax. The Ishantu face of beauty turned into a blackened face of burned destruction, features collapsing in on themselves. The creature before him was blasted and piteous, a melange of all three of his dead friends: Pergamis, Khio, Usakus. It wheezed and wept and babbled at Busparta in their agonized voices until his testicles sought to crawl way up inside him, as they were when he'd been a small child. He expected a shivering chill as if flesh crawled and hair stiffened (except he had no hair left on his scalp, legs, or arms anymore and only scrubble for beard) yet there was no icy revulsion. There was only heat.

Heat.

It rolled off the walls and floors in waves as visible as those on the sea. It baked off him in perspiration rain as large in drops as the beads that formerly made up the Ishantu's dress. These beads had disappeared or burst apart as she became a cooked wreck of a body.

That was it: they must have shattered. He was ill with the delirium of it, moving backward toward the door in steps feeble with calenture. He would swoon any minute. Some hero!

But he couldn't look away from the image of his dead friends, twitching in what radiated from their fused selves/ought to be dead that way/unable to cry/much less jerk and churn so. He couldn't make himself think of something else—of beauty and unflawed, unwounded bodies.

"Ring. Mother," said Khio as if trying to exhale a song.

The Usakus mouth closed, opened, rambled out incoherent noises past blackened gums, the stump of a tongue, cocking its charcoal scrap of ear as it listened for soul crows.

"Remember that woman in Fahor?" said Pergamis through lips the size of pork fat slabs. "Kill me kill me kill kill me kill me kill mekillmekillmekillme..."

Busparta left the room. He must have. He didn't remember running out. Had he run or had he crawled, down close to the floor to be under the rising pall of stinking smoke?

Yes, it stank. He could smell it raw, greasy, and ravaged. Hair, skin, and bones kindled, going to oily meat—going to crusts of charcoal—going to ashes. He could taste it, sooty and slick with fried mucous, mostly his own as the fire had raced over and boiled the air he was breathing until the enamel on his teeth softened and formed a paste sharp as goat's milk cheese.

He found himself at the foot of the stairs where he must have fallen. In a quivering, cowardly heap, gasping for air, sodden with sweat until he was rank and sour.

The brothel master was bending to help him up.

"Sir! Sir, are you all right?"

"I—guess I fell. Down the steps," Busparta mumbled, his mouth hurting. His nostrils hurting. All of him sore. He could barely think. He only wanted to stumble out of the building into the cooler air of the Kur night. There might be breezes now, coming from the sea. He would go down to that sea so he could lie in the tide.

"But your skin, sir," the master chattered, nervously assessing Busparta's condition. "Your clothes! Did a lamp fall over? You're burned. Is there a fire?"

The master started to run up the stairs. The Kura harlot had come out of her room and stood at the top of the steps, looking down and blinking slowly. She was sliding in and out of forms probably snared from clients on either side of her room: into a golden skinned Oriental with a peacock tattooed around her torso, into a naked female with vaguely simian features and a soft down of ivory fur all over.

"Is there a fire up there?" the master asked her.

She shook her head. There was no fire.

"How did he get burned?" the master demanded to know.

She shrugged, genuinely perplexed.

"Sir, I assure you this doesn't happen. This has never happened," the Amaki said as he hurried back to Busparta. The wrestler was limping toward the exit to the courtyard.

Busparta finally looked down at himself. He sort of recalled the smell and flavor of ruin, of fire, although he no longer could smell or taste again. His fine tunic was blackened, burned at the edges. He was as red as a terra cotta clay figurine and swollen to boot. He'd been burned but how?

He stopped and almost turned to gaze up at the harlot on the stairs. He decided he couldn't. Not yet. Something happened here. Something that never happened, according to the brothel master. But had it come from the abilities of the Kura?

Or had Busparta done it to himself?

He would have to come again to find out. Or find another way to discover the answer.

Chapter 12

"The gods clustered like flies round the lord of the sacrifice." 'Epic Of Gilgamesh' —Mesopotamian

Emana was embarrassed once she left the ship and was actually in the new city of Kur. She'd expected an almost reverent atmosphere but some people walked nude in the streets, groped in doorways, could be plainly seen rutting behind the diaphonous veils of litters that slaves carried. The white and pink marble walls were draped in streamers of harlot red.

Not that Ishantu were prudish but there was a natural decency in even passionate sex and a dangerous retrograde in excess. If it wasn't that she saw Rasal's face everywhere she turned, she might have fled back aboard the ship to leave this crude place.

The boy Azariah said she'd had a nightmare and needed to awaken from it. She slept yet, didn't she? Trapped in this terrible dream until she could reunite with Rasal. Then she could put the grieving process into its own bed, while she became awake and alive again for the first time since leaving Vira.

There was Rasal in the waves that slapped the dock. In the grains of sand on the beach. In the whorls of bark on the fragrant trees at the edge of the woods. In each brick that paved the street. In the mandalas of carpets sold in the bazaar. How could she leave? Where would she go? (The sailors would never let her back on board, no matter how much the Amaki captain appreciated her money. She frightened them. Sailors were a superstitious lot.)

She saw the other passengers long enough to watch them disappear into the crowd. The Israelites looked around with disapproval at the obvious carnality, the two attendants staying very near their master now.

Emana gazed at the swirl of races and nationalities. There were no other Ishantu. She didn't find this necessarily odd. Ishfntu didn't live in cities and definitely wouldn't have tolerated Kur. Her presence alone elicited curious stares.

Some of these stares were sidelong, suspicious. Who had reason to distrust Ishantu? No one here knew her, although they must have known of her people. They surely couldn't have heard of the traitorous Emana Hathor halfway around the world.

This was a place of travelers, going everywhere just as tales and gossip did. They might have heard of what a certain Ishantu 'Emana' had done in the city of Vira, but they couldn't know she was that very lady.

It upset her to think of them looking upon her with doubt simply because she was Ishantu. Could the terrible wrong she'd done cast a stigmatizing shadow upon all her people? Perhaps there was no place left on the earth where she could leave her deed behind.

She stared off toward the old city. Despite their great age, the ruins in the distance rose with foreboding grandeur. She wished she could go there, drawn to its mystery. This upstart place could have nothing she wanted or needed. The old city was supposed to be haunted. But who and what, she thought, were not that?

She passed Egyptians as she went down the street, recognizable by their wigs and the sky blue shadows painted on their eyelids. The Orientals wore a fabulous cloth they called silk that they wouldn't share the secret of. They minced by in slippers of this and Emana admired it. It was said they even wove fine fabrics from kudzu and banana. Phoenicians were in evidence all about. Their flat oval plastron pendants were worn on the breast, decorated with enamel and intaglioed designs, each among them rich as a king. Kels strode by in itchy tartans. She could hear them coming as they wore bells everywhere on their persons—on necklaces, bracelets, sewn into the ends of their garishly colored tunics. Shebans glided past, bedecked with amber. Sumerians in pleated linen turbans—one in a cloak with a lion's mane for a hood—went by unimpressed, having been accustomed to buzzing cities for four or five thousand years already.

Emana saw Rasal's face in a sundog. There was the scent of oranges in the marketplace. Frankincense wafted from a nearby temple . . .

... not a temple. It was a bordello. The windows were open, and the Amaki within were burning bitumen and myrrh resin to freshen the rooms, after the night's hours of aberrant sex were over.

Rasal's body, oh, one more time that wasn't a dream where she woke up cold and alone. (Not 'woke up', she reminded herself. Stirred within the nightmare's cusp.)

It wasn't a temple. There weren't any temples in the new city of Kur. That was strange. No altars, no priesthood, no gods.

Weren't there always gods?

Off to the distance in basalt, old Kur had temples. Old Kur had been alltemple. Many gods had walked there. Emana sensed this. Perhaps they walked there still, and this was why people called it haunted. Maybe these people had fallen so far that they no longer recognized the shapes of gods.

She passed a vendor selling masks carved from terra cotta or molded from papyrus. They were grotesques, festooned with ribbons, peacock feathers, strands of shark teeth.

"Change YOUR face, too!" the vendor invited. "The beast is unafraid!"

Mythical creatures, carnivorous animals and outright demonics leared at Emana from his table. They were all monsters. Emana never used to believe in monsters. Lately she wondered.

Another vendor sold clay casts of pairs of breasts—sizes and shapes from virginal apples to lusty melons. These weren't fertility symbols intended to be treated respectfully at someone's household altar. Some of the nipples were

painted pink, some were brown. Others had been set with semi-precious stones that were deliberately faceted sharp, to cut the tongue that lingered there. All came with straps so they could be worn.

The booth next to it sold dildos. The ones with the trenchant barbs in the tip and slivers of glass embedded along the shaft made her shudder as Emana heard behind her, trailing in the sea breeze, "The beast is unafraid!"

She knew none of the native Kura were out. It was day and she'd heard they shunned daylight. What a terrible thing, to be denied the sun.

These travelers, partiers and seekers after the bizarre thrill were left to their own devices until sunset.

"No thanks. I'll wait until the houses open tonight," a man said bruskly, as he shook off an enterprising street wench.

"Why would you want an animal when you can have a real woman?" She smiled invitingly and gestured with her hips to illustrate the sport as old as flesh. She wore a tight bodice cut just below her bosom and below that only a girdle of woven, chewed leather straps. This was hung with coins that jangled as she undulated her superbly muscled stomach.

"That kind of sex I can have anytime. Unless you have a cunt between your breasts so I can fuck your beating heart, go away. I want to build my own toy," he replied derisively.

He snatched at the front of her bodice and peered down it to see if she might just possess the mutation he desired.

The prostitute didn't pull away but sneered. "You sound as if you might be the killer they're looking for. The one that abducted a woman from the Chou party last night."

"Dear, you obviously haven't been here long. The old city is haunted. It's the demon that takes people—those foolish enough to venture there despite the warnings. The authorities aren't really looking," the man replied, letting go of her blouse after thrusting her back a couple steps. "It sometimes uses the shape of a wolf. Some have even heard it howling like a wolf around the time somebody disappears. Since no one ever finds a body, it must be the demon."

The human harlot argued, "The other Orients in the Chou's party saw it and insist it was a man."

"The Orients see half as much as everyone else. Their eyes are smaller," he retorted, squinting for effect. He then laughed at his own questionable witticism. "It's illegal for persons who aren't Kura to peddle themselves. You could be publicly whipped. Get away from me before I report you to the nearest guard."

He shoved her. She fell awkwardly against a stone wall. He laughed and went on down the street. No one who'd seen came to her aid or did anything other than turn away. The wench cried out and grabbed her arm, pulling up the angles of her sleeve to check the damage.

Emana stood nearby. She could tell he'd broken the woman's wrist. The street wench began to cry as the flesh purpled, the bone bulging beneath the bend of her hand.

"Let me help you," Emana said as she hurried over and knelt beside her.

"No," the prostitute snapped as she pulled her arm back against her chest.

"I'm an Ishantu healer. I can treat this and make you better," Emana said, surprised when the woman recoiled. Didn't she want to lose the pain?

"You're a bloodsucker. I've heard from Vira how Ishantus heal," the woman retorted. She scrambled to her feet and stumbled into the throng of travelers.

A vendor selling costumes with cloven feet and with wings made of tassels over a framework of curved river cat tails stepped into Emana's path as she attempted to follow the wench. "Change YOUR your body, too. The beast is unafraid."

Emana spun to go around him and saw another man sitting on a stool. She heard him speak a second before she noticed him.

"Don't let the wench hurt you," he said quietly, not facing her but staring off toward the ocean. She could only see his profile. It was very handsome, with the strong chin and nose of an Aegean. "Her remark was made more from jealousy than fear."

He hopped down from the stool, and Emana saw he was a dwarf. His legs were pitifully undersized for the rest of his graceful body. The other side of his face was hideously scarred from a series of deep and overlapping cuts.

"You're here to see the Kura," he said, shrugging as he realized it was a statement of the obvious. "This is a cruel city. You should have a guide. I know which are the best houses. I know the names of all the best Kura."

"Are you employed by the houses?" she asked as they more or less fell into step together.

He smiled thinly. The flesh on the ruined side of his face bunched as he did this.

"I can't get inside. It would take a sack of gold to get one such as I within the walls. I came here to go in, of course. I was a king's toy on the island of Naxos. Greece isn't civilized. The glory of Mycenae and Crete are passed. Will we ever loose our barbarism and rise as high as they did? It isn't a glamorous place even to be lord of. To be a slave there is to belong to brutes. Anyway, the king took umbrage with the fact that I was better looking than he. He had me held down while a servant used a knife on half my face for his amusement. What are toys for? The scars appear to be meaningless slashes to the uneducated but actually the servant carved words into my skin at the king's orders. Phoenician alphabet. Over and over it says 'little man, little man'. Eventually I escaped and made my way here, hoping to learn from the Kura the secret of making myself other than what I am."

He explained it with the practiced air of one who was used to telling strangers his life story. Emana felt great pity for him. If he'd been helped early by an expert healer, he might have been less scarred. Now it was too late.

"Do you believe it's possible to learn their secret? Is it a secret, or is it only a characteristic of their race?" she asked.

"It must be possible to find salvation in change. There will be a secret. Whether it'll be the knowledge of how to turn myself into a gazelle or the peace of dying in the arms of an angel, I can't say," he replied. "I'm called Solon. Would you like for me to show the way to one of the better, safer inns where you might rest before going to seek the Kura? There are one or two that cater to those here on gentler pursuits. These establishments are quiet and clean, opposed to the plentiful orgy stables."

At that moment, as if to illustrate Solon's comment, there came raucous braying from within the walls of the nearest inn. A naked man covered in lentil soup came sailing out the open door, his clothing being hurled through the windows after him. Without bothering to pick up his garments, he jumped up and dove back through the window, grinning like a monkey. Emana noticed with upraised eyebrows that there was a long loaf of bread sticking out of his ass.

"Lead the way," she told her guide.

"Good day, Solon," the proprietor of the Lazuli said, bowing slightly as the dwarf ushered Emana inside.

"Good day, Marpac," Solon replied. "I've told this lady that you have the best and quietest lodgings in the city."

Marpac smiled. "Certainly. We don't need discretion when we have standards. The walls have been built extra thick to provide a cushion against outside noises. And the rooms are draped to allow sleeping during the day. Will the lady be staying long?"

Emana turned as she looked the place over. She was impressed that even a common eating area she spied through an archway was clean. The place was mud brick and built around a central courtyard. The outside had been treated with a simple whitewash, instead of the pink used by so much of the city—made with a weaker mixture of the murex shellfish that produced the famous Tyrian purple. The inn was simple, considering the towering marble ziggurat that stood across the street from it. The inside walls were painted more brightly, in a pleasing mural of ibexes grazing green pasture.

Looking through the archways that served as passages into the various parts of the inn, the rest of the building seemed to have sprouted room by room, as the inn was enlarged for a greater customer capacity. Emana heard waste water as it ran from drains gouged in the bottoms of the walls. The water ran along the slim corridors between the buildings. Indoor plumbing was a rare luxury. There were no such conveniences closer to the docks, where the smell of outside waste was stronger.

"I expect to be a week," she said. "I don't exactly know. I would at least like to pay for the week in advance, if you have room."

"We have it. We're seldom full. Most travelers to Kur prefer establishments with fewer rules of conduct," the proprietor replied.

She was impressed that he didn't proceed to tell her what these rules were, taking it on faith that Solon would never bring him an unsuitable guest. Also,

he looked Emana up and down—quite politely and surreptitiously so as not to offend her—and nodded with satisfaction.

"We have a variety of food and drink to accommodate people from many lands. We'll get fresh milk and blood for you. You're Ish fntu? We've never had an Ishantu stay here before. My daughter's palsy was healed by one of your race when we lived in Tyre. I'm honored by your presence."

Emana was wilted from the depressing sea journey. Yet she didn't allow the straightness of her back to alter, struggling to maintain composure in her face. But it had been too long since she'd dined. She feared she'd show her madness again and frighten these people. That mustn't happen. Not when she was so near . . .

"Would it be possible to have some dinner sent to my room? I'd like to rest." "Certainly."

"I'll return at sunset if you wish it, Lady, to escort you to a house of the Kura," Solon offered.

Emana nodded, gracing him with a sincere smile of gratitude. She reached into her sash to give him a silver coin. She remembered what he'd said about the brothels and their strict admittance. She decided to give him a gold coin instead.

The room she was given was hung in thick dark blue, the color of those sapphires that weren't black stars and weren't quite indigo. It smelled faintly of the Egyptian incense kuphi. She saw Rasal's face in the curtain folds which rustled subtly from the presence of either unseen windows behind or tunnels for sea air. There were intimations of his scented braids, a suggestion of his arms beckoning.

She'd made it just in time. She was dreaming with her eyes open, the hallucinations of the insane. She understood when the boy Azariah had said she needed to wake up. She'd said she was mad. They were both right.

She stretched out on pillows scattered about the floor, watching as these phantoms of her dead husband moved across everything. Did she actually close her eyes and fall? Did it appear she'd slept until the kitchen maid knocked lightly? The scent of milk and blood—white and red—was fresh as a child's sigh from the hallway.

"I'll see you tonight, my love," Emana whispered to Rasal. "I know there's no vision that won't have you in it, for you'll come out of the earth a little for me. Your spirit will inhabit my dream in the Kura. And though I may not be truly awake now, I will be when my eyes open and behold you, remade in the shifter."

Emana dressed in a simple undyed gown of flax, as if she was going to her wedding. She wore no jewelry other than her chain and needle. Ishantu married without pretentions, in the coarse but pure elements of the earth.

Earlier she'd visited the inn's bathing pool. She'd scrubbed with a sea sponge, not too hard. It wouldn't do to wake up yet, would it? Not and risk

losing the dream of Rasal before she could claim it for her own. It was only hours away.

She'd washed her hair free of the saltwater of her journey, scenting it with powdered clove. She ground a whole clove between her teeth until her mouth filled with spice.

Emana stepped into the inn's narrow courtyard to wait for Solon. Two other guests passed by on their way out, doubtless to venture to one of the brothels that opened just after sundown. One was a man with tanned skin and hair the color of fresh lemons. His cheeks were clean-shaven, but he had a great drooping mustache and his hair was knotted in an intricate pattern. He had the heavily muscled forearms of a charioteer.

The other was a woman with copper skin, burnished under the torchlight, although its texture indicated that it hadn't been darkened by the sun. It was too supple, too flawless. The woman's head was shaved and her sleek scalp had been painted with chevrons and meanders of blue and white.

Both of them left within a few moments of one another. They averted their eyes as they went past. Emana knew that, in this case, it wasn't the slight of avoidance due to some prejudice. It was circumspection. They were about a very private business combining the sexual and mystical. That required an aloof mindset and deep concentration.

Emana could just make out the pattern of basalt darkness which lay beyond the gay lights of the new city. Why couldn't she go to old Kur for this reunion with Rasal? The couple would never have chosen a place like this for intimacy. And the other city was right for it was ...? (Suddenly she couldn't remember that it was supposed to be haunted. That it was filled with ghosts and that Rasal—as a ghost—might be easier found there.)

She wondered what happened to bring the Kura from the height of a civilization—that could build such palace-temples as those rising near the sea—to the degradation of suffering the world's deprayed to visit them.

The sexual and the mystical.

What was Emana here for if not for that?

Healing.

All her long life she'd been the one to cure others. Now she was sick and needed it herself.

This, then, enobled the act for both participants: the petitioner/seeker/dreamer and the one who would become the dream to heal the other. The dream wasn't held in contempt for its reflection. It might be prophetic or insightful but never was the dream blamed for its message. It was held in esteem, in reverent awe. It was elevated to the province of the gods—such gods as must have built ancient Kur.

Had Emana been degraded when she gave her blood to heal others? Had her vein become a profaned vessel?

No. It had never been that.

They weren't gods, she thought to herself. Gods might battle and be imprisoned below the earth to chew the fragments of their once great cities,

but they didn't wither to become prostitutes of global standing (or otherwise posturing). They didn't dwindle to such a fate as the Kura had.

But the Kura must have been great. Such turrets, minarets, and soaring towers weren't the architectural norm of many thousands of years ago. Ancient Kur was older than any of the old cities. It stood for a long time as a great civilization before whatever happened brought the Kura down.

Then what had happened to them?

The Ishantu had always been respected, scientifically advanced, sainted in the leading of their lives. Now perhaps that was to change—or at least the rest of the world's perception of it was about to change. And then what happened? Did the ability to work wonders slip?

All because of one person. It only took a single flaw in the tapestry that was greatness to unravel the rest.

Emana bowed her head and fought tears.

Solon came.

"I think I know the best house for you to visit," he said as he led her into the street. "There is a Kura who is the most proficient in the ways of comfort. If I could gain admittance to only one house and visit but one Kura, I'd choose her. I've seen her form as she gazes out her window at night. I've watched the world unfold in her spin of shapes, recognizing the moonlight of her eyes in every one. Her name is Alali, and she was the first of her kind to befriend humans with her shift when the Amaki ships landed here a half century ago. Alali in Amaki means 'well of the soul'."

"Well of the soul," Emana repeated softly.

He'd been kind not to mention whatever distress he might have seen in her face when he arrived. But the fact that he mentioned comfort to be attained by her visit showed that he'd noticed her pain. And his voice was soft when he spoke.

There was a shadow in a window, tall and broad-shouldered, thorny. It bristled with unmistakable erections that stiffened in a row down its spine and from each finger, in a knobby crown encircling the skull, persistently from a mouth in a bludgeon of a tongue. The shape of a corpulent, saggy-bosomed woman began to climb it in earnest, lowering herself here and there, self-impaling, sliding like a tormented cat in heat across the rigid multiphallic body. She used erections for handholds to pull herself higher still, until she could at last mount the throne of its head triumphantly as the outside skeleton of penial armor rippled and throbbed.

There was an enormous fountain flanked by Mycenaean-style columns, spiraling in carved stone and painted. In the center of the fountain was a terra cotta fertility goddess—not at all Mycenaean in form or conception—with water flowing through holes in each breast. It looked Motyan in design. Nude people splashed in the waist-high waters. Something flashed in and out of various sea-creature shapes: delicate anemones with gesturing, tickling tendrils . . . dancing, veiled angelfish . . . small but lethal shining barracudas. These circled around the bathers or languidly swam

between their legs. No one was concerned about the fang-throated barracudas, except to scream in shrill imitation of fear and then laughingly slap water at them.

In another courtyard after this—beyond a doorway flanked by great sandstone lions—a man kept a weird-eyed beast on a chain. Emana thought at first glance that this was a woman on all fours with a glorious mane of tangled curls. But then she spied the deep cleft that split the face vertically, two eyes shimmering in muddy topaz above the flawlessly round, smooth cheeks. There was neither nose nor mouth nor chin, only the crease within which was a blossom of tight folds of flesh. The bud moved, clenched, then squeezed out a tiny ball of dark shit, which then became a nipple as the ass was transformed in sliding degrees into a single ponderous breast. This then metamorphosed to become the full lips of a woman forming a kiss, which bent into a grimace of theatrical tragedy as the topaz eyes rolled up to the whites.

Emana rubbed her brow and wondered if she was dreaming again, nightmaring with her eyes open. But none of these things were the dire images that usually accompanied her nightmares. There were no flickers of Rasal's face, no soul crows, no roses and no bodies rising in freezing water.

There were more people on the streets than there were when Emana's ship docked during the day. Some wore the strange clay and papyrus accounterments and appendages openly sold in the bazaar. But the booths of the vendors were different now.

Emana saw the street wench who wouldn't let an Ishantu treat her broken wrist. She'd been arrested for trying to peddle her mundane human charms. She was bound spread-eagled on a slowly turning wheel, being hand-cranked by a merchant who'd purchased the punishment duty from the authorities. She was badly bruised from head to foot, and there were other bones broken as well. Her jaw was dislocated and she'd spit out most of her dislodged teeth. These lay with a variety of rocks on the ground around the wheel that creaked as it revolved. Emana thought the woman was dead until one swollen eye opened.

"Stone the harlot," the merchant offered. "Legally condemned. Break a bone and win an ornament. Stand behind the line and see how far and how hard you can throw. Warriors of both sexes, step up!"

There was the man who'd that day knocked the wench against the wall. He purchased a stone and inched up to put his toes flush against the lumber girder, which was as far as he was allowed. He flexed the muscles of his arm and grinned.

"I warned you," he said to her.

If the prostitute recognized him, she didn't show it. Emana assessed from her condition that the girl had already been rendered quite senseless, conscious enough to open an eye from time to time but not enough to feel much anymore in her shocked state. The man threw powerfully, and Emana quickly turned away before she could see the rock strike the wench's body. But she heard it, softly splitting and wet.

The crowd cheered.

"Ohh! You must be a discus champion, sir! Care for another?" the merchant pressed.

"Discover the secrets of life and death." A pockmarked man leered from a selection of serrated and pronged knives, coring devices, bottles that smoked dangerously around their wax seals, and scourges tipped in miniature bells with jagged glass as clappers. "Watch what comes apart go together again! Buy tools here, and then venture beyond to the House of Teche to make death your lover!"

Solon gently guided Emana by.

The merchant snatched her wrist. "Think of it, Lady. You could be Isis tonight, lovingly reassembling the pieces of your Osiris. You could even give him back his cock that was devoured by the oxyrhynchus fish, after Set scattered the fourteen parts. The best part of man or god! A feat the goddess Herself didn't manage."

Emana recoiled, thinking of reassembling the pieces of Rasal, putting his head with his body. They had stitched it back on and then put him under the healing earth, but what difference had it made?

(I waited! I waited! What more could I have done? If he'd been dispersed to the four corners of the world, it would have been easier.)

Solon slapped the vendor's hand and barked, "Stick to peddling to untouchables, Akeru."

The vendor hissed back, "I gladly would but the House of Teche would never admit you."

A parade marched by, participants leaping athletically, brashly bouyant, wriggling obscenely, sedately malignant. Everyone wore a disguise as they celebrated. The city torches cast a cloudy light that made each mask moving between shadows seem to be a real face of euphoria or distortion, demi-gods descended from the heavens or risen from dim underworlds.

By watching carefully, Emana finally spotted two not in costume. Their flesh blurred at the corners, corrugated into edges of hard and soft light, then wrinkled within into bizarre patterns, holding each notion of form for mere breathtaking moments before rushing to adopt the next.

"The Kura," she whispered to herself, unable to help staring rudely, gasping in shock.

Just as the woman whose face had been first posterior and then mammary caricature had been a Kura. And the water-shapes in the fountain, elusive under liquid currents. It should have been evident that these two were non-human in this parade of beast emulators, for they were the only two on heavy leashes. She locked eyes with each of these shifting creatures as they morphed past. Emana felt—what?

- ... momentary confusion?
- ... panic?

It was gone too fast for the emotion to fully register. It was powerfully disturbing, even without the need for physical touch to form a clearer diagnosis.

Emana shivered as the parade squirmed by in dementia.

Then she saw the naked man in peppered oils at the rear of the parade. He had an enormous serpent draped across his shoulders. He also wore a sack tied around his waist. The sack wriggled.

As Emana watched he pulled a small mouse out by its tail, grinning with green-stained teeth as it squeaked in terror. He fed it whole and alive to the serpent that already had several bulges along its sinewy frame.

"How cruel," she said with revulsion.

"Yes," Solon commented gravely, "he'll make that snake sick, overfeeding it like that."

A little farther on down the street, a sinister voice whispered from a darkened doorway, "Do you love monsters? Grow your own."

There was a narrow man with his back bent the wrong way, his head turned toward the sky as he spoke, eyes peering to try to see her at the end of his nose. His legs were ridiculously bow -legged. She thought this ought to throw him off his balance entirely, whatever balance he might have been able to manage. There were crutches wedged under his armpits to hold him upright. These were embedded in a cart on wheels upon which he was propped. He was starkly naked so that every warped convolution in his bones showed, down to his penis which was also twisted until it resembled a pig's curly tail.

Another man stepped from the doorway and pushed the cart with the crippled one on it back inside. Emana almost expected the bent one to walk backward, crabbing, but he couldn't walk at all. His muscles were totally useless with atrophy.

The second man whispered, "The garden of prodigies."

Emana wasn't able to keep from glancing into the doorway. Candles puddled gray wax onto the littered floor. A dozen or more large pots were lined up along a wall, heavy earthen jars whose tortuous windings were peculiar wrenches of angles and circular crooks. Heads emerged from the openings. The faces were dull, miserable. The empty eyes were soulless.

There were human bodies jammed in those vases, limbs being deliberately distorted. A hand stuck out of a side hole, a foot from the back that would never properly touch the ground. There were sometimes two confined to a single pot, limbs meant to grow vinelike about one another, or with certain organs permanently linked in novel ways. They weren't Kura children for, it was said there weren't any. But they were so small that they must have been somebody's children.

Or had once been, when they were first confined to the jars. They must have been infants when they were placed within to grow in the shape of the particular vessel. Years later, the jars would be broken apart and the stunted, sculpted bodies would be rolled out—finished anomalies.

The smell was unspeakable, even if the pots (and their prisoners) were filled with water and then tipped over daily to clean them out.

"Not for you, Lady! Don't look in there!" Solon cautioned, knowing he was too late with his warning and sorry for it.

He hung his head in personal shame, bearing a special empathy for those destined to be objects of curiosity and derision. Fated to be toys.

"How is this permitted? Can't we summon the city guards?" Emana said with difficulty, a hand to her throat. She was horrified that anyone would deliberately maim children for sport. Yet she'd lived a long time and knew the world was cruel. She'd drunk the sins of murderers and understood from the screams she'd swallowed how terrible men could be. Still, usually only nobility could get away with brutal excess. This vendor was no noble from anywhere.

(These aren't the things I should see on my way to Rasal. These things curse our union. They are omens of disaster.)

She trembled in her thin flax gown.

"This is Kur," Solon replied. "It might not be precisely legal but no one will do anything. The man is from the subcontinent, where a thousand elephants are put to death in sacrifice every day and where princes dine upon fetuses in pear nectar. The Sanskri spend fortunes here when they visit, and none of the houses would dream of offending even this lowly scum from that country."

Emana was furious. She wanted to go back and smash the jars. But then what? She might be able to make the lame walk and separate those wedged carnally together, but she couldn't straighten their ruined bones nor give them the stature that nature might have granted them. Their emotionless eyes related that each of them had been entombed in their pottery for years. They were disabled in more than their bodies. She couldn't cure their neglected melancholy and she couldn't mend too much cruelty.

She was tempted to flee back to the inn, to forget this night that began with promise. It was ruined. It was dreadful. She'd made a mistake trying to come to this place. There was no healing to be found in Kur, for there was nothing but ugliness here.

She must leave this awful city at once. She'd run down to the beach, to the sea, and throw herself into it. And if she drowned and was carried away in waves from the beloved land (no, this land wasn't beloved...) then she would gladly die, willing not to return since Rasal hadn't returned. Perhaps the sea would push her to another shore, where the earth was still inhabited by the spirit of the good goddess.

"I've failed again, Rasal," Emana sobbed, covering her face with her hands. Solon led her away down the streets, past curious whirls of bodies, stranger humans, catcalls, singing and festival.

"It's time for me to go back," Emana said to those hands, to a remote memory of her husband whom she hadn't seen since his death. There had been illusions, lies, shapes in brain fever. Nothing more. "This quest for you is destroyed." "No, Lady, it isn't. Look." The dwarf tugged at her until until she followed his gesture.

A shape danced in a faraway window, sensually smooth, bending on willow legs with clouds of floating hair. These became tendrils of rose-colored smoke. Became a blue heron with fog feathers and a royal crest. Became a dervish swirling of dust. Became a capering, multi-armed demoness with a cunt in each palm and breasts of licking flames.

Solon sighed as they approached the house with this window. There were other windows facing the street but the dwarf never took his eyes from this one.

"Alali," he murmured.

He envied Emana as he waited for her at the gate. He was sending her up to be in the arms of a creature he was infatuated with. How many times had Solon brought people here to purchase the services of this Kura he cherished from afar?

Was it anywhere near enough to create the sack of gold he needed to reach her himself?

He didn't hate the Ishantu for being able to go in his place. There was only sorrow and a longing—a bit of jealousy—shining from the ghastly scars on the carved side of his face. The handsome half of it looked as if he might stand beneath the Kura harlot's window, orating extemporaneous poetry to win her love.

The scars spoke to him. They laughed, resonant with ridicule as they muttered, "Little man, little man..."

In that window, as the Kura stared out toward the dark, older city (recalling what life before this one? aching for what alien magic?), she was alternately a unicorn, a silver-skinned mermaid with coral lips and a shawl of kelp, an androgynous beauty who seemed at first to wear a voluminous cloak but who then spread arms wide to reveal expansive wings.

The closer Emana came to the brothel's front entrance, the more the Kura took and held onto the shape of a man. It was as he might appear rising through sand, through porous earth. The outline of his body became more distinct the nearer he came to breaking the surface.

And what was this man's aspect? What was his body like? How did his face appear?

Emana knew it would be clear to her once she entered Alali's chamber. Emana knew that body and remembered the face. Solon watched from the gate and loved the Kura, no matter what she became or who she became it for.

There was a power in that becoming. There was a freedom from the single prison of the crippled body.

Sometimes there would be a few nights when Alali wouldn't be in her window. Solon would be afraid something had happened to her. It frightened him to believe that anything could happen to her.

There was that night a year ago. She'd broken through the roof, wolf-headed and red-eyed, howling fury into the sky. It had been horrible and magnificent. A wild man had run away, bloodied and bellowing the gibber of mongrels. Solon was angry, wondering how that man was allowed inside when he couldn't go.

(Gold: the key to all doors.)

Alali hadn't been in her window for a week after that. And when she finally returned, Solon glimpsed a flicker in her mutable eyes as she gazed at the moon. As if the moon were really the magical one that she hoped would one day love and rescue her, pining for it the way the dwarf pined for her.

But that couldn't be, for in moments she then became a series of nightbirds, one after another. Nightbirds, like those he'd seen fly across the face of that moon, from the shores of black lakes and the branches of shadow forests. All in another lifetime for Solon, when he'd been a slave and both sides of his head were handsome. These nightbirds carried moonlight on their wings, even if they never escaped her window.

Emana entered the building and was greeted by the brothel master. He bowed low until his fingers scraped the floor. His red cloak swept back dramatically. He was a haughty one, shining with courtesy as if he alone offered passage into the vaults of wisdom.

He grinned. "Good evening, Lady." His teeth glittered. He probably rubbed them with oil of aloes so they would catch the light.

She noted the expensive hilt of his sword, smelled the sandalwood that slicked back his hair. He was clean shaven. He plucked his chest and stomach free to better display the sinewy flesh he was proud of.

Was he the lover here to be fawned over and paid for? No, merely the purveyor.

Emana had no doubt that he would sell himself in a moment. He'd bend himself over to the most humiliating of strange entries to gain more coin. There were those who would do anything for wealth . . . sell themselves . . . worse still, sell others. But what could she say? What did she have a right to say in protest? Wasn't she here to buy someone?

Not a 'something', as clearly many of the partiers to Kur believed.

Did that lend this transaction more dignity?

Emana regarded the brothel master with contempt, knowing that he'd bare any orifice of his body or suck any perfumed or greasy relic of anyone else's for the price. Yet in Kur that might never happen. Why would anyone journey to this faraway land, with the fabled Kura who could satisfy every and all whims, just to have sex with a common pimp?

And this was the man who wouldn't allow the dwarf inside?

Ah, but soon SOON there would be oranges and frankincense/ and the time wasted going mad in the desert/having dreams that haunted/unable to awaken/tasting dust/growing thin/lives weren't meant to be spent in endless grief but merged . . .

Emana tensed, controlling herself from embarrassing outbreaks, from shrieking her husband's name. She nodded slightly in an acknowledgement of the greeting given her by this outwardly handsome, ridiculously pompous, inwardly (she sensed it inside like a cancer snaking through his guts) brutal human male.

Emana was distressed at how nervous she was, how close to breaking down as she had on the ship when she thought the deck was the rose garden of the Hila clan. She wanted to be eager but cool, sophisticated. She was no longer a virginal child but a woman of the world. What bride didn't shiver?

But brides didn't stalk to their wedding nights with blood inside their minds, raving their vows. They didn't nearly rip off their gowns to run amuck.

She trembled as if Rasal was really upstairs.

(Wasn't he? Wasn't it truly Rasal? She could cry out for him, pierce the floors and ceilings with her voice in agony.)

She cast a sideways glance at the brothel master. This man with the greedy eyes—and the cobras raising their deadly heads up his esophagus from the venom pit of his belly—was keeping her from Rasal. Somehow this brute kept Rasal imprisoned up these stairs, and this was the reason they were apart so long. If violence had been a part of the Ishantu make-up, Emana might have rushed at this Amaki bastard and scratched his eyes out. Didn't he care what she'd been through? Had he no conscience for what he'd done to her by walling her husband up within a tower?

