

THE NOMAD: A LOVE STORY

By

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INTRODUCTION

We all remember our first love. No matter what we experience in life, we keep a place in our hearts for the things that came along when we were most impressionable, when the world still felt wondrous and open to infinite possibilities. So much of how we feel about our favorite things stems from our earliest memories. Our love for *Star Wars*, or *He-Man* or *Zelda*, has less to do with quality, and more to do with who we were at the time.

Because our first loves hold such meanings for us, we cling to them, and are less willing to share them. But the nature of writing is exposing that which we hold most dear, so that the world can poke at it, or praise or ridicule it, or just simply ignore it. Naturally, I have been hesitant to let the children of my imagination loose on the Internet.

When I was eighteen, my heart was aflame, and after many failed attempts at writing my first novel, I started work on *The Nomad*. To be fair, I was young and inexperienced, fresh out of high school and just entering college. I struggled with basic form, with how to establish a scene, and with how much description to give. But I was driven by unbridled imagination and idealism, utterly convinced of my future as a novelist. Despite the techniques I acquired over the decades, I long to find that old Nick Alimonos again, to possess the fervor I once had.

The Nomad is a love story, largely inspired by *The Odyssey*. Like Odysseus, Dynotus searches twenty years for the woman he loves, for his wife, Sali, who has been kidnapped. Like *The Odyssey*, *The Nomad* is an adventure with fantastic locales and mythical monsters, but instead of the Mediterranean, Dynotus is lost to the sands of the Sahara.

But who is Dynotus? In many ways, he is a precursor to Xandr, a hero inspired by my love of mythology. Four years before starting the novel, I had typed a short story called *The War of the Gods*. In an alternate universe, which I call *AERTH*, every pantheon known to mankind, from every nation and time period, existed simultaneously. Here, gods battled for supremacy, and the last to stand were my favorites: Zeus and Thor. But the two thunder gods ended up destroying themselves, leaving Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, to be inherited by the son of Zeus and the Japanese Shinto goddess, Amaterasu Omikami. Hence, *Zor* was born. Taking after his father, Zor had his way with a mortal

woman from Sparta, whose offspring was unusually strong, like Heracles. And so she named him “strong” in Hellenite, which translates to *Dynotus*.

PROLOGUE:

He was a big man, a stranger, a nomad from a distant country. But as powerful as he looked, he was tired, beaten, defeated. He entered the taverna to sit quietly and catch his breath, and right away I could tell he was not of the desert. His face was a burnt red, his lips black and parched like the Dead Sea. Around his eyes were lines of restlessness, and deep within them, a story.

Seeing how feeble he looked, I approached, hoping to make a profit. "Welcome to the Slaughtered Goat. I am Abissai. Have you been out in the desert long?"

The man lifted his hand to the table, and to my delight, I spied a brilliant ring about his finger. "Not long enough."

"Whatever do you mean, good sir?"

"Ages ago, I was in possession of great treasure, a treasure like no other. But I lost it . . ." and with that, I thought the man might weep, except for that he had no water left in his body to do so.

Hearing of this great fortune, the man piqued my interest, and so I asked, "Would you care for a drink? Or something to eat? My camel looks better tended than you."

"No need, kind sir, for I thirst for one thing only. Though my body starves, it is as nothing to me. Rather, I should wilt and die, than continue to suffer the fate that has befallen me."

"Is it of this treasure you speak?"

"It was all that ever mattered to me."

"Then you are on a quest . . . to find this treasure, eh?"

"I am."

"And how long have you looked for it?"

"I do not quite remember, for time slips my mind like the sands in an hourglass. Yet, it has felt, like an eternity. Perhaps . . . twenty years or more."

"Twenty years . . . **Zarathustra** be merciful! If you have been traveling for so long, you must have come from a distant land."

“I have.”

“And your quest has brought you here, to this desert town?”

“Most of my search has been in the desert.”

“But after so much time, do you not think that this treasure you speak of, may be vanquished? Do you still believe that you will ever find it?”

“I do not believe that I will find it. I will find it.”

“Tell me, then, who are you? Abissai has an ear for a good story, if you have strength to tell it, that is.”

And from this point forward, I sat speechless, as I listened to my new friend tell his long and marvelous tale.

Part I**The Romance****Chapter 1**

I was born in the Peloponnese, in the southern half of Hellena, where the mountains meet the sea, and each man may call himself king, a land sprawled across uncounted peninsulas and islands, a country the gods favor most in all the world. My mother, Alcmena, was a mortal woman of the landed classes, but her farm was small and she was mostly poor. Her husband succumbed to illness at a young age, giving her no sons or daughters, and yet she made for a young and beautiful widow, and was favored by the King of the Gods, who visited her in the form of a white stallion, carrying her away as Zeus once stole Europa. Hence, I was born, son of Zor and Alcmena. I was not but one-year-old when my mother discovered my great strength, and so she named me ‘strong one’ in my native tongue. *Dynotus*.

When I was but six, I could plow the fields with the strength of an ox. Not long after, mention of my abilities reached the ears of the ruling elite, and my mother was remarried to a wealthy landowner and aristocrat, a poet named Tyrtaeus.

I knew little of my stepfather, for I was sent at the age of nine to sleep in the barracks with the other boys. It was the Spartan way, the law passed down by our ancestral king and founder, *Lykourgos*. We were taught harsh discipline, wrestled and ran, and sparred with the spear and the spathi, and always I exceeded the others, and was made team captain. We slept together on pallet-beds, and rarely were allowed baths or use of ointment. Instead of softening our feet with shoes, *Lykourgos* decreed that we should harden them by going barefoot, believing that, if this was our practice, we would climb more easily, and go downhill more sure-footedly, and move more swiftly. We ate together in the mess hall, given just enough to survive. If we wanted more, we were encouraged to steal, but were flogged and went hungry if caught. We learned to be self sufficient in all things, and in so doing, became bold and cunning. There could be no sheep among Spartan warriors. As I endured hunger more easily than my comrades, I did not hesitate to portion what little was given to the weakest among us, and in this way I made many friends. At twelve years of age, we were no longer permitted clothing, forced to go naked the whole year round. And yet, some small mercy was shown to us, during

the bitterest winter nights, when Demeter most lamented the loss of her daughter, **Persephone**, and we were offered a single tunic for warmth.

When our troupe grew to maturity, we took our place as **hoplite** soldiers in full bronze armor, with spear and shield, marching to battle at the sound of the drum and to the rhyme of **Tyrtaeus**. One day, my fellow comrade lost his hoplon, the round shield that was indispensable to the phalanx, and as valued to a Spartan as his own life. It had been hidden away by a rival, who had lost to him in a wrestling bout. Nothing but cowardice could have so disgraced him, and so I offered my own shield, and suffered the shame of it. As we were far from the city center, I had no means of procuring another such item, and so I joined the lower legions, the peasants who did not own land and could not afford armor, and the slaves of the hoplites, those nicknamed ‘rock-throwers’. And yet, I proved my valor, with rocks and sword alone, slaying far more enemies than my better-armed allies, in what came to be known as the Messenian Wars. We did not question the rightness of our actions. All that mattered to our commanders was proving ourselves fearless, for courage is a Spartan’s most sacred weapon, forged in our hearts from the time we are born, and tempered by skill and by discipline. Our songs were only of courage, and of the shame and dishonor that comes with cowardice. There was no room in our minds for any other thing, no praise for honesty, or for compassion . . . or for love. We destroyed any who opposed us, and the city-state came to rule the whole of the Peloponnese, and our King, Demaratus, became wealthy and prosperous.

After the wars, the people we conquered, those of non-Dorian blood whom we called “helots,” became our slaves, and after a time they learned of our cruelty, as did I. Disgusted by the subjugation of another people, I abandoned my station to wander Hellena naked and alone.

By my eighteenth year, I had journeyed the known world, seeing peoples of every culture and color, becoming wise in their ways, learning the secret fighting techniques from the people of the distant East, and also, visiting the Hyperboreans to the North, where I won, as a trophy, my prized and treasured ring. Though it may seem to you a mere trinket, this silver ring has decided the fate of countless lives. With but a thought, it can become any weapon held in hand, a sword, a mace, an ax, a spear.

But always, I returned to my homeland, where I visited my aging mother, and the soldiers with whom I was raised. And yet, it was the land itself that beckoned me, the green slopes cradled between the Taygetos Mountains, rich with olive trees . . . Such beauty is unparalleled in all the world. To think that I shall never look upon her like again, to speak of it and remember . . . pains me.

I decided, at last, to build a permanent home among my people, but feared they might come to worship me. Nor did I wish to incite the wrath of the king, lest he feel his authority threatened, for never have I desired a throne. And so, I built my home high upon the Taygetos Mountains, placing stone upon stone, with my own hands, where I could look down upon the city, with its white homes and stadiums and bustling populace. There, I lived in solitude, above the petty squabbles of mortal men.

One morning, I was greeted by a great white steed, which I knew to be of my father's sacred stock. He was wild and untamed, a divine gift, and he succumbed to me without a bridle. I named him Thunderfoot. And in my growing loneliness, he was my only company.