He waited for her to state her business, to announce her preference. If she demured too long, would he decide she was insane and have her ejected from the building?

(No, they received insane visitors every night, people with every conceivable mania, sickness, and personal heartache.)

"I wish to see . . . " She'd started to say she wanted to see Rasal. Emana faltered and finally managed to say, "I wish to see Alali."

She brought coins from her sash. The brothel master put out his palm to accept them. Emana dropped them into his hand without touching him. She sensed that within the walls of this house he did indeed hold Rasal prisoner.

He held someone prisoner.

The house had the atmosphere of a dungeon.

What a place to be wed, she thought with dismay.

"Up the stairs. Second door on the right," said the brothel master. "There's no need to knock first. You're expected."

Of course I'm expected, Emana considered with a bit of a sneer. My husband waits for me.

She wished she could blink the tears away that started filling her eyes. She'd managed to restrain them all day but now they came. Well, she'd cried when she saw the people in the jars but that was different.

She only wanted to show a happy countenance, radiant as she met her mate. She climbed the steps, exhaling to taste the breath that flowed across her tongue, checking for the clove to be extant. She wet her lips with that tongue until she knew they glistened. Her nipples erected with anticipation, acorns of fire through the fabric of the gown.

She remembered a line from the vows she'd exchanged on the night she and Rasal had united, many years ago.

(You were alone and this I heal.)

It was supposed to be forever. It should have lasted centuries. No single member of an Ishantu couple ever traveled alone. They always went together so that if a deadly accident befell one, the other was there to wait and draw them up again from the earth.

(Rasal, I waited!)

Emana reached the landing and heard strange noises coming from behind some of the doors. Voices of passion and pain, groans and physical exertion. She ignored them as she turned to the right of the corridor, seeing but not really noticing the frescoes on the smooth surface: of lilies, their curled back petals being sought by hummingbirds. Pairs of cats, hares, and people sported between the rows of flowers.

She wouldn't permit a memory of Rasal's head as it was severed from his body, or of that head rolling down the hundred steps of the law altar—no! She wouldn't allow the recollection of his perfect body starting to swarm with worms from the rose garden. No! She denied the image of Rasal spreading soul crow wings in panic dreams. She shut her eyes, thinking: please, don't!

Emana saw only shining Rasal, tall and strong, completely alive. Not risen, for this Ishantu had never died. He was handsome, a vessel of great power. His blood cured plagues and consumptions.

With this firmly in her head, Emana didn't hesitate. She opened the door to see him there. And he was there as she'd pictured him: loin cloth of simple flax, hair unbraided in the only time it would hang loose—free for the wedding ceremony. His muscular arms were wide to receive her with joy. His red mouth smiled.

"You were alone and this I heal," he said in his deep voice. Exactly as Emana revered it.

The tears couldn't be contained as she rushed into his arms. She tripped over her narrow skirt but he caught her. He was strong, lifting her up to him and enfolding her to the body and scents she knew well. Cool frankincense and oranges.

Somewhere a single drum was beating.

She was a fever in his arms, cooling by the seconds next to his skin. They embraced and it was Rasal's mouth, his flavor, the pattern on his organ tongue she knew by heart. The grieving months fell away. She was sane again, the bad memories of murder gone for they'd never happened. Must never have happened for here he was: complete and vibrant, murmuring poetry into her ear the way he had during the best of their most intimate moments. Inarticulate of human speech, the words were sounds of underground rivers, of slowly freezing lakes cupped between mountains in winter, of blood rushing to its limits within the body's shores.

Emana was truly awake.

She pressed against Rasal, raising her leg to draw her foot up his bare calf, sliding it up his thigh, angling it like a dancer. She felt his hardness between them, would climb up his hips to find it. He put his hands around her waist to lift her. She let herself fall into him, where their spirits merged even as their bodies did, like a shifting of grains from the earth. Her clove-flavored mouth filled with blood to share, even as his did with the scent of it sweetly on his lips.

Emana wrapped both legs around as Rasal lowered her from the air onto himself. They kissed again, and this time their blood gushed from the wells of their throats to shower one another's mouths. Oranges/cloves/richest darkest soil/metal/souls of healing. Emana sank into her bridegroom's dream of eternity.

Sank the way of rain water.

Then she dropped unexpectedly, suddenly with gathering speed as if she'd stepped from a precipice.

Inside, and something here wasn't a vessel of power. It was removed from the act of healing. This inner being wasn't Rasal but valleys that fell into total darkness. Emana tried to slow her descent but only scrabbled at slanted fractions of moonlight.

Strange and unknown animals howled at the moon—or at stars. Points of light like myriad eyes watched from the night. They raced through Emana's veins, staring at her from the other side of her face.

Emana felt with her own healing sense that these were all the beings of the Kura, and these were all that had ever been Alali.

Lost and knotted. Visages as plentiful as the stars. Just as tangible . . . and not at all.

In the distance Emana saw Rasal disappearing into a crowd of beasts and people, a menagerie of beings where no two were alike. Rasal was fading back in a deep canyon that was lit dimly with what light Emana carried in her hands, grappled from her fall through the sky.

He disappeared. Emana shouted his name but was unable to concentrate. This assembly of creatures confounded her. Every one of them wept and shivered from fear. He was gone, lost among them.

Emana felt a jolt to her backside.

She flowed out, released. She was on the floor. A few feet away from her the Kura melted, shifting, trembling.

Emana was stunned. They'd merged as she and Rasal really had when they were intimate. But that was only possible between Ishantu and Ishantu. Or could the Kura shapeshift so perfectly that Alali became Ishantu at that moment? It would have to be a transformation that went into the psyche and spirit. What other explanation was there?

Emana knew she could bring Rasal back by concentrating on him, filling her conscious thoughts with him to help the Kura refocus. Then could Alali

resume her husband's shape. She couldn't let him go this soon. She'd come too great a distance and ached for him too deeply.

But even if Emana did summon his image back in the shifter, the act of closeness with its dissolving of her spirit into his—into the other's sense as was integral to the Ishantu sex act—would only see her faced again with this sickness in the Kura.

This was what she felt the edge of as the parade passed close by: the Kura on leashes, their confusion. Emana had been born with the natural ability to attune to pain. This was inescapable. What lay within this person in the room with her was complete torture.

Emana wobbled to stand up and reached out toward the cowering beast. She sensed with her fingers, astrals probing the disturbed air which pulsed between their bodies. The Kura regarded Emana with ferret eyes in the face of a dove—then swam form into a zebra shaking a mane that wasn't hair but spring water—replaced by a woman's generous full-lipped mouth with the rest of the head that of a white cat, torso a tortoise-shell calico.

"Let me help you," Emana said, taking small steps to close the gap between them.

Alali opened her mouth. There was an eratic movement within.

A butterfly fluttered on her tongue.

Her tongue was a butterfly, lapis lazuli and silver wings, the sacred colors of the goddess.

A hand/paw/flipper/edge of a wing extended from the shifting mass. Emana grasped it, kneeling beside the Kura. To help, she first must diagnose what ailed this creature. To do this, she needed to understand. This wouldn't be easy. It wasn't as simple as detecting the poisoning of a baby or the feebleness of an old heart. Whatever this was, it was complex. It was unlike any disease Emana had ever encountered before.

Emana inched closer until her bent knees touched the legs of the beast. She felt it shuddering along its flanks, rippling up and down the rearranging vertibrae of its spine, pressing triangles of ears back and flat. She shook off her own fear and let herself fall back into the Kura.

The fall was expected this time but no less startling.

Alali felt the woman's spirit slide into hers. There was a positive force here, drawing the creature to itself. She leaned into it as if to make welcome the penetration by the Ishantu's spirit. They fell together. But this time they didn't land in a canyon filled with the shapes of Alali, for was Alali not present on the journey now?

Her mind began to open. They found themselves on the shores of the sea. Alali was beginning to remember.

PART THREE

"She who receives the 'me' of the underworld does not return. She who goes to the Dark City stays there."

'The Descent of Inanna' —Mesopotamian

CHAPTER 13

"A rapid shadow from a slope of grass, Into the darkness of the stream did pass." "The Witch Of Atlas"—Percy Bysshe Shelley

Arkat knelt on the lichen and cupped his hands to bring the cool water from the pool to his mouth. He glanced back at the prints of the boar his hunting party was following. He also sneaked a look at Gret who bent nearby to drink. He waited to see if Gret did the same, and if he grimaced as he did so.

The man's eyes would tell him if Gret suspected that Arkat had been the one to kill Gret's brother. Byr had been found at the bottom of a gorge, where the hunters sometimes stampeded horses over a cliff, climbing down after to take the meat and hides. Byr had been tangled in the heap of bones from thousands of those horses, and had anyone suspected that he might have been thrown from the ledge above the gorge?

Arkat had taken Byr's woman only two nights after, and this might have aroused suspicion. Of course, a woman would try to quickly replace a deceased mate, thus ensuring her further protection. But who among their tribe hadn't known how Arkat looked at her with desire?

Byr hadn't expected the attack, and it was easy to just push him while standing behind. The other man never even turned around to see the hatred and passion in Arkat's face.

In the distance the men heard singing, music such as was played on the strange instruments the Kura enjoyed in their city. A frightening place that was, even though the inhabitants never attacked anyone and didn't appear to be warriors. It was a gathering of mountains constructed by the red-eyed race, where they lived in towers of basalt in straight lines and incredible angles. The populace looked down from holes cut into these structures or running through the even canyons that went between.

Arkat and his hunters occasionally traded live red deer and bison, hartebeast and zebra for food stuffs and finer hides. They didn't normally capture animals alive but the Kura only wanted them that way, keeping them in cages in the center of their city. And the winters could still be very cold, even though no one in Arkat's tribe could recall seeing a glacier in their lifetime. But stories were still told of the great ice masses that once crept across the land, mostly farther north. When those winters came, the tribe needed more than it could hunt and gather to get through until summer.

"Are you pleased with Dita?"

Hearing him speak, Arkat turned to Gret. The man's eyes were as flint as his axe.

The muscles in Gret's legs bunched under the hem of his goatskin tunic, as if he prepared to rise suddenly. Or leap.

"Why?" Arkat growled, voice a threatening storm in his throat. He stood slowly, pulling himself to his full height to be more imposing to the crouching man. Gret was shorter than he anyway. Arkat had both fists wrapped around his club.

"Dita says you whisper in your sleep," Gret replied.

There was a soft crunching of leaves beyond the bend of the stream. Both men barely turned to see a Kura male walking through the woods, not thirty paces away. Was he collecting the black birds? They had seen many Kura beyond their city in the last few moons who were gathering these birds. One had been carrying at least twenty, all trapped live, enough to feed every hunter who was present at the time. He'd been alone, and it would have been easy to take the birds from him. But the Kura were magic. To harm one might bring the rest down on the tribe. And there were countless numbers of these Kura in the city of towers.

Arkat and Gret could see this one had no birds. He was bending to collect herbs. He saw them but said nothing, only nodding, going about his business. They kept a respectful distance.

Then there was a crashing to Arkat's left, a snort of fury and a shattering of fallen tree limbs as they were trampled. A boar charged from the bushes, tusks lowered for goring. Earlier, Sut had been positive he'd hit it with his spear. He went off to search for it with Jof and Luto. It was obvious that someone had wounded it, in the side where blood still streamed thinly. It wasn't a mortal wound but the boar was hurting and angry.

Gret and Arkat scrambled to get out of its way. Arkat didn't move fast enough, and the boar's tusks ripped into his groin. The man shrieked as he stumbled, pulling himself back up halfway, only to be attacked again. This time the tusks caught him in the lower back. Arkat arched his spine in agony as he fell.

Gret had jumped across the stream, splashing one foot back in a panic. The mud sucked at his foot. He heard the boar as it spun toward him and charged. He sucked in his breath as he simultaneously jerked around with his axe upraised. He offered a prayer to his ancestors and steadied himself to receive the full force of the boar's weight.

There was a noise in the wind, light as a child's exhale.

The boar went down moments before it would have struck Gret with its strong, sharp tusks and hard shoulders. The Kura lowered his bow, an unusual weapon Gret had seen them carry. Better even than a spear for killing an enemy beyond the reach of a man's arms, beyond where he could even throw a stone.

Gret touched his forehead—a gesture of thanks to the Kura. He pulled his foot from the mud but didn't walk back to Arkat.

The Kura did. He said a prayer, asking forgiveness of the boar he'd killed. He quickly examined the fallen hunter, fingers hovering over the terrible gouge wounds.

"Your friend is dead," the Kura said simply.

"Wasn't my friend. I was going to kill him myself before the boar charged us," Gret admitted. He saw no benefit in not saying it. It was what he was thinking. He wasn't a liar, as Arkat had been.

The Kura raised his eyebrows.

"Arkat killed my brother," Gret told him with a shrug. "Woman Dita said so this morning."

The man's spirit languidly rose from the body, as if understanding only slowly that it was no longer alive and must depart. It tried to reach back for its club but the soul spun a little, turning skyward instead.

There was a rush of wind through the trees. Both hunter and Kura squinted at the sky for signs of storm clouds. There was a black smear coming from the direction of the city. They heard a hoarse, loud racket—as if whole trees were being split and the cliffs were tumbling down in avalanche. But these sounds didn't come from either trees or rock face.

Gret pointed without being able to speak. The Kura bounced back to stand, staring, as a flock of crows descended on the rising soul to tear it apart.

Only it wasn't just a flock. There were hundreds of them, thousands. More than the Kura had ever seen in one place—save for the temple in Kur. Pazu was experimenting with them there, encouraging many in the city to bring them to him.

He could tell these were exactly the crows he and this primitive hunter were seeing. They were unlike any others. Pazu had changed them. The Kura thought Pazu only made them bigger and stronger. But he'd done much more than that.

The hunter cringed, eyes huge with terror as he watched Arkat's soul being pulled apart. He'd never even seen an animal tear a body this relentlessly. And these were but crows, after all. Not lions and not wild dogs—without fangs.

The Kura shuddered. This was unnatural. He expected the crows to attack him and the hunter. But they flew away with the bits of the dead man's soul, wings beating like the drums for funeral rites. And they weren't returning to the city. They were flying up, deeper into the sky until they seemed to disappear.

The muscles in Lilit's legs were taut, her hands clenched in fists as she and Faj strode to confront Pazu about the crows.

The corridor to his working rooms were brightly lit, more than most hallways. His rooms were at the top of the Pyramid of Sciences, grooves open at the widest slant to allow in as much of the day's sunlight as possible. He was doing careful work, needing a lot of illumination to see by.

They could smell the cages for the crows, rank with bird droppings from thousands of birds—even if they were cleaned daily. The floor was a mess of black feathers. Pazu was bent over scrolls, as a student swept the feathers into piles for removal. They couldn't help but notice the cages were empty, slender willow bars shattered for egress.

"You didn't report that your crows escaped," Lilit said loudly, in lieu of properly announcing herself. She was angry, having heard Faj's account.

Pazu rose from his chair, his eyebrows raised. "No, it happened only a short time ago. At least, we don't think it could have been more than a few hours. Wea and I arrived here about noon."

Wea dumped feathers into a crate and then squinted when dander flew up into her face.

Lilit examined the cages. "They broke out?"

Pazu shrugged and couldn't hide his smile. "They were stronger than when I had them collected. Amazingly so."

Lilit nodded to Faj, who then related to Pazu what he witnessed in the forest.

Pazu was impressed but somehow wasn't contrite enough to suit Lilit, Mistress of Arts.

"Well! It seems I've created a new species."

"This is a terrible thing and you're proud of it?" Lilit was incredulous.

"Not at all," Pazu corrected her. "I'm only trying to create an elixer which will benefit our race. You saw my proposal when it was presented before the committee a year ago. I used crows because it was agreed that I dare not experiment on Kura. No, it must be perfected so I do no harm to our own people."

Faj's jaw twitched. "No creature should be treated as if its suffering doesn't matter."

Pazu ignored this. Faj was only a student as well, hardly qualified to be critical of a teacher.

"Is there something wrong with being in a position to guide the world toward better things?" Pazu asked, slowly beginning to gesture with appeasing curls of his long-fingered hands. "The world is such that all living things adapt or perish. We aid their adaptation with our blessings of maturation and generation, is it not so? We give shifts in pigmentation, heightened senses, speed..."

Lilit sighed. Pazu had a tendency to lecture as if he—alone of all the teaching priests of the city—knew the tenets of their religion. What could she say yet? What he said was true.

"A mistake. Utterly regrettable. Testing on the crows did bring my work far but now this has evidentally halted. I'll have to get a better caliber of subjects, as close to us as possible so that I may do more advanced study."

Lilit frowned and took a step forward. "What are you suggesting?"

Faj went to the windows where Wea was dumping feathers. He shuddered as he watched them fill the air, reminded of the crows swooping down on the poor human's soul. He brushed crow dander from Wea's shoulders, and she smiled at him.

"I'm naturally suggesting using humans," Pazu replied blandly. "They lack our self-healing abilities, our longevity, and our intelligence. But they're similar in physique."

Lilit shook her head, adamant. "Impossible. What if the same thing happens to them that happened to the crows?"

Pazu chuckled. "It won't. The crows only took this last step beyond being stronger when I added the last element. This is what caused them to metamorphose into that change which sent them crashing through their cages. I have eliminated the element. It's that simple, Mistress."

"I'll never support this. I'll fight it. It's immoral," she told him, red eyes flashing.

"No, I didn't think so," Pazu said with thinly veiled condescension. "But most of the committee will."

Lilit was furious but knew he was right. Who didn't want to live forever? And who wasn't flattered at the idea of being both invincible and the unquestioned emperors of life?

"Look, Master!" Wea cried from the window slits.

Pazu stared with a look of wonderment.

"What is it?" Pazu asked his student, as he and Lilit walked to where they could see out the top of the Pyramid of Sciences to the sea.

"A glacier," Faj replied. "I thought they were all gone."

CHAPTER 14

"Summer shunned Winter like an enemy, wouldn't walk at his side . . . "
'Summer And Winter' — Sumerian Wisdom Literature

Wea and Faj sat together in one end of the boat, as it went across the stretch of sea to the glacier. They were excited at having been chosen to represent their teachers on this mission of exploration. With the tension between Lilit and Pazu, they hadn't been able to see one another. Not only did their conflicting schedules not permit it, but it was hard to be in love and not feel as if they were betraying their mentors. They were now together for the first time in weeks—the day Lilit confronted Pazu about the crows not being counted, for it had been a heavily supervised and uncomfortable few minutes only. The spectre of ideology loomed over them, as tangible as the shadow of the iceberg.

"The Mistress of Arts dwells in the past," Wea said. "Change isn't always bad; change is progress."

"We've done well for the world in the past," Faj argued. "But change isn't always good. And it isn't always progress."

"Pazu is a far-seer," Wea told him patiently. "He teaches that there are tiny things beyond the eye in infinite creations. He says that by discovering them and learning their secrets, we stretch the limits of our own world."

"Lilit teaches that creation and destruction came from the same void. They are both valid and together bring harmony, but only by working side by side. To fuse the two cancels out their individual natures and returns us to the void," Faj replied.

The other students in the boat exchanged glances, listening because they were so close they couldn't help but overhear. Each was on one side of the debate or the other, searching faces to see if they could tell who favored immortality and who didn't.

They were dressed in skins, traded for with the hunter humans. Wea's face emerged from a hood of bushy mammoth fur, a great beast from far to the north. The hair was stiff, sticking out in spikes. It somehow made her face seem even softer to Faj. She was trailing her fingers in the water.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, sitting suddenly straighter and bringing her hand out of the water with a start.

"What is it?" Faj asked, leaning near her and grasping for her hand. "Did something bite you?"

He looked into the sea for signs of an eel.

"It's gone so cold," she said, then laughed with an exaggerated shiver.

"Melt water," one of the other students told them.

There were chunks of ice floating on the waves. Up ahead they could see the underside of the berg, where current had hollowed a part into a low ceilinged cavern. Icicles hung by the thousands.

The boat bounced against clots of brash ice, nearing a place where they might land safely.

"Look. There are flowers on the shore." Wea pointed to where strangely elegant blossoms lay at the juncture of glacier and ocean.

Faj jumped out, splashing, to help haul the boat up. He then knelt to examine them.

"I wouldn't have thought flowers would grow here," commented another female student named Ue'l, as she also bent to pick up one of the blooms.

Faj felt it crumble at his touch. He rubbed it between his fingers and sniffed at it. He put it lightly to his tongue. Wea shuddered as he did it, thinking to warn him against even moderate ingestion of an unknown substance. But Kura seldom suffered much from poisoning. One's senses were the best way to gather data. It was only that if it should make him sick—however briefly—he might have to remain behind in the boat. He'd miss what could be a most fascinating journey across the glacier. And she'd feel she ought to stay behind to care for him, thus missing it herself.

Faj grinned. "Salt. It's salt from the sea. It comes onto the ice and gathers moisture from the air. It freezes going up. Making a rosette."

"How beautiful," Wea said. Then she teased him, suggesting he take one to Lilit. "It's nature. No hand of Kura in that."

Faj made a wry face, not fully appreciating her humor. "Even if I could transport one without it shattering, it would melt. I suspect these crystals don't exist long."

"A pity," she said. "Perhaps with work, we could render them stronger. Surely something so lovely deserves a better fate."

"Perhaps its fragile transience is part of its ultimate worth," Faj replied. "Longevity might render it dangerous."

"Do you know how old this glacier might be?" she asked, arching a slender eyebrow. "It may well be thousands of years old."

"And it's melting here," he reminded her. "All things have their time."

"Enough, you two," said Ilargi, the young woman who was nominal leader of the group. "We're going to do some climbing."

Scallops of shadow gray sloped into the clouds. These in a kind of silver smoke partially hid blue peaks that rose into sharp blades of ice shale. Banks of blinding glacier ice piled in drifts like snow.

Snow had piled thickly on the lee side of a blue gray ridge. Soon the sun would reach a point in the sky where its rays would be at an optimum angle to melt it, causing gables of ice to collapse. Wea didn't want to be standing there when that happened. It was such a slow march though, walking on ground that was—at unpredictable turns—slippery and dangerously soft, offering no balance or support.

She wondered what it would be like to die under an avalanche. Would she be crushed or suffocated? Or would she merely freeze to death, a long demise that had to be like going unwillingly into a dream. She glanced at the wicker frame work of Faj's pack, rime ice already building there.

Surely it would be difficult for the Kura to heal the damages of petrified skin and blood. It must be similar to a burn, with the area going to a ruin not unlike the cross between rot and stone. Burns were something the Kura couldn't easily treat if they were too deep. There needed to be a life spark in the tissue—even if only a wan one—before it could be coaxed to a brighter light.

Faj saw Wea was getting behind. He took her hand, giving her added strength to trudge up the steep rise toward a row of corniced peaks.

She imagined how enormous this must have been, when it first began to drift away from the frozen regions of the world. Now it wasn't receiving the snowfall it needed to maintain itself. It had weakened through slow melting, through the collapse of parts of itself at the edge into the sea, in its very heart where Wea could hear it breaking. In some places this was an echoing thunder, in others a garbled crackling.

"Do you hear it?" Faj asked her. "The ice sings beneath our feet."

They came to an immense crevasse, going down very far until none of the students could see bottom. The sun dazzled in infinitessimal fractures, grooved and patterned as if it were a language, the story of a people chiseled there by stone carvers. Further down it lost the illumination altogether, going to a severe purple darkness, like the overlapping of twilights.

"Look at the hole." Ilargi indicated a semi-circle of divet in the crevasse wall about forty feet from the surface. "It almost seems too perfect to be a natural cave."

"I want to go down to investigate," Faj eagerly offered. He'd already shrugged off his pack to get at ropes.

"For safety's sake, there should be a pair of you." Ilargi had a wry smile ready. "Perhaps Wea would like to go as well?"

Wea was quickly digging out her own store of rope. Others combined their ropes with these to make a length which would drop them down far enough to reach the cave. These were knotted and slipped around their waists, tied securely as first Faj, then Wea, went over the edge.

The Kura were a nimble, graceful people—as able as mountain goats to find every alteration in the icy surface into which to put their feet. The crevasse wall wasn't entirely sheer, its flaws resembling carving being more apparent as the couple descended. Still it was perilous, not at all like climbing pure rock. This was another element, one that under different circumstances was fluid. If not for the ropes, descent would be impossible.

The other students remained above, anchoring the rope. They slowly fed it over the rim.

The grasses out of which it was woven had begun to stiffen from the cold while in the packs. Being laid on the sub-zero ground hastened hardening,

and the friction of rubbing against the ice made them brittle. Wea heard the rope above her splinter, the noise a hiss like sudden static. She'd just seen Faj plant his feet on the lip of the cavern several meters below her. She jerked her head up with alarm as the cord snapped. There was a sickening jolt around her waist, as the fibers of grass first seemed to tighten before loosening. Her ribs were momentarily compressed until she believed they would squeeze her heart through her throat. Her stomach—instead of moving upward through her body with this organ—seemed to fall, making her sure it was in her feet. She cried out and plummeted, knowing she wouldn't be crushed or suffocated, nor would she slowly freeze. Death would be a series of agonizing blows against the stone-hard outcroppings that must be hidden in the shadows she'd find, breaking bones as she slammed against them. They would never even be able to recover her body.

Perhaps she would fall forever. There might be no bottom here, no thin frozen valley at the end of this. Perhaps it was a shaft to other worlds or merely to underworlds that were the possible gaps between matter and light. And what might float there—unable to find birth or death because the lack of natural laws left all things without substance and thus of unrequited destiny? Wea screamed, her lungs filling with stabbing, icicle air.

Descent was suddenly, painfully halted. The rope about her middle tightened again, gripping her in a fibrous vise. The frozen breath was pushed out. She dangled, wrapped in violet until she couldn't see an inch before her face.

"Wea!" Faj was still bound to her at the other end. His voice echoed down to her from his place at the cavern's mouth. He was pulling her up, grasping each knot of the rope desperately, firmly.

She hadn't really fallen far. It only seemed that way. She wondered how she'd managed to think of so many terrible things in what was barely a moment of time. She could see the slender ledge where Faj had come to rest in the climb from the top. She saw his anxious face, beautiful with slanted eyes of clear garnet. She could see his hands reaching down to grasp her own outstretched fingers.

There was a pop and the beleagured rope between them came apart.

"Fai!" Wea cried.

Faj first went down on his knees to clasp her fingers and then went down on his belly with a grunt, tightening his hold of her. She was afraid she'd pull him over. They would both fall, ending for them the frivolous debate over nature and supernature. Perhaps beginning another journey where such biological possiblities didn't exist. That's what waited close by. She could sense it. Not a brutal demise but a gate, to a void where intrinsic form had never been.

Close by.

Faj pulled her up beside him with a heave of muscles and a gust of breath through his clenched teeth. He held her against him, both of them lying there and gasping.

"Are you all right?" Ilargi called down, her voice an ululation of bells distorted in the vast crack of the ice.

Far above, the anxious faces of the other students peered over the blue edge of crevasse. When the pair were up there with them, this forty or so feet hadn't seemed much distance. Now it might as well be miles.

"Yes," Faj shouted back. "We're going inside the cavern to have a look."

Wea laughed nervously. "We may not be able to get back up, but we're going inside to have a look."

Faj put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

"We'll get back up," he assured her.

"How? What ropes the others still have are going to be just as fragile in this cold. And I don't think there's enough left between them to reach us."

Faj smiled slightly, lips almost paralyzed by the ice. "Either we'll think of something or Ilargi will."

The cavern wasn't very wide, although it was tall enough that the two could stand. It was oddly lit within. There was a large shape in the center of it, taking up much of the floor. It was stretched out as a giant turtle on its back. Indeed, it seemed to have limbs—much as a turtle would—emerging from a shell or a chrysalis. These numbered eight, twice as many as any tortoise. They were frozen in a gesture of supplication.

Or in some peculiar death dance.

Or in the act of some invocation.

It didn't have a turtle's head. What it did have was formed disturbingly like a human head except that the eyes were reticular, etched not unlike the crevasse walls. And it had two mouths, each open wide as if in cries of warning or screams of rage. This whole assembly glowed with a greenish light which neither truly brightened nor warmed the cave. Wea jumped at seeing it, reaching for the knife she kept in her belt.

Faj gently touched her arm. "Wait. This thing isn't alive."

He slowly circled it, cautiously examining it from all sides. "It's quite frozen, very solid, I think."

Wea frowned. "But the light. Where does it come from? It's a glow far stronger than a normal aura."

Faj passed his hand near it, sensing for any signs of animation—or suspended animation. He felt none. There was something but it wasn't life. At least, it wasn't life he'd ever encountered before. He stepped close enough to study the terrible face.

"Wea, you should look at this. It's hollow."

"Like a carapace?"

"More like a . . . tomb," he replied. "Only the body within it is gone. Odd there'd be no trace of it. When a body decomposes, it leaves behind a residue. And how would it have rotted in these temperatures?"

Wea also passed her hand near it. She shook her head. "There is a sort of heat. But it isn't like the sun or a fire. It's more of what you'd feel in a wound

that's hot with poison, even though the flesh is cold. Maybe this burned the body away."

Faj reached out and gingerly touched the structure with a forefinger.

It crumbled without a sound. The whole length and width of it dissolved, leaving a pile of tiny crystals on the cavern floor.

"Oh, dear," he said. "It looked more solid than that."

"Yes, it did. It fell apart as if it were nothing more than ash," Wea remarked, bending to stare at the profusion of crystals scattered by her feet. "Yet they're not ash at all. Or snow. Or powder. They're quartz-like, utterly transparent."

Faj picked one up, small as a pollen-sized diamond. It had points and facets, gleaming even as he held it up toward the cavern mouth, even though it was dark in the crevasse. The lot of crystals hadn't lost their light, glowing up from the floor like a shimmering pool of water in which stars reflected.

Faj sniffed. Then he put his tongue to it for no more than a brief taste.

Wea gasped. "Be careful!"

For this was as unknown a substance as either of them had ever seen.

"Don't nag. We're not married yet," Faj told her with a mischievous grin.

Then he closed his eyes and collapsed. We arushed to catch him. He seemed to glitter for a moment, as the jewels did, as the tomb shape or the turtle shape had. His skin grew very soft. She pulled back in alarm after touching him. She bent forward a second time, determined to sense what was happening to him. She ran her fingers over his face and chest, discerning nothing above an elevated heart rate and a shift in adrenalin production.

He lay there for several minutes. He opened his eyes and sat up.

"Faj! You frightened me," Wea exclaimed, almost scolding him. "Are you all right?"

He bounced to his feet and embraced her. "I feel tremendous," he told her. "I feel as if I just drank a feast, won a race, touched the feet of the goddess, and made love to you all at once."

He smiled at that last notion and clasped Wea to him. She pulled deftly away.

"There's something about the crystals," she said. "We must gather them and take them back with us."

They scooped them up and filled the pouches in their clothing, having left their cumbersome packs with the other students. Then Wea remembered their problem. "How are we going to get up there?"

Faj strolled to the cavern mouth and looked up, his mouth open and teeth gleaming.

"Come and put your arms around my neck."

"What?"

"Just do it."

She did as he bade her, not truly imagining that her lover believed he could climb the crevasse walls.

She watched in amazement over his shoulder as he thrust forth his hands. Long, thick talons sprung from his fingertips. There was a sound of tearing leather as talons also appeared from his toes. He began to grapple the ice, taking them out of the crevasse, moving quickly and lithely like some icenatural cat.

Wea was terrified, trying not to look down. She shut her eyes. Chips of broken ice flew past them as he gouged at it, where it seemed there were inscriptions in the glacier wall and added to whatever might have been written there.

Ilargi and the other students helped haul them up when they were close enough. Wea loosened her hold on Faj. She stepped away from him, staring at his hands. The talons shrunk, becoming merely what they were before.

The glow left him and he sank to his knees, exhausted.

"That didn't last very long," Wea whispered, examining him for any signs of damage—or of lasting metamorphosis. There were none. He was only a Kura.

Faj sighed, remembering the euphoria. "It was wonderful while it lasted." He was so fatigued they had to carry him back across the glacier and down to the boat. He slept as they rowed across the bay toward the city.

CHAPTER 15

"... when the gods created man, they let Death be his share..." 'Epic Of Gilgamesh' —Mesopotamian

The committee had taken Pazu's side. He'd made such a fine argument.

"We are together," he said, "each one to the next, linked, made up of the same motes of power. The motes are also made up of motes, down to that which is protonic breath. Take only two, weaving all the motes which are braided into threads of force into a strong rope that thus connects the two. This rope cannot be broken. Furthermore, we may tread upon it into either the future or the past."

Lilit had thrown up her hands in despair as they voted three to one to let Pazu test his elixer on human animals.

This test was ongoing in the plaza, with all the city gathered to observe the results. Lilit had seen only as much as she could bear, leaving the scene because she was helpless to stop it.

She'd felt guilty, seeing the lions pacing. Her own favorite pair—Bel and Pihatu—were suspicious, sensing with their feral psyches some storm about to be unleashed. Other animals in the zoo which surrounded the plaza were uneasy as well. Monkeys swung rapidly from branch to branch or clung, frozen, to the bars, watching tensely. Elephants trumpeted, raising their trunks and stamping mighty barrel feet. A pair of rare stegosauruses—virtually extinct—bared their weak teeth and swung armorplated tails back and forth. In the aviary, the turtle doves, hawks and swallows shook down feathers in a dusty rain as they soared up to the ceiling and swooped around the perimeter in a frenzy. The phoenix began collecting spices to build its pyre, thinking the time was nigh.

She'd left the city and now walked along the beach, looking across the water for signs of the explorers returning from the glacier.

The sand was warm against Lilit's bare feet. The grains reached up between her toes, itchy and soothing at the same time. Occasionally she stepped on a sharp sea shell, empty of its mollusk and sticking up like a rampart to defend the tides with. Her feet bled from this long stroll where she stepped on many. Looking behind her, she saw the patterns of her bloody footprints stretching back. It gave her a strange sort of comfort, leaving these imprints of herself. The goddess from whom all life sprang had Her blood everywhere, the proof of passion that is orgasmic and non-fertile, even as Her clear waters of procreation and ovulation signified all that was made and to be made. Rivers of death and rivers of life. The ocean waters lapped into Lilit's prints and took the blood unto themselves, colored a little by it. And

what was this but the assurance that death and life were part of the same fluid, the matrix of being?

Lilit made no attempt not to cut her feet on the beach.

We receive, she thought; we return. In that blood lies my special nourishment which feeds the sand.

It might not be scientific. Those lofty manners she left to scientists like Pazu. She followed the old ways, from a simpler trove of faith. Those old ways had never been frightening, had never elevated the importance of one life form above another—as did the current work Pazu was doing.

Out on the sea she saw the beautiful glacier, a giant of blue-white ice. The temperature had dropped noticeably since it glided into their waters. She wished she could have gone to explore it with her students, Faj and Ilargi. She smiled, thinking of the wonders they might be seeing. It had been thought that these frozen behemoths were gone, except for far to the north and south. It really hadn't been so long since the world was covered in ice. But that cycle was dimming, a warmer one taking its place as the earth went into another phase of its life, same as any creature living on it.

Lilit stared out at the glacier and felt a momentary twinge. There was something, a nearness of . . . nothing. Of purple darkness where shapes of . . . nothing . . . waited. It could be a place were entities vaporized or where memories went when they were forgotten. The feeling was present for a moment, then flickered and left her. She whispered a prayer for the students on the ice, not really identifying a true danger for them. What had she sensed? Only a curious emptiness.

She thought about the experiment Pazu was doing in the plaza. He'd brought several of the humans he was provided onto a raised platform for the city to see. These poor people seemed to grow muscles on the spot. Their flesh and hair glowed with vitality. New teeth sprouted in the gapes of mouths, which the hard gatherer's life had caused to fall out before they were scarcely out of their teens.

Pazu ordered one to do some simple animal tricks. The man rolled over, heeled, flapped his arms like a chicken. Pazu had given no commands aloud. He'd thought them. The human had become telepathic.

He had all those who were just treated with his serum to do things, concentrating toward them. He pulled one of his young student disciples up onto the platform to order them, too. Then he chose someone at random from the crowd. The humans danced, cavorted like mice, copulated, sang. The ones who hadn't yet been given the serum huddled in a tight knot, knowing only that they'd been removed from their tribes. They didn't understand why, since it didn't appear they were going to be harmed.

Then the treated humans—at first almost bursting with glorious health—erupted in hemorrhages. They bled spontaneously as corpuscles exploded along their bodies. They suffered aneurisms and strokes from the strain on their simple systems. They bled to death within minutes, one of them still trying weakly to flap his arms like a chicken.