Yearning for the camaraderie of my younger days, I went down to the agora, and always among the people went naked, like Apollo and Aphrodite, for I had grown beyond mortal trappings. The peasants considered my visitation a good omen, and I was offered riches to curry favor with the gods. Old women knitted **chitoni** for me and tanners their finest sandals. Warriors, seeking bravery, made sacrifices of their kills. Artists made likenesses of me in chiseled marble and in brushed gold **amphora**. Too often, fathers implored that I take their daughters, and unwed women sought me also. And I must admit that as my father and grandfather before me, that I was weak, and unable to resist the pleasures of the flesh. Soon, my appetites rivaled tales of my other exploits. Rumors spoke of the hundreds falling prey to my wiles. There was even talk of strange, half human partners, including nymphs, Amazons, mermaids, centaurs, titans, harpies, sirens, and young men. Of these tales, I can say only that they are, for the most part, myth.

As for King Demaratus, I was greeted with open arms. With my every visit, he was certain to arrange the finest banquet, for us to feast and drink honey wine and eat roasted lamb. The king employed dozens of maidservants, which labored over his every whim. But before the banquet, a sleeping chamber was arranged for me, where I could rest and

be bathed, and then during the night, three of his most beautiful servants were sent to my room. The following morning, I would thank him for his kindness, and return to my mountain abode. In this way, the king was made confident that the gods were content, and that if war should break loose, I would come to his aid.

Life for me was like this, until my twenty fourth year. Smoke was rising up from the city, I could see, and King Demaratus knew to signal me by fire. I could not fathom the trouble. It could have been anything, from a horde of demons rising from the Underworld, to an invading legion from a neighboring city state. Never could I have imagined, in my naivety, how I was to be damned that day, how I would come to know perpetual grief.

Chapter 2

The fires were not meant to summon me, as I had thought, but the result of bandits, who came to rape and pillage. Even as I arrived, women were being dragged from their homes by the hair, mothers and daughters alike, as fathers and husbands were forced to watch. Truly, this was the work of savage men. And in seeing these things, Lyssa possessed my soul, the goddess that drove my cousin, Heracles, to murder his own family in a fit of rage. But under Olympus, my murderous rage was justified, and I was to avenge.

I came upon a woman, at the feet of an armored bandit, who was brutally beating her with a cudgel. No sooner than when he noticed me, did I catch his arm before his weapon could fall again, and break his limb in my grasp. He dropped to his knees in agony, and I finished his life with a kick. She gazed long upon me, with swollen eyes, had I been the very avatar of Zeus himself, and kissed my feet, muttering words of blessing. But I, deep in my wrath, shoved her aside.

Pressing onward, I turned my ring into a great scythe, sharp enough to raze the grass. In the village square, a horde of them was gathered, each wearing dark leather and wielding curved swords. Like the breath of Aeolios, I blew through them, and made them feel the edge of my blade. By the time they were aware of me, six men lay dead or bleeding at my feet. Quickly, they turned their arms to my demise, and yet, before their bronze could penetrate my naked skin, I rent their skulls in twain, and as they fell, I could hear in their screams their dread of Hades. Throughout the melee, I went untouched, as invincible to them as Achilles at Troy, fighting with the strength of the Nemean Lion, lashing against them with the speed of the Hydra. All were slain but those who fled. And yet I was not sated, thirsting for blood even as I spilled it. Already, my countrymen were singing my praises, as I pursued the bandits, high upon Thunderfoot, to the harbor at Gythio, where Paris of Troy abducted Helen of Sparta, born of a swan egg.

It was here that I met the bandit leader. To look upon him was to be filled with dread, for he was monstrously adorned, with the skull of a great beast upon his head, with horns like that of the Minotaur; and on his shoulders, pauldrons of bone; and about his loins a skirt

of human hands. And also, he held a great ax without equal, topped with a skull, with an edge like a great serpent's fang, as long as his head to his abdomen, with a hilt of scales. At the sight of me, he showed no fear, but said, in a broken approximation of my tongue,

"Fools go where gods dare not tread."

"Villain!" I answered him. "I fear nothing! And we shall soon learn who is the fool!"

"So you believe, because you do not know of Trax the Torturer."

"And who is this swine you speak of?"

"It is I, who will pull from you your heart, and take your fingers as my trophy!"

With little effort, I swatted his ax away, and suspended him from the ground, and squeezing the life from his throat, I said to him, "Know that it is I, Dynotus, Son of Zor, whom you have insulted! I could break your spine like the cock's, and end your pitiful life here and now, but I will not do you the honor. Rather, I will have you suffer defeat, to forever lament this day, the day you dared to plunder these shores and met Dynotus!" With that, I severed his arm, and tossed him with his men into the sea, whereupon he boarded his ship.

When he landed, he stood in a fury, crying, "You know not what you have done! I shall return to my home, to bring a great legion, with the aid of my father. You know him not, but all in Assyria cringe before the name of Iuz, Iuz the Cruel!"

"Go find him then, and let him know that I shall sever his arm as well!" This I replied, before his ship left for its distant realm.

That day, there was a great feast in the halls of King Demaratus. He showed me his gratitude, as always, by offering the things I loved most: wine, women, and food. I rendered Thunderfoot unto a servant, to be escorted to the royal stables, and continued on under the pediment of the king's palace, across rows of fluted Dorian columns. The mosaic patterned floor was cool and smooth against my dusty soles, where I was gingerly greeted by three maids, stripped bare, who bathed and oiled me.

In the afternoon, I did rest, and in waking was greeted by four women in rich white himations, their hair laced in gold, their earrings of precious lapis lazuli. Only one of them appealed to me. I was sure to remember her name, to include her with the bathers I fancied, certain they would come to my bed that night.

As the royal feast was a formal affair, I was required to don clothing, much to my displeasure, with a lion skin for my loins; and a cloak of royal purple fastened by a brooch from Crete, engraved with the bull of King Minos; and a gilded laurel wreath upon my brow. Entering the great hall, I came upon a festive crowd. There were breads, eggs, and freshly caught squid; meats of heifer, swine, lamb and poultry roasting; and olives from neighboring Kalamata. We drank mead and milk and listened to the lyre and the pan flute, and watched the dancers' careful choreography, as performed by the most talented Athenians. Among those in attendance, were the landed classes, aristocrats and men of the phalanx, and the revered members of the oligarchy. And yet, despite their number, I recalled no one and favored none. Only the king himself, could I call friend, and it was for him that I remained. My true friends had not been allowed attendance, though they lived no differently than I, those who had suffered the most from the attack, their homes now in ruins and their women violated. Richly dressed as I was, in that assembly of riotous and pompous people, I was most uncomfortable.

Demaratus carried himself well, dressed in a simple purple tunic. As Sparta was ruled by the oligarchs, he was less a supreme ruler, and more 'first among equals.' Lifting his wine goblet to me, he said, "Today, my friends, we celebrate yet another victory, as Dynotus, Son of Zor, our blessed centurion, has vanquished the marauders from the South! Let us drink, in honor of our beloved Dynotus!" They cheered, every face turned to me. Modestly, I made way to the king's side, whispering to him, "The bathing girls were very beautiful. I liked Ellena, Astymeloisa, and the maid servant, Clytemnestra." "Dynotus, my friend, you remain quite the hedonist! I am certain they will be eager to . . . share themselves with you tonight!"

"You are so very generous, as always, your highness."

"It is all in gratitude, my good man. Now sit, for tonight we revel in Dionysus, and in all his delights!"

A girl showed me to my seat, where a jeweled grail awaited me. When I looked across the table to greet my neighbor, I noticed another young girl, who looked no older than seventeen. For long minutes, I stared dumbfounded. Hers was a beauty like no other, her hair cascading gracefully to her mid-back, in two braids like golden silk threads; her nose broad yet small; her lips pink as saffron. When my eyes caught hers, I was smitten. Deep and blue as the Aegean, they were, glittering in the flame like polished silver, and I remained transfixed by my own reflection, by the meager visage mirrored in her eyes, my divine beauty made lesser in the beholding.

All through the night, Fate entwined us in her thread, yet it was like a bolt from the hand of Zeus. It was a feeling quite foreign to me, for it was most unlike what passions I had known for other women. Stranger still, she hid behind the table, so that I did not see the contours of her body, and yet this did not seem to matter. At first, I thought to add her name, to the bacchanal planned for me, but the thought of her in my bed, with three others, was repulsive in a way I could not understand. Was I, perhaps, in the presence of some goddess, Aphrodite herself? Or had her servant, Eros, driven me to madness? I thought to ask the king for her alone. And yet, I did not desire it. Finally, I chased such foolish thoughts, and resolved to ask her name, so that I might tell the king to send her to my room. In answer to me, I was further amazed, that her voice did justice to her beauty, and like Apollo's harp, did soothe the stirrings of my tumultuous soul. So mesmerized was I, I was compelled to ask again, making myself look the fool.

"Seline," she repeated. "My name is Seline."

"Is it Hellenic?" I muttered oafishly, the sound of my own voice harsh, and grating.

"It is a Dorian name," she replied, "it means princess. My mother hailed from the North, where came the ancient Dorians. But I live with my father now. He brought me here to live in Hellena."

"And do you . . . live in the palace? Are you a servant?"

She smiled, as if to laugh, and replied, "I live in the palace, yes, but am no servant."

“Oh, then are daughter to the oligarchs?”

“No, I am born of Demaratus.”

A chill ran across my spine. To think what would have happened, had I coerced her to my bed, or have let the king know of my lust for his daughter! Learning of this, I abandoned any future thought of her, replying, meagerly, “Princess, I am delighted to make your acquaintance. I knew not who you were. Forgive me.”

Later, King Demaratus called his people to attention, to make an announcement. Half drunk and lifting his spilling chalice, he proclaimed, “Dynotus, my good, good friend! To show my appreciation for all you have done, I grant you one wish. Any single thing you desire, whatsoever I possess, shall I give freely, if you indeed wish it.”

I stood to respond. “There is no thing under Olympus which I desire, that you have not already given. I am grateful, nonetheless.”

“Come now, Dynotus, do not be so modest. I know you’ll find something that you desire of me, and on that day, let me know of it, and it shall be yours!” Afterward, the crowd of voices drowned my own, and I returned to my seat, humbled for the remainder of the banquet. And then a strange impulse moved me, to look where Seline had been, hoping in my heart to see her once more. But to my dismay, she was gone, with nothing but her memory to linger in my mind. All the while, a young orator was reciting,

Let us fight with courage for our country, and for our children

Let us die and never spare our lives

Young men, remain beside each other and fight,

And do not begin shameful flight or fear,

But make your spirit great and brave in your heart,

And do not be faint-hearted when you fight with men;

Your elders, whose knees are no longer nimble,

Do not flee and leave them, those who are old.

For the young boy, there was much applause. With great conviction, he had spoken the well-known words of our people, a poem by my stepfather, expressing the creed and

ethos of Sparta. But his voice was a distant echo to me, for I cared only to hear the princess again.

That night, as I began to undress, there came a tapping at my chamber door. The three maidens stood before me, clad as they had come from their mother's womb. I gazed long upon Clytemnestra, beautiful as I remembered, but when I reached to kiss her, was unable. Instead, I took hold of Astymeloisa, and tried to make love to her, but alas, the power was not in me. Finally, I told them to leave.

They were discouraged, but quietly did as they were told. I shut the door to my room and laid myself down. From the West, moonlight filtered through my window. But as I shut my eyes to sleep, I could not part the face of Seline from my memory.

Chapter 3

The next morning, I was quick to mount my faithful steed early, so that my many votaries would not mob me. Like the wind I did travel over land, for my stallion was of sacred and Olympian descent, and no beast or fowl on Earth could match his speed. Like the thundering of Zeus' chariot wheels did the hooves of Thunderfoot equally quake and move with untiring and unyielding speed. By noon, I had reached the top of my mountain abode, and looked down upon all the land governed by the King.

Climbing to my humble home, I found the serenity and peace I once cherished. And yet, I was unable to meditate or be at peace. I thought, perhaps, I longed for the comfort of a woman's touch. But I did not. And this baffled me, for as a man of nature, I had no desire for any material thing. I had eaten a good meal and did not thirst. Of the things I owned and valued, my horse and ring, I had both with me. Yet, I felt, that there was something I left behind, and that without it, I would never be whole. Within me there was emptiness, a piece of my soul that was cold and barren. Deeply disturbed by these emotions, I prayed for a dream to reveal the secret of my longing.

I awakened suddenly that night, having dreamed that I was wrestling with the son of Ares, the demi-god, Phobos, and was unable to best him. And then I noticed it, that the walls of my room were as empty and shallow as I. Till the coming of Dawn I lay restless, my feelings turned to torment. It was as though I had never known life nor lived it. I breathed and walked, and yet, felt no more living than the kouros, a man made of stone.

Looking out upon the horizon, I knew my destiny would lead me to the king's palace, and knew without question, there I would return.

The day was warm and bright, and the chrysanthemums bloomed and the little birds sang, and I knew that Persephone had returned to her mother Demeter from her time spent in the Underworld. As I journeyed to the king's palace, I chose to take an indirect route, so that I might cross through no village and keep unnoticed in my arrival.

When I saw the palace from afar, I dismounted and left Thunderfoot in a wooded olive grove, then threw my tunic round my shoulders and cautiously approached from the side. In this way, I hoped to find the King, so that I might tell him of my troubles without the knowledge of the old and stodgy oligarchs. As I walked, I came across the royal stables. Here were the charioteers and equestrians from Macedonia who tended to the royal mounts. It was there that I saw Clytemnestra, her rags muddied, clutching the reigns of a large horse upon which a young maiden sat, dressed in a short chiton, her golden tresses swaying in the breeze. At the sight of her, my heart raced, for I knew that it was Seline.

Clytemnestra was instructing the princess on how to ride a horse. Seline, all the while, attempted to balance herself upon the animal riding sidesaddle, and as the horse trotted, she looked as if she were about to fall. Finding this amusing, I watched as she was

eventually thrown face down into the mud. At first, I thought she might rise with tears or fury. But, to my surprise, she lifted herself with laughter, and seeing this did Clytemnestra laugh also. Seline was not hurt. But her hair, face, and clothes were soiled. After that, Clytemnestra told her that she should bathe immediately, for a princess should never be as filthy as a peasant. But Seline refused to listen and tried to leap upon the horse again. She lost her footing, however, and fell now backward into the mud, and I laughed again. Covered like a hog she arose, chiton sticking to her skin, globs of mud falling from her hair. Undaunted, she attempted to mount the horse, and it was apparent she had succeeded earlier only with the help of her maid servant. Finally, after many failed attempts, she accomplished the task and for several minutes rode free.

With the wind brushing against her she raised her arms defiantly and cried out in triumph. And as I looked, I found myself sharing in her newfound joy. Then suddenly, her bare heel kicked inadvertantly against the animal's side, and the horse galloped too swiftly for her to control. Unable to halt the beast, she tugged on the reigns managing only to steer it towards the fence.

Immediately, I broke through the wooden boards in my path and leapt onto the field to intercept them. The horse charged blindly against me, but at the final instant before impact, bucked, tossing the loosely seated girl from its back. With my godly strength, I pushed the horse aside, and caught her in my arms. Our eyes met and in hers I saw a spark of remembrance.

"You . . . saved me," she murmured.

"Those Macedonian breeds can be temperamental at times."

"Have we met before?" she inquired.

"Yes, I am Dynotus."

"You were the man I spoke to last night. But if, if you are Dynotus, what are you doing here? I thought you returned to Mount Olympus, to your home amongst the gods?"

I lifted her as I stood, saying, "I do not really live among the gods. Actually, my home is quite near to here, in the Taygetos."

She smiled and replied, "Could you . . . put me down now, please?"

"But of course," I studded, doing as she asked.

"So you don't live on Mount Olympus with Zeus and Athena?"

“No, Seline, I am not a god. I am only a man.”

“My father told me of your modesty. I am grateful that you came to help. Thank you.”

Then, I looked into her glimmering eyes and fell speechless. Being the son of Zeus, I could take anything from anyone. But, in the same instance, this made me feel apart from humanity.

“You really should go and clean yourself,” I said at last.

She blushed. “Yes, I should.”

As she strolled back to Clytemnestra, I called out, “If you like, I have a beautiful horse. He can take you to a river nearby and you can bathe there.”

She turned to look at me, combing a dirt stained lock from her eyes. “I adore horses! But they do not seem to share the same fondness for me. Is he gentle?”

I cupped her hands in my own. “As gentle as you, fair princess.”

“Yes, I would like to see him.”

I then whistled loudly and summoned the mighty Thunderfoot. Seline looked at him in awe. “He is so beautiful. His mane is so soft and white. I have seen no horse his equal. May I ride him?”

“If you wish,” said I, picking her up by the waist and gently placing her on its back. It was then that I realized, no man or woman had ridden my horse but I, and it was strange for Thunderfoot was a divine animal, a gift from Zeus, and would not lend himself to mortal hands, or so I thought.

“Do you wish to see the river now?”

“Oh no! I dare not!”

“But why?”

“She knows her place!” said Clytemnestra, accosting them suddenly. “The princess is not allowed to leave the palace grounds unless escorted by her father.”

“But Klea!” Seline objected, pouting, “He saved my life! Surely I’ll be in safe hands, with him. He is the son of Zeus, after all!”

“Well,” said the maid, “I don’t know about this. I’ll have to go ask your father.”

“Go ask and we’ll wait for you here.”

When Clytemnestra was far off, Seline turned to me with a devious grin, saying, “All right, let’s go!”

“But I thought you did not want to . . .”

“That’s just because of Klea. She’s hovers over me like an albatross. I had to wait until we could get away.”