Tears had welled up in Lilit's eyes, spilling redly over her cheeks.

Now she rounded a grassy bend that pouted over the beach. Flowers dangled from the shallow underside of it with dainty spider webs and multicolored blossoms. She gasped. Past the curve of its shadow there was a body washed up on shore. It had been nibbled by fish until she couldn't tell what was done to it. She ran, afraid it might be one of the team of students who'd gone to the glacier. Did their boat strike ice and sink?

It wasn't a Kura body; it was human. And she didn't have to see beyond the fish-damage to know what happened to it. It was one of Pazu's test subjects, from the days before the show in the plaza. It's form was bigger and stronger, muscles powerful enough even in this shabby state. While Pazu had been 'perfecting' the serum.

She bent to the body and dragged it onto the grass. Here perhaps some hungry animal might find it. Here the remains would dissolve to feed the dirt beneath, even if nothing else claimed it. Here the family might find it if they were looking.

Did hunters and gatherers take the trouble to reclaim their dead when they fell to wild beasts or nature's designs? She didn't know. Perhaps each tribe had its own customs.

"Rest in summerland, cousin," she murmured. "Live again in a thousand bright forms."

She plucked out one of her long hairs and laid it in what remained of a hand.

"Let this be a rope in the darkness to lead you into the light. Don't fear the sparks that run along it. They are the lightning and the spirit of the touch."

The hair crackled, spat fireflies of bright sparks, then disappeared from the ruined flesh.

She began to walk back toward the city, cutting her bare feet here and there. She'd work with Bel and Pihatu when she returned. She loved her lions, sometimes even sleeping beside them in their cage within the grand zoo. She'd let them lick her bloody feet, pretending for a while that this was as predatory as the world ever was.

Lilit heard screams coming from the trees that bordered the beach. Looking that direction, she saw several naked humans with metal rings about their necks. Pazu's rings, where they had been bound together to bring them to the plaza, unlocking them once they arrived. They were shricking in terror and running for their lives.

They were being pursued by several Kura. She thought she even recognized them. One was a student of Pazu's, a youth named Causub. At least she thought it was Causub. He was bigger, muscled like a bear. He howled with a blood lust that made her skin prickle. The other Kura were likewise larger than she knew them to be. The Kura were always supremely healthy and well-proportioned. These new muscles were almost grotesque.

One of the humans disappeared. Causub stopped and sniffed the air. He put his fingers to his temples. Then he grinned savagely and swung to the

left. He dove into the underbrush and pulled a screaming female out by her feet. Lilit lost her breath with disgust as she watched Causub tear the female's throat with his teeth.

"You can't run from us! We can read your minds!" he cried in triumph. He smeared himself with the human's gore.

Lilit ran to him, jerking him backward off the twitching body by grabbing a fistful of his hair. He snarled at her and began raising his fists to strike her. She'd never seen such murderous desire in a Kura face before.

"Be still!" she commanded him, her voice a thunderous roar.

Causub cringed under it, melting against the earth. Lilit wasn't a leader for nothing. The other Kura with him covered their ears and stopped wherever they were in their chase of the humans. All of them were covered in blood not honorably taken.

Lilit put a strong palm to Causub's forehead and pulled, feeling the psychotic heat sting into her hand. It burned her fingers. His arms and legs trembled as the bearish muscles dwindled. He groaned as she launched herself into his mind in the healer's fall, probing to discover what had happened. Goddess! What would move these decent Kura youths to lose their minds and slaughter helpless people?

The fall into Causub took her back to the plaza. The lions paced their cages.

"Be not afraid," Pazu told the crowd of onlookers. The treated humans were taken dead from the stage. The city was muttering. The scientist sought to reassure them." This cannot happen to our people. We heal such anomalies in ourselves. These are very little things to the Kura metabolism. We don't have aneurisms or strokes or hemorrhages. The result for us will be immortality."

Lilit's people were shouting in outrage.

Causub leapt the platform, exclaiming, "We believe you, Master!"

To show his absolute faith in his teacher, he grabbed a dose of the serum and swallowed it.

Several other young men jumped onto the platform and took doses from the tray. Pazu couldn't be blamed if they took it from him. The committee hadn't yet sanctioned it being given to the people of Kur and—after this demonstration with the humans—might have reconsidered their positions. But this way he had Kura subjects, volunteers to show how safe it was. That this was the time for their people to turn their part of the world into the realm of immortals.

Causub shouted to the crowd, exhorting them with rhetoric culled from one of Pazu's own lectures. "Time will be altered, taking on a character different from age and deterioration! It will no longer bend until its end returns to the point of its origin, to where the soul rejoins the cosmic mix! It will be straight, unfaltering toward infinity!"

The youths began to change, subtly, strongly. They growled with delight and took off after the humans who hadn't been used in the experiment.

The crowd in the plaza parted in shock to let them run through.

They captured some humans in the forest at the edge of the city and tore them to pieces. They were mighty, invincible, like gods of war and the sun.

"What's happened here?"

Lilit withdrew from the boy's mind to see that the expedition had returned from the glacier.

"These fools took Pazu's serum and see what's occurred?" The Mistress of Arts shook her head. "We must get them complete transfusions immediately."

Causub leered at the party of students, gore still covering his hands and lips.

"It was exhilarating. I can never go back to what I was before," he said, although he'd already lost much of what he'd acquired.

The students stared at the other changed Kura, horrified at the carnage they'd committed but fascinated by the power in their bodies.

Faj remembered how he felt after tasting the crystal. He glanced at Wea curiously before helping Lilit by lifting the subdued Causub over his shoulder.

CHAPTER 16

"Come, I will bear you up to the heaven of Anu;
Place your breast upon my breast,
Place your palms against the feathers of my wings . . . "
'Etana' — Mesopotamian

Faj searched his pack in vain. He was sure he'd put his share of the crystals in it. He went through the pouches in the furs he'd worn during the expedition. He couldn't find them.

He'd collapsed, sleeping during the trip back across the bay. Anything could have happened as his friends carried him across the glacier. The crystals might have fallen from his clothes.

Surely they hadn't been lost in the ice or in the sea. What a terrible waste of potential.

There! A snag of itchy heat. His fingers pinched the single crystal hiding in the folds of the bear robes he'd worn for warmth. Faj extracted it from the woolly fur and held it up. One crystal.

He took it to present it to his teacher. Lilit was among her lions, brushing their fur and purring into their ears. Her long legs were folded under her with the head of Pihatu, the great male, in her lap. The lion was as content as any palace cat.

Faj explained the discovery of the cave and what he'd felt after tasting the crystal. Lilit listened carefully.

"Surely the shape you found was indeed a grave," she replied. "Or a prison. One belonging to an ancient god, long before our existence as a race. It possesses much power. I feel a million motes dancing in it, racing, ready to explode. What lies beyond such explosion is . . . changed."

"A nothingness?" Faj offered, recalling his and Wea's assessments.

"There's really no such thing," Lilit corrected him. "There is always form. It might simply not be here anymore. There's always spirit. It may just not have consciousness or certain destiny."

"Which means what, Mistress?"

She smiled a dry smile. "My dear boy, I have no idea."

Then she tilted her head with an expression he recognized from her many lectures. It usually indicated she'd had an inspiration.

"It might be the chaos of generation," she said. She held it up and motioned for him to come look. "See? In the facets are stars being born."

Faj gasped. It was so. Then he saw her smirking. She was holding it up to the brilliantly-arrayed night sky. One would surely glimpse stars through such clear quartz.

"Is it the only one you brought back?" she asked him.

Faj hung his head. "Well, no. Wea and I collected at least a couple hundred of them."

Lilit just looked at him. Then she replied, "Is this the only one you have?" He nodded.

She shrugged with resignation. "Then I believe we can safely assume where she has taken the others. I'll go to the committee in the morning and put forth the request that most of them be returned, so that many different arts may study them—not just Pazu's. Such a discovery must be shared with all, for whatever wisdom or benefits may come from them."

Faj bowed and departed the lion cage.

He made for Wea's apartment. Her windows faced west and were at this time of night filled with the moon. She hadn't yet retired to bed when she let him in but was dressed as if she'd been expecting him. Her hair was loose around her hips and scented with hyacinth flowers. She wore a drape of sheer white gauze over her shoulders that hung in folds around her knees, belted by a slender braid of kudzu at her waist.

"Faj," she murmured and touched his cheek.

"You took the crystals, Wea. All of them," he accused her. "That wasn't fair. Pazu doesn't hold the reins to all quests for knowledge."

But it was hard to be cross with her when she looked this way. The flower scent filled his nostrils. He saw the swell of her curves through the transparent cloth.

"I'm sorry," she said, bowing her head. Her long lashes brushed her cheeks as she lowered her eyes. "They are yet here. I will give them back to you. You're right, of course. I let my enthusiasm get the better of me—again."

She turned away and took a cup from her table. The moonlight coming through the window slits shimmered on the surface of what liquid sat in the clay goblet. She turned back and offered it to him.

"You know, Faj, you were so strong today as you carried me up from the cave to safety. I clung to your back and felt the strength in your muscles. It filled me with longing."

He took the cup and drank.

"If you hadn't collapsed, I think we'd have discovered what love feels like on the ice. I imagined you hard as the glacier." She took the cup from him and drank also.

"I think of the shadows in the crevasse today," Faj replied. "I think of the shore and of crushing the blossoms of salt under our thighs."

"The salt would sting!" she added, laughing.

"We'd scarcely feel it for the cold," he reminded her. "We'd have to keep moving to stay warm, feeding our heat to one another to keep the ice from stealing it."

What strange wine was this she gave him? It had the bouquet of almonds and chamomile, but there was an undertaste he couldn't identify. He was about to ask her when suddenly he couldn't move or speak. He was certain he'd collapse, as he had in the cavern. He didn't fall but stood rocking on his

feet, poised as if about to fly or launch into a dream. There was a film of plum-colored moisture across his vision. Half-revealed figures swam there, entwined. He realized he heard a married couple that lived in the apartment next to Wea's. They were making love. He heard—no—sensed the passion they felt, as the man thrust deeply and the woman arched her back. A pair of nightingales mated in a nest that rested between basalt stones on the ledge, their desire coming from their minds to translate as bits of chime and song.

Wea, too, stopped moving. Her mouth hung open, as if she'd been about to say something. A tear glistened in the corner of her right eye—was what she'd been about to say a confession of some sort? Purple darkness sat in the hollows of her fine cheekbones.

Then suddenly they were in each other's arms, stripping off their simple clothing. He reached up to cup one of her breasts, and it was covered in soft feathers. She draped a wing across his broad back. The glow of their mouths doubled as they kissed. He grew wings of his own. These beat the air around them as he entered her. When both cried out, it was in music.

The birds on the ledge were startled and flew. Then Faj and Wea were man and woman again.

She'd never felt so superb. Her eyes had never shone this much before. Her unbound hair was thick and glossy, yet soft as a newborn's. The heart beneath her breasts beat loudly against his own. The bottles of wine and perfume on her table shook with the rhythm.

He felt his own shoulders broaden. Muscles in his arms and legs that coiled around hers rippled with excellence. He licked her bare shoulder, tasting spice. He noticed that a scar she'd had from being born was gone. It had never been much. Her mother had removed the tiny fist that was there, sprouting from what was meant to be a twin. Her mother had deliberately not healed the whole of it, so that Wea would ever be reminded of the sibling in her shadow and would say prayers for a vanished sister. But it was gone, the shoulder smooth and unblemished. And, sensing, he found no trace of the twin within her, no vestigial of what he'd always felt lying dormant in his beloved.

The sister has gone beyond the gate, he thought. Was that possible?

Their lovemaking peaked as never before. They pulled apart, amazed that neither of them was spent. The energy continued to race through their veins. He caressed her new shoulder, waiting for the surge in him to ebb as it had in the cave. This was surely what she'd done . . . put a crystal into the wine.

He saw the shadows on the wall. They were being observed.

Pazu and most of the members of the committee were in the room and watching this. Faj reached for his clothes, staring at Wea in disbelief.

"What have you done?" he asked, seeing in her face that she'd lied to him. Wea reached out for him, and he read it in her mind. She no longer had the crystals. She'd given them to her teacher, and Pazu had created a new serum from the old. The two of them were the test subjects.

Faj wanted to leave but even the committee members ordered him to remain. The couple was observed for the rest of the night. But Faj and Wea lost neither their new vibrant health nor their telepathy. They didn't become violent, as had Causub and the other students after taking the first serum in the plaza.

They were kept the next day and night. Pazu made incisions in their arms to demonstrate how rapidly they healed, even for Kura. Wea willingly dragged a blade across her own throat—how Faj screamed, trying to leap across the room to prevent her—and it healed before it could even begin to bleed.

"Watch this," Wea said to the committee. She looked at Pazu with pride and devotion. She cut off one of her fingers.

Faj wept, picked it up, held the cherished finger to his lips. It withered like a leaf.

Another grew on her hand in its place. Nothing regenerated like this, save for a few creatures such as starfish.

"You've done it, Master Pazu," the committee concluded. "It's time for the Kura to cross their threshold to eternity."

CHAPTER 17

"If it is possible, I will even cross the Abyss..."
'Epic Of Gilgamesh'—Mesopotamian

It was morning as Lilit strode into the hall to do as she'd promised Faj—entreat the committee to have most of the crystals distributed to the various orders for study. She was confident this would be quickly done. The committee always strived to be fair to all. She was surprised when she was informed that the committee had adjourned to Pazu's quarters in the Pyramid of Sciences, leaving instructions not to be disturbed for any reason.

She immediately went there. A guard posted at the door stepped in her way to block her entrance.

"I'm sorry, Mistress. You're not to be admitted," he told her.

However, since Kura didn't bear arms against Kura, she simply brushed him aside.

"Nonsense," she replied bruskly. "That would be a hindrance to balance, wouldn't it?"

She walked purposefully into Pazu's working chambers. The members of the committee were engrossed in one of Pazu's long scientific explanations.

"The crystal has a strange configuration, appearing at first to be quartz-like. Closer inspection reveals that it isn't hexagonal. Its configuration is strange, and it is as if we have added a diamond to the mix. Unlike snow and the ice from the glacier upon which it was found, it doesn't melt. When heat is applied, it splits into smaller versions of itself. It is an infinitely complex yet resilient formation . . . "

"Surely you wouldn't mind sharing some of it with the rest of the orders?" Lilit said acidly, interrupting him.

"This is a closed meeting," said Ager, part of the committee.

"How dare you," Lilit rebuked him. "When has any meeting ever been closed to Master or Mistress? To do so is to ignore your responsibility to a portion of the city—my followers. It could only be closed for purposes of deceit and to prevent honest debate."

No one else challenged her presence.

She smiled at Pazu as sweetly as she could manage, seeing he was a colleague. "Now, about those crystals you don't have sole right to."

"I would gladly share, Mistress, but I'm afraid they were all used in the serum. It does have to be an especially large amount to feed the population of this city."

"You used them all?" Lilit suppressed her anger. It was cut anyway with dumbfoundment at his audacity. "What gave you the right? Your student wasn't the only person to discover them. The other person present and sharing equal credit was my student, Faj."

Pazu's teeth gleamed as he grinned and snapped his fingers. Two people, a man and a woman, came from the adjoining room. They were both changed in stature and body shape. She didn't recognize Faj and Wea at first. They were taller, more heroic. Their skins had taken on a glow she'd only seen in visions of the goddess in sacred circle. Even the texture of their flesh was apple-smooth. When they walked, their feet didn't quite seem to touch the ground.

"Behold! The first of the new race!" Pazu said exuberantly.

Faj took a knife from the table and cut off a finger. Lilit watched in stunned silence—as Faj had done the night before as WSa performed this miracle—while the stump rebuilt him another digit within minutes. The amputated one shriveled and fell to dust. Pazu bent down to blow it away with a dramatic flourish.

"It seems Faj has had a change of heart," Pazu proclaimed.

"It will be announced to the city that Pazu's serum will be given in the plaza seven sunrises from this morning," Ager informed her.

"Is there to be no argument? No debate? No common sense heard or plea for the sake of nature?" Lilit asked.

She glanced at Faj, who lowered his head for only a moment, refusing to meet her gaze. Wea took his hand—the one with a new finger—and squeezed it, giving him a sweet smile of reassurance. Then did he look back at the Mistress of Arts with a measure of rebellion.

"There's no argument to sway us from what we've witnessed here. We further decide that taking this serum will be mandatory for all who wish to live in Kur," said Baoul, another committee member.

"You mean, we'll be forced to take this abomination against nature, even if we don't want it?"

Lilit trembled with rage. This was too much. What had happened to these once good people? Could even they be so greedy, so covetous of the years, that they could throw away their decency?

"Certainly not, Mistress," Ager was quick to say. "But if you won't take it, you won't be permitted to live in Kur. It will be a city for gods."

"You're free to go anywhere you like," Pazu added, doing his best to show how generous this was. But there was a gleam of triumph to his eye, his science succeeding over her faith. She'd almost won. If it hadn't been for the glacier . . . If it hadn't been for the crystals . . .

And the irony was that Lilit couldn't even obtain any more of them. Not for study nor to distribute to other orders. The glacier had glided out of sight in the hours before dawn. Pazu wondered if she'd even noticed that.

Faj still looked defiant, clutching his beloved's hand a bit too tightly, as if in desperation. Lilit turned to him, knowing he wasn't really at fault. They must have done this to him through trickery. Now he was what he was. By the look of him, there was nothing to undo it. She thought a blessing in his direction. It was unspoken so it wouldn't embarrass him in front of the others gathered there.

Lilit glimpsed moisture in his eyes, a pained expression, as of one being granted forgiveness when they might not think they deserved it.

She understood that Faj had read her mind.

(I do hope you won't be hurt by this. May the goddess protect you.)

Lilit left without another word to any of them.

"I'm prepared to leave this land," Lilit said to her people.

She assembled them on a high, wooded cliff. There were about ten of them, including her student Ilargi. Each of these represented a group of ten who represented a group of fifty. They would deliver this message on down, and those who received it would decide whether or not they wished to leave with Lilit. Respect for the Mistress was great. It was certain that thousands would leave the country behind her.

"I have ships," said Maju, the zoo's supplier. He traveled to distant lands, bringing back species for study and aid. "I gladly offer them for any who will go."

He added a bit sheepishly, "Of course, these ships are designed for animals. There are few comforts. But many of the animals are large. There's a lot of room."

Lilit arched an eyebrow as she replied, "I'm sure most won't mind sleeping on straw and having no furniture. We're not gods."

"Where will we go?" asked Hyakinthos, a man who worked with seeds.

"Everywhere. Anywhere we can help," Ilargi replied.

Lilit put an arm around her student.

They stood on a wooded cliff overlooking the beach. The remains of ice came in on the water, blocks of blue gray, deposited on the sand and melting in the sun like chunks of grease. The waves were choppy and visibly cold. But the glacier was gone and soon the ocean would warm again.

A human woman emerged from the trees beyond and ran onto the beach. Her chest heaved and tears were streaming down her face. The Kura heard the whoops of a human male, also coming out of the trees in pursuit. From the shell ornamentation in her hair and the bones woven into his, it was plain they were from different tribes. He caught up with her and struck her on the shoulders with a club.

She fell and he grabbed her hips, flipping her over onto her back. He began tearing off the hides she wore around her torso, striking her savagely with fists as he crouched between her legs. He raped and then stabbed her with the stone knife he carried.

Another woman came from the trees and ran up behind him as he continued to stab the body of the first woman. He was oblivious to everything around him, knowing only a bestial ecstasy. This second woman's face was twisted into a mask of rage. She grabbed a chunk of ice from the beach and brought it down on the back of his skull. He cried out, dropping the knife. He grabbed his head with both hands as she hit him again. He tumbled to the

sand. She scrambled across him, striking him repeatedly until he was dead. Then she threw herself on the body of the first woman and wept.

Several more men with the same bonework in their hair leaped from the woods below the cliff, shrieking and swinging clumsy clubs made from heavy branches. One had a crude spear, but this was the only man carrying a handmade weapon other than the one who'd killed the woman with his knife. This wasn't a hunting party, for then all would have been outfitted with spears and nets. Perhaps the women were captives of their tribe and had escaped. They might have only been separated from their people and wandered into the men's territory. It didn't matter. They saw their fallen comrade with blood running from his shattered skull. They rushed the second woman and began beating her with their clubs. The man with the spear repeatedly stuck it into her. She cried out, trying to defend herself. But there were four of them. She couldn't break through their circle.

When they were satisfied she was more than dead, lying beside her friend, they ran off down the beach whooping and singing. They didn't stop to hoist the dead man to their shoulders and carry him off. The reason was apparent when the group with Lilit heard the wings on the wind and the shrill cries of the crows. Even though the birds didn't descend to the body, the primitives didn't yet realize that the crows were no threat to the living. They were afraid.

Lilit swiftly began climbing down the cliffside.

"Mistress!" Ilargi cried, for the cliff was quite vertical.

Lilit slipped, grabbing handfuls of shrubs and small trees to steady her descent. But she had to hurry. They had already seen the man's spirit fly up from his body, confused, trying to shield its head as if the ice was still being pounded against it.

The sky grew black, the flocks of crows undulating not unlike the heavy waves thrashing atop the sea. Their screams were deafening. They caught the man's spirit and rended it. They allowed the spirit of the first woman to pass unmolested through them.

Lilit fell most of the way to the beach, rolling. She felt her gown tearing in several places but was unable to hear it over the skreeling of the crows. She smelled their carrion stink and it turned her stomach. Just being close to them made her feel unclean.

"What's she doing? They're dead. There's nothing Lilit can do for any of them now," Hyakinthos said, leaning out over the cliff.

Lilit sprinted to the second woman's body. The men had battered her until her features were indistinct. Her naked form was bruised over broken bones which protruded through purpling flesh, oozing slightly through punctures made by the spear—even though the heart had ceased beating. The ice washed up on the beach from the glacier was accompanied by an odd silver froth. This was matted into the woman's hair.

Under the tumult of the crows as they went at the dead man's soul, Lilit bent to the dead woman.

"With this blood I take, let this blood sin of hers enter me," she prayed hastily. "I take it unto myself to free her soul."

Lilit lapped from one of the ready spear wounds. She felt an immediate rush of images: cooking meat over low fires, singing with others in tones without words, strange rites of the first menses, fleeing a tiger on one day and outracing her sister during a footrace on another.

An ordinary life. A short life. And blameless.

The spirit left the woman and went up, following that of her raped and murdered sister. Lilit watched, cringing below, waiting to see if her improvised magic had worked—even if only a little. But there could be no such thing as working only a little. It must succeed the distance or the crows would tear the woman's spirit apart, devouring it as they had the man's.

The second woman's spirit passed into the sky without incident. The crows were leaving. Lilit paused, fearful they might pursue and attack her, sensing the crime she'd consumed.

But they flew off in a long hideous streak, never even seeming to see Lilit. Did she have to die before they would come for the sin?

Even now it was being absorbed, rendered to nothing.

There wouldn't be anything for the crows to come for. Lilit didn't know why; she just knew it was true.

The people she'd been with on the cliff climbed down. They gathered around her and the bodies on the beach.

"What did you do, Mistress?" Ilargi asked her teacher. "We saw the man's spirit devoured by the crows. This didn't happen to the women."

"The man committed murder. The first woman wasn't guilty of a blood sin, so the crows didn't bother her. The second woman was guilty of killing him in vengeance," Lilit replied.

"But the crows didn't attack her," Ilargi pointed out.

"They were going to. I sensed this. Before Pazu changed them, there were no crows that plagued human souls. It was a member of our race that brought this on them. Humans are simple and primitive. They can't even grow their own food. It will be our solemn duty from here on to become the protectors of human souls, even if those humans commit a blood sin. Only the gods have the right to pass judgement. Not Pazu, not creatures he's perverted."

Maju argued, "But she still took a life. Isn't it justice when murderers suffer?"

Lilit pointed to the second woman's body. "She suffered. To pay for a life lost with your own may be justice. I don't know. But the spirit must always remain inviolate. It yet has journeys to make."

CHAPTER 18

"Thou mayst behold

How cities on which Empire sleeps enthroned
Bow their towered crests to mutability."

'Hellas' —Percy Bysshe Shelley

The time of leaving was a few hours away.

Lilit drew a circle in the plaza. As she pressed the single crystal into her hand, the darkness revealed the millions of starry spectators.

"Mother," Lilit called, voice a vibration of trained emotion.

There was a soft gold essence, an undulation in the night's texture that could only be described as a tactile dawning. There was a rush of love, a sureness of having been touched through the flesh. The goddess was there with her.

"Mother, this is an axis. Show me what turns here. Mother, this is two palms facing but apart. Show me what is in the space between life lines. Mother, I am in the heart of Kur. Show me my people and their future."

Behind her eyes, Lilit saw banked brown earth, stone walls, shrines of tiered mud, temples of bricks set in bitumen, altars of volcanic glass, and citadels of terra cotta. Incomprehensible names were murmured in her ears: Tepe Yahya, Catal Huyuk, Moenjo -Daro, Jericho, Uruk. These obviously were where those leaving would scatter and build.

"But what of those who stay in Kur?"

Again that sickening feeling of a gate with nothing on the other side of it. Lilit pressed. There was no such thing as nothing.

She squeezed the crystal and felt its strange actinism penetrating. She forced herself partially through the gate, her spirit face emerging into a glow of mist identical in color to that of the crystal. Warily opening her eyes, she glimpsed spirals, whirling coils, vortices where absolutely everything spun out of control so fast that she could make out not a single thing distinctly. She knew only that it was everything because it had the special mix of all that might be thought or dreamed of in the natural realm of which Lilit was a priestess.

Not nothing.

The total, grasped without holding it until it was perceived as nothing.

Lilit pulled out of the portal, suddenly frightened by the chaos she witnessed, by the dangerous negation of concept. All? None? It was incoherent. What did it mean?

She brought her spirit back with her body in the circle. On the perimeter encircling the plaza were the cages of the zoo, animals rumbling within.

She briefly saw wisps of that confounding 'everything', moving around the edges of her circle, just on the inside of the circumference rim, dragged from

their own plain to this one. Here and there in the cloudy jumble, she could identify gaps that might be mouths, stretched as if screaming. But only silence came out.

Nothing came out.

"Why, I'm surprised to see you, Mistress," Pazu said. He admitted her into his quarters at the top of the Pyramid of Sciences. "Have you changed your mind and come to help usher in the new age?"

He carefully modulated the level of sarcasm in his voice but there was enough of it to irk Lilit. She'd come out of desperation, and he was still playing the superior role.

"I'm here to try a last time to appeal to you. End this folly, before it's too late for a city and a people we both love," she told him, not permitting herself to respond to his barbs.

"Yes, I do love Kur and our people. It's for them I do this," he replied.

Faj and Wea were supervising a number of students in the process of gathering all the doses of serum. The couple stood out as a pair of young godlings from those who hadn't received it. Which is what Pazu and the committee believed them to be: a holy vanguard. Lilit couldn't help staring at them, trying to diagnose any portion—however small—of the doom she discovered in the circle. There wasn't one speck of lurking flaw or hidden peril in them.

(Nothing?)

How could this be? She knew what she'd been shown. But she had to admit that the serum these two took appeared to be both safe and benevolent.

Yet she hadn't asked the goddess to see the present. She'd requested a vision of the future.

"I've come here from pure invocation, a link between the goddess and this," Lilit explained, taking the crystal from her robe. It sparkled unevenly between her fingers in the torchlight.

Pazu didn't dare sneer. This was the Mistress of the Arts of Balance Between Worlds. She wouldn't lie. It would be a serious—and outrageous—breach of Kura custom and law to suggest she would tell an untruth about a sacred revelation. Fallible human shamans in reindeer headresses might do such a thing—never a priestess of Kur.

Lilit continued, seeing she had the attention of every person in the room. She wished there were committee members present, but it was Pazu she must ultimately convince. Since the committee granted him a whole-hearted blessing, it couldn't be retracted. Only Pazu had the power to end this calamity before it began. She explained what she saw and felt in her circle. The crystal pulsed with eerie light, seeming to punctuate each of her prophetic words with a glacial mysticism.

Wea remembered her first impression, hanging precariously in the crevasse. 'a void where intrinsic form had never been . . . 'Her exquisite eyes

grew puzzled. She felt a curious, empty itching at her shoulder, as of a tiny astral fist. (Oh, remember me always, sister.)

Faj turned away to gaze out the window slit, at some faraway point he was certain only he could see. He recalled his own intuition. '... poised as if about to fly or launch into a dream.'

Even Pazu was uneasy. He wouldn't admit to having felt something . . . an intangibleness. Was it an involuntary premonition, as if he could take a single step and pass through a doorway? He'd mentioned it to no one, not even to Wea who'd brought him the crystals. He'd felt it at once as he rolled them in his hands. But admit to it? Now? Or ever? Not to any of these people. Especially not to Lilit.

The other students were quiet, stopping in their work to exchange expressions of apprehension.

"You've sensed it, too!" Lilit exclaimed, surprised that it was so clear on the other teacher's face.

"Of course there's a gate we must pass through to enter a new state of being," Pazu replied, his expression gone impassive. He would betray no more emotion to Lilit. "And there's fear. It's a natural fear, as impulsive as the humans who bow down in childish awe before lords they revere in terror because they cannot comprehend them. It is a recognition of the unknown, untempered by enlightenment. We may quake at the entrance but, once we've passed through it, we'll absorb the profound."

Faj had already stepped through this gate, as had Wea. This was true, wasn't it? So there was nothing to be cautious about. Faj and WŠa turned to one another to share a confident kiss. There was a static spark, the color of the crystal. It didn't hiss but sang as one high note from a brown wood thrush. Everyone in the room but Lilit smiled and cheered.

Pazu raised his arms and said expansively, "Join us, Mistress. The future holds no terror for those with the courage to stride to their consummate evolution."

Lilit didn't appreciate his round-about way of calling her a coward in front of the students. She countered with, "Careful you don't overstride until you have no place left to put down your feet."

Pazu chuckled. "Better to step out and be blanketed in the thin blue sky than to cower on the ground, landlocked and footsore, until dust is your only inheritance."

Wea laughed with delight and spun, clapping her hands. She bumped into a table and knocked over a clay bottle there. Not quite as graceful as she appeared to be, Lilit thought ruefully. Godhood apparently had limitations.

The bottle tumbled to the floor and cracked open. The torchlight caused the crystals within to shimmer. Pazu's condescending smile disappeared, caught in a falsehood.

"You said you used them all." Lilit was also not smiling.

He'd lied. One Kura priest of an entire order had lied to another. She should have been appalled. She ought to have been thunderstruck at the

enormity of this transgression. Instead, it surprised her to find she was merely disgusted by it.

Pazu sighed, a dismissive note in his exhale, as if he really wasn't concerned by his deceit. What he tried to accomplish justified any pretense. "Half remain as you can see. Why? Do you still desire to study them? Won't that be awkward on board an overcrowded ship bound for a wilderness? No. They belong to Kur and to those who aren't weak and craven."

He said this with utter contempt.

"Allow me to demonstrate the nature of weak and craven." Lilit's eyes flashed as she stepped forward and brought her fist squarely against his nose, knocking the scientist to the floor. She'd also just committed an unforgiveable act for their society but she figured it was a night for it. "There. Perhaps this wrong I've done balances out yours."

She squinted and considered it. "No, I don't think it does. But I feel better for it."

The students gasped, a few crying out in shock. Faj grabbed the Mistress's hand, reading from her mind that she was thinking of striking a second blow.

Lilit felt the supreme strength in her former student. She turned her eyes to meet his, letting her own abundant energy surge into him. Despite his newfound vigor, the jolt unsettled him. Shame-faced, he released her.

Lilit said to Faj, "Welcome, boy, to the corruption of power."

I have stooped, she thought as she stormed from the room. I actually let Pazu get to me, and now the guilt is doubled.

Lilit returned to the plaza, to the zoo where the lions were yawning up toward a nearly-full moon. She took her favorites out, Bel and Pihatu, and began her walk to the beach where the ships waited. People joined from the many intersecting streets, following the priestess and her golden lions.

Out on the water the beautiful ships bore multi-colored sails. It was a sheer material of plaited thistle down and folded magma, chanted over by the order of weavers until their magic made it strong but gossamer as dragonfly wings. The vessels themselves were shaped like swans, prows singing as they rose and fell through the waves.

Lilit stood on the yellow deck with Bel at her right hand and Pihatu at her left. She regretted leaving the Pyramid in anger, of violence having been the last thing Faj and the other youths saw of her. She whispered a blessing to them, grief-stricken because she knew it wouldn't be enough. Perhaps Pazu was right and this was cowardice.

Not because they were afraid of the effects of the serum, but because they didn't remain to do what they could to help the others when that great purple darkness appeared to engulf them.

True, there were guards—armed ones and that was unsettling—who were assigned to every entrance of the city to keep those who left Kur from reentering. They stood with bows in hands and arrows strung, prepared to ruthlessly meet any interference with their destiny. Lilit knew no one would

have the chance to stay behind to help. Pazu had convinced everyone that rescue would be unnecessary because failure was unthinkable.

Lilit heard a softness in the wind, understanding that the other Kura on board were also sending out blessings to those left behind in the city.

Out to sea. Sails. Faj tried not to look in that direction. There were friends on those ships, cousins. Loved and honored ones.

Would they ever be seen again?

He was going to live forever. This longevity surely increased the chances he'd see them again.

They wouldn't live forever. They stubbornly declined the same destiny. This, therefore, decreased the chances.

In the plaza, Pazu introduced Faj and Wea to the multitude. These were the evidence of shining perfection. These were robustness taken to paragon limits. Here was beauty without corruptibility.

The pair went to a cage, the one nearest the plaza apex where Pazu's altar was set up with measured doses of the serum. In this enclosure were the deer. Faj and Wea reached out to pet a buck and doe. Kura flesh became elastic, shining wetly in the dawn's light. Wea's eyes grew round, circled with a deepening chestnut. Creamy fur sprouted to rustle along her breast and belly as she slipped to all fours. Her legs became impossibly slim. Faj's skull erupted in a magnificent rack of antlers as his head jutted forward and muscles rippled back into a horizontal hide. They brushed muzzles affectionately before she presented high flanks and a quivering upright leaf of white tail.

The crowd watched in rapt delight as this god-stag mounted his mate. They sighed as she arched her long neck and as he shook his horns toward the sky.

They finished, becoming god and goddess in Kura form. They stood and turned to the assembled city and cried, "Join us! What you want, you will be! What you would be, you have only to think of!"

People pressed forward, shouting, laughing, grasping the cups of serum to swallow. They drank and danced, touching their own loins and breasts, impatient for miracles. Then they touched those of their neighbors, plying the novel malleable flesh. Faj was so swept into the excitement that he grabbed a dose from the altar and downed it before Pazu could say, "You don't need that, boy. You've already crossed over."

Wea followed her lover's suit.

Pazu only watched, thrilled to witness this spectacle of his success. He saw everyone's skin turning very supple, soft as wet clay. It stretched and tightened until it seemed to inch across their skeletons. It flapped in banners in the sea breezes. It reflected the radiance of the sunrise as fingertips opened in blossoms of petals.

Faj thought of Lilit. He'd slipped away to watch her as she took her pets from the zoo. He heard her weeping over the others she couldn't take with her. "Only so much room on the ships, my darlings."

The lions left behind roared after them.

She looked across her shoulder at the shadows, as if knowing he was there. Briefly her eyes became golden in the moon's light, same color as the lions' manes.

Now he could see the sails were on the horizon. Pazu's voice boomed above the ecstatic crowd. "To be willing to accept the responsibilities immortality brings is to be heroic. To challenge the rules of nature isn't wrong if we make better rules. All which has gone before this moment belongs to the past and to barbarism. This, then, to the new nature!"

The animals in the zoo paced. They watched, sniffed the air, and slowly went wild. The lions screamed. The monkeys shrieked as they bared thorn-sized fangs. The elephants stampeded against the bars. The phoenix lit its nest of spices to be immolated.

The eruption was like fire.

The Kura must have fainted and not fed them. They must have lost consciousness on the smooth, black streets of the city to be there for days. Their hearts must have nearly stopped, their brains shifting from crease to crease as alchemy was wrought in the smallest part of each. The multitude had swooned and the zoo was left to go hungry.

If Lilit's healing faith was earth and water, Pazu's science was fire and air. Unstable, it whipped itself stronger. It created and uncreated down to subtle ashes. It remolded as it tested for every strength and weakness. Nothing old or useless remained. Something new always emerged from wind-fed flames. Even the universe was suspected of having been born in fire.

The animals began to howl.