“But your father . . .,” I began.

“Oh, my father is a stuffy old man. He keeps me locked away in the palace night and day! There is so much I don’t know and want to know! I haven’t any idea of the world or of anything in it!”

“Your father is a good friend. I cannot disrespect him.”

“Please, Dynotus, I want to roll in the grass and play in the sea . . . and I want to run naked in the gymnasium like the wives of the hoplites!”

“Seline!” I exclaimed, grabbing her by the ankle, “you are a princess. Such things are not for you.”

“What good is it to be princess then? Everyone envies me, my clothes, my jewelry, the palace where I live, and yet they don’t understand; I live no differently than an outcast, than a prisoner! I want to see other kingdoms, all the ones I’ve heard about: Thebes and Athens, and Olympus! All I know is outside my window, a small part of Sparta. And this must be the most boring place in the world with all the men living in their barracks or off fighting some war. I wish I could live in the barracks too, maybe become a hoplite myself . . .”

“Believe me, you don’t want that. Besides, women are not meant to fight. Your battle is maternity, in giving birth.”

“Did Tyrtaeus write that drivel? What about Athena, she wears armor and a helmet and carries a shield!”

“That’s different. She is a goddess.”

“And Artemis has her bow. Even Aphrodite fought at Ilium in the Trojan War.”

“You know the words of Homer?”

“I memorized the entire epic poem, both the Iliad and the Odyssey. What else is there to do when you are caged in your room like some animal?”

“You’re not like any woman I have ever known . . .,” I murmured softly.

Then she pierced my soul with her eyes, blue as the Aegean and penetrating as a hoplite spear. “Please, Dynotus, we haven’t much time. Once Klea comes back, it will be too late, and I’ll never know a day of freedom.”

Seline rode while I walked beside her, leading her to the river. Through a dirt path and over jagged rocks we went, between the olive trees and the eucalyptus. The stream we came to dashed against many layers of jutting stones, and there I helped her to dismount as Thunderfoot began to graze.

“Here we are,” I said. “Skotino, the dark river.”

Seline let her chiton slip off her shoulders and it fell as if loosely fastened, bundling round her ankles. As Spartan women did not wear undergarments, I was forced to look away, out of respect for her and her father. But she responded to me, “Do not be timid. Have you not seen thousands of women before? Do not the Spartan women show their thighs in public, and exercise with the men in the gymnasium as Lykourgos decreed to ‘produce in us habits of simplicity and an ardent desire for health and beauty of body.’?”

“It is true what Lykourgos said,” I answered. “But you are different, you are the-”

“I know. I am the princess!” she interrupted, wading knee deep into the current.

I spied upon her then as she splashed her sides gently, but her simple beauty did not manifest lust, but rather, a feeling of awe and reverence, an uplifting of my spirit as on the wings of Daedalus.

“Have you brought me here to make love?” she asked bluntly and unabashedly, a strand of hair lain wet across her cheek as she faced me.

“No!” I stammered. “I did not mean to mislead you.”

“Do you not think I’m beautiful?” she asked, river droplets glistening from her skin, revealing herself to me proudly as a sculptor would his korè.

“You are fair as any goddess,” I answered truthfully.

She smiled. “What hubris! But I suppose it’s alright, since your father is Zeus.” And then she pouted. “So then why do you not wish to make love to me?”

“I cannot,” I replied. “You are Demaratus’ daughter. It is forbidden.”

Seline and I parted ways without as much as a kiss. It was not that I did not want her. But in that she was a virgin princess, fornication with me, who was not her husband, would only defile her and make her a whore. Regardless, there was a greater than the pleasures of the flesh. I wished to wake each morning to find her resting in my arms. I yearned to share with her my home and all my life’s experiences. Yet, more than anything, I longed to do something special for her, to give her happiness, and to know that it was I who did so.

Several nights passed and I could not sleep, knowing now what it was that troubled me. One day, as I was gathering pomegranates from my garden, tortured by the icon of a bathing Seline as if stamped like a drachmae under my eyelids, a Muse took pity and gifted me with inspiration. Hence, I summoned my steed and rode to the port of Gythio where I met with Phoenician traders from Biblos. And from them I purchased sheets of papyrus and ink for writing.

For Seline I did compose a letter, the words being those of the Muse but with feelings my own, for I had little knowledge of writing. Then in the moonlight I crept along her balcony window and left the letter there for her to find. When she awoke the next morning, she stepped out on to the ledge and found a flower and a scroll. Curious, she lifted the flower to her nose and opened the scroll, which read thus:

With how melting a glance does she look towards me, more

Tender than sleep and death; nor are such sweets idly

proffered. But Seline answers me not, but wearing her

garland like some bright star shooting across the sky or golden

sprout or soft plume she strides with feet outstretched . . .

grace sits on the maiden's tresses . . .

Were she but to look at me . . .

coming close to hold me with her soft hand, quickly

would I become her suppliant

After this, I returned one night to gaze at Seline's empty balcony. Even in that darkest hour I found her, standing with candle in hand. And she called to me, "Dynotus, how I cherished what you wrote and read it if not a thousand times!"

"Seline, how do I find you not in dreams at this hour, when even satyrs pause their reveling to slumber?"

"Oh, but I dared not sleep for hope that you might come again unto my windowsill and this time catch you in an act of love."

"And how do you know that it was I who sent you such doting words? Would any man be so foolish as to open his heart to a woman, to reveal his very essence and remain unshielded, like a naked breast against a spear point?"

She cast me a mischievous smile. "I did not say that they were doting words, Dynotus."

"Then it is true that I am but the deliverer of the scroll. But the words belong to the Muses."

"Do not the Muses come when they are summoned? Summoned by the yearning and aching of men's hearts?"

"Tell me. Do you patrol your bedroom like a centurion watching for a thief? Is it passion that keeps you awake, or is it fear?"

"It is both. The passion that churns for you and the fear that you might not come again."

"Then I pray this churning continue so that passion might thicken and become . . . love."

"Dynotus, will you ask my father to marry us? I cannot know joy without you. I can't breathe without you. I can't live without you. The day you caught me in your arms, I knew that I would be your wife some day."

“Should your father give me his blessing, I will marry you. Till then, pray to Aphrodite.”

“But no, Aphrodite is for love, and Hera for marriage.”

“But what is marriage without love? We should ask for both.”

“No, Dynotus! You are the son of Zeus. And Hera, his wife and goddess of marriage, despises all Zeus’ sons that are not her own. Your mother was Alcmena, a mortal woman, was she not?”

“Then praying to her will be of no use. Let us venerate Aphrodite, and that which Pandora’s Box did not release.”

“And what is that?”

“Hope.”

And so there I slept beneath her balcony, and when Dawn rose I did wake and enter the palace. There I sought the King, and found him on his throne. As always, Demaratus was delighted to see me. He greeted me warmly and asked, “Dynotus, my friend, what brings you here?”

Now, I was filled with fear, and kneeling before him did reply, “I have come to tell you my wish, that which you granted me the night of the banquet last.”

“Excellent!” he replied. “And for what have you decided to ask?”

“It is the one thing, the one thing that shall give me joy and happiness all the days of my life. I implore you, do not deny me this one wish!”

Demaratus laughed. “This is quite unlike you, Dynotus! Do not hesitate. Whatever you desire, I shall gladly grant. Do not fret.”

“I humbly request your daughter’s hand, your daughter, Seline.”

The King sat stunned for a moment, and then his smile turned to an angry scowl and his face pale and aged “. . . my daughter? You wish for my one and only daughter? She is the only person, the only thing left in this world that I love. Of all the women you have defiled, the only virgin, the only thing I know that is young and pure, all that I have left in the world that you have not spoiled! No! I will never allow your lecherous hands take from me my daughter! As if you could not go and satisfy yourself with all the whores in the village, you would dare come here and rape my precious Seline and make her one of

them! I say never! You will see my death before your limb shall ever know the love of my young and innocent daughter! Go now and ravage a pig to satiate your appetite, and may I never suffer the sight of you within my hall again!”

Chapter 4

Any man who would have said to me those words, would I have taken his life. But I could not bring myself to be angry with the King. Though he now despised me, and would never see me again, I still thought of him as my friend, my only friend. At times, I even wished to call him father, for that is what he would be to me, if he had granted the wish I so deeply desired. But rather than be filled with spite, I turned unto myself and hated what I was. I am a god, worshipped by multitudes, and yet, I would rather wish to be a pauper or a mortal servant. Though I would not live forever, nor dwell among the gods on Mount Olympus, nor seduce so many into my bed—I would have sacrificed everything to be but near her, not as a husband or a lover, but as a servant, one who could enter the palace of the King and not be shunned, if only to see my beloved Seline.

Very slowly did I return to my home. As quickly as I had journeyed to the king's palace, did I now ride Thunderfoot, at merely a trot. I dirtied my hands in the dust of the white stone, of the mountain that I climbed. When I reached the top of the cliff, I was tired, though it was a thing I had never known before. My muscles sagged and my massive arms lay limp and dead like from my shoulders. My head bowed low, so that, I could dwell only on the earth. For I could not bring myself to look up into the heavens, in fear of seeing that which made me. Lowly was I, lowly to live not upon a towering mountain, but within the dirt, like the worms and the bugs. Finally, I collapsed upon my knees, not in weariness but in prayer. I, then, looked up into the sky, up into the sun, and did cry out and raise my hands unto heaven. And the white clouds did close in and encircle the sun and form an image. I could see a beard as white as snow and two eyes blazing with blinding light. Then, did I cry my father's name, "**Z O R**!!" And his name was carried out all across the land, through every mountain, off every stone, echoing in the ears of every nymph and god of nature. But, he did not answer me.

Several days passed and I lived atop a boulder in the mountain. I made myself fire and hunted for food. But I did not return to my palace. I did not feel worthy enough to live there.

Then, on one hot day, as I was hiking through the mountains, I heard a scream. At once, I rushed to the sound of the voice. And as I neared closer, I heard that it was the voice of a woman. Then, I began running, running until I heard the voice calling for help directly below me. I looked down over a broken ledge and saw a string of blonde hair blowing in the wind and a pair of delicate hands clinging desperately to the rock.

"Seline!" I called, reaching out my hand. She looked up at me, her fear stricken countenance subsiding to a happy smile. "Dynotus, I knew you would save me!" she said.

"I have not saved you yet, my dear. Reach out your hand so that I may catch it!"

"I can't! I can't hold on with one hand!" she screamed back.

I stretched to grab her as best I could, but I could not reach her. Determined to find another way, I yelled, “hold on!”

“Please, hurry! I don’t think I can hold on much longer!”

Desperate, I leaped over the edge of the cliff and caught myself upon the slight protrusions of the rock wall. I then grabbed her by the waist and with all my might, pushed her up over the edge, knowing it would cause my fall. Seline tumbled to safety. I dropped like a stone. When she gained her senses, she looked over and screamed, “Dynotus! NOOOO!!”

Luckily, I landed on a small ledge about fifty feet below. Only my godly might saved me from death. Yet, still, I believed that I had broken a rib. As I lay unable to stand, I saw Seline running and reaching her hands toward me. We embraced, and I found her in my arms again. “Dynotus, why, why didn’t you fly?” she said, and looked at me, confused.

“Fly? I cannot fly,” I replied.

“But. . .but you are a god, are you not?” she asked.

“No, I have told you countless times. I am only a man. I am not even. . . .not even a strong man. Even now, I cannot bear to be without you.”

“Nor can I,” she said.

“You. . .you came to find me?” I asked in amazement.

“The King was cruel and harsh to you. I overheard what things he said. I felt so horrible, but there was no way that I could convince him that your feelings for me were true. I even showed him the letter that you wrote to me, but he thought nothing of it and tore it up!”

“You heard what he said of me? Than you must think of me as an animal.”

“No, no, I do not. I don’t care what you did or have done in your past. What matters is that we be together.”

“But. . .how did you get here?” I asked.

“At night, when the guards were asleep, I crept out of my window and rode my horse to this mountain. It was the highest one, and it was here that I knew I would find you.”

“But why, Seline? You should not be here. Your father will miss you and I cannot love you the way I desire.”

She began to press herself in my arms, resting her head on my chest and gently caressing her fingers against my worn, rough face, “but why? Do you not want me? Do you not love me?”

I pushed her away, “NO! You cannot understand the way I feel for you- the way. . . the way I love you.”

She tried to coerce me again, “show me!” she said.

I turned away. “I already have. It is not in the flesh and so, you have not seen it. You are blind to it. And I cannot take you. . . I will not take you like a whore. If I could be. . . if I could be your husband. But it is law. I cannot marry you without your father’s permission.”

“Why. . . why are you crying? Men. . . men don’t cry,” she said softly.

I touched her cheek, “this one does. Tonight, you may rest here. But in the morning, I will take you back to the King.”

That night, I made a fire and hunted us something to eat. While we sat around the flame, under the starry sky, Seline and I began to talk. “What’s it like being a god?” she asked.

“It’s not so different than being a man. Except. . . it’s very lonely.”

“Isn’t wonderful, to be able to lift anything and be stabbed by knives and things and not be killed?”

I lifted my hand in the air and let a bolt of lightning come down from the sky. “And what would I lift? If I could live forever, what would I do?”

“Do you. . . do you get bored, up here?” she asked.

“Yes, but tell me, what’s it like being a princess?”

“I think. . . I think it’s very awful. My father. . . he locks me in my room and doesn’t let me go out. He’s afraid that I’ll get pregnant with some boy or that I’ll be raped or something. I can’t go anywhere or do anything, without mobs of people wanting to look at you and kiss you and fondle you, and tell you how pretty you are and how they would like to live in the palace. And I have no friends. So many say they are my friends, but

they don't really care about me. They don't see the person inside. All they see and all they care of is my father's wealth. Of course everyone wants to marry me, I'm the princess!"

"I understand how you feel. It's horrible that your father locks you in. Such a beautiful creature should not be kept locked up. She should be free to roam wild, to do what she wants and go where she pleases. I hope that the person you marry gives you greater freedom than your father."

Seline frowned, and said quietly, "no. I fear whoever I will marry. The men below are not like you. They are not gentle and kind. They don't think of women as people, but as pieces of meat, meat to be enjoyed. And when they are bored of you, they keep you to do work. My husband will marry me for my riches, and then force me into cooking and cleaning and staying home. If he doesn't like what food I serve or if the palace is unclean, he will beat me."

"No. . .don't say such things."

"It's true. I know. All the wives I've known get beaten. Astymeloisa, the maid servant who lives in the palace, has a husband who is in the army. Every night he comes home late, after whoring around with other women, and then he is drunk and beats her. I find her every day with new bruises and scars, but she says they are nothing, that she hit her head on a table by accident. But I know better. Rather would I die than be married to any man. Any man, that is, but you."

"I'm sorry. . . I wish that I could do something."

"Please, let's change the subject."

"What should we talk about?"

"Tell me anything. Just speak to me."

"You know, in the light of the fire, your eyes sparkle like the stars." Seline looked up, brushing her hair, and said, "tell me about the stars."

I pointed up to three stars that were aligned in the heavens and asked, "do you see those three? Those stars are really a belt, and if you look around them, you can see the shape of a person, can you not?"

"Yes! . . I never noticed that before."

“Well, that is Orion. He was a great hunter. And he was very handsome.

One day, while he was out hunting with his pack of dogs, he was seen by the Goddess of the Hunt, Artemia. Though Artemia is a devout virgin, she fell in love with him. However, Apollo, the brother of Artemia, became jealous of Orion. And so, Apollo schemed to be rid of him.

One day, when Artemia was swimming out in the ocean, Apollo came to her and challenged her hunting skill, saying that she was unable to shoot a far off bird that flew over the water, with her bow and arrow. Well, Artemia became very angry, and she took her bow and did shoot down the bird. However, as she approached closer to see what she had shot down, she realized that the bird she had killed was not a bird at all, but in fact, that it was her loved one, Orion. Well, when mighty Zeus, God of the Heavens, saw how grief stricken she had become, he came down to earth to take Orion’s body, putting him in the sky to remain forever as a constellation.”

After telling the tale, I looked and saw that Seline had fallen fast asleep. I shivered, feeling a gust of cold wind come in from the West. I stood up and looked for something warm that could be used as a blanket. It was then that I found my horse, Thunderfoot, and saw that on his back he wore a sheep skin saddle. And so, I took the sheep skin saddle from him and walking over to where Seline slept, did drop the blanket over her, whispering, “good night, sweet princess.” Making sure she was tucked in tight, I crawled to a nearby boulder, trying as best I could to keep myself warm.

I woke early the next morning. I didn’t sleep well; for I was plagued with strange nightmares. I fought the demi-god, Phobos, and lost.

Placing Seline on Thunderfoot, I began making my way down the mountain toward the King. Then, as we were descending, Seline cried out, saying, “what is that!?”

I looked to where she was pointing, seeing down below, at the base of the mountain, a swarm of marching men. “It is the King!” I cried.

Seline looked at me, terrified, “he brought the entire army!”

I separated from her, “stay here, I’ll handle this.”

“No, I can tell them to stop. It’s me that he wants. Let me go alone, so that they do not hurt you.”

“It doesn’t matter. The King thinks I have stolen you, and for such a crime, he will not let me live. I must face him, or forever run and be in hiding.”

I went down to meet the army. The soldiers stopped in front of me, armed with swords and shields and wearing helmets. One of them stepped forward and said, “where have you hidden the princess?”

“She is safe. I will return her to the King if you do not attack me.” “Silence, swine! You are in no position to make demands. We shall find the princess and then slaughter you!”

“Do you know who I am!? I am a god! I, in fact, have not kidnapped the princess. But, if you wish to meet your fate, step closer.”