Faj heard them as he thought to himself (this isn't what happened the first time I took the serum).

He heard them from the far edge of a dream, as he was lifted by their noise and carried through the forest.

(Wea, where are you?)

How the animals escaped their cages was a mystery. (Lilit's followers must have unlocked the cage doors!)

However it happened, they were free to flee the city. The animals ran down the beach in a mad panic. They splashed in the sea waves to catch fish in their paws. They ran riot through the woods to devour every deer, rabbit, and squirrel they could find, traveling in packs to attack tribes of humans and kill to the last member. They were starved from the Kura neglect until they ripped their prey to shreds, desperate for hot blood.

How long had Faj and the rest of the Kura been unconscious in the plaza? Long enough for the zoo creatures to go crazy with hunger.

(Why didn't they attack us, for we were here and helpless? Did they believe we were dead? With Pazu's serum in us, did we stink of poison?)

When Faj woke at last, the animals were everywhere. They growled at each other and were covered in blood, attacking and retreating into the trees.

The zoo cages were strewn with rotting flesh. Flies buzzed in bear entrails. Maggots squirmed through the openings in leopard's heads. Clotty jackal spines were greening. Wolf pelts steamed.

Faj couldn't even find the strength to wonder how all the animals were there, evidenced by their butchered carcasses. The Kura had heard them as something went terribly wrong with the serum. Twitching in comas on the basalt stones, they felt the dark moods of starving animals.

Now there were animals all over the place.

When a full moon rose, it was delicious and painful. It beckoned in silver, driving Faj insane enough to spread crimson triangle wings and attempt to fly up to its face.

But no matter how high Faj flew, the cool moon couldn't put the fire out.

Emana pulled away from Alali's psyche.

The Kura harlot was spinning in a terrifying array of the beasts of the world. It was so fast and nauseating a whirl that Emana had to steal a solid glimpse in the bronze mirror to see she was whole.

She almost didn't recognize herself. Her eyes were bulging with confusion. Her breath was so heavy it came from her lips like the cry of a wounded dove. She was still firmly enmeshed in Al...l;'s memories. She felt a stab of guilt, as if she'd personally taken the serum. (Emana had tasted it, through Alali.)

Had the Kura received what they earned? Perhaps only the hollowhearted followed a deceitful charlatan like Pazu. Godhood wasn't attainable but synthetic. The only thing not a hoax was the exhaustive flow of centuries.

Had Lilit, Wea, and the others sensed the abyss? Or was it only a cross-over point where an emptiness waited? Well, that was surely what the Kura inherited from Pazu's serum once it was mixed with the crystals. For when one lost their identity, what else was left?

If Emana was able to access Alali's hidden memory, then Al...l; also recalled much. Maybe not all of it but enough to overwhelm her. A wail of animal sorrow came out of the Kura and rang in Emana's heart.

The Ishantu bent and put both hands onto the twisting gyroscope of shapes. She wasn't sure what she'd be grabbing hold of but she had to help.

"Be still. Quiet now." Channels of energy flowed evenly from her fingers. The race of images began slowing. Emana wondered what person from the history she'd entered and then left would be the result.

No personality from nine millennia hence appeared.

The creature on the floor was long-legged and slim, with the finely striped ears of a tiger and the vertical pupils of a meadow goat, webbed feet, and hands of pink sea shells. One wing emerged from the middle of the back like a dorsal fin—but feathered, impossible to fly away with.

This puzzled Emana. There had been thoughts from several people in the memory. If she'd seen the past through Alali, then why didn't she see it from Alali?

She'd accessed more than the Kura's memory. She accessed time.

"I can heal you but it will take a little longer," Emana said. A wave of weariness told her how much power she'd spent. She caressed the Kura's unusual cheek. "I'm going now but I'll return tomorrow night."

As Emana left the room and went down the stairs, she realized she was different from when she went in. She might have to come back before she could heal the Kura but Emana was already cured.

Shlomo, the man from Jerusalem, reclined on cushions, drinking a local peach wine—not the bitter drink invented by Noah. He watched the Kura become many women as she danced. She was the woman from the valley of Sorek, Delilah, who cut off Samson's hair and made him weak. She was an Egyptian princess in sheer, pleated linen. Her eyes were lengthened with kohl until she resembled the cat goddess Bast. She was sleek as Saba and showered in Opher's gold. She was Moabite with scented sand between her thighs. She was a sly priestess of Ashtoreth, drenched in Sidonian musks. She was Ammonite and Hittite and every woman upon the earth. Her hair rippled black, henna red, diamond blonde, dark topaz. Her skin flashed from pearls to obsidian and every gemstone in-between.

He whispered a passage from the Canticles, "Who is she who looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"

He closed his eyes and touched her, felt her skin become cold as the idol's.

CHAPTER 19

"Dead folk, why do you appear to me . . . ? — Mesopotamian

Solon grinned as Emana left the brothel.

"I told you she was the best," he said, clearly misinterpreting the Ishantu's new well-being.

She didn't go into detail; she only nodded. He was close enough.

"Shall I escort you back to the inn?" the dwarf asked, this time accurately judging her feelings.

This wasn't someone who would wish to tour any more of Kur's night life, despicable as it was.

"Yes," she replied. "Will you return tomorrow evening? I want to come back here."

"Certainly."

She'd come to see Rasal and had indeed seen him. The rest was unexpected. On the way to the Lazuli, they passed a house with balconies arranged on its upper story. A man stood on one of these, his face upturned to the night sky. He looked troubled and his eyes searched the stars, as if hoping for a sign from them. It was the older of the Israelites. From the room came the music of bells and harps. The shape of a pythoness—not a snake charmer but literally a being half-woman/half-serpent—undulated behind him. The shadow looped across the man until it seemed to coil around him. He shivered, sensing it overtaking him. He closed his eyes in a mixture of fear and ecstasy.

Emana and Solon discreetly went past. If the Jew saw her, would he have noticed she was no longer a madwoman?

(Yes, even at a distance he would've seen this. He was a man who noticed a great deal.)

"Have you ever been to the old city?" Emana asked her guide.

"No, Lady. That place is haunted by a demon. People have disappeared and died," he said. "I go down to the beach sometimes. It reminds me of my boyhood in the Aegean. But other than that I rarely leave the city. With every respect, Lady, you shouldn't either. Not without an escort."

She smiled. He was being considerate, not merely attempting to make himself seem indispensable. She'd seen enough of Kur's streets to understand that any human woman was better off escorted. But she wasn't human.

Solon brought her to the inn and bowed.

"Goodnight, Lady. I'll be back tomorrow evening."

"Goodnight, Solon," Emana replied, giving him gold from her sash.

She was surprised to see someone she recognized, sitting in the courtyard.

"Eno Hila!" she exclaimed softly. "I didn't know you were in Kur."

He was equally surprised to find her there.

He said, "Nor I you. What brings an Ishantu to this city of excesses?" She smiled sadly. "I came to be healed of my grief."

"And have you been?"

"Yes, this very night. And, in doing so, I've been reminded that I'm also a healer."

She explained to him what she saw in Alali's psychic country. He listened intently, growing more fascinated with each detail.

"We know many of these city names. Could the Kura who followed Lilit into exile really have been responsible for fostering the walls of these places? The name Kur is what the people of Sumer call their underworld, it being their word for 'enemy territory'. And her name, Lilit—is this the lady whom some now call goddess?" Eno wondered aloud.

"I think many gods were once extraordinary people. Their names become spoken and thought of with so much reverence after their deaths, that a power is generated in the worlds to which their spirits depart. It exalts them beyond the limits of the dead," Emana suggested.

Could this be true or had Lilit merely become confused with the goddess she served until, millennia hence, the goddess had come to be called by her priestess's name?

"Imagine if Pazu's serum had been successful?" Eno mused.

"But why are you here, Eno? Did you come to find Ghia Anut's semblance, as I came for Rasal's?" Emana put her hand on his bare arm with sympathy. She remembered the image of a burning woman that haunted him.

"I didn't come seeking Ghia's vision," he replied. "I admit it's because of her I'm here. Let's go inside and drink. I'll tell you about it."

They took a table in the inn's quiet feasting area. Emana was given blood and kid's milk. Eno had palm wine.

He told his story. He saw the round piece of his brother's skull as the executioner at the law altar tossed it out of the amphitheater. He sent word through Vira's streets that he would pay well for it, giving a better price than a vendor could sell it in the market for. He was still recuperating from the injuries he received defending Emana from Cien Anut's attack, following Lar's execution. A scrawny rat of a man who smelled of boiled cheese greedily brought it to the side of Eno's couch. The skull piece had been painted with Tash Hila's name in gold, but hadn't yet been drilled to make jewelry from. At this time Eno was still benefiting from the aid Emana gave him directly following the sword fight. The damages to his thigh and shoulder might well have been fatal otherwise, being near major blood vessels.

Lady Hila saw him examining the piece of bone and asked, "What do you want with that accursed thing?"

"I'm not sure yet," he replied, turning it over in his palm.

"I wish you'd get rid of it," said his mother.

She never uttered a word about removing every other trace of Tash from the household. Yet, silently, everything of his brother's was taken away.

"I'll dispose of it when I'm finished. I promise," he told her. "It's better I have it than some gossip monger."

He clutched it, searching for some unusual property of either heat or cold but finding none. He was weak again as he often was, in nauseating bouts since his injuries. He set it next to the couch and fell into a swoon.

The piece gave him nightmares.

In some dreams he saw his brother, kneeling between the thighs of Indian women, fantastic growths like coarse mushrooms on their skins. Their genocide eyes peered through ropes of spider hair. Behind them, the skies lit up from weapons of war that set the very clouds on fire.

Tash danced through a charcoal field, a necklace of infant bones around his neck. The tiny, warped skulls clacked against each other and shrieked in childish terror. Tash glared at him, grinning through a hail of burning arrows. He whispered in a voice that swelled apart from the surroundings like a cobra's goiter, "The dark . . . the dark . . . burns in incense."

Eno smelled this incense. It stung of gall and sulphur, of dung beetles and hair.

When he woke he smelled his wounds. They had started to fester. Why hadn't his mother permitted Emana to treat him? The human healer employed by the household wasn't as adept as she. Eno found himself calling her name aloud as he tossed in delirium. He would then see the sulking face of the Hilan personal physician bending over him. He'd sink back to the sweat soaked couch, despondent.

(The physician was already mumbling against Ishantu, seeing an advantage to be had. Human doctors would eventually make the most of it, wouldn't they? Seeing a way to eliminate their strongest competition.)

In other dreams Tash led an army of jackals through the Egyptian delta. All along the Nile, dead men clawed their way out of the ground. Their movements were loose, jangling, as if they had been cut to pieces and then haphazardly reconnected—save for their genitals which were missing. These corpses dropped to all fours and became jackals, following Tash as he danced them toward the moon-colored desert. In Egypt, the desert was known as the home of the dead.

Tash chanted, "The dark . . . glorious . . . comforting . . . bathes in oil." This oil was sticky as pitch, lumpy and yellow as bile.

When he woke, Eno discovered he'd vomited on himself. He couldn't rise even an inch from the couch. The poison in his wounds had sickened his entire body.

A maid was there, wiping the mess from his face with a cool cloth. His mother stood nearby, worry making her look much older. She was dressed in mourning. For Tash? Or had the clan war started? Would she be in grieving clothes for a long time to come?

Would she soon need to wear them for him?

"Take away that piece of bone," she directed the maid.

Eno jittered on his bed, shouting, "No! Leave it!"

Lady Hila was startled. The maid uttered a small cry. He seemed ferocious, hands out like claws—even as weak as he was.

"All right. All right, son," his mother said.

In still other dreams, Tash was creating a sour red sky out of a woman's flayed body. He jerked her legs so far apart that her pelvis cracked like the juncture on a shellfish. With her raw, exposed vulva he made an outraged horizon at sundown. A tiny mutilated jewel of embryo squeezed out that was the evening star. Tash buried his face into this perverse sunset until he was smeared with bloody miscarriage. Then he stretched his jaws wide so the crimson drool glittered.

"The dark ... glorious ... comforting ... commanding ... and grateful. The dark is its own reason. Everything is sacred because nothing is sacred."

When Eno woke he saw Ghia's spirit, wrapped in veils and skirts of flame. The edges and tips of these licked toward him as she bent down. The heat was excruciating as she cauterized his wounds.

The last dreams were of Tash's murder of her. Of Eno knocked helpless against the stack of bricks as Ghia screamed in her delicate inferno. Of never being able to save her. And of how very much he hated Tash for this.

It took months to recover enough from his wounds to make the long journey to Kur. There had been clan war but Eno wasn't able to fight. That war was over. There was a tentative treaty but no clear resolution. Lord Hila had perished, as had many Anuts. Eno was the inheritor and could easily afford to travel where he pleased.

He finally came to Kur, went to one of the brothels, paid, and was admitted to a room. The harlot beast shifted into curious wax effigies: ever-melting as Ghia, partially whole as she'd been, the appearances of Eno's father and cousins slain in the war, the Ishantu Rasal Hathor, his lovely widow, Eno's stern -faced mother, the skinless condemned upon the law altar. The Kura was puzzled, trying to latch onto this master's dark mood to please him.

But Eno didn't want his own dark mood to be replicated in flesh. Having Tash come from his own memory wasn't good enough. He wanted Tash himself.

Eno set down the box he'd carried from Vira and reached into the folds of his robe. He handed the Kura the skull piece.

"Draw from this if you can."

If they could read from the mind, why not from an object? Even Eno was able to get Tash from it. Perhaps not consciously, but certainly in his dreams. He'd learned much more about his wicked brother than he'd ever wanted to know.

The Kura immediately understood and slipped the bone disk under its tongue.

The candles in the room flickered and almost went out, the wicks hissing. Something flapped at the window. Eno jumped, whirling, expecting to see—what?—a soul crow?

There was merely a soft silver moth. It brushed the curtain to blend its wings with the sensual fabric. Then it moved away. How could something so small make so much noise?

When he turned back Tash was there. He didn't appear as Eno last saw him—tortured on the altar, with raw tendons open to the air. He was the way he'd been at his strongest, a foot taller even than Eno and broad shouldered as an ox. His black hair hung in greased ringlets down his back until it resembled knots of slave chains. The only mark on him that bespoke his death was a hole in his forehead where the skull had been trephined.

"Brother!" Tash exclaimed, pretending filial affection that had never at any moment existed between the two men. "You've missed me so much to see me beckoned here. I'm touched!"

He strode forward, smiling, his arms wide. Eno stepped back, knowing how easily Tash could crush him in a fatal embrace. A wall of stench flowed from the image. It was the smell of rotting corpses.

Tash assumed a mask of hurt pride. "No hug for me, Brother?"

He grinned, each tooth gleaming as if he'd just polished them with mint leaves. "No matter. Where I've been, I'm served to my heart's content."

"Where's that?" Eno asked, not accepting that this vile killer could have entered a hero's heaven. Yet it seemed unlikely that he would have been in the land of no return, where all the common dead were of the same dust. The crows hadn't taken him, so he was in no realm of punishment.

Was there another place?

"The dark is grateful," Tash told him. "I'm a prince where no lamps shine, in a palace of bones that seem black, for no white may glitter there."

"But if it be so gloomy, then you may not even see blood there," Eno countered. "What a thing for you to be deprived of, I would guess."

His brother chuckled, eyes narrowing to slits.

"Blood is always visible, no matter how intense the shadow," Tash corrected him. "Where the night is dull, blood provides luster. So don't worry about my happiness where this is concerned."

"I won't," Eno assured him, trying to breathe through his mouth because he couldn't stand the reek coming up his nostrils.

"Even fire doesn't illuminate my castle. And there is a fire present, my brother. Fire, and musical shrieks to attend me. For pretty Ghia is there, as radiant as I remade her. And all of the others who screamed their fealty oaths in their final moments are there to serve me." Tash stepped forward again, the cruelty in his eyes making them as inhuman as those of the jackals Eno had seen in fever dreams.

"I don't believe you," Eno said, stepping back and placing a hand behind him on the box he'd brought.

"Then I'll prove it to you." Tash leaned toward him. "Look into my head, Brother."

Eno couldn't help but look into the hole, the edges of skin and bone still ragged with the marks of the executioner's tool. At first all he saw was a

round dark spot, so red it was black. Tash came closer, putting Eno's face mere inches from it.

It seemed as if he was being pressed to another world, which fell out of all proportion with the small space of a man's brain.

He heard their cries, desolate and tortured. Mutilated women, bending toward cruel mirrors. Dismembered men flopping like so many captured eels. Children born in caves to be slaughtered in caves.

Ghia danced in a writhing column of flame. Her skirts were gauzes of fire. Her face was twisting, melting, stretching into a wail that couldn't manifest because the inferno had snatched all the air from her blackened throat. There was only the roar of her cremation. The crackle of her fine, shining hair.

"She's my burning, virgin bride," Tash murmured. "From time to time I put just my finger into her vulva, to remember the texture of roasted goat."

Eno sneaked the lid of the box open, snatched at the item within, and brought it around from behind him. Tash's gloating paused in brief confusion to see what it was Eno held. He realized too late to pull away before Eno could put the necklace on him. From the very box their mother had discovered after the execution and asked Eno to get rid of.

"These are the bones of your children," Eno said, "strung on a length of gut and full of the power of India's ancient weapons. There is no greater weapon than vengeance."

Tash snarled and tried to jerk out from under it. But Eno used both hands to tighten it around his brother's throat.

"They were infants, and even then they were more helpless than most. But the dead are always stronger, aren't they, Tash? And why? Because the dark is grateful."

Eno used his entire strength, doubled by righteousness. Tash's flesh shimmered, losing its mirage of robustness, vanishing where the executioner had stripped it off that day in Vira. It split where only fat and muscle remained, leaking a horrible greasy paste. Tash's face turned red as blood, then the purple of a twilight backlit by a forest fire. Finally it turned black, and his protruding tongue became the color of the blind fish that stay at the bottom of the ocean. The hole in his forehead no longer showed the entrance to Tash's palace, but squeezed out a curdled fistful of cinder gray brains.

Tash had gone down on his knees and now slumped backward, until it was difficult for Eno to bear his weight through the slender necklace cord. Eno released the body.

An ephemeral voice spoke between chimes, "Thank you, beloved."

Ghia touched his shoulder. She was no longer on fire. She was whole and beautiful. She moved away from him through the wall. The shades of countless others that overlapped—uninjured, surrounding her—were also leaving. She smiled and whispered, "Goodbye."

Tears filled his eyes, stinging as he stared without blinking. He hoped to see her for every moment until she disappeared.

The Kura harlot convulsed on the floor. Eno quickly unwound the gut and bones that were strangling it. The beast spat. Where the skull piece had been under its tongue was now just a wad of slime.

Eno was ashamed to have caused any injury to this innocent creature. It had done him no harm. He found it odd that the beast hadn't attempted to defend itself when he throttled the Tash image. He'd heard that even the Kura found their survival instincts when the threat was intense enough. Perhaps it was because it had the piece of skull in its mouth and this made the connection much stronger. Maybe it was because Tash had such a strong personality, making it impossible for the Kura to shift away from the mood.

Eno sat on the floor and held its paw as it shivered, losing the remnants of Tash's hated form. He wondered if it feared him. How could it? It understood his thoughts and knew he intended no danger. He'd never meant to hurt the Kura, only Tash.

It assumed several forms. One was a copper dove-cat, another a jade butterfly-lizard, then a chimera with sapphires for teeth. Finally it became a star-eared dog that licked Eno's hand.

CHAPTER 20

"The dust is rising, spreading out like a great wing of smoke..." "The Trojan Women'—Euripides

"You know, the guards won't do much around here for most infractions. But this is one activity where they'll arrest everyone on the premises. It doesn't get any more illegal than this in Kur, my friend," Gutu-abbann, the owner of the amphitheater, told Busparta.

"Why is that?" asked the hero.

"Well, this is a fight that can be to the death. There are only about five hundred or so of these Kura left. They don't reproduce and the Am...k; are pretty stingy with them."

Busparta was surprised. "I didn't know they could die. I thought they were supposed to be immortal."

He recalled the harlot he'd visited, burned black, features collapsing on themselves. And yet . . . afterward she was all right.

"A common misconception. They don't get sick and they can heal over wounds with a shift of their shapes. It's rare but during a bout like this one, it's possible for one to dramatically best the other—if they can totally tear them apart. They're beasts and they have beastly instincts."

"Have you ever seen one die?" Busparta pressed, suspicious. "Are you sure it didn't just change into something you didn't recognize?"

"The soul crows came for it. These Kura used to kill to exist, driving off the people who used to live here, oh, a long time ago. Before the Amaki came and figured out how to restrain them. I saw one that became a gorgon to worry the devil out of another that became a tiger. Then the tiger became a dragon and toasted it with a gust of breath that might have burned the place down, if we didn't have slaves standing around with tubs of water. The crows came for its soul. Doesn't get much deader than that."

The harlot was burned. No, that had been his illusion. Was this, then, the difference? Dark moods couldn't kill. They simulated. They were the lies of life and death.

Busparta studied the amphitheater's decorations as the owner proudly led the famous warrior to a central seat where he could watch the coming fight.

"This is Busparta," Gutu-abbann told everyone who was sitting in the audience or milling about. "He's the hero of Mysia. In my theater!"

People gawked at the scarred veteran.

Busparta ignored them, gazing at the masks and ritual disguises hung on the walls. The walls were sturdy and whitewashed, rising up to a circular roof at least one hundred cubits above the ground. Solemn and grotesque paradies were done here daily for the tourists. He'd earlier seen skin-and-feather -clad dancers doing barbaric mysteries, accompanied by musicians who were so bad the spectators threw garbage at them. Mostly, people gathered to see dramatic performances of the various creation myths. These were pantomimic depictions of heroic legends, including one about Busparta himself and the fire demon. It was popular right now, since it was current and the hero was in town. The more traditional theatricals were in the styles which had become popular in Babylon, with songs and poetry on the cycle of Inanna and Gilgamesh, and those performed in Egypt with priests and the Abydos Passion Play, concerning the death and reassembling of Osiris by Isis and Horus. Miracle stuff. Fun for the whole family.

Busparta frowned, seeing a garden of sorts growing on the amphitheater's arena floor. There were trees and grass, reeds and bushes. A stream of water burbled from a source unseen off-stage.

"Why do you have this? Why isn't it clean and bare? Doesn't it make it hard to see what's going on?"

Gutu-abbann nudged him with an elbow and winked. "Oh, but it makes it more interesting. You'll see."

Busparta hadn't wanted to go back to one of the brothels. He was afraid there would be another fire. He was afraid he'd have to believe he might've started it. But how? He'd beaten the fire demon.

There were people who believed that a warrior took on the best essence of who and what he defeated. Had Busparta taken a part of this demon into himself? He didn't think so. He thought it more likely it had cursed him with the memories of his incinerated friends, tormenting him until he smouldered with the recollections he could scarcely bear.

"Look, Mysian hero! The Kura are being brought out," the owner said into his burned ear.

Two burly men tugged a pair of reluctant Kura out on leashes and made them sit—whirling in and out of forms in terror—in the center of the arena. One of them pressed his face near a Kura to drill a mood into it. It resisted, confused by the cruel taunts of the crowd and, for once, actually pining for the safety of its brothel prison from which it had been stolen. It shivered, tiny dormouse hands reaching up to shield the features of an ordinary alley cat.

The other man was more successful with the second Kura. This one became a lion, rippling with feral muscles, twitching its tail as it stared hungrily at the two men. Its trainer kept his eyes focused on it, keeping it at bay until he and the other man could vacate the arena.

The lion leaped toward the still-uncertain Kura. This second beast shimmered like a dusty wind and became a porcupine. Quills the length of a human forearm rose defiantly along its crest. It rattled these in warning. Then, with an arch of its back, it detached numerous of the spines. These flew like arrows to hit the lion full in the face.

Startled and in pain, the lion retreated with a snarl of fury. It had been in mid-air when the onslought came. It back -flipped, trying to swipe at its pierced muzzle with a paw.

The porcupine scurried forward, swelling into an enormous bear, prepared to overwhelm the lion with weight and ferocity. But the lion shrank into a wee green frog and hopped onto a leaf of the same pure green, taking time to recuperate and gather its wits. The bear stopped abruptly as the other Kura seemed to vanish right before its eyes. The frog's camouflage was so perfect the bear couldn't find it at all.

"Where did it go?" someone in the audience shouted. "It isn't over already, is it? I paid good silver for this."

"Did I blink and miss it?" another cried indignantly.

"I saw it! It's there on a leaf! If I hadn't seen the lion as it turned to a frog, I'd never have guessed!" yelled a third, pointing down into the arena.

The bear roared. Then its torso sucked the four limbs and stubby tail inward. It became a sheathe with the head flattening, all narrowing as the bear became a snake. The serpent coiled, sinuously moving through the reeds and bushes. It dug into the dirt, burrowing down until only the top of its head was exposed. The frog, no longer able to see it, moved a fraction of an inch on the leaf.

"Hey, I came here for action. I want to see some fighting!" a man near Busparta crowed.

"Silence," the Mysian hero hissed at him, sounding so much like the snake below that the man blanched and sat down.

Busparta was extremely interested. He knew that brute force didn't always spell the best contender.

The snake spied the frog and launched out of the dirt to strike. It plucked the little green amphibian from the leaf and swallowed. There was a tiny bulge in its tube, moving slowly down.

Suddenly the bulge began to grow. It started to get too large for the snake. Even though the serpent's eyes were a lidless round, it nevertheless managed to look surprised just before the solid ball burst from the scaly midsection. The shattered snake flopped on the ground while the partially dissolved mound of flesh raced up a tree. There was a shaking down of leaves as it found concealment in a branch.

The snake was almost blown in half. It managed to writhe sideways to the stream and fall in, letting the cool water bathe its damage. Its tube of flesh reknitted from both ends and its scales took on gloss. Fins sprouted in slim jewels from its body as it became a silver fish.

Most of the spectators were missing this as they grumbled in the seating surrounding the arena. Busparta saw everything, studying with a rapt appreciation for pure adaptation in turmoil. What warrior wouldn't give up sacks of plunder for the ability to turn each injury around?

The leaves in the tree rustled. A heron lighted from the branch to the ground beside the stream. It stepped gracefully to the water and snatched the fish in its beak.

The fish wriggled away, splashing back into the stream. It rose back up, splashing water in six directions as it took on the form of a hawk. It knocked

the heron away with a swipe of one majestic wing and took to the air, swooping, sailing up to fly several times around the whole of the arena, over the heads of the audience. The hawk had broken one of the heron's wings with its smack. The smaller bird fumbled its way across the ground, trying to get into the air with only the other. Soon the hawk would descend to finish it off.

The heron shifted to become a red fox.

But the fox was dead.

"Well, that wasn't so smart, was it?" Busparta commented.

He watched as the hawk dropped elegantly to the ground again, holding its regal head up with disdain for the earthbound spectators.

The fox was upside-down, eyes half-closed. The tongue lolled in a slick black strip from its stiff mouth. The hawk hopped close and bent toward it, preparing to pluck a succulent eye from the corpse.

The crowd cheered for the first time, watching the fox reanimate with chilling speed and suppleness—just as the sharp beak was about to connect. The fox twisted and caught the hawk in its jaws.

"It was only playing dead," Guttu-abbann said, clapping the hero on his broad, blistered back. It was concealed by Busparta's cloak but he still winced.

The fox shook the hawk which in turn beat its wings, trying to use claws on its opponent's face to no avail. It quickly abandoned this now disadvantageous form to become a wolf, four times larger than the fox. The wolf bristled and clamped powerful fangs onto the back of the fox's neck, shaking it like a misbehaving cub. Then it pinned the smaller animal under its weight, ripping and biting into the soft belly with claws and teeth. The fox shuddered, going from playing dead to a more realized state of death. Its eyes glassed over as paws twitched in helpless fits.

Then it ballooned. The red hair slipped out of sight and a rough gray hide took its place. The wolf yelped as the rapidly expanding bulk threw it off balance. It skittered and tumbled, as if a mountain it had been sitting atop had avalanched.

The bull elephant that had been a fox rumbled, stamping the ground. It raised its trunk to trumpet in challenge. It charged the startled, growling wolf. It rose up to stomp it amd missed, the wolf rolling between its legs to snap at them. The elephant angled its massive head and wrapped the trunk around the wolf's torso, lifting it up and back over its head with a roar of triumph. Then it flung the wolf after squeezing it. The wolf howled as it came down heavily. Bones were heard snapping. The wolf lay in the grass for only a second. Broken ribs protruded from its heaving sides. It staggered to its feet, wheezing. The elephant charged again.

The crowd was on its collective feet, screaming for blood.

The ground began to shake.

Was it from the elephant's weight as it thundered across the arena?

No. The wolf's shape bulged, retracted, swam out of focus. The entire furry pelt moved like a bellows. Then it lifted from the earth in the same instant, its size detonated into a massive transformation. The wolf became a roc, wings

still growing to span the whole arena as its shadow eclipsed the mad elephant. It caught the elephant in talons each the size of a man. It continued to expand, rising up toward the amphitheater's high ceiling until it crashed through, carrying the elephant into the sky.

Debris from the ruined roof fell on the crowd below while they shrieked and ran for the exits.

The owner sighed. "We'll never hide this one, will we?"

He shrugged at Busparta, shaking his head, as if these were the fortunes of his business. The hero dodged a splintered rafter as it plunged from overhead. It landed on Gutu-abbann, crushing him beneath, along with several others who had paid to watch the Kura fight. Busparta stumbled away, looking up at the night to observe with wonder the giant bird, its great wings obliterating the sight of the stars.

People floundered. Some were trampled while others fled. Many were trapped under beams and bricks from the tops of walls which tumbled when the roof caved. They screamed or wept, with no one stopping to help.

Busparta wanted to do what he could for them. But he was there on a mission for his army. He mustn't be arrested when the guards came. He could already hear the commotion outside as the city beheld the prodigious creature taking its sizable prey across the sky. Would the roc devour the elephant on some monster cliff near the shore? Would there be one less Kura in the decreasing total of shifters?

Or would there be yet another metamorphosis which would save the elephant and doom the roc?

Busparta fought his way to get out of an exit. He gulped in fresh air. He thought to himself, Yes, there is a potential here. I must take some of these home.

CHAPTER 21

"They are what that which they regard appears, The stuff whence mutability can weave All that it hath domination o'er,—worlds, worms, Empires, and superstitions."
'Hellas'—Percy Bysshe Shelley

Emana stood near the street, waiting for Solon.

It disturbed her, reconsidering every aspect of the delving into Alali. Could there be any doubt that the ancient Kura and the race that Emana's people were descended from were the same? What a thing to have to admit, that ancestors of the selfless Ishfntu had been so greedy that they'd done this to themselves.

(Not all of them, Emana, a voice whispered in her head.)

No, not all. But most.

"We're capable of sin," she told herself out loud. "As I should well know." The dwarf hailed her and saluted.

Solon knew something marvelous had happened while this client visited Alali. She'd gone inside deeply troubled and then emerged changed, radiant. Of course, he knew that Alali was special, for this Kura had always been thus to him—even if he'd never seen her closer than through a second story window. He'd seen the Lady Hfthor come out of Dayan's brothel as if from a chrysalis. It brought tears to his eyes—of joy for her.

Now it was the seond night. She smiled at him as they prepared to leave for the brothel. He believed she'd been delivered from her sorrow, so he wasn't sure why she was returning. He only understood that the Ishantu would never venture there for base reasons.

Not that it would have been any of his business, Solon reminded himself. They turned to go in the direction that would ultimately bring them to Dayan's.

There was a whirlwind at the end of the cobbled street. It turned in plum-colored dust devils through a crowd that parted in a hurry to get out of its way. There was a smell of orchids and blood in it. Worms could be seen twisting at the edges as if trying to wriggle from the cloud's core.

People fled back, although it wasn't a large cyclone. It was no thicker and no taller than a cypress tree. They peered off anxiously toward the ocean, even if they couldn't see it for the night. There were plenty of stars in that direction. They didn't need to fear a storm blowing in, from which such an anomaly might be a precursor.

Solon studied it and sighed, murmuring, "Alali . . . ," before Emana identified it with psychic recognition.

It was indeed the Kura harlot. What was she doing on the street?

The wind spiraled up to them and stopped. The being within shifted from cowering rodent to cornered ferocity. It had been so long since the Kura had been individual, with solid forms and identities. Al...l; couldn't communicate without the force of another's mind mood to give her speech. Even then, the words weren't her own. She tried—in half-forgotten syllables, in goosey sibilance and plaintive brays—to ask for help.

"We have to get her off the street, Lady," Solon urged. "There may be people after her."

Yes, surely that dreadful man. Dayan, the conceited pimp. It didn't matter to the dwarf that Alali might have done something violent, for violence was forever present in the shifters. Only her safety mattered. A dreadful event must have occurred for her to be beyond the brothel master's grasp and far from her house of captivity. Wouldn't Dayan be coming after her any minute?

Solon was prepared to die for her.

"Let's return to my room. I'll diagnose there what's happened," Emana replied as she unclasped a lightweight cloak from her shoulders and draped it around the shivering creature.

The moment she laid her hands on the Kura, its frenetic metamorphosing slowed. There were brief glimpses of a more human form, of at least a being that walked upright on two legs. There were intimations of a woman's face with liquid green eyes.

Solon had never been this close before to his icon of mutability. He longed to reach out and touch her but he dared not. He went behind the two women (for he thought of the shifting beast as a woman) through the courtyard, turning frequently about to make sure no one followed or might even just be watching them.

The people in the street lost interest as soon as they discovered there was no danger and, therefore, no excitement. They went off to the more enticing diversions Kur offered after dark.

Emana met Eno as he came from his own quarters. He wasn't dressed for joining the demented night life. He was going to stroll along the beach, pretending it was the Caspian. Now, seeing the harlot and Emana's solicitous attentions to it, he decided he might be of more service to them—though he couldn't imagine how.

Solon looked up at the tall prince and stepped aside to let him enter ahead. Then he checked the hallway in both directions, before stepping into the Ishantu's room and closing the door.

"It's all right, Alali. You're safe with us," Emana told the Kura soothingly. "Relax and don't struggle to speak. Let me join with you as we did last evening. I'll understand what's happened."

Solon and Eno stood against an indigo curtain, watching in wonder. The Ishantu wrapped her arms around the disturbed creature. She closed her eyes as she leaned her forehead to the beast's changing face. Her own body seemed to mist slightly, even as the Kura's shape became perceptibly more solid. The healer's outline smudged as if it were nothing more than kohl traced around

a white eye. The air around the two faintly crackled, threads of subtle lightning making a corona about their heads.

Emana fell into the Kura's mind. This wasn't for something recessed far back in time. This was only for an incident fresh upon the moment. No long fall ensued. There was a soft drop, as of her feet going out from under her for a heartbeat.

She was in Dayan's brothel. She was sleeping with the others in a chamber below ground, falling in dreams as the day passed, the harmful sun easing below the horizon at the end. Then night came and there was a sense of the moon rising. Dayan came with his servant Huddissi, bringing Kura measures of blood to sate their appetites until just before dawn when the business would close its doors again.

The master noticed a difference in this one. It was calmer. There were minutes when he saw out of the corner of his eye the gleam of naked flesh, a girl with red hair and a rich bosom. He would quickly turn to observe her suspiciously, but she would melt into a sad-eyed sheep or a swan-headed hare.

She was looking at the tightly sealed room, sub-terranean and damp. She stared with pitying horror at the others, a sick heat floating from the constant altering in a motley magma. She blinked rapidly, trying to get hold of an image at the back of her head, of something . . . finer.

Terraced, turreted, sunny without danger.

Dayan came up behind her and grabbed her by a perfectly whole arm. He swung her around roughly. He glared fiercely into her eyes and shouted, "What's happened to you? Who has done this to you?"

He flung her against a moist wall. Then he quickly slammed the door to the chamber open to search the stairs outside it. He checked the entrance of the house, the corridors, each of the upstairs cubicles. He stormed about, certain someone must have crept into the building before he officially opened for the night. He checked the courtyard with his sword drawn, red cloak billowing behind him. But the gates were still barred. He went back into the house, locking the front door behind him again.

"You can't have done this to yourself!" Dayan exclaimed, his breath in her face too artifically perfumed, nauseatingly flowery. Didn't it make him vomit having such a thick bouquet sit upon his tongue all the time? "Speak! Point out the direction from whence this mood comes to you!"

Of course, she couldn't speak as he knew it. He would have been startled if she'd actually spoken. Alali could only shrug, pointing with honesty to her own chest.

"Are you mocking me?" Dayan cried, grasping both her shoulders and shaking her. He drilled his punishment mood into her.

(Tiny, boneless, folding!)

Her fingers twitched, losing their knuckles as they became crinkling tubes of mushy skin.

(Slimy, hollow, dung-burrowing!)

Her features retracted to a pucker, spine collapsing, disintegrating with each curved rib in succession.

She tried to pull away but she was shrinking.

(Nasty! Filth! Worm!)

(Worm!)

Slipping through the layers of darkness, seas of strange faces and bodies, a city beyond them of majesty and garnets of memory.

Something finer.

Alali flung off his worm command and shoved the brothel master away. The astonishment in his eyes was laughable as he tumbled to the floor. He'd been poised for her to reduce physically, into a minute wriggly being smaller than his shortest finger. Something he would pick up and take to the cell of punishment. The one on the level below even this one where the Kura were kept during the day. Where poor Alali had suffered before, had been tormented and starved.

(Crush you! Worthless! Ground beneath my heel!)

The self-loathing. Invertibrate insect. Useless to a world of towering giants. (Small.)

She wouldn't wait for him to get back up, for Dayan to get his hands on her again. Huddissi made a grab for her. She lashed out, hissing, fingers curled with sparkling claws. The servant dodged what was aimed for his face, being scraped across a shoulder instead.

"Get it, fool!" Dayan ordered him.

Huddissi reached for her. Alali snapped open sudden canaliculated jaws, two pronged fangs spitting venom, a forked tongue menacingly flicking his direction.

"I can't!" Huddissi whispered, cringing away.

Dayan commanded the other Kura with silent, severe moods they dared not ignore. The harlots leaped, stretching a hybrid of tentacles with pincers at the ends and serated jaws bobbing on ridiculously elongated necks.

The counter-command that issued from Alali wasn't bestial. It was drawn instead from some inner strength, previously forgotten in her biology. It was superior to Dayan's, transcendent of man and animal, and—for one brief second—confident of its own power. Even the Amaki's mouth opened. He beheld a glimpse of someone so luminous and perfect that he started to speak a prayer, believing a god had appeared.

The other Kura retreated back by inches as this being cautiously glided toward the door.

Then the facade fluttered. Pandemonium broke loose among the harlots. They flung themselves into a dizzying array of bellowing, puling, squealing denizens who were more insane than ever. They turned into apes, lizards, and wildebeast, then into harpies which fell on Dayan and his servant with a wheezing shrillness and eagle claws extended for their eyes. Huddissi screamed. Dayan withdrew a few steps, feeling all color drain from his face. He gathered enough wits to push an order at them, even while he felt talons

scratching his face, even as one eye was speared and raked. (Worms! Worms! Back to nothing!)

They bounced away from the two humans, landing on the floor to quiver there as white-gray grubs. It was everything Dayan could manage not to stomp them into dust.

Alali was more unsettled than before, fleeing up the stairs and through the first floor hallway. She had to crash through the locked front door, assuming the shape of a rearing stallion with hooves of blood red granite. She galloped across the courtyard, then jutted Pegasus wings from her broad shoulders to soar over the gate.

But something at the back of her head . . .

Disconcerting, a jumble of far-reaching symbols . . .

Alali's wings sifted away at the apex of her jump. The horse plummeted with a scream to strike the paved street below. She felt three of her four legs break. She lifted her head and wildly tossed her mane.

Have to get away.

She could smell the scent of the healer who'd visited the night before, in a trail that any creature of many feral animals could easily follow. Alali assumed the funnel of wind and went to find her.

Now Emana felt how afraid she was. The harbinger of the worm still had the Kura's psyche chattering in terror. For was the worm not the lowest of all the menagerie? Wasn't it the vilest and most helpless? It was the bottom rung of the ladder for one who'd once reached for godhood.

Emana concentrated, bending in the Kura's spirit land and putting her strong hands into the ground. She pulled out clods rich with black porous soil.

"The worm makes this rich," the Ishantu explained.

The red-haired girl knelt beside her, face very similar to the one the first Amaki sailor had impressed upon her. It was probably the first human form a Kura had detected in nine thousand years. It wasn't any of the personalities from Alali's dimmest memories of the city. It was as close to a 'people' reference as she might summon.

Emana put flowers on the figurative landscape. They both bent to inhale the heady aroma.

"Without the worm to make the soil ready, there could be no flowers," Emana said. "One must respect the worm and understand how necessary it is, how noble to the purpose of the world."

Alali blinked at the Ishantu in child-like awe. The two women embraced, both in spirit and in flesh.

Eno and Solon watched as the females entwined, hands searching to find curves and hollows. They could see breath pass from their lips in exhalations of coral rain. Alali was already naked. She deftly unfastened Emana's complicated gown, unwinding it from over the shoulders, unraveling it at the waist and hips. The fabric fell in coils about her feet, which Emana stepped out of as if from a collapsing basket. The pungent rose aroma of their sex filled the room while their lips and fingers explored the buds of navels at their

backs, above the round swells of buttocks. They probed the vulnerable traps of labia, thumbed blossom nipples the shade of cinnabar. Their sighs assumed matching rhythms. The only semblances of animals that stole across the harlot's form were those associated most with passion: oriental temple felines, hounds, vixens.

Eno's face was hot, spreading in a flush down his whole body. He realized with a momentary discomfiture that he was very aroused, watching this exotic mating. He wasn't sure if he should leave, quietly, to allow them a decent measure of privacy.

The dwarf next to him was evidentally wondering the same thing. A look of genuine sadness enveloped the half-scarred face as Solon beheld the object of his desire in yet another act of love.

'As close as you'll ever get, little man, little man, little man . . . 'The words carved into his features seemed to burn deeper until he felt branded to the brain.

Solon took a few silent steps toward the door.

The women parted, turning faces of breathless beauty toward the two men. Eno realized that Emana was the loveliest woman he'd ever seen, even more than his cherished Ghia. He'd noticed before, of course, but in an abstract way, not able to think of it beyond the confines of his grief for the lost Anut woman and Emana's grief for Rasal. There had been a wall there made of honor that he wouldn't cross.

But now Ghia's spirit was avenged and released—for him and for her. And Emana was walking toward him, unclothed and luminous, her black hair streaming across her breasts, the red part at the juncture of her thighs glistening. If he'd been put under enchantment, he couldn't have responded more automatically to her erotic luster.

Alali was inexorably drawn to the dwarf human. A flood of sympathy overwhelmed her, an empathy like love itself. She knew he was the one who for years stood nightly beyond the courtyard and watched her, his mood at all times pining and alone. She went to him, sitting on the floor next to him. She beckoned for him to put his head in her lap.

Was she doing this because she was responding to his mood, as she'd done with countless others in the years since the Amaki landed on their shores? Or was this another calling, a step back to her origins? Long ago—beyond even the hope of a concise and conscious memory—had her people been healers?

Here was someone in need of healing. She sensed deeply and became a sleek gazelle recumbant on the room's cushions, long legs drawn under her. All but her fingers which were hummingbirds, brushing the dwarf's cheek until the scars seemed to disappear with the whisper of the wings.

CHAPTER 22

... (The worm said:) "What is the ripe fig to me? Let me drink among the teeth, and set me on the gums, that I may consume the blood of the teeth and destroy the marrow of the gums."

from text on treatment for toothache —Mesopotamian

She made a light, white as cuttlebone, which pressed against the backs of his eyelids. It was a strange sort of gift for a creature who couldn't tolerate the dawn to give. Solon bristled with savage tears, feeling all the rage in him come out to melt. Al...l; was the epitome of all exiled things in the world. She was, as such, the only one who could grant him refuge.

He didn't want to relive his life, punctuated with a sterile vengeance he could never have. He had no fractious erotic fantasies where he satisfied all the lost queens of Crete and Troy. He sought no illusions of power. He merely lay in her embrace and let her changing flesh fold over him, making him beautiful because he was in her shadow. Creatures swept away by the flood either perished or were made stronger and cleaner. Those who passed the night of an eclipse came to see light with fresher appreciation. Men who have fallen through fire and survived may see flesh more profoundly.

This was the effect being with Alali had on the dwarf.

They kept her hidden in Emana's curtained chamber the next day, allowing no light to come in. Solon spent the daylight hours guarding her, watching the Kura harlot during the novel half-sleep she had, regarding her with more awe than ever. The Lady Hfthor stayed with Eno Hila.

Solon left just before sunset. He made his way to Dayan's brothel. He found its gates locked. He wondered if the Amaki had alerted authorities to Alali's escape. Surely he must have. A Kura was an investment, worth a great deal of coin. Had he even opened for business last night?

No, he'd been injured by the harpies. The house was in an uproar.

Being small had advantages. Solon went to the back, where a low hole went through the bottom of a wall into the courtyard. Through this a trough ran sewage out of the house and into the street. It was a snug fit and a messy one, but he managed to wiggle through. Now, on the grounds of Dayan's brothel, he went around to the front of the house. He could see where the horse had smashed open the door. He was surprised that nothing was put over the doorway but a carpet, fastened to the crosspiece. Unbelievable that Dayan let this go. He might at least have ordered his servant to summon a carpenter.

Solon parted the rug-as-a-curtain and stuck his head inside. He saw no one, heard nothing. They were supposed to be open for business in minutes. Yet the entranceway was littered with broken wood. The flowers from the night

before drooped, wilted in their vases. No fresh ones were set out for the evening.

Solon cautiously stepped in. It was as far into the brothel as he'd ever been before. He felt like an intruder, a thief. He imagined this was how tomb robbers must feel in the presence of noble dead—interlopers into sacred space.

He felt like a slave.

Solon tiptoed to the stairs and crept up them, waiting for the moment when Dayan or his servant or both would pounce on him and shake him like a dog. But no outraged purveyors showed. And he still heard no noise. It was far too quiet.

He checked each room upstairs, walking into them, coming within inches of the pallets, smelling the odors of frankincense and spikenard. He saw balls of myrrh set beside basins of water, where clients could wash after liasons with the harlots. He held his breath when he went into the room he knew was Alali's. He put his forehead to her bed, saying a prayer to Aphrodite. He stood at her window to reverently touch the glass he'd watched her shifting in so many times, wondering if she'd ever seen him in the courtyard below, in the street beyond. If she'd ever read in his mood of his love.

He went down to the first floor again. Solon checked the rooms there. The kitchen. Dayan's own chamber with an absurdly sumptuous bed of fine silks and golden leopard skins, tassles from braid woven in the farthest eastern empires. It was the couch of a human courtesan, one who painted her eyes in black kohl circles and spread her legs for pearl necklaces and for trays of candied nightingale tongues.

Yet there was no smell of sex in this bed. The conceited brothel master entertained no lovers here. Did he always sleep alone, never even caressing himself? Dayan's appetite was purely business.

"I guess you can't fuck gold," Solon whispered, shrugging.

In another room the dwarf found the servant, Huddissi, lying on his own sparse pallet of straw. He was bandaged about his upper body, long winding strips of cloths wrapped around his head, chest, and arms. He'd inhaled the smoke of hemp so he could sleep with the pain. Solon heard him breathing deeply and closed the door.

He went down to the room below the house where the Kura were kept from the day's light. This is where he found the brothel master. Dayan stood on a floor where a thatch of worms writhed. He wore a patch over one eye, the rest of his once pretty face badly scratched. Flesh was laid open to the bone in places along the cheeks and jaws, stitched up with clotted linen thread. He was rigid, spine stiff, hands clenched into fists. The one eye bulged and rolled about in its socket to glare at the worms. The face was beet red, a vein throbbing in the forehead until Solon thought the Amaki was going to suffer a stroke. His lips were pulled away from his teeth, which were bared and foam-flecked. The breath snarled out, one word over and over. "Vile! Vile! Vile!"

Solon waited for the brothel master to stomp the worms but he didn't. Naturally he didn't. They were worth too much to him alive. He would eventually spend this fury and then be ready to run the brothel again. One couldn't run a brothel in Kur without Kura harlots.

The dwarf recoiled. Is this what Dayan had done all day? Had he done this last night, or at least after his wounds were treated? Had he stood here and drilled this pathetic mood into his slaves? It was so pitiful . . .

Solon went back up the stairs and stood just outside the house. He listened as people came to the locked gate, rattling its doors to no avail, calling for the brothel master to open up. They went away. He heard the customary violence of Kur at night: laughter, shrieks, chaos. He waited until very late when he heard Day...n.

The man went down to the room two levels under the house. He turned a key in a lock. Then he stomped up the stairs, going into his own room to collapse exhausted into the ridiculous bed. Solon followed, silently moving to the man's sleeping form. He took the key from the table where Dayan had placed it.

Solon went down to the dungeon under the house. He unlocked it and was horrified by how mean it was. He choked on the stale air. He gently picked up the worms, still coiled around one another in terror. He put them into his tunic and carried them outside. He set them on the ground.

"Go," he said.

They twisted tube bodies and didn't respond, save to shiver in the night air. The moon was full but it was late. It had gone down beyond the walls where it couldn't be seen from the courtvard.

He concentrated. (Wonderful, worms make roses possible.)

They came apart but it was no use. They needed to leave the brothel grounds entirely or Dayan might find them later.

He thought. (Flocks of birds. Hummingbirds. Doves. Ravens.)

(Doesn't matter, Flv.)

(Just fly now.)

Commotion of flesh. Feathers sprouted from nothing membrane. The identical ends became different, beaked heads and tails. Song. Then into the air.

He watched them go, not knowing what they would do when morning came. They would do whatever the Kura had done before the Amaki had arrived. Perhaps they would find refuge in caves under the ancient cliffs near the beach. Maybe they'd hide inside trees. They might go back to the old city. At any rate, this was one brothel that wouldn't open again.

Solon went back inside and returned to Dayan's room. He slipped up to him, making sure from the rhythm of the Amaki's breathing that the man was definitely sleeping.

The dwarf carefully pulled the patch away, exposing a bloody gap where Dayan's eye had been torn out. He winced at the way it gleamed wetly in the

dark. Then he pulled the lowest denomination coin he had from his tunic, spat on it, and dropped it into the empty socket.

Dayan screamed, jerked out of his sound sleep by a raw bolt of pain. He clutched the wound and dug into it, trying to remove the offending object.

"Payment for admittance, you dirty pimp," Solon cackled.

The dwarf fled the room, going back down the hall.

Dayan pulled out the disk with an agonizing plop. He covered the wound as he sprang from his bed, fresh blood running between his fingers. He ran after the dwarf, bellowing as the stabbing torment seemed to crack his skull. He made it no further than the carpet over the doorway. He became entangled in it, falling, cursing as Solon went behind the house and crawled out the sewage hole.

Emana breathed easier once she was out of the new city, away from the corruption. She wasn't far from the ruins of the first city, searching along the edge of the woods for hyssop leaves, senna pods, and licorice root: all herbs she felt would benefit her patient. She didn't know whether any of these things were native to Kur's shores or not.

Being this close to ancient Kur brought fleeting images back from her sojourn into Alali's mind country. She kept expecting to look up and see torches burning in the high window slits of towers which had crumbled long ago. She kept anticipating the faint sonance of animals from the plaza zoo, where Lilit had knelt among her lions. The black basalt structures in pyramids and columns that still stood were only silent shadows beyond which the sea rolled.

There were no lights; there was no noise.

Eno and she had spoken that day of exploring the ruins together, haunted or not. How preserved it must be, if robbers had really never ventured there for plunder. They couldn't go. At least one of them must remain with the Kura. Tonight Solon had gone to spy on Dayan, and—since Emana needed the herbs—this left it Eno's lot to stay at the inn.

He didn't mind, finding it intriguing to attempt to teach the Kura to speak again. Her shifting had slowed in pace enough she might easier hold the concept of language. He was very patient. Watching him with Alali, Emana couldn't help smiling, thinking what a fine father he'd make.

She'd tried to get the necessary herbs in the city, but apparently medicines were as tightly controlled as the prostitution. No vendor's stall carried anything other than dangerous approdisiacs. Those in serious need of medical attention were referred to expensive physicians. They looked at her queerly when she asked, knowing she was an Ishantu healer.

This used to mean something noble. How quickly status changed.

It had been only a year, yet the damage to the prestige of her race seemed world-wide. She couldn't help worrying how her people were faring at home in the Dasht-e-Kavir and the land between the rivers.

There was a prickling at the back of her neck. The old city might be in shambles and the zoo empty, yet she definitely felt the presence of an animal. Bushes rustled behind her. Emana tried to catch a scent but the movement was from something down wind. Whatever it was, it was large.

Before the Amaki landed on these shores, the Kura had preyed so heavily on the local animal population that there were few indigenous creatures left. Now that the Kura were in captivity, beasts had made a recovery. The forest was full of things which ate both leaves and other animals.

Emana slowly turned to determine what manner of creature was coming up behind her. She could only see the quivering of a few leaves. Her eyesight in the dark was excellent. She'd be able to perceive any shape, any pattern of spots or stripes, the glint from tooth or eye. There was nothing.

Perplexed, she walked toward the bushes, on her guard, ready to leap away at the slightest menacing activity. Something was nearby. There was a mounting pressure on her chest suggesting danger.

Emana reached the bushes and parted them, ready to draw back her hands in a hurry, to turn them into weapons if necessary. In a slight clearing behind the bushes was a long green branch cut from a sapling. It was bent almost double and tied with a thin strip of leather that wasn't really strong enough to hold it long. Just enough to keep it bent for a few minutes as the branch slowly straightened itself, rustling the bushes as it returned to its linear shape when the fragile leather strip snapped.

Emana shuddered, realizing this wasn't the work of an animal. This came from a cleverer beast, intended as a distraction. She gasped, turning from the green branch to run.

It was from another direction entirely apart from the bushes that the man sprang at her. She saw false black claws attached to his hands, slashing at her. The upper half of his face was painted into a red ochre mask. He was the tallest human she'd ever encountered, jumping at her so high in the air that he momentarily blocked out sight of the moon. He growled like a wolf, landing on her with weighted force until every measure of breath was struck out of her. Emana had no time to put her hands up in defense, or to try to use her own strength to throw him off. She was Ishantu and easily possessed of enough power to fight him, if only she could get leverage.

She never had the chance. There was no moment when she might have acted before those lethal obsidian claws cut her throat. Before he began stabbing her with them, jaggedly ripping flesh and puncturing vital organs. He leaned forward with his mouth open, and the blood spraying from her opened throat hit him squarely in it.

But then he turned and spat it out again. He stared down at her curiously. Ishantu often fed their own blood to people as medicine. It didn't taste anything like human blood and no one ever objected. It was said to be sweeter.

Perhaps he hungered for salt and for iron, as opposed to the flavor of ground jade and nutmeg. Whatever, he didn't like the taste of Emana's blood. It was too unfamiliar.

He drew close and inhaled the thick scarlet sugar.

{Godjuice.}

Had he whispered that? Or did something murmur it in his ear, and Emana merely overheard it?

{Artemis goddess of nightshining.}

{Lady of Wild Things Sister.}

{Redkillbeamonggodskill. Hungrythe nightissex.}

He looked up in wonder at the bright silver moon.

He glanced back at her.

{No, dark, not full nimbus circle.}

There were wasps buzzing in the darkness, voices in the shadows as Emana fought letting go of herself. It was only that there was an inviting fog, a mist where she knew she wouldn't be in pain. It was so hot here! It would be cool in there. Cool as mother earth.

{The night is sex the night is voices bleedfuckkill.}

Buzzing beside her cheek. Burning stingers.

Burning stingers in her hair.

He was peering into her face, sniffing, teeth bared that were broken and ugly beyond description. She was fading but could still diagnose a deep, disturbing sickness in him. This was madness, not unlike the worst of those whose sins she'd had to drink as they were peeled on the law altar. A wolf/not a wolf/a shaggy heart/fanged spirit.

He nodded as if he understood.

{Not goddess of night shining, other side, dark side moon.}

{Better not eat. Poison maybe.}

He growled and pulled away from her. He began digging, squatting on the ground and paddling his hands like righteous paws. The cool soil flew up and behind him like . . . fog . . . mist . . .

Emana tried to raise her hand to clutch her throat, to keep the blood from all flowing out. Why now? Why, when only a couple of days ago she'd have welcomed death. Would have closed her eyes and summoned gates open that led to Rasal.

But now she didn't even think of Rasal. The name on her lips was Eno's.

For life went on. The living healed as was meant to be. They looked into other eyes and saw the world.

Providing life went on.

Emana died. He was going to bury her, this shaggy heart/ fanged spirit. Out in the woods where no one would know where she was.

Where Eno wouldn't know.

Who was going to wait for her?

Lyko fled after committing the murder of the dark of the moon. He was confused and frightened. It was the first time he'd killed a god or part of a god. Surely a heavenly retribution must follow.

(Fool you are part god yourself shining triplets Apollo Artemis Lyko!)

The gods had never allowed him in before. They wouldn't now that he'd slaughtered one of them. What else could have sweet blood but a god?

Lyko normally slept his days in a cave sheltered under cliffs by the sea. It was too far away; he didn't want to be without cover for that long. The star eyes burned into his pelt, watching him as he loped through the marshy grasses on the beach, judging him cruelly. He had to hide himself!

The ruins were nearby. Lyko made for them, aware of the red -beaked skimmer birds nestled in the thickets. Sand fleas swarmed up in clouds to secret themselves in his ruff. He could see jellyfish which were being washed up in tidewaters, shimmering like scraps from the brilliant sunset of hours ago. A sea turtle —plodding across the dunes and leaving striped tracks—stopped when it saw him. It abruptly retreated inside its shell. Normally Lyko would have cracked it open with a rock, pulling the naked creature out to eat. Or he'd have waited silently until it began to move again, hoping it would lead him to where it laid succulent eggs in the sand.

Bits of washed-up coral gleamed all around, reminding him of spilled blood, hardened by the ages. It reminded him of his kills. Not in this unfortunate place where he wished he'd never come, but of the rocky peninsulas of home, the craggy ramparts surrounding Vikos Gorge in the Pindus Mountains, the cloudy summit of Olympus where his father Zeus dwelled. The smell of oleander, juniper and bay. Irises and crocuses. The plains where a wolf could gambol for days and not stumble once.

He recalled a single occasion, being almost blinded by his sister's moonlight as it reflected from the white limestone peaks on one of the Aegean islands. He'd thought she was about to descend to him, Lady of Wild Things, to take him to her breast at long last. But—haughty as ever—Artemis only dazzled him and then scorned him.

Now he'd killed her dark half, spilled out her blood to thicken into sea coral. He must run and hide. The black basalt stones of this ancient place would cover him up.

Tomorrow night he would venture back to his cave. He'd sort through the mound of corpses he'd collected over the past year, dragging tourists here who foolishly believed there might be sights outside the city. And he, prowling near the ruins, near the roads, on any one of the twenty-eight full moons every month. Seeing always the waxing sister, bidding him to be a wolf. He would locate in the tatters of their once fine clothes what riches these travelers carried. He'd board a ship and leave this fateful shore. There was no homecoming to be found in the sinful houses of the harlots, no mates of transformation who would comfort him.

{night is silver angry kill}

{bitefuckstabfuck singthedeadkill whydidn'tyou singfuckeat the darkofthemoon?}

He yipped, yowled, swatted at his ear with a paw. This caused him to lose the rhythm of his run and he tripped. Lyko sprawled all four legs up like a foolish clumsy cub. He growled at the voices humming at him. He got up, chased his tail, trying to bite it, feeling one of the voice-stingers crawling into his asshole and laughing {should have got in her place here, rodethedarkmoonbeam, jerkedthedeadseed throughherhipbones!}

Lyko screamed with fury and squatted, trying to shit the voice out.

{must kill for yourwolfhood}

He strained, sphincter muscle cramping. All that emerged was a tiny, hard, dark moon.

The voices didn't silence.

He threw his head back and howled. He couldn't see the bright sister moon in the sky anymore. Had she set or stepped behind a veil of clouds? Was she taunting him? Or did she fear him since he butchered her dark side?

What did Artemis think of her shunned triplet? It took true godpower to catch a shadow in his claws, didn't it?

Lyko shook himself, then tried to take back his dignity after stumbling tainted it. He couldn't find Artemis in the skies.

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{---here---}
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Lyko was startled by a voice all light, sweet as the dark moon's blood of crushed oriental green stone and berry spices.

It wasn't like the other voices that tormented him in his head. And now up his ass.

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{--here, brother Lyko--}
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He looked frantically about. Could it be . . . ? she . . . ? calling him? Finally!

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{—-here, follow, and—-}
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Transparency, haze of golden white nimbus. Floating off into the maze of tumbled basalt.

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{----you can have me at last----}
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All he needed to hear. Yes! Artemis wasn't angry at the murder of her dark side. She was impressed. She was beckoning him with this ethereal smudge. She was going to . . .

{—-spread my thighs, silver and gold it feels, and all my roundness opened for you—-}

Lyko bounced, racing, becoming erect as he jumped over the remnants of labyrinthine walls, following over buckled slabs that tilted at crazy angles, perhaps once buildings, or streets. The apparition was moisture in the air, a smoothly luminous tide trickling beyond old Kur's edges. It went into an interior darkness beyond fathoming, where no living foot had set for centuries times centuries.

He didn't care. He smelled sweetness. He couldn't see nipples or the wet curve of labia. But they must be there! They would be there once Artemis laid herself down. Once she turned her moonlight into flesh. Once she became a

bowl of alabaster for him, became his wife with holes of terrible heat to enter. He was so excited, Lyko almost burst from anticipation.

Faint glow in a grotto of triangular shapes, a man's shadow galloped near him. Such as what Lyko always saw attached to himself. He wasn't concerned; he wouldn't be fooled. This upright thing was a trick of Apollo's called Lycian, called Wolf-god, trying to steal Lyko's birthright of the pelt. It was Lyko who wore the fur and should be called Wolf-god.

Artemis had changed sides, now that Lyko had proved himself by slashing the throat and stabbing the heart of her dark side. She would spread her legs and give him the coronation at last.

Lyko paused, reaching back (or down as the shadow suggested) to cradle his testicles and slightly bruised phallus. He moaned as he stroked it, pleading to the goddess with his eyes to stop and lie down for him now.

The radiant specter did stop, coiling come-hither tendrils scented with bitch musk, and flapping actinic leaves he perceived as disembodied vulva.

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{---come---here---into me Lyko----}
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His ears pricked. He felt the apparition cold and burning at the same time. Yes, such was moonlight!

{---godhood! the world belongs to the mighty who rule it----}

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{--grand leap into self-destiny--}
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"Sister!" Lyko cried as he pounced into the shining center. "I'm listening! I'm here for you!"

Lyko gagged, strangling. He whirled, blinded, deafened, each sense leaving him. Even the voices of his demon wasps became quiet. He clawed at the luster, trying to find a way out. He couldn't even touch it, or—if he did—he couldn't feel it.

This is what it's like, he thought in terror, desperately floundering as he dwindled in the icy flash. This is what it's like to be eaten.

And then the mind of the triplet of Apollo and Artemis was snuffed out, easily. The hulking giant slumped for a moment, shadow on two legs bending at the solid hips. The spine arched as if in the act of plunging.

It straightened, squared its shoulders, lifted its head. Fingered the filthencrusted beard with disdain.

"A bath," Pazu said. "Definitely a bath first."

CHAPTER 23

"I am the god Pazuzu, son of the god Hanbi, king of the evil wind-demons. It is I who rage mightily in the Mountains (of the Underworld) so that they come up. As to those winds which accompany them, the west wind is set at their front—The winds, their wings are broken."—Inscription on a Babylonian amulet

Pazu didn't take the serum with the others. He was a scientist first, and he needed to step back from the total picture as events unfolded. He must objectively observe the effects on the people of Kur. He was proud, secondly, and wanted to bask in his achievement. This was his ultimate glory, seeing his race climb to godhood because of his efforts. His taking the serum and joining them could only ever be anticlimactic after such a triumph.

"What's happening?" he said aloud.

There was no coherent answer. Even those students who'd come to the plaza to hand out the serum were no longer able to respond. The Kura were devolving into a meld of caricatures, stolen from their proximity to the zoo. They weren't the miens of placid animals but of creatures caged and out of control, driven into a total panic.

"What's happening?" he whispered, lowering his voice to an incredulous breath, barely audible to even his own ears above the din.

What went wrong? This serum had worked flawlesly when he tested it on Faj and Wea only seven days before. Pazu now saw people he should know—ought to recognize as fellow Kura and colleagues—turning into nightmares.

He withdrew into the nearest building at his back. He barred it and climbed each stairway until he was all the way to the top. Here he carefully crept to a window slit to watch, angled so that, hopefully, he couldn't be seen because his body was shielded by the wall.

The things outside and down below attacked the zoo. They tore the caged specimens to pieces, then fed on everything: elephants, baby tigers, impala, gargoyles, eagle chicks. Pazu cringed, hands gripping stone. The screaming went on until the sun set and rose again.

He didn't leave the window, couldn't stop watching. He had to observe. He needed to note every occurrence. It was what creators did, wasn't it? After creating? Watched as creation spun, either in natural complacence or out of control?

He noticed that the first day had been filled with this strange shifting and endless murder. But the second dawn found the Kura crazed in another way. They were seared wherever the second dawning's light touched them. Pazu

smelled burned flesh, hair, feathers. They scrambled for shelter among the city's houses.

He heard one of them—something—rush into the building he hid in. He was seized with a petrifying dread, waiting to hear it run up the stairs to the uppermost floor.

He heard it fumbling around down there. It flopped across the floor, crying pitiously in a disturbingly liquid voice. It hit the steps twice, a thudding of softly striking limbs too numerous to coordinate. It didn't come up. Whatever it had become, it couldn't manage to climb, either because it was unable or because it couldn't figure out how.

Pazu stretched himself out and put his ear to the floor, listening all day for it to try again. He drooled onto the carpet of rushes, so afraid he'd hear the wet body moving on the stairs.

It didn't.

Why had they been able to stand the first day and not the second?

The serum deteriorated in the week between its first use with two subjects and then the whole populace.

(Those traitors who went with Lilit didn't count.)

... no, they were safe, out to sea ...

safe. And Pazu hung his head, wept into his hands, ashamed because he wished he'd gone with them.

The serum took hold utterly in twenty-four hours. All right. The telepathy was an immediate result. First stage. Picking up the chaotic fear of the zoo creatures.

The second stage caused their bodies to go into flux, ordained by the telepathy, no biological code to restrain form to that of their own species.

(Curious, Pazu thought, lapsing into cooler scientific puzzling. WAS there, then, some mechanism within all beings that ruled shape? That made a man a man and a lion a lion? It would have to be a braid of codes, each determining the color of eyes, the height, the intelligence, the talents—everything. How he wished he could delve into these mysteries. He only knew that parts of this braid must be destroyed—or at least inhibited—by the serum.)

Third stage was intense hunger. Perhaps due to the supreme amount of energy expended during flux.

And then? Photosensitivity? The softness of their ever -altering skin, the way that fire scalded milk and melted wax? Would even moonlight have this effect? Would they never be able to come out from the shadows of the stones again?

Sunset arrived. Pazu heard the thing which had hurried into his building as it stirred. It had been silent since ceasing its futile attempts to ascend the stairs. And those had been only a few terrifying moments after running into the rooms on the first floor. It went out. Pazu went to the window.

They were slowly emerging, coming onto the streets, timidly slinking/slithering/creeping. Blinking all manner of eyes in wonder, as if seeing twilight for the first time ever. As animals must see it in a rainbow of

shimmering darks, not unlike the fish in the deep seas, viewing it as every object connected to the next by motes of varying densities.

When they each began to spasm, screeching as they went up wildly toward the bloated moon, Pazu understood this paler light was no danger to them.

(The zoo animals were dead, carcasses rotting in the cages. Then where were the Kura getting their shapes from?)

Memory.

There was a certain imprinting which took the place of a normal biological code. An unreliable source. How long could they survive such a constant strain on flesh and bone?

Forever. They were virtually immortal. Thanks to Pazu.

He remembered his two test subjects actually severing fingers to show how they grew back. This had been a major point. The Kura had always been subject to the loss of their ability to rise after death if they had any part of their bodies separated from the rest. He wondered how far this went. How many times could the body be divided before this miracle ceased to occur? How many times before the processes of regeneration couldn't keep up with the demands for repair?

Until that event happened, they were going to be fated to this shifting. Not even random death could spare them.

The scientist-priest covered his eyes with his hands and turned from the window. This was the danger Lilit warned them about. A gate with nothing on the other side of it.

No self. No hope.

Flapping at the stone . . . A harsh rustling as something half hawk/half shark bounced against the window. Pazu stared as it pressed a lidless eye to the wall slit. It opened a maw of serrated rows and let loose a cry, as of tectonic plates rubbing in earthquake. Indeed, he felt the building shaking. The creature shrank, rolled, bundled up into tighter scales and feathers the size of a desert sparrow/asp. It came in sideways at him, then telescoped out into the hawk/shark again, as large as the dimensions of the room would permit.

Pazu pressed his back into the far wall. He tried to reach the door when its suddenly ballooning weight struck him. It revolved, trying to manuever its mouth around to him, grinding him against the stones in the process. Pazu turned his head and closed his eyes.

(I can't \dots can't look into those jaws \dots wide \dots like a gate to a place of horrors. can't can't \dots)

There was a babble in his head as his mind unwound.

His last vaguely coherent thought was that this was his own personal doorway to nothingness.

The teeth entered him above and below. They weren't at all like knives. He was snapped apart bluntly. There was a brief roaring in his ears and a thick sense of dreaming of the world's end. Those who died during such dreams were doomed to wander, weren't they?

Pazu didn't know for a long time that he was a ghost. He was in shock, wandering the city like any other man who might be wounded and delirious.

One day, as he walked the steadily declining streets, he chanced to step into a well of very bright light. He looked down at himself. Still, a mirage could make a person seem to ripple and then vanish. It was hot that particular day and the air was humid from the sea, water vapor hanging in phantoms wherever not enough shadows bent.

He really took a good look, partly at himself, mostly at the city. The forest had grown into the streets until all the paving was broken. In some places whole avenues had disappeared. Vines crept up to the domes and pinnacles of the houses. Silt had begun to bury some of the smaller out-buildings. Water had eroded more porous stones until they were granulating.

When had Kur aged like this?

(I am dead.)

It was so easy to speak it.

"I am dead."

He saw no other ghosts. Why was he still here?

Just because one died—or was killed—didn't mean one's work was finished.

He knew that Kura swarmed the woods. They hunted for food, starving. They fought and devoured each other, when one of them could manage to be faster and cleverer in its shift than its opponent.

Even after Lilit left, taking five thousand with her, there had been fifty thousand people to take the serum.

How many were there now?

A few hundred.

Pazu was devastated.

He knew he was still around so he could fix it.

But a spirit could do nothing. A scientist needed hands; a priest required physical channels for his power.

He must have a body.

He tried to enter the Kura, any Kura. But it was like trying to pour wine into a vessel that wouldn't stay a cup, couldn't hold onto being a bowl, went flat as a platter and hollow as a reed. He needed hands, not paws/flippers/tentacles. There were no bodies among the Kura anymore—only boiling magma.

And then Pazu saw a ship in the bay.

Again, how long since he'd realized his own precarious state? The bones of the animals slaughtered in the zoo had crumbled to dust. The wooden cages were rotted, gone the way of softer things to dissolve. A few pieces in the cracked streets had fossilized.

Pazu went as far as he was allowed, unable to leave the city by whatever invisible cords bound his spirit to Kur. He strained against the restrictions, wanting to go down to the beach and wave his arms, like one shipwrecked and alone forever.

Forever.

Kura were coming home. Some of those who'd left with Lilit were returning in a boat with a square sail. A prow carved in the shape of an animal rode the waves toward the sand.

Pazu held his hands out, palms up, supplicating.

(Returning, have they forgiven me?)

His fingers curled into fists, wisps of fog and no more.

(They escaped when we did not. Self-righteous, lucky, surviving and alive. I curse them!)

When they landed, he was astounded to see not Kura but humans. When had humans learned to build ships? They carried weapons forged from metal, not simple flint-chipped stones. They wore clothing from woven textiles.

The pitiful savages he remembered—before the beasts of his making hunted down those in the vicinity—couldn't even make a simple bowl from wet clay.

They sent three of their party to explore the ruins, searching for valuables. Pazu followed, waiting until one of them was separated from the others.

The man slipped away to piss behind a wall to the great library. He was a short, broad shouldered fellow. His mud-colored hair was pulled back into a single unruly rope down his back. Pazu decided to enter this one. The body was certainly solid enough. It would suit his purposes fine.

The man clutched his throat, eyes bulging, the hair along his arms and legs vibrating on end. Pazu felt the way he had when the hawk/shark fastened its teeth on him: compressed, severed, ground into meal.