“Ha! you are no more a god than I. You are but a man who knows nothing but to rape and force women, for you could never know love like a man with a wife, like I, with my Astymeloisa.”

“Bastard! Die!” I screamed, and thrust my sword through his gut. He dropped over dead. When the other soldiers saw what happened, without having heard what was spoken, they rushed in and attacked, thinking that I had initiated the battle through a blatant and impudent act of violence. Without thought, I became a raving mad man, rushing into battle with my bloody sword. The army fell around me and swung their weapons to strike me dead. I blocked and parried their futile blows and struck back with such force, that no shield, sword or helm could save their lives. I created a circle of death, and any who came within striking distance of me did I slay. All at once, they charged toward me, but I hacked them down like long stemmed weeds, cutting through and killing three or four with each blow. Others tried to stab me through the back, but I was too fast for them and too conscious of my surroundings. Using the skills I had learned in the Far East, I did fight with both hands and both feet. Those behind me felt the force of my kicking blows, which shattered their armor and broke their bones. Those in front of me felt the cutting edge of my swirling blade. Those beside me felt my fists of rage. And though I was great in might, their numbers overwhelmed me, and soon, I began to feel the slings and gashes of many blades cut into me, those which I did not see or could not catch. After dropping hordes of men, I grew weary at my blood loss, and fell back in retreat. As my blood cooled and my savage madness left me, I realized, that, I was fighting Hellenite soldiers, the same people who I had sworn to protect. Then, I felt my weakness, and did run to find my horse.

I reached, Thunderfoot, finding Seline sitting upon him. She looked at me in shock, and upon seeing her, did I lose all my strength and drop to the ground. Seline fell to my side, so that her long blonde hair dipped into my blood. “Oh, God! Dynotus, you’re. . .you’re dying!”

I reached up to touch her face, already seeing the tears welling in her eyes. “It’s all my fault. I shouldn’t have fallen in love. God’s do not fall in love the way I fell in love with you.”

“But. . .they hurt you. They made you bleed. You are not a god. You are a man.

When you climbed upon the ledge to save me, you risked your life. You could have died. Why did you do that? Why did you risk your life for me, if you knew that you could not even marry me?”

“I would give my life for you. This is what I’d do, this is how I love you.”

“Now, I understand. I know now what you feel for me.”

“I wish that I could live, just to be with you. But it is better to die, if I am to live without you.”

“But you won’t die. Your wounds are not that severe.”

“No, but the rest of the Hellenite army is coming and they come to kill me.”

“Can’t you run?” she asked.

“No, I cannot run forever.”

“Run, run and come back to fight another day.”

“I cannot fight the Hellenite army. I am and will always be Hellenite, and I have sworn my life to protect the Hellenite people. I cannot fight my own people. It would be a sin to bear far worse than any simple death.”

“No! I will not let them harm you!” she cried.

When Seline turned around, she saw a legion of men standing before her. One of the soldiers approached, and taking off his helmet, bowed and said, “princess, thank Zeus that you are safe.”

“Get away! Do not harm this man!”

“But, princess, he raped and kidnapped you!”

“He did not kidnap me! I came here on my own. Nor did he ever lay a finger on me. He is the kindest, most loving soul I have ever known. You shall not touch him!”

The soldier lifted his sword, “he may have not kidnapped you or raped you, but he did kill Astymeloisa’s husband and many other good men. He must be put to death!”

“Astymeloisa’s husband deserved it, the bastard! And well, as for the other men, they’re all bastards too!”

“Move aside, princess!” he ordered.

“No! I will not! If you want to kill him, your sword will have to go through me!”

“Please, Seline, do not endanger yourself,” I said.

She knelt down beside me, “but. . .but I love you.”

And her tears washed away my wounds and cleaned my bloody scars and I said, “all right. For you, I will run.”

I stood and pointed my sword at the leader of the army. “Do you wish to fight again!? Maybe your men will take me down, but I shall take more with me, and surely you shall not survive. Order them back, or I will kill you!”

He looked down at the sharpness of my magic blade and said, “all right. Give us the princess and you can go.”

“Only under one condition,” I replied.

Both Seline and the soldier looked at me in surprise, “what condition?” he asked.

“You must swear. You must make an oath that you will do what I ask. Do you swear?”

“I swear.”

“You must promise to let her be free, to go where she wants, when she wants, and to never keep her locked in her room again. Also, when she gets married, it will be your responsibility to be sure that she is **never** beaten by her husband, and if she is, I will come find you and kill you myself.”

Suddenly, a voice called from the distance, “no need for that!”

The three of us turned. “Father!” Seline proclaimed.

“King!” said the soldier and bowed.

“Demaratus! It is good that you are here, so that I may give these demands to you myself.”

The King leaped off his horse and everyone, save for Seline and myself, knelt and bowed. “There will be no need for these demands, if you can carry them out yourself.”

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked.

“I have decided that you may marry my daughter, if, you bring back to me, to be used as a wedding wreath, the Crown of Kirce.”

Then, I realized that the King, indeed, wished me dead. For he still believed me to have kidnapped his daughter, and feared that, if I were to escape alive, would return to kidnap her again. Thus, he wished me to find the Crown of Kirce, an artifact almost impossible to find, every hero having tried also having died, hoping that I, too, would seek it and not return. And though I knew that I could run and never be caught, I loved Seline so much, that I was willing to gamble this small chance with my life, in the hope of marriage. First, however, I had to be sure that the King would keep his word.

“And how do I know that you will not lie, as you did the night of the banquet, and not give your blessing?”

“I will swear by the river, Styx, that if you bring me the Crown of Kirce, my daughter shall I give to thee in marriage.”

“None may break that oath, even gods, and not be damned for all eternity. Very well, I shall accept your offer. I will search and find the Crown of Kirce, and return to be wed to Seline.”

Chapter 5

I traveled great distances and through many lands to find the crown. So many adventures had I experienced on my journey, that the quest to find the crown could make yet another story all its own. But those encounters are of no importance to my tale. I do recall, however, the glorious day I returned triumphant. I spoke with many fishermen on the whereabouts of the island, where the wicked queen and sorceress, Kirce, once dwelled. Most of whom I spoke with told me they knew not of such a place. Then, I met a blind poet who told me of an odyssey. He spoke of ancient times, back during the war against Troy. He told me of a man who had angered the god, Poseidon, and had caused him to wander the Great Sea for twenty years before finding his way home to Thaki. And so, I went to the city of Thaki, and found that this man had long been dead. However, his great grand children knew of Kirce, and of how to find her. They told me to go to the edge of the river, Akaron, and gave me two things they said I would need. One was a conch shell and the other was a pair of two gold coins called obol.

When I arrived at the river, I found it surrounded by a thick fog. Nothing could be seen in any direction. Looking at the ground, I could tell that no life remained. And I wondered, where would I find a boat? Where did the river lead?

Finally, I decided to blow on the conch. To my surprise, the shell made a loud noise, like a horn. I waited several minutes and saw a ferryboat come crossing by. The boatman held a long oar and was shrouded in a black cloak that masked his face like a veil of mourning.

I stepped into the boat and asked if I could be taken to see Kirce. The boatman did not reply, but began to row as if he had heard and understood my request. After a long time sitting, I grew weary, surprised the boatman knew where he was going, wondering with amazement why the thick cloud neither lifted nor ended. I knelt over to drink of the water in thirst, but felt a cold, bony hand pull me back. I assumed the water was not safe to drink and said nothing of the matter.

After a long period, the boat came to a stop near similar, lifeless soil. As I stepped out, the ferryman extended his hand, and, to my terror, I turned to look into the face of death. Now, I understood the mystery of the fog and of the conch shell. I had summoned the ferryman of death, who had taken me to find a dead woman. And the gold coins were for his payment.

After giving him the obol, I stepped on to the island where the fog cleared, seeing it was midnight.

Though I had journeyed through the Underworld, the island was not of the Underworld. It seemed as though Kirce had died, but somehow—through dark magic—had avoided Hades. Instead, she seemed to have brought Hades to her. The only difference, which I

could tell, is that the guardian dog, Cerberes, was not there, nor was the Gates of Thanatos. Yet, the soul of Kirce still dwelled on the island, and only Charon had known to find her. For the island was shrouded in fog, and only the lost at sea could find their way to it.

I tread through muddy ground until I reached a paved clearing. The path led to a dark temple. On each side of the road, sculpted gorgons guarded the entrance, illuminated by distant torchlight. I walked between rows of demonic faces and through an archway to a pair of double doors. The walls were lined by centuries of dust and mold. In the corner of the archway did I see many cobwebs. Sitting in the center of a large sewn web, a black widow spider made her nest. I took one of the torches from the wall and entered the temple.

Even with the torchlight, it was difficult to see. From room to room, no light could penetrate the darkness.

The temple was cold and unfeeling. It appeared that no living breath had graced its halls in a hundred years or more. Exploring further, I discovered a hallway filled with candles. Walking by, each candle lit itself.

The candles led me to a room dug one foot beneath the rest of the temple. Entering it, I found myself standing in mud. Then, I heard a strange noise, and turning to look against the wall, found numerous pigs. Most of them were dead, but, one moved toward me. Then, the pig spoke, with a voice no different than a man's.

"Turn back!" the pig said. "Lest ye suffer the fate that my crewman and I have befallen!"

"I am Dynotus, Son of Zor. I seek to find the queen, Kirce," I answered him.

"She is here, but you do not want to find her. Turn back or become like one of us!"

At first, I considered the pig's warning. But it was not enough to convince me to leave. I did not think my fate was to end up a pig. I knew my destiny to hold greater things, and so I marched on.

After a lengthy search, I found another room. There was a pentagram etched into the floor and candle stands placed at each point. Beside the symbol, did I discover a book case. Lifting one of the books, it crumbled to dust. Finally, I discovered, high on a pedestal, the queen's throne. As I stepped up to it, I found, to my horror, the skeletal remains of Kirce. Apparently, she had died alone, sitting on her throne, none having the decency to bury her. It was no wonder her soul had never reached Hades. She had died without burial, a fate far worse than death. Then, the thought occurred to me, that, perhaps, I could be the one to do her the honor. But when I touched her bones, they, too,

turned to dust. With that, I saw a golden crown fall from her head and come crashing to the floor. Taking the Crown of Kirce in my hands, I felt triumphant. However, as I began making my way back to the temple doors, a horrifying thought occurred to me. I wondered, that with everything in the temple seeming so ancient, with the books and the remains of Kirce having turned to dust, how was it that the pigs in that one room, who had warned me about being transformed, were not only still intact, but still alive? It didn't make sense.

As I made my way through the passage to the double door, I heard an echoey voice coming from all directions. A cold chill ran down my spine, as the name, "Dynotus," rang throughout the temple. I halted, swinging my torch up defensively. Then, I saw a beautiful young woman descend a staircase, a staircase I knew not was there. She had raven black hair and black painted eyes, and her lips were painted as black as her robes. She pointed a finger at me, smiled, and glided over to where I stood as if she had no feet. "What woman are you?" I asked in bewilderment.

She raised her hand, letting her sleeve slide down her arm to her shoulders, revealing a gold bracelet like a serpent coiled around her wrist. She brushed a long nail against my neck and whispered, "I see your wicked thoughts, oh handsome one. What would you have me do to you?"

I grabbed her arms and pushed her away, "I have no thoughts for a woman such as yourself!"

She receded and spoke in a loud mocking tone, "am I not beautiful, Dynotus?"

"I will not be seduced by a dead woman! You appear beautiful, but your flesh is cold and icy."

"Let that not deter you from my pleasures. Kiss my lips and let your blood warm me."

"Rather would I kiss the lips of a serpent! For I bet a serpent hath less poison in them."

"Come now, Dynotus . . . look into my eyes and turn me away if you do not desire me."

And I did look into her eyes, falling spellbound. Within them, I found the erotic wiles of a whore. I embraced and kissed her, and fantasized of our eternal love making, all the while, strange voices pounded my head.

Kirce raked her nails against my bare skin, scratching my back, and soon, I felt myself losing blood. I looked to see a pool of it around my feet, with Kirce kneeling to my waist to drink from my thigh. A deep sense of bliss came over me as the black witch sated her

nefarious appetite. Then, I saw my reflection in the Crown of Kirce. But, to my horror and disgust, I also saw the image a ghoul, sucking on my blood.

I screamed and kicked her away. She fell back, laughing, and licking her lips. Then, she knelt and lifted the crown, placing it atop her head. “At last! At last, you have given me the blood I’ve needed to renew my body! Before you came, my beloved, I was merely a specter.” Then, she added, with a hint of sadness, “I was wasted away to nothing, nothing but a cold and lonely spot in the corner, only by sheer will keeping my soul on this island and forcing Death away. I would not go! I knew that a man would come to restore my beauty, like the shipwrecked crews from before. But you. . .you are special. So handsome. . .and a demi-god! Your life force will sustain me for centuries! I wouldn’t change you into a swine, beloved.”

“Yes, but how long will your youth last, before you must drink of me again, witch!?”

“Only in another few days,” she replied. “But why worry of such things? Here we are, free from death, you and I . . . together, forever! We shall feed off of each other’s life forces. My magic and your blood will make us immortal!”

“I already am immortal!”

“Then, stay here. . .and I shall give you everlasting love!”

“You know nothing of love. Once, I knew as much about it as you, but I have learned, and it is a thing greater than immortality.”

“But, I can be any woman you want . . . any woman you desire . . . please stay here with me!”

“I must return!”

“Ahhh . . . so you are getting married to a beautiful princess, I see!”

“Get out of my mind, lest I take back from you your life!” I threatened.

“Describe her to me. Tell me what she looks like, how she acts. I can be her. . .I can be her!” she pleaded.

“You could never be her!” I screamed, and turned my ring into a sword.

After a pause, she responded, “you are not a shipwrecked sailor, are you?”

“I have come for the crown!”

“Then, if you must go, sleep with me one night, or else I shan’t give it thee.”

“One night, yes, and in the morning I shall be like a newly cooked rooster, dried of blood and seasoned for your hunger.”

And Kirce took off her clothes and did walk toward me naked, speaking in seductive whispers, “now, Dynotus, legends of your lust have even reached my ears. How could such a man like yourself, resist a woman such as I? How can you leave here, not having known what I feel like? Don’t you want to. . .?”

“Silence! Give me the crown and let me leave or I shall take off your head!”

Kirce raised her hands, making her robes jump back on, and floated away, gazing at me with eyes of evil. Then, like some voracious beast, her nails grew black and long, like the talons of a vulture, and a forked tongue slithered from her mouth as she spoke, “Men, they are such pigs!”

With that, a beam of light erupted from the center of her crown. I raised my silver sword and the beam was deflected back at her! I then heard a horrid scream, and looked to see, where Kirce once stood, nothing but a crumpled robe and a gold crown.

I walked over the remains, taking the crown, and found a piglet underneath. She looked at me and tried to run. But I moved more swiftly, turning her belly-side up, to make certain that the creature was female. I laughed, laughed and walked down the corridor to the pigpen.

When I opened the door, I found the crew of sailors, now pigs, and seeing that they had no mate, did offer them the swine in my hands. Closing the door, I remarked, “There you go, Kirce, several mates with whom to share your everlasting love!”

Chapter 6

I found Seline's white robes soaked with tears when I met her. I had finally reached my homeland as Elios Hyperion and Apollo began to carry the sun across the sky. It melted into the atmosphere like a boiled egg spilling its yellow yoke over the horizon. I had just come over a grassy hill, when I saw the palace standing in a cloud of thick fog. It was on that hill, that I found Seline running toward me. In one hand she carried a handkerchief and with the other she held up her dress so that she could run.

We embraced and I saw that her golden hair had turned gray and her skin had become pale and sickly. Her eyes were pink and weak and shimmered with dampness. Her hands were cold and numb. When I saw her like this, I was in so much shock that I could not speak. Then, she said, "Dynotus, is it you? Is it really you?"

"My dear, who else could it be?"

"I thought you were dead."

"Why would I be dead?"

"Did you not seek the crown?"

"I did."

"At first, I knew nothing of the crown. But when I heard stories of what fate befell those who sought it, I believed you were dead. After all, you are only a man."

"Yes, but I am a man who loves you, and no power on Earth or on Mount Olympus can stop true love."

"Dynotus, I love you so much. . ." and she paused to catch her breath, ". . . and when I thought I would never see you again, I began to slowly wilt and die, and hoped that I would so that I could find you in Elissium, so that we could be together. I wished to waste away so that nothing but the echo of my tears would remain. My tears for you."

"There is no need for that now. I have returned with the Crown of Kirce, and we will be wed this very day! Nothing can separate us again."

And I lifted her in my arms and carried her to the palace, and as I did, the fog lifted and the sun rose high into the air warming Mother Gaea, and flowers sprouted after each step I made.

The gates of the palace opened and all the guards and maid servants greeted us with hospitality and joy. This, at first, surprised me, for I had not expected such a warm and friendly greeting from people whose acquaintances I had slain. Then I saw the King, who rushed toward me with open arms. Though he was smiling, I could tell that much grief had befallen him. “Dynotus!” he exclaimed, “you have returned!”

“What happened? I believed you despised me and wished me dead.”

Then the King laughed and replied, “I did! I did! When you left, I thought you would not return and rejoiced. But my daughter locked herself in her room and cried. There was not one day that passed that she did not cry. She did not eat. She did not sleep. And she said she would never leave her room unless she saw you coming toward the palace from her balcony window. I implored her to come out, but, she refused. I offered her everything a young woman could want. Clothes, jewels, horses, servants, she cared nothing for them. At last, I broke down her door and saw that she had become thin and frail, and that her skin had turned pale and her eyes lost color, and I became terrified. I thought she would die of grief. Then, I fell on my knees and begged her to tell me of anything that would make her eat. And she said, ‘to see Dynotus again’. It was then, that I realized, that she truly loved you. And I told her that I could not find you. But, that, if you were found, or if you returned alive, I promised her to be wed to you. With that promise, she ate.