Never had he remembered so much of his demise before. There had been weight and a nightmare, no more. But now there was agony in every part of him, ripping down to bone marrow and then being squeezed until each organ burst like a spoiled peach.

Pazu found himself backing out of the man. The sailor wore a ferocious look on his ugly face. He drew his sword with one hand and with the other clutched a talisman he wore around his neck. The man began chattering. It greatly surprised Pazu that he understood him, a foreigner who must be speaking an alien tongue. Was language a province of life and the restraints of the flesh?

The man brandished the sword at the specter and chanted, "That one which has approached the house scares me from my bed, rends me, makes me see nightmares. To the god Bine, gatekeeper of the Underworld, may they appoint him, by the decree of Ninurta, prince of the Underworld, by the decree of Marduk who dwells in Babylon . . . "

It was a protective incantation, invoking gods against some evil being. Pazu half-expected to be thrust further back by it. He'd been a priest in life and believed in magic. Yet it didn't affect him.

The man, infinitely more confident after pronouncing his little prayer, lunged with the sword. He believed this final act of defiance would banish the wraith entirely.

Pazu might not be able to enter the human's flesh, but he was able to grasp the blade along its wicked edge. He held it fast, not at all sure of how he was doing it without concrete form. It didn't cut him.

The man gasped when his forward thrust was suddenly halted. He continued striving out, even as the sword's progress ended, jolting with a grunt as if he'd hit a wall. He let go of the weapon and fell. Pazu flipped the sword until he had it by the hilt and drove it down, piercing the man's neck and burying it in his torso. The tip emerged from his lower back.

He heard a cry. The other two had seen the sword seemingly floating in mid-air, abutted by a faint mirage. They saw it slash down into their comrade of its own accord and then be quickly withdrawn. The dead man's body flopped for seconds as if still alive.

They ran. One of them tripped over the edge of a block of basalt, once the cornerstone to the weaver's guild. Pazu bounded to him in gossamer steps that must have looked like flying. The man shrieked, throwing his arm up over his head.

"Demon! Pazuzu!"

Pazu stopped, startled to hear his name—or what was almost his name.

The third human ran back, reaching down to help his friend up. "Hurry," he admonished. "We have to get out of this place!"

Pazu brought the sword down heavily, cutting off the proferred hand at the thick wrist. The gouting blood splashed the fallen man in the face.

"Yes, the dead live here," Pazu told them, wondering 'will they even hear me?'

The fallen man scrambled out of the way, crabbing backward in case the sword came down again. The wounded one grabbed his spurting stump and screamed so hard that both his mouth and nose bled, too.

"Tell all, anyone who comes to Kur seeking treasure will die," Pazu said, waving the disembodied sword to and fro.

It didn't matter if they could see him a little or a lot or not at all. They could see the weapon.

He watched the Amaki as they gathered the Kura beyond the city's perimeter. None of the beasts could hide in the ruins long. Hunger always drove them onto the beach or into the woods. He studied the sailors from the edges of the city, doing perverted things with the remnants of his race. Those he'd tried to make gods sprouted breasts and ever-virgin hymens, rosy anuses and tender pricks, generous but toothless mouths, anything these human captors desired to debauch.

And anytime one of them grew bold enough to try to enter the ruins again, inflamed by theories of fabulous hordes of gold (what a city this was! rivaling palaces of the pharaohs! ... whoever pharaohs were ...), Pazu would be sure to kill or to maim, to terrorize. Yes, Kur was haunted. Yes, it was a horrible place where the dead moved and demons flew.

It was easy to frighten them, fun to hurt them as he saw what they did to his poor countrymen. If once he'd had little regard for humans, now he hated

them. They had come a long way, all right. But he couldn't be fooled. No matter what they could build, they were still the same beasts they ever were.

Pazuzu? He wondered if this was a parting joke of any of those who had fled these shores thousands of years ago.

He watched the new city rise and the humans from all corners of the world arrive to further rape his race. One day, he would find a body he could inhabit. And then his work would continue. Then he'd save what was left of his people.

And if they couldn't be gods, they would be demons.

Then came that crazy man, covered in blood, stinking of animal hides and shit. Old pieces of liver and snot in his beard. Believed he was a wolf. A giant of a human. Strong and healthy enough not to be poisoned by the filth he was living in. His mind was weak. His will was damaged, ruled by voices of waspish delusion. It was simple.

Pazu stretched, filling his lungs with sweet night air. He curled and uncurled his fingers, marveling at what a fabulous thing hands were.

He went to the Pyramid of Sciences, only one fourth as tall as it used to be. It was easy to reach just by walking up the dunes of sand that inclined toward the window. He went through the window slit. The one they had watched the glacier through, many years ago. He wriggled inside and stood in his working quarters. He stooped down to dig through the dust and the litter of countless nesting birds for the clay bottle he'd put the second half of the crystals in.

He held them in his hands. They were still glowing but had their color changed? Still a tingling heat. But were they as warm as before?

They were different. Their properties had altered, as if their strength had a life and it was slipped by half.

What result would this bring to the serum? Pazu didn't know. He wouldn't wait long to find out.

PART FOUR

"You call us damned spirits! You, You are yourselves the wizards true . . . " 'Faust'—Goethe

CHAPTER 24

"There shall the lilith repose, And find herself a place to rest."

—Isaiah 34:14

Eno sat crosslegged on a cushion, hearing the faint spatters fall from the candles flickering around them. He could hear this above Alali's voice, for she spoke very softly, carefully, trying to get it right without having to reach into Eno's mind to let it speak for her. That which came from another's mood didn't last forever, unless it was often repeated. She could remember 'Alali', because the first Dayan's descendants had called her by that name. She could remember the rules of conduct, because the punishments were ingrained—but not the reason for the lesson.

Eno leaned close, making it easier for her to see how he formed his lips to make certain round noises. He showed how the tongue could be manipulated against the teeth or the roof of the mouth to make consonants. He let her touch his throat to sense inhalations and exhalations.

(I didn't come here to abuse the Kura. I didn't come for meaningless gratification, Eno thought. But the fact I came at all—whatever the reason—is part of what keeps them slaves.)

Slavery was a fundamental part of existence in Eno's world. Economies depended on it. Or so he'd always accepted.

It was difficult for him, knowing what the Kura had once been. He could find no rationale that properly explained or justified the new city of Kur. It had been built for no other purpose than debauchery. People who were otherwise perfectly decent in their own countries went wild here. Not that he hadn't heard of it back in Vira but it was spoken of as a joke. One assumed that at least half of what he heard was exaggeration. And somehow this made it all right to patronize such a place. As long as his intentions were noble, he was guilty of no cruelty.

If a mouthful of flesh was taken from a living being in a kiss, without biting down with the teeth, did it hurt? When others have been chewing off their share, was the softer portion more merciful?

Or was it just another stolen mouthful?

Eno pursed his lips and made a full circle. "O."

Alali mimicked it, reminding him of a little girl—born nearly deaf—trying to learn to speak a few words.

He put the tip of his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Lllll."

He dropped his jaw and resonated. "Ah."

He closed his mouth and vibrated through the pressed lips. "Mmmmmm."

It was a word he learned in Jerusalem during his education abroad. He'd visited there a second time just prior to coming to Kur.

"Olam," he said slowly.

"Ollllahhhmmmm," Alali repeated.

It was a word that meant world, the masses, everything.

Eno smiled.

"Wrong," Alali pronounced, pulling back, a shadow crossing her face.

"No, right. You said it perfectly," he assured her.

"No, wrong!" Her delicate human ears pricked, slightly pointing into the subtly feral. "Emana!"

"What about Emana?" Eno stood at the sound of his beloved's name.

"Wrong!" Alali shouted. She couldn't think of what else to say. She walked around in tight circles.

"She went to pick herbs in the woods," Eno said. "Has something happened to her?"

The Kura obviously struggled to form words. Eno knew that the connection between her and the Ishantu healer was a powerful one. It was a stronger bond perhaps than even between lovers.

Alali sprang toward the entrance to the room, legs working with a coiling grace that slightly unnerved the Hilan. She crouched at the door and whined, scratching at it with what were beginning to look less like fingers and more like claws.

Eno opened the door. "Let's find Emana, Alali," he said, gently putting a hand to her shoulder.

Did he sound ridiculous? It was like he spoke to a dog, instead of to a being who'd once been in every way superior to men. The flesh beneath his palm rippled slightly, and he couldn't help pausing, expecting her to change into a hunting hound.

She didn't. Indeed, her alterations were intangible, as if the connections were beyond her reach.

They hurried out, passing others staying at the inn. No one even looked at them. They were hardly as strange as sight as most of what could be seen in the city.

A man was getting off a horse in front of the inn. Eno approached him. He'd left without taking any money, so he tugged off one of the massive gold rings he wore. He held it up for the man to see. "I want to buy this horse," Eno said quickly. When the man hesitated, his startled eyes fixed on the valuable ring, Eno added impatiently, "Come come! This ring will easily buy you twenty horses."

"Bargain." The man snatched the ring, setting it between his teeth to check for the slight softness indicating the pure metal.

Eno lifted the Kura onto the horse, then climbed up behind her. The horse resisted a little, not comfortable being mounted by a shifter. At first Eno was afraid the animal might throw them and bolt.

The horse settled down. Alali no longer put out the chaotic aura of the total harlot-beast.

"That's a relief," Eno muttered nervously, grasping the reins tightly in case the horse began bucking anyway.

"Well, you can't have the ring back. He throws you and it's not my problem," said the man, stepping back. "Is that a Kurawhore? Are you serious? I thought everyone knew you couldn't put a Kura and a horse together. It's like trying to make a horse let a wolf ride it."

The horse trembled again and reared. Eno tightened his grip on Alali, gripping the sides of the horse with his legs. "Whoa."

Alali put her hands in the animal's mane.

She murmured softly into its ears. Eno suspected at first that it was a song, or a bit of mimickry to make the horse think she was nothing but another horse. But then he heard her whispering, "Please. Please."

They galloped off down the street, dodging somersaulting jugglers, weaving in and out of the partying crowds. There was only one direction that took them by the route Emana must have taken—toward the forest, the old city, and eventually the sea. The other ways led into hills that surrounded the new city on three sides. The healer would hardly have risked climbing at night for a few herbs.

Alali shivered, breathing hard. Eno squeezed his arms around her. "It's all right. We're going to find her."

The Kura moaned, as if not so sure.

Once out of the new city and among the marsh grasses, she began wriggling desperately. Eno reined in the horse. The Kura jumped down and ran. She stopped to sniff the air, touching her head. She wasn't certain whether the trail she followed was a tangible personal scent or one of psychic connection. It could be both. It rang in all of her senses. Her very skull vibrated like a bowl made from hollow bronze.

Whatever it was, it was urgent. It was too late. It screamed for immediate help. It fell terribly silent.

Eno dismounted and followed her on foot, leading the horse.

"What is it?" he asked.

Alali whined, pirouetting on the ball of one foot, growing frantic.

"Have to wait!" she cried pitiously.

Eno pressed his shoulder into the muzzle of the horse. The animal snorted. "Wait for what?"

"Have to wait!" She looked at him, very human hands coming up in pleading. The fingers turned into tiny fists that resembled cowrie shells. "Please! Wait!"

Then she spun, a blur of skirts. She threw herself down to the ground. She began crawling through the grass on her hands and knees. She was clearly trying to assume a four-legged stance but it refused to manifest. She went through thorny bushes and a stand of bristly purple thistles. She stopped and exclaimed, "Emana!"

Eno left the horse and made haste toward her. He saw blood on the ground. Had there had been a terrific struggle—or murder? Reeds lay broken, bushes were flattened. Red pools slowly soaked into the earth. But this was near the sea and the ground was already marshy. Puddles could stand for quite a while before they were absorbed. Flies buzzed around these, the way they did around open wounds.

There was a mound of roughly-turned dirt. The Kura was digging through it savagely. Eno bent to help her, scooping out the disturbed soil with bare hands.

It was a shallow hole. Not far down they found the Ishantu.

Al...li's cry of grief was a match for Eno's. He partially lifted Emana from the grave and cradled her in his arms.

"What did this?" he asked, seeing the gash across her throat, the stab wounds in her chest and stomach. "Who could have done this?"

She must have suffered much. None of the injuries would have caused sudden death or even a blissful unconsciousness before dying. Her eyes were open and staring, speckled with earth. Her mouth had been stretched in a scream and was also packed with soil. Eno tenderly cleaned this from her mouth with his fingers, as if once done she would breathe again. He brushed at her eyes, kissing the eyelids, feeling the lashes against his lips.

He'd heard the stories of a demon that sometimes attacked the tourists, seen in the shape of a wolf or heard howling like a wolf. He remembered that the Ishantu didn't believe in monsters. Was a demon a monster?

(It was, if it could do this to someone as beautiful and good as Emana.)

Some claimed to have seen it and swore it was but a man.

Could just a man have done this much mutilation?

Eno wept freely. He should never have let her go, not after dark and alone. He could have gone with her in the day to pick the herbs. But somehow he'd believed she was safer than a human woman would have been. Because Ishantu were strong. And they were holy.

Yet Emana was as dead as anyone.

He'd seen Rasal Hathor murdered, and he should have remembered that the Ishantu could die. He touched the gash at her throat. It was deep and bloody, but not enough to sever the head. He caressed down each arm with trembling fingers. He lifted her the rest of the way from the shallow grave and set her on level ground. He ran his hands down her legs, counting toes as he had fingers. He felt her breasts and both crimson nipple-blooms were still there. She'd been savagely butchered but she hadn't been sundered.

"Have to wait!" Alali cried.

He agreed. "Yes, we have to wait. Three days and three nights."

He fell back to the earth and started digging a fresh hole. "But we'll put her in a grave we make for her ourselves. One dug with love, not one carved out by her murderer."

Alali helped him, and then they put Emana in it. They blessed each handful of dirt they covered her with.

"You must return to tell Solon what's happened. You have to be inside and safe when the sun comes up. Can you go back by yourself, Alali?" Eno asked.

He knew he couldn't possibly leave. Someone had to wait for Emana. He could only hope that whatever interim there had been—between her murder and burial and then their discovering her—wouldn't prevent her from rising. If she couldn't return to him, Eno didn't know what he'd do. Would everyone he loved in his life be taken from him?

"I can. I will," the Kura replied, nodding with determination.

She went swiftly away, face set in deep concentration, thinking to herself repeatedly, I must keep human shape so no one in the city who sees me suspects I am Kura. I must keep human shape . . .

Eno watched her go, sending a prayer after her. He wished her to be protected by whatever gods there were.

He sat by Emana's grave, trying not to see the blood that stained the grass and rocks. He put his hands palm down on the soil he'd just covered her with. He recalled observing as Emana kept this vigil for her husband. He remembered the words she'd spoken.

He exhaled them softly, distinctly, hands on the earth half- expecting to feel a response. What? A worldy heartbeat?

"Flavor of sacred salt . . . soft as mixed breaths, Lilit, scent of flowers . . . light like sun through rain, Lilit, rocks full of ghost faces . . . slow life up like a tree reaching, Lilit, peace in these red mouths . . . arisen from the last shadow of the night."

Eno stiffened, hackles rising, as he heard a lone wolf howl from somewhere in the ruins. The noise was unearthly, the baying of a lost soul toward an unreachable moonlight. He shuddered, then murmured. "Let her come back to me, goddess. Mend her and help Emana return. I'll wait right here. One needn't be Ish f ntu to have love which transcends death. I pour everything I have down into the earth."

Below ground.

It was cool, soothing beyond the torment of flesh. Emana no longer felt the pain. She couldn't move. She wasn't panicked by this; she'd beed dead before.

She'd only just begun to bear a faint consciousness. She'd had none as the wolf man buried her body. And she'd had none as her friends dug her up. She never felt Eno's loving examination of her corpse, counting her fingers and toes, as if she were newly born instead of newly killed. She didn't feel his tears on her face. She didn't know that she was in a grave other than the one her murderer had uncaringly dumped her body into.

Was this consciousness? Did she think from her body or had her 'self' gone into the surrounding soil?

How would they know where to find her?

They couldn't know.

Emana was resigned to death, waiting for oblivion. It was long before her time.

Or was it?

Maybe she and Rasal were fated to die young. She didn't know if she'd go to a place where her late husband's spirit was or not. Would she simply be absorbed back into the world through decomposition of body and spirit? Did the healing powers of dead Ishantu spring from the earth in peppermint, tansy, and buttercups?

Ishantu didn't fear death, but that didn't mean they knew what it was. So many priests and religions claimed to know that answer. Really no one did. No one except the dead themselves, and—even then—the answers weren't swift in forthcoming.

Perhaps this is all the answer there is.

Perhaps it was only a faint awareness that knew no shape, that touched nothing, which in time would forget everything.

In the darkness, cold earth pressing all around (she must be thinking in her body then, to sense these things), Emana became aware of a strangeness. It wasn't a detail she recalled from the instances of death before this one. She hadn't noticed it when she'd died in the desert and been buried in the desert by Rasal.

She was hearing a faint music.

Moist, fluted, of water and air being blown through a hollow reed to produce melodious bubbles.

Muted, round percussion on the auromatic woods of an ala -drum.

Bells of very thin, filigreed shells and teardrop clappers.

The worms were singing. They moved toward her in a slow, itchy caress, not nibbling for Emana wasn't ready for them. They were only curious. Exploring.

And singing: Welcome to the earth. Welcome to the earth.

Had Rasal heard this in his grave in the rose garden of Vira, near the Caspian Sea where the ground was damp and fertile with worms?

No, for Rasal had been truly dead, beyond the reach of resurrection.

What a pity for any vampire not to be buried in an earth rich with worms. Emana had never known before that worms sang.

What did maggots do as they hatched from their eggs, laid in decomposing meat by flies?

Perhaps maggots wept.

Alali strode through the throngs in the streets of Kur, her long red hair flowing out behind. She had a grip on her human form, not allowing it to waver even as she had flashes of moods from people around her. Perversions. Sorrows. Crippled loves and hates. She saw Kura on leashes and others in the windows of brothels, doing the sensual dances of exotic forms. Rude hands groped her as she hurried along. It was all she could do not to shift and attack some of these abominable humans.

A man stepped directly into her path.

"Alali!" he snapped, eyes squinting at her with indignation. "I recognize you!"

She stopped, blocked by him. It was a cousin of Dayan's, Atononil. He ran another brothel several streets away. What descendant of the first Dayan didn't know the face and form of Alali, their ancestor's first harlot beast? He roughly grabbed her by the wrist. "I was informed how you turned on Dayan and escaped. Come! You're going back. You can't dream of how he'll punish you this time."

She could shift into the slightest thing and pull away. Let's see if he could cling to a mosquito! She could become a fierce predator who would rip him to shreds with scarcely three flicks from fangs and claws. She didn't follow as he yanked at her. She stood her ground. He knew what she must be thinking. These harlots were treacherous. Atononil spun back to face her, jaw thrust forward, eyes boring into hers. He demanded compliance, drilling a mood of the meek slave into her.

Alali experienced a momentary weakness. Then she thought, 'I must keep human shape' and shoved his mood aside.

"Help!" she cried, using every iota of memory she could dredge up of a plaintive female voice. "Help! Rape!"

No one paid any heed except to glance with humor at the pair of them. A man in the clothes of a Phoenician sailor laughed. "Need some help being raped, do you? I have more right here!" He grabbed his crotch.

A guard stepped from a doorway. Usually there were never any of the guards about, no matter how loudly one shouted. He put his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Hold! What are you doing to this woman?"

"She isn't a woman," Atononil countered, tightening his grip on Al...l_i's arm. "She's a Kura harlot, and she escaped from my cousin's house last night."

The guard studied her, frowning intently. Alali clung to her shape, pushing from all corners of her mind any mood that might cause her to show what she was. Everyone within hearing distance on the street gathered to watch.

Atononil put his face close to hers and drilled a mood of change for a vixen, browbeating her with it. His breath was thick with cheese and beer. But she permitted no fur to sprout, no angle of the vulpine to chart her jaw.

"You're crazy, mister," she whispered, eyes so wide and—girlish—turning to the guard to bat her lashes imploringly. "Please, sir, make him let me go. I must return to the Lazuli Inn, where my mistress awaits me."

The guard looked her up and down, at the heaving bosom, the widely-spaced green eyes, the tangle of auburn hair. He tried to effect her with his own dark mood: a far eastern woman with golden skin, black silk hair, and breasts that were two identical balls of amber, in which were encased brilliant blue beetles shaped like Egyptian scarabs. No matter that these images were from differing cultures. Somewhere all ideologies met when it came to weaving fantasies.

But the guard's fantasy woman didn't emerge, didn't so much as show her ghost.

"This is a woman, you fool. Are you blind?" The guard glared at Atononil. This idiot could make him look bad in front of the people. He shouldn't have stepped from the doorway to interfere in this matter. He ought to have stayed invisible in the shadows.

"She's a harlot. She was the very first whore of Kur. My own grandfather, Dayan the Amaki, called her from the woods over fifty years ago," Atononil protested.

He wheeled on Alali, striking her with his open hand. He clutched the front of her simple dress and tore it, exposing the generous breasts. "Show him what you are! I order you!"

Alali covered herself with her arms, feigning embarrassment. She made her cheeks flush. She wailed, "Please, sir! I have to go back to the Lazuli. Don't let him hurt me anymore. My mistress will be angry!"

The guard drew his sword and put the point at Atononil's throat. "Do you know there's a law concerning the treatment of other humans? It's illegal to sell any flesh for sex save from Kura. It's illegal to enslave any flesh for sex save from Kura. It's illegal . . . "

"Of course, I know it. My ancestors made those laws. She's Kura, I tell you!" "She doesn't shift. What Kura doesn't shift?" someone in the crowd pointed out.

"He's a rapist. He's trying to abduct this poor woman."

"Why, I have female slaves of my own. I wouldn't want them to be violated on the streets by ruffians."

"Punish him!"

"Tie him up and let's stone him!"

Atononil looked around him in shock. The faces of the well-dressed mob leered, baring their teeth, shaking fists of delighted outrage. He turned back to the guard, eyes bulging. The guard smirked, tapping the flat of his sword into his palm, asking of the crowd, "Shall we? Why not? An offense has clearly been committed."

They dragged him away to bind him. Atononil was pushed down with his face in the dirt, his arms bound tightly behind him. Two men forced his elbows back until they touched. He cried out as his bones snapped and his shoulders dislocated. His feet were bound at the ankles. They lifted him up like a sacrificial sheep.

People hunted for suitable rocks, joking and singing as if at a summer festival. Naturally, all the best rocks were collected every day by the vendors, and now these merchants sold them—so much by weight.

"Would you like to throw the first stone?" the guard asked Al...l;, "since it was you he attacked?"

Al...l; gulped as she saw splashes of Atononil's blood on his clothes. The crowd was tearing these garments off, dipping them in his cuts and scratches, tying these gaily scarlet strips into their hair for ribbons. She could smell the salt and iron in it. It was a dangerous odor for her nostrils.

She shook her head. "I have to return to the Lazuli. I'm already late. My mistress...," she stumbled.

She was afraid she'd be compelled to stay and help execute Dayan's cousin. Afraid she would lose control in the smell and sight of blood. Dawn was coming because she'd been delayed. And she was hungry.

The guard's eyes twinkled as he patted her on the rump. "That's very conscientious of you. Run along then."

She couldn't get away fast enough to avoid hearing Atonon; l's screams and the roar of the crowd as stones whistled through the air, the thuds of rock against flesh, even the sound that blood made as it left through violence. She put her hands over her ears and ran, thinking 'I must keep human shape...'

There was a smear of cerise and honey on the horizon. The parties started to subside as the brothels closed for business, and people scurried to get their own rocks thrown before the body was cold. Her heart rose in her throat when she understood she couldn't possibly reach the inn before morning filled the sky. She was so hungry. What if she couldn't help it and attacked one of these degenerates, wearily trudging back to their own inns? She'd never hide it then.

(Shift! Fly! Find the shadows! Hurry . . .)

But who would tell Solon? He must be frantic, arriving back and finding no one there.

Alali rounded a corner. She was on the avenue with the Lazuli. The sun had its first rays sliding up the cobblestones. Could she beat it to the entrance? She ran faster, as quickly as human legs permitted. No whirlwind or gazelle. She had full control over human shape now. She couldn't shift if she wanted to.

(She did want to. She had to. The sun was right there. It was slanting toward her, and Alali was afraid.)

Solon paced the courtyard, pulling whiskers in frustration. He heard footsteps and saw her, wild green eyes and long legs, torn gown flapping around her waist.

"Alali," he called, relieved to the point of fainting.

He rushed out to meet her, feeling the warm light on his skin.

It was also on hers, making her red hair bright as polished copper, the flesh rosy. She stopped in the rays and screamed. She knelt, cringing, anticipating burning pain. She splayed her fingers across her face to protect as much of it as she could.

Nothing happened. The dwarf touched her shaking hands.

"Emana is a great healer," was all he could say.

She licked her lips. "Hungry," she murmured. "Help me, Solon."

The dwarf smiled. "There's blood at the inn. I'll buy you breakfast."

CHAPTER 25

"The Snatcher has hold of my flesh, Death sits in my bedchamber, And wherever I set my feet there is Death." 'Epic of Gilgamesh' —Mesopotamian

What could the Kura do to an opposing army?

Busparta knew they could turn into gargantuan creatures such as rocs, for he'd seen this with his own eyes. These were eyes that weren't easily fooled, having seen much that would have driven other men insane. He knew the Kura could alter themselves to do combat with whatever enemy was sent against them.

What could a Kura have done against the fire demon the treacherous Lydians summoned? Would it have become a rain elemental? An ice monster?

The fire demon couldn't be called up again for another century. At least not that specific fire demon. Were there others?

What about Titans? Might they be freed from their mountain prisons and ordered to tred the defenseless Mysians underfoot? Why, a Kura would just become something even more titanic. Or so infinitesimally tiny that it could crawl into a giant's ear and worry the brain into soup.

Or the Mysians could strike first, with decimating preventative measures. The Kura could become serpents from the deepest oceans, splashing tidal waves to submerge the Lydian coast. They could become voracious tiger-birds, swooping down from the skies to pluck Lydians from the countryside. They could become huge burrowers which would shatter the underground, causing the earth to open up in abysses beneath the cities.

The possibilities were practically endless.

They were a logical extension of war, when faced with enemies who had no honor. It was an unfortunate thing, plotting to go to such extremes. But the Lydians started it; they were the ones who brought magic to strategy's table. Let it be on their heads. Let it be on their graves.

Busparta ventured out with the small sack of gold, precious black pearls, and pigeon blood rubies his government had given him to buy Kura with—providing he determined them to have military value. This would be easy, procurring a pair of the creatures from the greedy Amaki.

Then he could go home. He could be on the sea (the beasts kept in the cargo hold). It would be cooler on the water with the breezes. Kur was too hot, stifling with the sweaty crowds, most of them rich, spoiled, and thoroughly dishonorable. If he hadn't seen so many different costumes, heard such a babble of diverse languages, viewed a rainbow of skin colors, Busparta might have thought every one of these despicables was a Lydian.

He made his way to the first brothel he saw, its door painted with the same shade of pink as a woman's vulva. The master appraised him, staring at the scars, the virtually hairless head. The Mysian hero looked as if he'd once been boiled for a pudding.

"What is the gentleman's pleasure this evening?" asked the Amaki.

"I would like to purchase two harlots," Busparta said, showing the man what he'd brought with him.

The pimp blanched at the wealth of coins and gems.

"Prodigious," the master commented. "You mean you actually want to buy two of them? Take them away? Forever?"

Busparta nodded. Wasn't this obvious? Would he spend so much just to pass a night with them?

"Well, that's a most generous sum, I must say. But I'm afraid the Kura aren't for sale. I mean, they are—of course—for sale, but only for temporary 'usages'. We lease them, as it were," the Amaki explained, grinning smugly.

Busparta saw the glimmer of metal in the man's mouth. He apparently suffered from pyorrhea, and a clever Phoenician dentist had fastened the front teeth together with gold wire. He glinted as he smiled. Busparta was sorely tempted to snatch that gold wire out, and then see if the man remained proud.

"You'd never sell them?" he asked, puzzled.

He'd been under the impression that an Amaki would sell absolutely anything for enough money.

"You see, there can be no more Kura."

"I know that. So?"

"Well, they were handed down to me by my father and to him by his father, who was one of the original sailors to land on these shores. All the Kura were divided up by those sailors."

"And?" Busparta was growing impatient. His face became uncomfortably warm.

"We'll hand them down to our children. It's a guaranteed income. Better than a farm, which may blow away in a drought or be consumed by locusts. Better than a fleet of ships, which need constant maintenance and might sink or be taken by pirates. Better than a trade, where they must learn and toil and try to be the best. The Kura are immortal, and each succeeding generation will want their commodity." The Amaki winked and nudged the hero with his elbow. "We can't sell our children's futures, their very birthrights, now can we?"

"This is a hefty portion of future and birthright," Busparta pointed out, shaking the bag until it chimed from within.

The Amaki sighed. "I make that much from two Kura in a couple years. That's between the going rate and the tips people leave them, not understanding that Kura have no realistic use for gratuities."

Busparta was told virtually the same thing at the next fifteen brothels, growing more furious and frustrated at each one. At the sixteenth, he noticed

that the furniture was smoking at the edges. It was all imported, everything sumptuous. There were chairs of Egyptian pattern with carved animal heads. There were decorative panels with scenes carved into ivory and painted with blue enamel. In one, a jeweled lion seized a slave by his gilded throat. There were cabinets of cedar and a table of teakwood. The smoke rolled across the scrollworks and the filigreed flowers, seemed to plume from the lion's mouth in a growl and from the gilded slave's lips in a scream. The cabinets crackled and the teak surface split into a web of fractures. The ivory darkened perceptibly.

The brothel master whimpered and began to cry for his servant. "Ragapundi! Bring water! There's a fire somewhere!"

Busparta was furious when even this Amaki refused to part with any of his precious heirloom harlots. But seeing the balls of smoke and—yes—sparks popping from the Egyptian animal heads like religious epiphanies, he was appalled. He looked down at his body, his arms. They were red. Either his fingers had swollen or the nails were shrinking. Another patch of his already reduced beard came away and floated a short distance before it sizzled, shriveled, and dropped to the floor like a spider struck by lightning.

The brothel master pointed at it wordlessly, mouth open as if about to gasp at the very least. No sound came out of him. His eyes only widened, his lips pulling back further in a grimace.

The servant ran out with a bucket of water, searching frantically for the blaze. He saw nothing but wisps of smoke and a few disembodied sparks. He then saw the edge of Busparta's cloak, a thin thread of glowing flame. He shrieked and threw the water onto the Mysian.

Busparta jumped back, doused. He shook the water from his clothes.

"Not him, you idiot!" the Amaki cried, slapping the servant.

Busparta shook his head. "Thank you," he told the servant wryly. "That was most—refreshing."

The brothel master wrung his hands, still looking about furtively for a fire among his possessions. Only now he saw no smoke at all.

"Oh, sir," he quickly apologized. "I'm so sorry. What a clumsy oaf Ragapundi is. We must get you into some dry clothes. You'll take a chill . . . "

"I hope I will," Busparta replied.

He pulled away from the oily, solicitous touch.

He picked up the army loot and left, disappointed. Was there no Am...k; who would sell Kura to him? He didn't want to resort to abduction, as did those theater owners who put on battles for the tourists. He didn't want to be involved in any criminal activity. Such outlaw doings were tactics for Lydians.

In the end he must do whatever he had to, for his generals, for the nation. He feverishly hoped he wouldn't be forced to kill to obtain these Kura.

Feverish.

Busparta walked down the street, past a group of people gathered around a pit of wild dogs. A vendor was selling an assortment of kittens, bunnies, and birds with clipped wings of colorful plumage for the patrons to toss into the

pit. Busparta tried not to look as a gorgeously-hued bird was thrown in. It tried to fly and went over into the pit in an arc that—out of the corner of his eye—made a sad rainbow. He looked down at himself to avoid paying attention to the savagery of the dogs and the laughter of the crowd.

His clothes were already dry. He'd been soaked to the skin only a few minutes before.

"If I keep walking, I can eventually march into the sea," he said aloud. He added morosely, "I wonder how long it would take me to boil it away."

He saw the gates open on another brothel, even though none of its windows were lit. Two men were loading horses with a collection of nets and spears. He wondered why this one house wasn't open for business. He found it odd that a pimp would waste a chance to make money.

"Are you the master of this place?" he asked a one-eyed man who was clearly the superior of the two.

The other was bandaged all about his face and arms, and it was obvious by his bent head and shoulders that he was a servant.

"Yes, but we aren't open tonight," replied the man with one eye.

A recent wound, Busparta noted. Gouged. With both deep and superficial scratches. Attacked by a bird of prey. Or by a vindictive female.

"I'm not interested in—accomodations," Busparta struggled for the right word. That was what harlots were, weren't they? Accomodating? "I want to actually purchase a pair of them."

He jangled the bag, showing the glitter within to Dayan's single eye.

"Hmmm," the Amaki grunted. He shrugged. "That's really almost amusing—in a pathetic sort of way."

Busparta clenched his fists, resenting the words and the man's manner. He felt himself growing hot again.

"I mean," Dayan continued, "that my Kura escaped two nights ago." He indicated his eye patch, then gestured vaguely to the bandaged Huddissi. "I don't have any Kura to sell or to refuse to sell."

Busparta glanced again at the nets and spears. He said, "You appear to be outfitted for hunting this night."

Dayan grimaced. "Indeed. We're venturing out to try to recapture them." Busparta noticed how soft the man's hands were. He kept himself fit enough for appearance's sake, but they were muscles of beauty—not of practicality. He was just a pimp. after all. Pretty, with a perfumed phallus and little real manhood.

The servant was wrapped up, groaning with every move he had to make. His face winced beneath gauze. He would be of little use except as bait.

"And have you much experience hunting?" Busparta asked, trying to keep a straight face.

Dayan looked at him sideways with the one eye as he arranged things on the horse so he could mount it. He coughed. "None at all."

"I'm Busparta the Mysian. Have you heard of me?"

Dayan admitted he had. Who in Kur hadn't? The hero was all the talk.

"I've done much hunting," Busparta told him. "I've hunted men, which are easy. And I've hunted the fire demon, and that was an experience no other can boast of."

Dayan regarded him with an appreciative nod of the head. "What are you suggesting?"

"You don't have much of a chance by yourselves. Even when the Amaki originally took the Kura," Busparta said, recalling the tales the other brothel masters had regaled him with that evening, "there were many sailors doing the hunting. It still took more than a year to capture them all. Am I right?"

"You do seem to be up on Amaki history, yes."

"I'll go with you and help you get your Kura back. For this, you'll sell me two of them for this bag of gold and gems."

Dayan snorted. "Why not ask me to give you the two Kura for your trouble?"

"I was sent here with this sum for the purposes of buying them. It's what the money's for."

Dayan rolled his eye. What a fool. He could keep the treasure for himself and say he'd spent it buying the Kura. How thick-headed was this soldier? Perhaps his brains had been cooked by the fire demon. No matter. Dayan couldn't do business without any Kura at all. His cousin Atononil had been stoned to death last night for some legal infraction. The guild of Amaki brothel keepers was calling for the responsible guard's balls and hands on a platter with figs. Atononil had heirs, so Dayan couldn't hope to acquire those Kura.

So, he could get seventeen of them back (losing Alali and two to the soldier) and a tidy sum as well? Not too bad really. Sound business move for a desperate man.

"Should we even take Huddissi along?" Dayan jerked a thumb at his servant.

Huddissi moaned pitifully, seeing a chance to generate some sympathy and remove himself from this onerous work.

"I should think he'll slow us down," Busparta commented quietly.

He didn't wish to hurt the servant's feelings. But he knew the man didn't want to go chasing after what the Mysian suspected had wounded him.

Dayan nodded for Huddissi to go back into the house. The servant gratefully hobbled away.

The two men rode to the old city. This was probably where the Kura had fled, needing shelter from the day. They were likely prowling the woods for blood, but it was here they must return to before sun-up. At least some of them might. They didn't have much in the way of reasoning power, but they surely possessed enough instinct to go where they had been safe before the Amaki arrived.

"Let's go," Busparta said, getting off his horse so that he could enter the ruins.

"My friend, surely you've heard during your stay here that the old city is haunted," Dayan told him.

"It isn't just a story to keep the tourists away, until you Amaki can figure out how to profit from crumbled stones and mold?" Busparta retorted.

Dayan actually turned pale, staring at the ruins. His fingers tightly clenched the reins until veins popped on the backs of his hands. Dayan closed his eyes. Opening them, he was again a boy of ten.

"Dare you!" L'lagura cried, making a rude gesture.

"Is Dayan the Third afraid? Your grandfather would be shamed!" Poliurus laughed and pointed.

These two boys weren't the sons of brothel masters. They were an innkeeper's boys and would never be as rich as those who inherited the harlot trade.

Garyamil put a hand on his friend's shoulder and whispered, "Don't let them bait you."

"Have you only smiles under your tunics?" L'lagura asked both the Amaki boys.

"They have gold rings piercing their cocks so they can't rise," Poliurus said derisively. "Keeps them from abusing the merchandise."

"Better than the lead pieces you have inserted up your asses, so you fill up with so much shit," Garyamil replied.

"Everyone knows you're soft," L'lagura continued. "The Amaki only produce pimps because they have no real men."

Dayan's face flushed red and he clenched his fists. But he couldn't fight these two bigger boys. If he came home dirty and with his fine linen clothes torn, his father would ridicule him in front of the whole family. He'd have to clean toilets, and he would be forbidden to bathe for a fortnight.

"We're better than you," Dayan snapped back. "This is our city."

"Only because you're too frightened to enter the old city," Poliurus said.

"Liar!" Dayan cried, pulling away from his friend's restraining hand.

"Prove it!" Poliurus demanded.

"Go into the old city and bring out something to show you've been there. See?" L'lagura said.

L'lagura held up a curious black stone arrowhead he might just as easily have found in the woods. But who was to say if he might have discovered it in the ruins? He could claim and have Dayan challenge him on it until both of them were blue in the face. And it still didn't change the fact that the innkeeper's sons were allowed to run and brawl and drink and whore, and the Am...k; children were destined to be scrubbed clean at every moment of their lives. Their grandfathers had been sweaty seafaring men, stinking of ship pitch and fish, with calloused hands and sunburns. But they'd founded the new city. They built it, and their families were the newly rich. They were the fleshpot princes of these shores.

Dayan looked at Garyamil who nodded. "That's the stone the old ones used. But it might have come from anywhere. I've seen them for sale in the bazaar."

"Which is where every pimp child can be found when given a coin and ten seconds to himself," L'lagura said with scorn.

Dayan began walking into the ruins, and his friend couldn't let him go alone. For then he, too, looked to be a coward. He was a year older and somewhat taller than Dayan. Surely he had the appropriate extra courage to match his years and height.

"All we have to do is get something and bring it out again. If we're quick about it, how hard can it be?" Dayan asked.

Garyamil whispered so the innkeeper's boys wouldn't overhear, "And we'll be oh so quiet that the demon mightn't hear us at all."

"We shall have the footfalls of mice," Dayan agreed.

"We shall be as brave mice," his friend added. He then snickered with how ridiculous this sounded.

Dayan giggled with him, imagining a mouse with a helmet and sword.

"We'll wait here for you," Poliurus called after them. "We'll watch and make certain you actually climb the fallen walls."

"We'll know if you try to sneak around the edge of the ruins. We'll see if you run away, and we'll tell everybody!" L'lagura promised.

The two brothel masters' boys glanced at each other before climbing over a mound of basalt wreckage. They could swear they heard each other's hearts beating, fast as any dancer's feet in the drum tantrum. They waited for the very air to feel different. It should be colder . . . fetid . . . but it wasn't.

They didn't see when L'lagura and his brother left to find other amusement. They had no intention of waiting around, bored, while these two died in the ruins. Only idiots entered that place. And if they weren't as cowardly as the boys accused them of being, they were still idiots. If the Amaki came looking for them—finding L'lagura and Poliurus there instead, they might guess the boys had baited the two into entering old Kur. And then who were the fools? Only the ones who came up against the powerful Amaki guild. Children or no, they could be stoned in the streets for having dared Amaki to their deaths.

Dayan immediately began looking for something to take. All he saw was rubble. That, and strangely imposing structures covered with vines. Not proper dwellings for humans. Only a necropolis: buildings of the dead. All in the same dark stone, as if carved straight from the shadows.

The smell was of the sea and the woods, the sand and oldness. Did evil have a smell? One of rot and foul incenses, of shit and rancid guts. This didn't smell like that.

So there couldn't really be a demon. The underworld couldn't hide itself, couldn't mask what it was.

"I'm not afraid," Dayan muttered. He said it louder. "I'm not afraid."

"What did you say?" his friend asked him, turning on one foot to look back at Dayan.

A pile of stones slipped out from under him. Garyamil began falling.

Dayan rushed forward to catch him. But suddenly Garyamil was caught by something else which took his arm and gently righted him.

There was a pause where the air was stifling, as if there were no air at all. They heard a rustling that could have been wind.

And then Garyamil was snatched off his feet altogether. A ghostly image hovered above him, snarling with a face of horror straight from the bowels of the dark world. It lifted the boy up vertically until they must have been fifty cubits above the ruins. It soared above the crooked towers and half-sunken archways, carrying the struggling Garyamil aloft.

Dayan's breath caught in his throat. He tried to scream. He managed only a few words of prayer. He watched the demon Pazuzu take his friend over the pillars of a temple and then drop him. Garyamil's shriek was long during the fall but broke off when he disappeared from sight. The demon flew back across, toward Dayan.

The boy cowered, waiting for the demon to grab him next. All the water drained out of him as he stared up at winged darkness. His ass sprayed in a series of queasy farts, and he was certain that his brain—along with his intestines—had just melted.

Pazuzu drifted around his head and shoulders, clapping wings against the child's ears. The sound was thunder and avalanche Dayan fainted in it.

When he woke up, the demon was gone. He'd skinned himself passing out on the rocks. He was still in the spot where he'd lost consciousness.

"Garyamil!" he cried as he got to his feet.

He was sickened by how he'd soiled himself. His father was going to skin him alive.

That is, providing he survived to leave this horrible place. The demon would come back. Of that he had no doubt.

But he couldn't leave his friend to try to escape.

Dayan set off in the direction of the temple he'd seen the demon Pazuzu drop Garyamil over.

Only three outside walls of the temple stood. All of its pillars had toppled. The floor was gone. The earth there had sunk a good ten cubits.

His friend lay in the pit, heaped with every kind of worm. There were flatworms and ribbonworms, eelworms and threadworms, spoonworms, hairworms, nutworms, segmented worms and spiny-headed worms. There were even some dangerous-looking centipedes and millipedes.

"Garyamil!" Dayan called to him.

Garyamil managed to lift his arms a short ways, enough that Dayan could tell he was alive. Dayan climbed down beside him, feeling the soft bodies crush beneath his feet, slipping on them and putting his hands down in the mess of them to keep his balance. Their slime paste adhered to his fingers, mashing between them. The ends still twitched even when they had no more to their centers than a smear of gummy texture.

"The demon dropped them all on me," Garyamil said, gasping.

"Can you get up?" Dayan asked.

"I can't feel my legs. Are they there? Did the demon take them?"

They were covered in worms, but Dayan could just make out the bottoms of his friend's sandals. He hung his head, knowing his friend's spine must have been broken in the fall.

"Go get help," Garyamil told him.

"I won't leave you here," Dayan said, thrusting out his ten -year-old chest boldly, even though he badly wanted to get out of the old city as fast as he could before Pazuzu returned.

Dayan felt bile swimming up to his mouth in runny curds, while he plunged his hands into the worms to clean them off his friend. He swept them off and crushed more beneath his feet. He smashed his fists into them. Vile things! Foulness! Shiteaters!

They swarmed around the shit down his legs. Crawling back across the pit floor to it, called more by their hunger than their fear of him. He stomped harder, faster, trying to destroy them before they could overwhelm him. He pulled his friend across his shoulders, both of them itchy with worms.

Somehow he got Garyamil to the surface. Somehow he managed to carry him from the ruins, every moment watching for the demon to return. Flicking worms out of his hair by twisting his head and shaking his feet. The older boy was so heavy.

The boy was flopped, very hard to keep on Dayan's shoulders. He had to climb over the low basalt rubble at the city's edge. Something tore in his groin. The pain was white hot and then became cold, frozen as he lumbered agonizingly with Garyamil's weight on him. Back into the woods, back to the road that led into new Kur. The innkeeper's sons would be there to help take Gary...mil to safety. Dayan might need carrying himself. Between his legs was ice—and a numbness he feared might never go away.

The innkeeper's sons weren't there.

Dayan could no longer stand up. He collapsed under his friend's weight, his arms and legs no stronger than wet straw.

"Garyamil! I'm sorry! I can't go any further! Garyamil?"

Dayan crept to where the other boy lay on the leafy path. His eyes stared at the sky. A thin line of frothy blood which had drooled from the corners of his mouth was dry.

How long had he been dead?

A worm crawled from his friend's nose. Disgusted and enraged, Dayan grasped it between his fingers and crushed it.

Dayan was brought from his memories by a clatter along the broken ramparts. Busparta drew his sword, seeing shadows along the crooked black stones.

Glowing. Bluish. Faces split and fangs glittered under the moonlight. There were almost twenty of the things, slowly flapping bronze fretwork wings. Elongated heads the shape of a rat's had mouths that opened all the way back

to their pointed ears. Their grotesquely muscled arms were folded in a mimicry of the waiting human's.

Ye gods! They're Smiling at us, Busparta realized with horror.

He asked Dayan, "Are these your Kura?"

"They . . . " Dayan sputtered, " . . . they can't be."

"Dayan!" one of them cried in a voice that grated the air into metallic slivers. "We're hungry. You haven't fed us for several nights, remember? But now that you're here . . . "

They leaped from the stones. The horses reared and screamed. The brothel master was thrown off.

Busparta slashed out with his sword and struck. The blade embedded halfway through the midsection of one of the creatures as it descended on him. He quickly tried to finish bisecting it, but the sword wouldn't go any farther, nor could he withdraw it to slash again.

The thing knocked Busparta to the ground. It chuckled as it straddled him, others lighting in a circle around them and bending close. It said, "The hero of Mysia can't do better than this?"

Busparta refused to cry out. He was a soldier and met his death with courage.

He hoped the underworld was a cool place.

CHAPTER 26

"I'm not at home when corpses seek my house;
I feel about it as a cat does with a mouse."
'Faust'—Goethe

Pazu watched as the new ones fed.

They had come to the ruins two mornings ago, wings ragged, disoriented by their unexpected freedom. Had they even understood they were free? Could such a concept be held in their minds?

Could any concept?

They were frightened by the approaching dawn when he found them. He greeted them like someone they ought to know (although they'd forgotten). He drew them to the shelter of the Pyramid of Sciences.

Pazu hadn't forgotten anything. He still remembered how to make the serum, as if it had been yesterday—instead of thousands of years ago. What was time to a ghost? It was a slip of days and nights, that's all. He used the deteriorated crystals.

He gave it to the Kura and then watched. He expected there would be differences. He was coolly detached, not allowing himself to tense with fear that terrible creatures—hawksharks—might arise to crush him in their weird jaws. He refused to blink when the Kura swelled up, waiting for their bodies to convolute, to smash him against the stone walls.

They only swelled to a point, no more than any other body decomposing under a hot sun. They burst into stinking sores, until he had to bring up the mass of his beard to cover his mouth and nostrils. Every part of them cracked open and bled a tarry black resin. Pazu backed up to the window and hung his head out for air.

They sprouted hair and it fell out.

They sprouted ragged feathers and crusty scales which they shed in piles.

They sprouted fangs and claws which fell out.

They vomited and shat in greasy green tendrils.

Then they died.

"Oh, no!" Pazu shouted. "This isn't what I thought would happen. There must be something else."

He frowned and cried at the bodies, "Do you have any idea how long I've waited?"

No, for they were dead. Even a few moments before when they were alive, they wouldn't have known how long it was. They might have existed for every moment of it, but they couldn't fathom the eons. The constant shift made reckoning passage impossible.

He examined them. They were definitely dead. Immortality had come to a feculent halt.

He thrust his hand into a wash of bile and excrement. He studied it.

Odd. There wasn't even anything alive in it. This was unlikely; there was always minute life in fresh shit. Pazu sat and waited beside the corpses. Not even flies gathered.

"Light," he said to himself.

He squinted and peered closer. He stepped back for perspective. He dragged one of the bodies into the darkest shadows in the room. Yes, there was a light there.

It wasn't a bright light. It was surely not a clean light. It flickered across the skin and radiated several inches from the silhouette.

Aura.

"The souls haven't left the bodies," Pazu murmured, then shrugged. "The soul always departs the useless shell. Without a rhythm in the heart muscle or a dream in the skull, the spirit has nothing to hold it. So what are they doing there?"

There were no heartbeats when he listened at the sunken chests. He put his hands on their heads and sensed no electricity within. Every Kura priest knew than the active brain contained a sort of lightning which crackled and hummed. Even a badly damaged brain produced a little static, which a sensitive doctor could trace.

Why, then, had these souls not flown. Were they trapped?

And if they still had souls, did this indicate they were alive somehow?

Was there a state other than dead or alive?

He owned the answer at the following sunset. There was a third state. And he, Pazu the Kura, had discovered it.

When they rose at nightfall, they were corpses with spirits intact. They didn't do the endless shift, for that had been a deviated function of biology. He watched them as they attacked the two humans at the edge of the ruins.

He almost clapped his hands with delight. "They can alter themselves at will!"

Their ferocious aspects didn't alarm him. They seemed to have such deliberate purpose, one intended to frighten as well as overcome.

(This was a throwback to the original serum. Or was it? Those alterations were drawn from telepathy. Were they only reading what it took to scare these men, or was it a spiritual memory of evil?)

Bending over the two bodies, crouching in a circle like vultures, they slurped loudly until it could be heard over the wind in the trees.

"They still drink blood," Pazu remarked to himself. "That's curious."

Did the dead body need the blood to keep it supple? Was this another recollection from a race that had always taken its sustenance from blood, instead of meat?

The original Kura weren't killers. They weren't cruel. It had been taboo to take life. Blood was let in small amounts, never enough to truly harm. If a man wanted an apple, he didn't destroy the whole tree to get it, or soon there weren't any more apples.

The new ones drained the two dry, creating devastating wounds from which to drink. They might, of course, have merely made a slight puncture to sup through, but they were killers and they were cruel. They slashed open the flesh wantonly, almost playfully.

Euphoric, they flew high toward the moon, like the old shifters. They went up until Pazu couldn't see them any longer.

"Did you make it all the way?" he mused, staring up at the stars.

Why not? Perhaps only demons could visit the moon. Should he have tried to do this himself when he played the demon Pazuzu for the Am...k;? But he hadn't really been a demon. He had been a ghost; he'd been chained to the ruins.

While they were gone, Pazu took the bodies of the two men to the pyramid so they wouldn't be discovered. After all, they were dead and outside the ruins. He'd always been careful to kill only within the old city, so he could impress upon the tourists the need to stay away. And the human-whothought-he-was-a-wolf had taken his kills to a cave. (Or had buried them.) Lots of guesswork for the poor humans. What happened to so-and-so? Oh, they must have gone to the ruins! Well, they were warned.

The new ones came back down just before sunrise, still afraid of the dawn. Pazu shook his head. It was a side effect he might never be able to reverse. In the back of his mind he knew it was the 'balance'. As much as he liked to disregard the old teachings, Lilit could have been right about this. It was a rule. For everything you could wring from the gods, they always managed to hold something back.

One was a bit slower than the others. Pazu saw it racing for the window slit, scrabbling yellowish claws in the purple air. A ray of sunlight scraped along one of its legs and burned a hole completely through a wing.

"Come! Hurry! Do you want to be torched? Don't move your limbs so wildly. You slow yourself down! Let go and fall now!" Pazu instructed, leaning from the window, his hands out. "Fall! I'll catch you!"

The man he'd taken over was strong. The new one shrieked and dropped in the sky. Pazu was half-pulled from the window as he grabbed hold of it by a flailing arm. It wasn't heavy, no more than a hide hung out to tan.

He dragged it in through the window slit, hearing it wheeze. The leg was shriveled like a winter twig.

Pazu cut his arm to bathe it in his own blood.

Shaking, the creature looked at him with eyes of chipped volcanic glass. It nodded, hardly able to keep awake.

"See? It heals," Pazu told it paternally.

He let them rest.

He considered how he might take his serum to the other Kura who were being held captive in the new city. He began examining the two murdered men. It had been a long time since he'd had subjects for autopsy. He was startled to discover their souls clinging to their corpses. Sunset came as Pazu waited. He was anxious, wishing he could talk the sun into falling the way he'd talked the beast into it. What could this mean?

The two humans sat up at twilight.

His army could ultimately be much larger than he'd ever originally dared hope.

He showed them to the changed Kura.

He said, "These are your brothers."

He didn't have to get the serum to the other Kura. He had only to get these new ones to them. It could be passed on through the bite.

CHAPTER 27

"... I shall wake up in peace; I shall not putrefy ..."

-Egyptian Book Of The Dead

Emana had no sense of time or of herself. It wasn't like a dream state where at least there was identity, however it might be distorted.

There was nothing: no sleep, no dream. It wasn't like the Kura-nothing that came after the serum was taken. This wasn't alarming. It didn't threaten or terrify.

There were no senses to feel these forebodings.

It was blank. That was better.

Emana didn't arrive at a shining heaven.

There was no underworld where dust was the fare of the dead and clay their food. No one weighed her heart to see how heavy her refusal to drink Lar Anut's sin had made it.

There were no approaching stars where she would find Rasal's face.

There were no mists to part, that she might visit Eno one last time to say goodbye and how she would miss him.

She didn't even think of these things at all, for Emana didn't think.

She no longer heard the singing of the worms.

Then, very abruptly, she had a thought.

Of darkness. Of cool soil. A rush of energy tingled all over. An ecstasy of pure love.

She wasn't in a grave but in a mothering embrace.

Her wounds healed. She felt ravages weaving, seamlessly rejoined, smooth. Organs which had collapsed swelled like fruit from blossoms on a vine.

She knew this feeling. She'd undergone this process before.

But was there more? Did she sense something a bit more tangible than the powerful nurturing from the heart of the world?

Emana realized, Someone's in here with me.

There was more than love. There was individual ego.

A thrill coursed through her veins which began to run with blood again. This hadn't happened the last time, nor had she ever heard of any other Ishantu relating that there was an 'identity' in the grave with them.

The goddess shrouded, made whole, vibrated a special vitality through the ground. She radiated her chilly maternity through sod, stone and dust, but never did she put in a personal appearance—whispering in an Ishantu's ear, Be not afraid but return to the living.

Never did the goddess murmur your name.

"Emana, be not afraid."

Emana gasped. There WAS someone here with her. She didn't imagine she heard it.

She started moving her fingers, a little bit at first, inching them to tweak at the cramped muscles. Next she bent her hands at the wrists, struggling to bend her arms at rusty elbows. She began clawing her way up through the soil.

Something was wrong. The ground sifted around her. It was too soft. It was getting softer.

It was soddening.

Emana heard thunder through the weight atop her.

It was raining. This was a marshy area. It must be raining very hard to make the earth turn so wet. Emana realized she was sinking. If she didn't get out soon, she might drown. She would smother as everything she lay in turned to mud. She frantically paddled, trying to pull herself into a sitting position. But it was a storm blown in from the ocean. It was a torrent she could only flounder in with nothing to grab hold of.

She sputtered mud from her mouth, gasping for air.

She swam in rainwater, legs scissoring back and forth, unable to find a point of control in it. She heard the voice in her head again, whispering, murmuring, multiplying until it was many voices, until it seemed as if there were bodies in this flood which bounced around her. The rainwater was red, scarlet as the inside of her mouth.

She opened her eyes and could barely see the edge.

The edge of the camphor chest.

She saw worms in a knot, earthworms squirming out of the soil, intricate love sigils. But they weren't in the box itself. They only formed part of it.

It was like in her dream, a hand coming over the sides of it toward her.

Eno grasped her upraised arm and pulled her out. He screamed her name over and over.

It wasn't a box. It was just the edge of her grave.

He dragged her out of the flooding hole and lifted her in his arms. Through the sheets of falling water, she saw Alali and Solon. They were both drenched, both grinning because she'd risen. She'd risen because those who loved her waited.

Eno kissed her mouth. She swallowed down his breath.

Behind him she could see the outline of the new city. Was it the dawn that made it look red?

Shining?

Why else would it seem to glow, as if splashed with the sun?

The sun was rising in the east, difficult to see because of the storm overhead, yet it turned the clouds and even the rain scarlet. It must have been what made the city look so ruddy.

There was a flash of brilliance from the overwhelmed grave. Something the color of burning myrrh flopped out of it and dove straight for Emana.

There was a buoyancy she had to yield to.

The Ishantu's eyes closed momentarily. Her face took on a glow that melted back into her features. When she opened her eyes again, she looked at Eno as if she didn't recognize him.

She smiled a bit primly and said, "Put me down, please."

Eno was puzzled but did as he was asked.

It stopped raining when her feet touched the ground.

Alali gasped. "You're not Emana!"

"She isn't?" Solon frowned, looking for some visible difference in the resurrected woman.

"Then who is she?" Eno asked.

Alali stepped forward, trembling. "Don't I know you?"

It was a fair enough question, for she still looked every bit like Emana. But whatever else was there was also most familiar.

"Yes," said the stranger in Emana's body. "Don't worry. Your friend is still inside, here and safe. No harm will come to her. You know me. I'm Lilit."

Lilit touched the Kura's forehead and added, "It's been a long time, Faj."

Alali was no more. The final stage in the Kura's healing progressed in a leap. The former student stood before his teacher.

He put his hand over his mouth in awe, recalling everything.

Solon stared, his jaw dropping to his chest.

"You're male," the dwarf whispered.

Faj gingerly patted his own torso, in a sad astonishment it was poignant to witness. He replied, "So it would seem."

"I don't understand. You say you are Lilit," Eno said, shaking his head. "Why have you possessed the Lady Hathor?"

"To keep the world in its balance," she replied.

CHAPTER 28

"After her came gray wolves, fawning on her, and grim-eyed lions, and bears, and fleet leopards, ravenous for deer; and she was glad in heart to see them . . . "

Hymn to Aphrodite -Homer

It had been a long night. Emana hadn't risen until daybreak. Eno hadn't slept for three days and nights. Solon and Alali (now Faj) hadn't really rested much in that time either. The day was spent in Emana's room at the Lazuli.

The Ishantu who was possessed by Lilit sat in some meditative trance, long lashes fluttering as her closed eyes moved.

Eno slept next to her, snoring lightly. One hand strayed to touch her leg, an unconscious gesture of closeness. Lilit didn't move away from it, perhaps because she was deeply immersed in her own spell.

Solon sat next to Faj, the Kura curled up on the cushions.

The dwarf thought about the conversation he'd shared with Faj earlier, as they walked back from Emana's grave.

"Do you no longer love me?" Faj asked Solon.

"I don't know. I've always perceived you as female, no matter what shape you took."

"And is this shape so important?"

Solon considered his own form of stunted size: short body, large head, stubby fingers. The scars on one side of his face. He'd always believed in a majesty that went beyond the appearance and which mattered more in the long run. It saddened him to think this belief was only the delusion of all lesser beings.

"Did you sleep with men before you became a shifter?" Solon replied tentatively, realizing he was answering a question with a question.

Faj smiled wistfully. "I was engaged to a lady named Wea. We were very much in love."

"Do you still love her?"

Faj stared off through the trees. The sun had come up enough to turn all the marsh grasses a burnt orange. The ground steamed from the recent rain. The dwarf wondered if the Kura was seeing phantoms in this steam, the way that distant memories sometimes emerged in elemental pictures. Of course, no one else could see them. Maybe they were nothing but water in the eyes, swimming fleetingly across the pupils.

"It's been nine thousand years of having no memories and no identity. It's as if I dreamed Wea. One can't love a dream."

Solon looked down at his own feet. There was mud up to his knees. His golden hair—touched here and there with threads of an ash gray—was

frizzing into ringlets in the dampness. He thought to himself, Yes, one can love a dream.

"She's probably dead. The odds are against her survival. Only one in one hundred of us is still here. I can't even recall her face or the smell of her perfume. What did her voice sound like? I don't know. My most recent tender memories—my only tender memories—are of you, Solon."

Solon sighed. "You speak of this Wea as if she was beautiful."

"She was, verv."

The dwarf may have always believed in the majesty beyond appearance, but facts were facts. "I'm a dwarf." Did he actually say this to Faj or was it an admission he made to himself?

"The Egyptian god Ptah is often depicted as a dwarf. Yet he created the universe," Faj replied.

This handsome Kura smiled warmly and touched the dwarf's hand.

Solon now watched as Faj slept, admiring the long muscled limbs, the broad shoulders. There was a cast to the fine features, not showing the ravages of time in wrinkles but merely where suffering had been. He looked like a youth who had endured great hardship and been made noble by it. His beauty was only slightly flawed by a melancholy and was still so nearly perfect it took Solon's breath away. Being next to him, the scars in the dwarf's face didn't ache and no longer mocked him.

Was love restricted to one's expectations? Any Kura might have drawn Solon with a sentimental longing, might have become the object to be worshipped respectfully at a distance. But only this one had effected him this way. He'd cherished only Alali. And without that being an icon of singular appearance, what else was there but a quality which beckoned him?

That which Solon cherished was still here. He felt it stir him when Faj was close by, sensed it haunting him when they were apart.

Gender, like form, was an illusion. When he closed his eyes, the illusion ceased to exist. What remained was love, always love.

Solon bent and kissed Faj's cheek, then leaned only a little closer so that their breaths might mingle.

The sun went down. Lilit opened her eyes. She rose wordlessly and left the room. Eno stirred, seeing her go.

"Quickly," he whispered, nudging Faj and Solon awake.

"Where is she going?" the dwarf asked.

The Kura smiled. "I think I know. We should accompany her. She might need protecting."

Lilit strode purposefully out of the inn and down the avenue. She called in a loud voice, "Come out and be healed!"

The city was already noisy with revelers. One more voice was scarcely noticed, even when it came from the beautiful Ishantu. She walked down the street, her hair and the edges of her dress lifting in the light wind, finding every place where she wouldn't be jostled. People naturally seemed to get out

of her way without realizing it. The grand party of license and cruelty swelled on, unabated, until shifters fled the first brothel she approached. It was only gradually that anyone noticed that something was happening.

The Kura harlots came through the windows of their rooms, abandoning the first clients of the evening's trade. The flames on the candles there turned violet as they flew past. They twisted out in all manner of shapes, from sublime to disgusting, horrors and elegance in passing seconds, trailing the dark moods they had worn for their customers.

Lilit greeted each with an embrace and tears, the manner of a mother finding her badly burned children. They quivered in her arms, beginning to bleed from every pore simultaneously. They didn't react as if this was a danger, even when the ooze quickly hardened into a scarlet shell. Leaving them frozen thus, she moved to the next and the next.

A crowd of those humans who were waiting in the brothel's courtyard or nearby in the street gathered to watch. The brothel master stormed out through the gate.

"What's going on here? Return to your rooms at once!" he commanded.

The Kura didn't go. Lilit turned each one into a statue of clotted blood.

"What are you doing? Who are you? An Ishantu! All you Ishantu do is cause trouble now. I've heard about you," the master cried.

He swiveled to touch one of the hardened, red shapes. It flaked rust onto his fingers. He studied it, repelled. He wiped his hand on his tunic.

The arms on the statues began to move, hands slowly picking apart the scabs, pulling them off as if they were nothing more than dried clay from a cleansing mud bath. They cracked out, flicking garnets of it into the wind, emerging with clean and constant skins. There were no grotesqueries in metamorphosis.

Faj whistled and did a little dance as he recognized people of his race and city. They blinked in tremulous wonder, touching their own new skin. They stared at their hands which didn't even ripple.

The crowd gasped, chattering among themselves. Many guessed this was a magic trick being performed for their amusement. They applauded politely.

"Change Your face, too," someone giggled, imitating the vendors from the bazaar.

Lilit moved onto the next street and the next brothel, calling, "Come out and be healed!"

The harlots followed, crying out the same message, listening to themselves without the gutteral or warbling shrills that had infected them. Faj belted it out as loud as he could, taking Solon's hand. The dwarf added his voice to the mix. Eno just shook his head and laughed.

"You know there are people who won't appreciate this," Eno said.

"There's always someone with no sense of humor or mystery," Solon replied.

"This one doesn't look impressed," Eno pointed out as the brothel master shouted for a guard.

At the second brothel the Kura hobbled, crawled, slithered out. One had enormous multiple teats like a mountain range. Another had become dead for its client, and bones were protruding through papyrus-thin skin, the head so rotted that the mouth was a grinning rictus. The only part of it not visibly decomposing was its apple ass, rosy and plump and freshly scratched. Another had shrews for hands, tiny scraps of flesh hanging from their teeth. Yet another had a face that seemed to have been torn by shrews. Lilit clasped each to her bosom, her braids falling across them in scented wands. The blood came and washed them.

The brothel master of this house also screamed for a guard.

A Kura was on a leash, in a shape that was part sacred cow, part sacrificial lamb, part boy. It was bending to an Indian woman who wore a bronze corkscrew phallus strapped to her wide hips and a rakshasa mask that she poked her tongue through. The harlot heard Lilit and pulled against the leather restraints. The woman snapped out a few irritable words and yanked hard on the leash. The creature bleated in pain.

"That's quite uncalled for," Solon said.

He ran over to the pair. He drew his dagger and cut the leash.

The woman struck out at him furiously. He put his arm up to ward off her blow, then snatched off her toy cock with his free hand. He jabbed her in the belly with it until she backed off.

She clutched her stomach as if it were a mortal wound. "You've cut me, you little untouchable."

"Oh, shut up. It's nothing more than a scratch," Solon retorted. "Be grateful I didn't stick it up your ass so you know how it feels."

"This will scar me," she protested.

"Consider it karma," he replied with a bow before hopping back to the others.

She screamed in anger as her Kura went with him. Its face twisted, taking on the countenance of her mask: the rakshasa which was the blood-beast of India. It went from bright green to yellow to blue. Its talons dragging the cobblestones sent up sparks. It turned its long gleaming eyes—slitted like wounds filled with gangrenous fire—to stare balefully at the crowd. Even as used to freakish travesties of nature as the travelers were, many of them still backed away from this gaze as if they had been forcibly shoved.

A guard finally arrived, pushing through the mob. He was flanked by irate pimps.

"The Ishantu is stealing our Kura. It's against the law," the brothel masters complained.

The guard frowned, seeing only people and statues out of some strange red stone he couldn't identify. Only a few nights ago, a guard had infuriated the Amaki guild by making an unfortunate decision, and this one was determined not to make the same mistake.

But as he watched, stiff images peeled. He watched the red stone crumble and sniffed acrid odor. There were only people inside them. Was this a masquerade?

"Where are the harlots you say she's abducted?" he asked.

"There! In front of you, idiot!" the pimps insisted.

"These aren't shifters," the guard replied warily.

Eno grinned. "No, they aren't."

The pimps grimaced at each other and then snapped back, "Well, they were a few minutes ago."

"They're Ishantu," the guard said.

Lilit and her attendants went down the street, calling, "Come out and be healed!"

There were at least sixty Kura with her now. The noise they made as they cried was impossible to miss, even in a place as turbulent as Kur.

Were-things of every divine and terrible definition swarmed from the next brothel. They left their clients shouting in outrage, coming out behind them, naked and oily. The fourth brothel master ran out behind, running his fingers nervously through the carefully arranged rows of his braids.

Lilit kissed, held, bathed the Kura in their own blood.

"Hold! I see it. This is against the law," the guard admitted. He drew his sword.

"The law says she can't steal them. It doesn't say she can't cure them," Faj explained, insinuating himself between his teacher and the guard.

The guard looked him over, believing Faj to be another Ishantu.

"Stop her!" the brothel masters pleaded.

Most of the crowd of onlookers cheered the performance. Others, cheated of their fleshy vessels and knowing this was not a play, shook their fists.

"I paid good money!"

"I want a refund if I can't get satisfaction!"

"What kind of business are you running here?"

"Stone her!"

The guard grabbed Lilit by her arm and wrenched her around to face him.

Her eyes glowed a spotted red/white. There was a flash and the stench of roasted meat. The air crackled. The guard yelped like a dog and pulled his stricken hand away. An aura of tremendous power flared from her silhouette and, for a moment, she was solid as terra cotta, as granite, as marble. She had a different visage for every person in the crowd: she was Isis with lapis blue eyes, she was a gorgon with the head of a bee and snakes for antennae, Ishtar wearing a crescent moon, a faceless effigy with pregnant abdomen and swollen breasts.

Eno, Faj and Solon had their weapons in hand, ready to defend her. The healed Kura flexed muscles surperior to the gathered humans.

Some fool threw a rock. It struck Lilit in the forehead. She didn't even sway on her feet as blood briefly appeared from a gash over her right arched eyebrow. She ran her fingers across it, gathered the drops, and shook them

onto the ground. As the cut on her forehead sealed shut evenly, lilies bloomed from the spatters of blood.

"See whom you offend and what you risk," Eno told the four brothel masters.

The guard stepped back, lowering his sword. The pimps glanced at each other and fidgeted. This was no mere Ishantu woman. This was a goddess.

Lilit continued down to the fifth brothel. The Amaki businessmen scurried ahead to warn the others. By the time the Kura marched to the sixth, the word was abroad.

"Come out and be healed!"

No one left the house. The clients milled about on the street and in the courtyard, glaring at the assembly with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. The brothel master stood at his front door, hands perched defiantly on his hips. But he was clearly loathe to actually speak against her.

"He's locked them up. I feel it. In a stuffy little room under the house," Lilit said sadly.

Solon recalled the sort of room it was from Dayan's. Faj did, too, and had tears in his eyes for the captives.

It was the same at each brothel they went to afterward. No more Kura came out to be healed. The hundred who had now clung to each other and wept. Lilit swallowed hard, her breasts heaving with a mixture of emotions: grief, rage, helplessness.

Eno put his arm around her tenderly, not thinking he was brazenly touching a sacred being. In his mind he comforted Emana again. He strongly felt that she was also inside this body and hurting over the imprisoned Kura. Besides, didn't goddesses ever require solace?

"You've cured a hundred, and this is miraculous," he reminded her.

"But now," Lilit said in a cracking voice, "Pazu will get the others. I don't know how he'll do it, but he will."

Later that night, the new ones came into the city. They sought out and rippled through the silent brothels. They became rats to chew through the doors of the underground cells. They became insects to burrow through the dirt floors, between the clay bricks, clacking carapaces against the dust that rimned the lower cells.

Then they stood next to the harlots and took on the most shining of forms. They became bright as the angels the Hebrew spoke of, as the elementals of the Kels, as lovely apsaras revered by the people of the Indus Valley. They held out their arms and smiled, saying, "We are your brothers. Give up these skins you can't control. Know what you are. You have the chance to make a slave of the night, instead of being the slaves of night."

Each was given a sharp kiss. Each fluttered in exquisite agony, breaking out in rotten pustules, shedding skin, feathers, hair.

"Who's down there?" a voice called from above in one of the brothels.

There were footsteps on the stairs. A master unlocked the door and thrust a candle before him into the darkness.

Demon wings clattered. Mouths stretched above the dead Kura, as wide as a man's whole arm.

During the day, no one on the street would know that there had been slaughter in each brothel. The harlots, their pimps, entire Amaki families in their beds. Three hundred and eighty whore-creatures. Another eighty humans. There was no stench, not that went beyond the walls to reach the street, no blood for every drop had been lapped up. No one could know anything about it, until night came.

CHAPTER 29

"... let a wolf come and reduce mankind ..."

Epic Of Gilgamesh — Mesopotamian

His new ones were visiting the last of the captives.

The darkness fairly hummed with the news of it. It popped with vibrant energy, as if the stars were filled with blood and that blood had heated to a boil.

Pazu had his own work to do.

Lyko's personality was gone but the substance of his brain was intact. Inside it were meaty memory centers that intrigued Pazu only vaguely to explore. Much of the history of the man who thought he was a wolf was of no interest to the scientist. It was a raga of unimaginitive violence and sordid delusions. But there was one piece he had access to that he decided he might be able to use.

Far down the ginger beach, into the trees that covered hills and descended into gorges, there was a cave with a high ceiling. It was where Lyko used to spend his days. It was where he brought the people he'd attacked. He'd been preying on the tourists of Kur for a year. There were dozens of carcasses in a heap on the cavern floor, in varying stages of rot. Contrary to the lunatic's memory, very little of the bodies had been eaten by their killer. Some parts were missing, such as fingers, but this had likely been an act of terrorizing them while they were still alive. The positions of some of the female corpses suggested they had been raped, either before or after their deaths—in some cases LONG after their deaths.

The walls of the cave had been decorated by humans living in the area in the time of the original city. There were handprints scattered everywhere, fingers splayed. Spike-haired bison and spotted horses were rendered in ocher, charcoal, and manganese oxide, which had been crushed into powder and mixed with piss, animal grease, and fish glue. There were hump-backed men drawn with antlers and snowy owl women. There were depictions of soul crows soaring above lifeless bodies drawn in white—the cyclical color of death.

Pazu stood under these works of ancient art, honorums to symbols of death. He stared at the recent dead in the pile and couldn't help smiling at the convenient juxtaposition. There were charred bones from boar and deer but they were mostly old. Rocks were blackened with ancient smoke. Skulls—bashed in at their bases—sat in archaic fire pits. There were stone scrapers, bone picks, an empty tusk.

This was what humans were fit for. Squatting on their dirty haunches, afraid of the dark, unable even to keep their fingernails clean.

Who was it taught them how to build ships and weave cloth? Surely they could never have managed these leaps by themselves. Lilit's

followers—scattered to the world's corners—must have given them the manner of these things, must have shown them about building and creating. The killing was a trick humans had always possessed. But how irresponsible to give them the rest.

They should have remained ignorant savages.

Knowledgeable savages did too much damage.

Now who was upsetting the balance of nature, Lilit?

Pazu sniffed. The close atmosphere of the cave was rank with decay. How had that Lyko fellow been able to bear sleeping here?

He was human, and they usually lived in their own filth.

Pazu resided in this inferior shell.

Not that he intended to do so forever.

He couldn't 'forever'. Lyko wasn't immortal.

Unless Lyko's body took the serum.

And he would take it sometime in the future. Eventually, but not yet.

He had too much to do to be restricted to only being conscious at the hours of the night. He needed to build his army and be ready to take it abroad. He must take over the new city. They required more new ones. They needed ships. With ships they could go anywhere, infect others, bloat the ranks of Pazu's followers. He would command those ships.

They couldn't sail during the day. But they could operate in the reverse of the Phoenicians. They would sail only at night, hugging the shore line closely, sleeping by day.

It would come to pass that he'd mastermind the fall of the race of men, undoing the damage Lilit's fools had done. The new Kura would dominate all, absorbing humanity into their number. In the old days, the Kura had worked to guide the various struggling species toward their evolution. This was simply that: the most major of restructurings—the ultimate mutation.

It boiled down to that braid of determining codes again. He'd found a way to take it from one creature and insert it into another. The vector he used was in the serum. Were the glacier crystals the catalyst? Pazu didn't know. Its importance seemed secondary to the event itself. The only thing he could focus on was the heat of the power he held in his hands, not the mechanisms of that power.

Pazu pulled the bottle from his cloak and removed the stopper. He reminded himself that this was an experiment. His success—the success of the Kura race—didn't depend on this working. It was possible that the contagion could only be spread from a primary source, one which had actually ingested the serum, i.e., a Kura drank the serum, died, rose, and then passed it on through the saliva. Perhaps this was a waste of the serum, testing it to see if it could be viable through an external application.

And on inanimate tissue, once alive/presently dead.

Pazu sprinkled the serum on the remains of Lyko's victims. He wet his fingers with it. He rubbed these across the teeth in mouths stretched in vacuous rictuses, through the stiff white breastbones behind which hearts had

shriveled, in leathery ridges of vaginas between legs that had been pulled so far apart the hips must have cracked. He daubed it in eyeless sockets as if it were magic tears.

He sat back and watched, grinning in the dark.

If they did re-animate, would they be as strong, coming from a damaged source?

He smelled his fingers. There was something compelling in the stench, primally raw and erotic. Either it was because this was the wolf man's nostrils he was inhaling it through or Pazu had been a ghost too long.

He licked one finger inquisitively. The mouldy sharpness surprised him. Overripe fruit, tangy musk, fermented kelp would taste like this. His saliva flowed richly as he put the other fingers in his mouth and sucked them.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked the pile of treated corpses. "Do something. Are you completely juiceless?"

He sucked his fingers and chuckled.

"No. Not completely juiceless."

But absolutely nothing happened. No sores blossomed and no greening pus spilled. No hair or teeth fell out, except in the bodies Pazu handled too roughly when smearing with the serum.

"Old priest," he said aloud to himself, "this was a trifle foolish."

He stood up and brushed himself off.

They had no souls. That was the key to this new wrinkle in the crystals. The soul had to be present in the body to be trapped in it. To have brought these corpses back to consciousness—and any semblance of animation—would have required an actual healing (in which they were rejoined with those spirits which had flown). The demon Pazuzu had no use for cures.

For this serum to work, there must be a process of murder. It was the only style a devil would find acceptable.

Sunset brought hundreds of demons into the streets of Kur. They swooped down on hard filigreed wings to snatch people up, carrying them across the tops of white and pink marble ziggurats. Bloody hailstones struck the roofs. They swarmed out of the brothels, greeting customers at the gates with appetites more depraved than any tourist's.

"What is your pleasure this evening?"

"What is your mood?"

"Come, let me share with you the darkest mood possible."

A parade began in the bazaar, such as would begin on any night. People capered in grotesque masks, ornamental spurs spinning, barbed dildos jutting, wearing udders and hindparts from freshly butchered animals. No one thought anything was amiss when some of them were more outlandish in their costuming, seeming to possess masks of remarkably elastic ferocity, fangs and claws that were cunningly pronged, gross genitalia swinging in tantalizing threat with acid-dripping pockets and serrated quills. They

admired it, reaching out to fondle, enviously exclaiming, "Wherever did you buy that costume?"

Until the strange prancers started sinking those jaws into whoever moved nearest, burying their snouts into swiftly gashed throats and snorting gouts of blood. The parade, which was already a riot, began to stampede.

In the shop where freaks were grown in twisted vases and sold as perversely ornamental flowers (and toys), the children warped in pots overheard the crippled man whisper to someone, "Do you love monsters? Grow your own."

They heard the master say after, "The garden of prodigies."

A voice hissed, "Monsters. Yessssssss."

There was a muffled groan and the sound of a painful breaking. A heavy but soft object was flung against the wall. A shadow entered the tilted doorway, dragging the master convoluter by a mangled foot. The vase-people shuddered and cried. The shadow stuffed the master into an empty pot, mashing him down with blunt force. He was wrenched at the joints until the pulped body was squeezed head-first into the container. The shadow stood up and turned to them. Liquid dripped from its fingers.

It said, "Thus has he been interred. Would you be released?"

The vase-people nodded but still shivered.

"The beast is unafraid," it said as it slid forward and grabbed the one nearest it by the head.

It lifted the screaming boy-in-the-pot high above it and brought him down hard against the dirt floor. The vase shattered and the misshapened body squirmed in the pieces, grinding shards into himself as he writhed.

The shadow bared a double row of yellow fangs and said, "Die a bit now, then make your own shape."

Some of the stunted prodigies struggled in their pots but couldn't even manage to tip themselves over. The others watched the carnage with a fatalistic detachment, as if this was no better and no worse than the rest of what they knew. When their turns came, they didn't even flop amid the pieces of their urns, and were less than surprised by how little it hurt.

Lilit and Faj stood in the Lazuli courtyard and heard screams. Eno and Solon came out of the inn.

"This is louder than usual for Kur," the dwarf commented.

Lilit replied stoically, "Death is usually more tumultuous than pleasure."

"Death?" Eno muttered and stepped to the gate.

Faj took his arm. "Be careful, friend. The dark is full of devils."

At that moment a beast with serpents for head and phallus jumped on a woman in front of the inn.

"What's happening?" Eno shouted, seeing bodies lying in the street.

"Pazu has moved his plans along sooner than I guessed," Lilit explained. "He's already making his major move."

Eno stared at her. "You knew this was going to happen and you didn't warn anyone?"

"She didn't precisely know," Faj said in her defense.

"She's a goddess, isn't she?" Eno countered hotly, jumping when he heard a roar in the street.

Pillars were falling at the opening to a Minoan style bathhouse. A beast the height and girth of six large bears was pushing them over. It snapped its jaws at pieces of speckled granite that flew up from the dust when the pillars crashed to the ground.

"A goddess is little more than a glorified ghost," Lilit replied sadly. "I have some elemental power, but I can't divine all things nor encompass all evils. If gods could do that, there would be no evil."

A crowd ran by, carrying their possessions in their hands.

Voices cried, "The docks! Try to get to the ships!"

A heavily-whiskered man lumbered out of the inn with a carved ebony chest balanced on his shoulder. His eyes bulged with fright, and he swung his free arm wildly to knock aside anyone who got in his way. Solon was shoved to the ground as the man rushed by.

"Hey!" the dwarf snapped as he found himself sprawled in the dirt. "Watch where you're going!"

Faj extended a hand to help him up.

"The only chance you have is to board a ship at once . . . " someone on the street shouted.

A severed leg dropped from the sky, splattering drops of blood the size of Babylonian coins. It was followed by other assorted parts, some readily identifiable, some not, all gory and freshly rended. Overhead was a grating, metallic laughter as harsh as a proper surgeon's saw against a bronze pike. A head hit the limestone courtyard bench, then rolled a couple of lopsided revolutions to lie partially squashed among a stand of bearded iris. Like a gibbous moon, it peered blindly out at the foursome.

"We have to do something," Eno said simply. "We have to fight them. Other people must be fighting them."

Looking out into the street, he saw a guard slashing away at a beast with the legs of a man but the upper body of a leopard. It snarled and crouched, raking its claws low at the guard's underbelly as the man swung his blade too high.

"I may not kill," Lilit admitted. "I can't take a life."

"I don't think they're alive, Lady," Faj pointed out.

"It doesn't change the fact that I can't be the instrument of their destruction. I'm a goddess of life and death, but my death face is not a destroyer. I'm a beacon for what is to be and what has been. I'm the comfort of both beginning and end," she replied. "You may kill in defense of yourself or another but I can't end an existence for any reason."

Eno gasped, exasperated. He saw three men and a boy hurrying up the street. He stepped from the yard to block their path.

"I know you," he said, astonishment on his face.

Eno stared at the older man, as if this were surely the last place he would have expected to find this person.

The man replied very quietly, the soul of composure despite the chaos around him, "Prince Hila."

The two younger men stepped forward protectively, reaching into their robes as if for weapons. Of course, he would have bodyguards.

The old man gestured. "It's all right. I know him."

Lilit knew Emana recognized these people also, as having been on the ship that brought the Ishantu to Kur. They were Israelites. The boy called Azariah gazed up at her with wonder, seeing she was changed from the last time he'd seen her but not certain how.

Eno bowed deeply, touching his forehead and heart in a salute of respect. "King Solomon. You're far from Jerusalem."

"No doubt you're curious as to what would bring me to such a city," the king said wryly. His beard was flecked with gray and combed with rose oil.

Eno could only nod, positive the renowned wise man must have a noble—or at philosophical—purpose.

"I've always had this passion for foreign women. It will be my downfall with God," Solomon said with a half-smile. "There are none more foreign than those in Kur."

"Highness, we must hurry if we're to get aboard a ship," one of the younger Jews urged. The muscles along his jaw tensed.

The king glanced at Lilit. "If you're thinking of boarding a ship," he said to Eno, "be careful where you travel with the Ish fntu. I've heard they're being driven out of many countries. Everyone seems to have turned on them. Some have been killed. I would wish no harm befall the lady."

Lilit felt a stab of sorrow that was from Emana Hathor. Eno saw the pain of guilt in her eyes. There was the presence of his beloved in it.

The boy trembled as a demon raced by, an Egyptian woman across its shoulders. Its hand was inserted up her rectum. They noticed how it moved, bowing out the base of her spine and working its way up, the line of her vertibrae undulating. Blood, shit, and slivers of bone poured from the jammed orifice. The woman had either fainted or she was dead.

Lilit put her hand on the child's head and whispered, "Don't be afraid, son. You'll escape. You'll be glad in your heart again."

The king of Israel and his entourage hastened away.

"We should go, too," Eno suggested, thinking only of Emana's safety.

Lilit shook her head emphatically. "I can't go. I have work to do."

Faj said, "I made my decision long ago—very long ago—that my destiny was here."

"I won't go if Faj doesn't," the dwarf added.

Eno sighed. He wouldn't abandon Emana. So where did this leave them? One of the Kura the goddess healed the previous night was valiantly battling a demon in a red cloak. The hundred had gone their own way, marching into the hills to watch the sunrise... and to perform a ceremony of thanksgiving to the gods. How many of them returned when this night came and were fighting Pazu's creatures?

The demon in the expensive red cloak fought with a sword, instead of with any number of the bestial weapons it might have culled from its own physical arsenal.

The Kura dodged as the other lunged, then spun on the ball of his foot and struck the demon's blade with his own. Then he pivoted, the devil's sword grazing his side. He angled away, ignoring the superificial cut, bringing his own sword up to catch the demon between the legs.

It should have been a mortal blow, this upward slash into the groin and guts. The wound fissured and split like a chasm. They heard a wind blowing from it, furious and whistling. Ice and snow whipped out of it, momentarily blinding the Kura. The demon leaned forward then and plunged the sword into the Kura's shoulder. It yanked savagely up on the hilt and then chopped down with it until it hacked off the man's arm. The sundered Kura slumped to the street.

Solon saw the demon's single eye. The other socket was nothing but a gold disk, gleaming in the flesh as if molten.

The dwarf had seen this particular crimson cloak before. Its owner had stood before him imperiously and refused him entrance.

"Dayan," he said. There was a familiar cruel beauty in the otherwise goblin face. "It's Dayan the pimp."

The fiend turned upon hearing its name. They could now tell that it didn't actually hold a sword. Its arm was a sword, and it swung the blade as it charged. Solon stubbornly unsheathed his own smaller dagger, hopping around Faj who had stepped in front of him protectively.

Dayan bellowed. He came at the dwarf and the Kura, swiftly carving the air with elaborate manuevers of the blade. He ran right past Eno and Lilit. Eno reached out and grabbed a fistful of the flowing red fabric billowing out behind the brothel master. He drew his own sword.

Dayan was jerked backward, cursing. He backhandedly swung his sword arm toward Eno's face. The Hilan quickly released the cloak, flinging himself away in a partial somersault. He dropped the sword and it clattered to the street. He skidded on his side, then scrabbled to get to his feet. He reached for the weapon. He thought he heard Emana scream, even though Lilit's mouth hadn't opened.

Dayan loomed over him in an instant, sword arm pointed and poised for the kill. Eno fumbled to bring his own blade up but he knew he was going to be slow. He didn't even have a proper hold of it yet. This wasn't the same as fighting a man. The thing was too fast.

Dayan's one eye was as coldly dark as the gold socket was bright. His legs looked uncommonly long but, of course, it was because he'd been bisected nearly to his navel. Yet no intestines spilled; there was no blood. There was only the roaring wind and its blizzard pouring out. The pimp-devil grinned,

savoring triumph. Then his head went flying. Blood did gush from the neck: thick purple gouts of it, thin green gruel fountains and pulpy yellow mush, black blood, gray blood—everything but red.

For a moment the body swayed on its feet, the cloak fluttering, full of ice crystals, sword-arm still poised to plunge into Eno's heart. Then it fell back solidly and sank, softening until it looked to be no more than a fragile wicker framework covered with wet muslin.

Faj stood with his feet apart, sword in both hands and over one shoulder, having swung the entire length in an arc from the other. He slowly lowered it, jerking at intervals, prepared to strike again should Dayan show signs of getting up.

There was nothing left to rise.

A spindly fog of butter-colored soul flew up from the shrunken mass that had been the Amaki. The sky was dark so they weren't easily seen. But the sound of the approaching soul crows was unmistakable.

Lilit crossed her arms over her breasts, her face enigmatic as she stared up at the night. Maybe she could see parts of it moving. But to the others, there were no layers to the blackness. It was solid as ever.

Thermal rage.

White hot monster, shining heat rolling off in waves so thick they made an opaque vapor.

Looking at them, what did people see? A cloud with a burnished face? Flying blindly past them, scorching them at its edge? Roasting them alive in its center?

And what did they hear? Whistles, wounded animals howling, hissing serpents, screech owls . . .

Son of the fire demon.

The fire demon couldn't be called again for another century but, oh, the seed had been planted. The child was greater than the father. He might not be able to withstand the confoundment of dawn . . .

- —The sun was the supreme god of all fires—
- ... but he wasn't limited to a single night. Other than daybreak's talisman, he couldn't be thwarted or dampened.

He didn't want to kill or destroy. He couldn't help it. He was furious; he boiled with frenzy. It was his nature to consume. Busparta had been a warrior. Fighting with sword and spear had been his duty. Now combustion was his duty.

(all of them perverse as Lydians)

- ... must destroy the Lydians ...
- -all the Lydians-

He didn't know exactly when his first fire commenced. He'd come with the rest into the new city from the old. He'd been the burned one, charred with melted features, mouth puffing out rings of smoke.

With every Lydian libertine visitor whom he confronted, his anger grew hotter. And then at some point there was a gaudy flash that dazzled him. He'd been surrounded by Lydians—most fleeing from him, stumbling over each other, crushing others under their heedless feet, some actually trying to destroy him. It had been an explosion (yes, it was clearly incendiary, with more than radiance/popping and thunderous clamor/blasting rocking immediate lurching...) and when it vibrated away, there was absolutely no one within a hundred meters of him. There was a sticky white ash. There were spots on the raised earth in the shapes of bodies. There were spots in a weird, running still-life on the sides of walls, as if they'd been painted with sharp black edges.

Everyone in that sphere had vanished.

There were other people (Lydians) writhing on the ground beyond this circle. Some were burned so black that they resembled the bas-relief umbras on the buildings. (No, not buildings. Only walls. Here and there was a vertical stand of stone or granite, all the rest toppled.) Other people had become flaking shades of red and gray.

He thought the wind from the explosion had blown their clothes half off. That they were crawling, dragging their rags behind them. But their garments had been totally incinerated, and what dragged along in the dirt from their wrists and ankles was sloughed flesh.

The city was on fire, the wind from the ocean stirring the flames to greater heights. It spread from street to street in a gathering roar.

The fire demon had burned, then sucked the flames back up into itself. Busparta's fire raged, uncontained. He couldn't take the flames back into himself. He had too many; he was bursting with them.

He whipped cloudy wings until cyclones seethed out and blazed, hopping from building to building. He dropped cremated jaws and howled out a sizzling challenge to the wicked Lydians. He did a dance that resembled frying meat, twitching with gristle, squirming with bubbling juices. He raced across roofs in pitiless sparks, to the very end of the city where the hills began. A hill rose up behind him, dark as the sky, smoky with mass. It cut off sight of the stars as easily as the smoke did.

Busparta considered catapulting across it, taking the flames to the surrounding forest, to the entire countryside.

He saw people weeping until blistered eyes ran down to their chins. He saw a disfigured lump of a man calling out for someone to be merciful. "Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!"

Busparta paused.

The head of Pergamis came out of his chest in a swelling blister. It was a roasted apple of a head, split and pulpy sweet inside, sugar-water oozing out in pink streams. The eyes were livid, wet oysters.

The head croaked, "Remember that woman in Fahor?"

A torso and head squeezed from Busparta's left side. There were no arms and legs to it, for they had fallen apart like overdone roasts. There were no

eyes. The lips stretched back in a voiceless scream, revealing blackened gums and a mere stubble of a tongue.

Another head and an arm popped in cinders from Busparta's right side. The face was a lump of soft grease. The arm peeled, flaked for lack of moisture. The hand on the end of it was a flipper with sponged fingers melded into one. "Ring... mother," it said.

Busparta's friends twitched on him. He felt their brains—cooked though they were until thoughts were no more than a cruel stewing. They had memories of scented female breasts, of jokes, of battle and comraderie and wine. And of ruin. Ignition. Torture.

Busparta's rage dwindled as sorrow slipped in, recalling finding them and of mourning each. But the flames only shrank—they didn't go out. They diminished while he waited beneath the hill at the city's perimeter.

Kur burned. Demons flew unscathed through the flames. They carried victims, dead but able to rise the next night to join them. Some had as many as two and three corpses across their shoulders to keep them from burning.

All the ships docked in Kur had sailed. Those people who fled to the docks too late were leaping into the water to escape being burned. Some drowned there. Others ran toward the beach.

He murmured the names of his friends over and over, "Pergamis, Usakus, Khio."

Busparta didn't move, seeing them metamorphosing on him, beckoned from his pain. He saw a woman walking through the flames, her braids rising and falling like striking serpents in the waves of the firestorm. Other than this she was completely unaffected. She raised her arms and shouted. Strange woman, with a cool face and singing eyes.

Then the hill behind Busparta crumbled. Tons of earth spilled over him, crashing down to smother him. They put him out. And they charitably put out the haunting voices of his dead friends as well.

Eno spun around to find she was gone. The flames cast a ruddy glow to the night, sibilant and howling in oppressive turns. There was no longer the question of fleeing or standing to fight. The fire was making it impossible to remain for any reason save suicide. They must retreat to the shore or be engulfed.

And Lilit had disappeared into the inferno. Had she been swept away, sucked into it, or did she run into it? If she'd entered, then Emana had also. Eno cried the Ishantu's name and started to go after her.

Faj snatched him back. "You can't go in there. If Lilit went that way, she doesn't need your help. She's a goddess."

"She's also Emana. Emana's mortal," Eno argued, straining to pull away. The heat from the flames blistered his throat, threatening to swallow his voice from him.

Faj forced the Hilan to look at him. "Remember when Emana went picking herbs? Then I was Alali, but we shared a connection. I knew when she was in

trouble. There's still a bond between us. She's all right, I promise. I'd know if she wasn't."

They heard the wood crackling which made up the sources for some structures and the roofs of nearly all the buildings. Except for domes and pyramids, most of the buildings had flat roofs timbered from the nearby forest. Marble and granite in the domes and pyramids heated until they became nothing less than enormous ovens. All the softer materials within them—furniture and curtains, joists and flesh—reached spontaneous combustion points or seared through until they crumbled. Clay bricks used to imitate styles of Babylon and Ninevah cracked. They could be heard shattering as houses made of them dissolved like temples made of salt.

Faj and Eno turned as a high-pitched skree filled the air. A demon croaked over Solon who was face down on the ground. The thing had raked his back with a double row of furrows. It was lowering its head (which was half-squawking buzzard and half-clacking praying mantis) to the wellspring wounds to drink.

Faj shouted as he drew his sword. He swung, ready to cut its foul head off. It changed with a shimmer.

"Faj, my love. It's been so long we've been apart," the altered creature said in a voice of sweet music. "Do you not recognize your Wea?"

Her skin gleamed of flower petals, breasts and hips round as moons. From her shoulder sprang a tiny fist, perfect but miniature, each finger helplessly elegant and closed in the total unborn blossom—the twin Wea was meant to have. Wea's eyes were slightly misted with tears that showed her joy at the reunion with her betrothed. Her rich unbound hair was scented with nectar. Her mouth was swollen with desire.

Stained with Solon's blood.

"I know who you are," Faj replied, hesitating.

So many images danced across his memory, overwhelming, of a black basalt city and a glacier in the bay. Of the flavor of tricked wine and of making love in the shape of a nightingale.

"Then would you not be with me again and let all the centuries between us be as nothing?" she murmured.

Her perfect bare thighs straddling the dwarf, she outstretched her arms for Faj to come to her.

Solon moaned beneath her.

Faj frowned. "I know who you are but I don't recognize you."

Wea gasped in the second before he struck off her head.

"Solon!" he exclaimed as he knocked the shriveling body aside and bent to gather the dwarf in his arms. "We must get him to the beach. I have to try to clean the wounds."

Eno ran with them. The Hilan kept his weapon ready in his hands, even though it had become so hot it burned them.

CHAPTER 30

"they have no being; Naught is but that which feels itself to be." 'Hellas' —Percy Bysshe Shelley

Faj slept lightly next to the dwarf. He'd done what he could for Solon but he knew the Aegean was dying. None of Faj's healing arts could save him. Would even Lilit have been able to cure him?

But she'd gone into the fire last night. Morning came with the three men waiting for her. The center of the day came with Eno still awake, looking across the beach for her. Afternoon arrived, but by then even the Hilan had slipped into an exhausted sleep.

Faj tried to fathom what was happening to his lover but couldn't. He knew that the demons infected others. The goddess had told him this.

Solon hadn't been killed. His wounds suppurated quickly, too fast for even most poisons and far too soon for gangrene. His whole body erupted in seeping pustules that grew even in the scar tissue on the side of his face. His hair fell out in sad little wisps, rolling across the sand like aberrant crabs. His gums bled. Faj had already needed to revive him twice when teeth— which had loosened—fell out to lodge in Solon's throat, strangling him in his sleep.

"Alali," the dwarf raved when the tides of fever swept him. "Faj."

Was this a plague? What else would be turning Solon into a living corpse? Faj cut a line across his own palm, trying to give the man the benefit of his blood. Did his blood still have such properties—or had the thousands of years of shifting nightmare rendered it useless, possibly toxic?

The drops went between Solon's lips. The dwarf opened his eyes wide, a garbled scream puffing out his disfigured cheeks. His pupils were briefly hellish, dark as pits. He hissed, reaching out clawing fingers, jaws snapping. Then he fell back again, blessedly unconscious. A foul green leaked from his nostrils, ears and rectum. His nails turned into balls of jelly and slid from his fingers.

In another hour it would be sunset. Faj wanted to then hunt Pazu down and make him suffer for this. He was Kura and had never committed a blood sin while in the proper form of his race.

But as a shifter? Well, all of them had.

He hung his head, ashamed for wanting to murder the priest.

Had slaying Wea or Dayan been blood sin?

Faj didn't think so. He'd killed to defend Eno and Solon.

He'd never done the sin drink. Only Lilit's students and their descendants followed that tradition. He wondered if, when he died, there would be anyone to drink his sins.

He stood up and peered across the sea. There were sails out far, making for the coast. They wouldn't make it by nightfall, although it likely wouldn't be long afterward. They were probably delivering travelers to Kur. How disappointed they were going to be . . .

"Pazu and his creatures will be waiting for those ships," said a soft voice behind him.

Lilit didn't look as if she'd been through a fire.

"Eno has been concerned about you," Faj told her. He leaned down to gently shake the Hilan.

"Let him sleep," she said. "We have to stop Pazu."

"How?"

"I think I have a way. But I'll need you. It's dangerous. You may refuse."

Faj walked beside her as she went back down the beach. "I'll do anything."

"You don't understand," she replied. "If it doesn't work, you'll be damned forever."

Pazu was annoyed. First with that renegade Mysian. Busparta had cost him more than half his army by burning down the city. The other new ones rescued fifteen hundred dead from the inferno, and there were about two thousand gathered on the blackened docks at sunset. But there should have been more. There should have been many more. Some of the victims of the new ones had been cremated. Other people had fled the flames by ship, and by running into the forest and onto the shore. The new ones had been too busy trying to escape burning themselves and trying to recover their made corpses. There had been no time to search out other victims.

What a debacle. If the Mysian hadn't been destroyed by that meddling Lilit when she smothered his element with her own, Pazu would have drowned him. It was irksome to discover he didn't have the total control over his creatures he thought he had.

Secondly Pazu was annoyed with himself.

He'd started to leave Lyko's cavern when he was seized by fierce pain in every part of him. He saw sores blossoming on his skin.

Was it because Lyko had been less than intelligent that Pazu could make such an ignorant mistake? Was Lyko's brain deteriorating because it was held by a ghost other than its own? The scientist couldn't believe he could have made such a drastic error in judgement on his own.

Licking his fingers?

Tasting corpse tears and uterine secretions, reveling in cannibal perversions worthy only of a degenerate like Lyko?

After having just smeared the serum into the orifices of the wolf man's assembled cadavers?

Dolt! Simpleton!

Pazu had died, fuming with his last breath.

(Died again.) It wasn't as violent a demise as the first time, but it was a more prolonged suffering.

Lyko's soul was naturally long gone. Pazu's was available for trapping in the corpse.

He'd intended to undergo this anyway but not until some time in the future, at a more convenient moment to his cause. After he'd led a large army into the most inhabited ports.

Now not only had they not left Kur yet, but there weren't nearly so many of them as he'd wanted to start with.

(I can do it.)

(I must. It's too late to turn back.)

Half the new city lay in smouldering ruins. There was a weird circle within which was absolutely nothing but devastation. As if everything on that spot had met with a magic lightning and abruptly ceased to exist, turning backward into time to be unmade.

This was what those on the ships would see as they approached the docks. That, and the pitiful survivors gathered to greet them and be rescued—looking innocent and helpless on the outside.

(Waving. Save us!)

Sly power on the inside.

Pazu rose at sunset and joined them.

It wouldn't be long now.

He wouldn't be so dull as to announce that they were about to see the millennium. Some of them—including himself—had already witnessed nine of those.

The beginning of a new age.

No, wait . . . better.

The start of the final age.

Eno opened his eyes and saw that Faj was gone. Solon groaned nearby, babbling in and out of delirium.

There were footprints in the sand. A line of woman's prints came to the spot where Faj had rested. Then two sets went away, the woman's and obviously the Kura's. Lilit had returned, hadn't she?

That meant Emana must be all right.

But where had they gone? Had she taken Faj to help with some of the city's wounded? It was odd that Faj would have left the dwarf behind. Or that they wouldn't have roused Eno, too, for surely they would need all the help they could get.

Eno had no training as a healer. He'd been awake for three days and three nights, had slept only a few hours the next two days, and then had run for his life last night. It had been a terrible week. Perhaps they tried to wake him but couldn't.

He knew if he'd heard the Ishantu's voice, he'd have awakened immediately.

Oh, surely that was love talking. He'd been so deeply asleep that another fire wouldn't have shaken him.

"Faj?"

The dwarf's eyes were all but lost in the open sores. He was so feverish, the sand he lay in was boggy. His flesh took on the peculiar light that people had when their spirits were fighting the final battle for their lives—one they must lose.

"Faj?"

"I'll go find him," Eno promised. "Just rest."

Eno stood and went the direction of the footprints. He hoped he could return with the Kura before Solon died. He didn't notice that the dwarf struggled to rise also and was following him. He shouldn't have been able to walk at all. But this was a curious illness. Perhaps it gave him more strength than he seemed to possess. The dwarf staggered up the beach behind Eno.

Lilit caressed Faj's forehead and cheeks as he lay upon the cold stone.

"It isn't too late for you to refuse," she said. "You'll die with my blessing. But I can't drink your sin or the crows won't come. The blessing may not be enough to keep them from tearing you to pieces."

Faj stared up the sky. It was turning from blue to violet, rose and gold on the horizon that split the heaven from the sea. The sun had gone down, but its passing light still lent a burnished glory to the western rim.

"I failed to help my people once. I made the wrong choice. What is it when we have the chance—well, if not to make things right, at least to make them better?" Faj asked.

"I think it's called redemption," the goddess replied.

"Then give me your blessing, Lady, Goddess, Mother," he said. "And send me on this journey."

She understood it last night, watching the soul crows as they descended on the demon pimp's spirit. The new ones were a perversion of the original Kura. They died but rose after one day instead of three, without love or waiting. Spirits rose up from the dead, and those who had committed blood sin stank of it—summoning the crows. But the crows didn't think to find them on the ground, still interred within the dead.

Someone had to show them.

She was goddess of life and death, but she wasn't a destroyer like Kali or Nekhbet or Ereshkergal. She didn't rend or devour but took the bodies of the dead in gentle softening, returning them to clay, giving them life again in other forms. She was forbidden to kill. She took the fire demon Busparta in this loving way, extending arms of earth which was her element and her mercy.

Forbidden to kill.

There was no other way if she was to prevent Pazu from utterly changing the balance of nature, from life and death to only death. There had to be an envoy to the beyond. The only way was that which humanity had employed in its rituals forever: blood sacrifice.

She must do it. It had to be her crime, carrying her blessing. She whispered the prayer and then raised Solon's dagger.

Eno saw her and cried out. Behind him, the dwarf's eyes bulged as he began to run. He slipped up to the Hilan and swiftly withdrew the sword from its sheath at Eno's hip.

Lilit brought the blade down into the Kura's heart. The body jolted toward its center, arms and legs coming up in a flutter.

Faj sighed. Death was simple, much less work than grand design. He'd practiced it from the dark moods of men. And when real death came after all the millennia, he was ready.

"No! Gazelle!" Solon screamed, hurrying to the goddess.

He brought the sword down and cut off the hand that held the dagger. Then Solon shivered, waxy gray tears running down his face. He collapsed and died.

Eno grabbed Lilit as she stumbled back from her sacrifice. She squeezed the bleeding stump.

"Quickly. Take the sword and sever Solon's head," she said hoarsely, "or he'll rise tomorrow night."

Eno did it, standing between the two dead men and a mutilated woman.

The dwarf's soul flew. Faj's spirit went up beside it.

Lilit murmured chants, face stricken as she sank into Eno's arms.

The sky had gone completely black on one side. There was a tumult of wings and the shrieks of soul crows.

They could see a distinct difference between the two spirits. Solon's was white, for he'd never killed. Even now, he hadn't been trying to kill Lilit, only to strike off the offending hand. It went into the sky and disappeared.

Faj's was a bright red star. It hovered, waiting for the underworld's scavengers.

But would he be safe? Could the blessings of a goddess—who had betrayed her very nature with murder—have any power?

The crows circled tightly around Faj.

Then the star took off, shooting toward the city, toward the docks where Pazu's army waited for the ships. The crows accompanied it.

Pazu and his two thousand stared up at the approaching black flocks. They were itchy in their puny human disguises.

Their pit-eyes were hard and dark. Could they change form and fight?

They could change but they couldn't fight the crows. They were just corpses with spirits inside that reeked with sin. And—demons or not—the crows would come. The crows didn't care who you were, once they smelled the blood.

Neither demon nor god was exempt from judgement.

Pazu flinched involuntarily, remembering the hawk/shark and tremendous sideways jaws. But he made to grab at one of them, snatching it from the air, wringing its neck. He would pull its head right off its carrion-ridden body! All

around Pazu, the corpse-army did the same, snarling and catching soul crows in their fists.

The crows felt like shit in their hands, like wreaths of maggots, like smoke. The death-eater birds turned themselves inside out and emerged with even bigger beaks and gullets flapping wide from the void, stinking of sewers, open graves, and sour gases.

(No! I am Pazu am Pazuzu! I lead my army, invincible of death. Nothing can stand against us . . .)

Serrated dagger-sharp beaks ripped into Pazu's molten flesh, every gobbet like a succulent softening eye to the crows. All about, his soldiers shrieked as they were rended, shaken from hunks into shreds and then a finely-mealed, scarlet dust. Pazu tried to escape by flinging himself from the dock but his body didn't even make it to the surface of the water. Between walls of black feathers—through them as if they were the sheer curtains of the abyss—he could see the boats coming in, languidly on the waves, gracefully, as he was torn into tinier and tinier fragments, and not a one of the parts of him lost consciousness.

EPILOGUE

The Dark Maid
"The gods cowered like dogs and crouched in corners..."
'Epic Of Gilgamesh' — Mesopotamian

Lilit squirmed in Eno's arms, contorting in some torment extended beyond the wound to her arm. Her skin became rough, prickled, then covered in a greasy down. Her face twisted, the features deforming before Eno's eyes.

"Lady, what can I do for you? Just tell me!"

She gazed up at him, a very womanly pleading in her expression.

Lilit said, "This is my sin, not hers."

Her voice deepened. It was a growl.

She closed her eyes and there was a pale flash of light. A lurid shape swirled out of the Ishantu's body, floated several meters away, and continued wringing itself, stretching and distorting.

"Eno?"

Emana was in his arms, the twisting gone from her face and her skin smooth. She was very weak but her form was again her own. She glanced up at him tenderly, then winced in pain. She stared in shock at her wrist, at the stump where her hand had been and was no more.

"I'm sundered," she whispered. "Oh, no, Eno. I can never rise again."

"Then I'll have to make sure I take very good care of you from now on," Eno replied as he kissed her.

The shape which had vacated Emana's body congealed into a dark rag of feathers. Shabby wings flapped over bird feet. Long hair hung across the face, obscuring it in bloody knots. It reached claws up and slowly parted these locks to look at the couple with terrifying eyes.

For a moment the features were Emana's. But then they wrenched, screwed, and who could say what they belonged to? They weren't the Ishantu's. They weren't from the woman who had been a priestess in ancient Kur.

Emana remembered a dream in which Rasal had said, "Go out into the darkness and unbless. The terror of the wilderness has given the greatest gift. To heal, one must sometimes swallow poison."

This was what Lilit had done: she'd swallowed poison. She'd done it willingly to save her people.

The soul crows were flying back from their grisly work at the docks. Their wings dripped gore, falling across the beach and incoming tide. A mouth not unlike a jagged beak opened in the transformed goddess's face, and a piercing cry of sorrow came out of it.

Then Lilit—the night hag—joined the flocks as they returned to the underworld.





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