Then, we waited. The entire kingdom fell into mourning and prayed to the gods for your safe return. Even the guards, when they saw my grief, hoped for your return.”

“So I didn’t need to find the crown?” I asked.

“My son . . . I give my blessing. If marrying you will make my daughter smile again, then marry you she will!”

Seline hugged me and looked deep into my eyes, then smiled and turned to her father. Already, her beauty had returned. “And for her wedding wreath, she will wear the Crown of Kirce!”

A crowd of people gathered round to see it. The King lifted it in his hands and said, “magnificent! I have never seen a treasure of its equal. It will make excellent raiment to my daughter’s head, its beauty surpassed only by her own.”

Seline smiled and reached out her hands to touch it. “Ohh, it is beautiful!” she said, and as she began to place it on her head, the maid servant Astymeloisa called out. “Seline, you have such beautiful things. I know I would never be able to afford such a gift for my wedding. But at least, let me try it on, to know what it would be like to be you.”

“Oh Astymeloisa, you are such a good servant. I would be more than kind to offer it. . .,” and Seline handed Astymeloisa the crown. The maid servant combed her hair back and stood upright to look her best, then, smiling with enthusiasm, did place the crown atop her head.

I think, I was looking down at the time it happened. I was lost in thought, wondering about the mildew growing on the brick walls, when I noticed, what at first I thought was a gust of wind, blow a leaf out of my hand. Then, the heat burned my side and I panicked. I yelled Seline’s name and lunged myself at her, toppling her to the ground. I turned around and heard people screaming, crying. Astymeloisa was still alive, though. Poor girl must have clung on to life for several minutes before she died. I remember her turning and turning and screaming. It took five buckets of cold water before the flames were drowned out, and by then, nothing was left of Astymeloisa but a black charred corpse. The crown had turned to dust, and I could have sworn that Kirce was alive and back to normal some place, laughing at me. I just thanked the gods for whatever impulse drove Astymeloisa to put on the crown before Seline. What I would have done if Seline had put on the crown, could I not even bring myself to think.

The King commanded that several days of mourning be observed for the dead maid servant. I could not believe how things were changing. Not even the King saw women in the same respect. At one time, the King would have sold Astymeloisa to me like a farmer who sells his livestock, to be used as a private whore. But today, due to Seline’s friendship with her and my love for Seline, Astymeloisa’s death became a national tragedy. Because of this, our wedding was postponed. Perhaps, if we had been married a few days earlier, I would not be here, speaking of what was to happen next.

The day of our wedding took many days to prepare, even with the hundreds of servants and maidservants working for the King. I demanded that as a naturist, the ceremony be as informal as possible, so Seline agreed to wear only a simple white robe and a gold tiara. Furthermore, a high priest of Zeus was summoned from the north, in Macedon, to marry us.

When the big day came, everything went as planned, even up to the very end of the marriage ceremony. The priest announced us husband and wife, and when I turned to look at Seline, for the first time my wife, all the memories of every woman I had known, melted away, and I experienced a thrilling moment of unspeakable joy, far beyond even the wildest of my sexual adventures. All that I could think, was of how I wished to swim in the ocean blue of my beloved’s eyes, and could not believe that, I had never even kissed Seline, not even once, and that by kissing her would I erase all memory of ever having kissed before.

I placed my hand behind her waist and cocked her head back. She gave me a welcoming smile and I descended down to drink of her rose pedal lips, when, suddenly, a cry was heard from the back of the temple. I turned to see the disturbance, my lips having just glided over hers, close enough to feel her breath, but, never having touched.

“I object to this wedding!” the voice cried out.

King Demaratus rose from his chair and asked, “who dares interrupt this union?”

Then, the crowd parted like the Red Sea, and coming forth, a strange old man with dark and wrinkled skin. He sat upon an old wooden throne carried through the temple on poles. The poles were held by four men in black robes and black turbans. His one eye was bloodshot and stared coldly at me, while the other sank closed. His nails were long and dirt filled, and his teeth were black as night. He spoke with a harsh and raspy voice, “I dare insult anyone, I, Iuz the Cruel!”

“And why should these two not be joined in marriage?” asked the King.

Iuz whispered into one of his guard’s ears and the guard brought forth a wooden box and opened it. Upon seeing the contents of the box, Seline screamed, and the others in the temple were just as shocked. Laying there, lifelessly, was a human arm, stained with blood and severed below the elbow.

“What is the meaning of this?!” cried the King.

“This is the arm of my son. My son who was mutilated by the Son of Zor. For this crime, he must be punished.”

Suddenly, out from another caravan, came Trax the Torturer. He looked as mean as ever, but, this time, with only one arm. Now, however, he had attached to his severed limb a large iron clamp, one which held his double bladed ax. “I demand justice!” cried Trax.

“Well, you shan’t have it. Dynotus did nothing wrong. You were bandits intruding upon Hellenite land. Dynotus was right for banishing you then, and he will be right to banish you now,” said the King.

Iuz leaned closer to the King and said in a deep voice, “oh, you misunderstand, my King, we are not asking for justice, we are telling you of the justice you are to receive, you and Dynotus!”

“Guards, take them away!” the King commanded.

Suddenly, hundreds of soldiers surrounded the room. All of them dressed like Iuz' guards. The Hellenite soldiers had disappeared. "All your guards are dead. We took care of them outside the village. In the Hellenite harbor is a fleet ten times the size of the last one I sent. It was easy to get beyond your defenses, since half of your army is attending this wedding. I was prepared to contend against a much greater force. I suppose this is my lucky day. And this time, we mean to sack the city of all its treasures, including the beautiful women!"

"Enough! Guards or not, if you did not learn the last time, you shall learn now! For as a trophy, I swear: before you leave here this day, shall you take back your own arm, held in a box!" I threatened.

"I think not!" Iuz replied, and as I went to smote him, did he cast from his hand a glowing jade beetle, which struck me on the waist and wrapped around me like a belt. A jolt of energy ran through me, as if I had been struck by lightning, and I fell to the floor paralyzed.

Iuz leaned over me and grinned, "I heard of your might, Dynotus, and so came prepared. Not even the greatest of the desert giants or the mightiest of the task genies can remove the Scarab of Nether Sharrukin, once it is placed upon them. When it attaches to your body, you become as powerless as a child."

Then, two of his guards grabbed me and began to beat and kick me. I sustained their blows, unable to move, and watched as Trax and Iuz did their evil, and I, powerless to stop them.

"The girl is mine!" Trax said, taking Seline in his grasp.

Iuz turned to me, and pointing his bony finger, said, "I thought for a long time the punishment I could enact upon you. But it looks as though the Fates have been generous. For there is no greater torture I can conceive, then letting you live and taking your beloved with me! If I were to kill you, you would merely ascend to Mount Olympus as a demi-god. If I were to kill her, you would know her fate, and eventually end your mourning, perhaps to find another love. But by taking her with me, you shall never know what tortures she will be made to endure. You will be plagued for all eternity by the unknown, and you will live, never knowing whether she is alive or dead, whether she is happy or whether she is forced into wedlock with another! A finer punishment, I could not have devised!"

Seline turned to him and said, "you monster! How could you be so. . . so. . ."

"Cruel!" he finished. "That is why, my sweet, they call me the Cruel!"

Trax pushed Seline to the ground and fastened manacles around her ankles, dragging her away in chains. Desperately clinging to the ground, Seline looked at me as long as possible, pleading, “Dynotus, help me!”

I reached out with all my might, taking her hand in mine, and said, “Seline, you must forgive me, you must forgive my weakness, but, I cannot move! But, I swear. . .I swear that wherever you go, wherever he takes you . . .I will find you, in the remotest corners of the world, I will rescue you, I promise!”

“And I swear, my love, that I will never love another. They may force themselves upon my body. . .but they will never have my heart; it shall always be yours!” and with that, she began to cry, as our hands were pulled apart.

I watched Seline be dragged from me and felt an enormous rage build within. It was as if something in me had exploded. With that, I grabbed the scarab from my gut, and letting out a blood-curdling scream, one to scare the meanest of wolves, I did free myself from its power. I crushed the scarab in my hand, and taking hold of both guards, did smash their heads together and break their skulls.

Immediately, I rose to my feet, my godly strength returned. I ran after the bandits, but, already they were on horseback. I called for my own horse, Thunderfoot, riding him out to the harbor.

There, I saw a fleet of ships departing. I wished to catch them, but, knew not which of the many ships contained my love. With all of my effort, I was too late.

It was then that I vowed, that no matter what the cost, no matter how difficult, no matter how impossible, I would search and I would find her, even if it took the rest of my life. I would not rest. . .until she was back in my arms again.

This is how I lost my treasure, effendi, the greatest treasure that any man may possess, the treasure of true love.

Part II: The Search

Chapter 7

When Seline was kidnapped, I first thought to find her by catching the ships before they docked. I had learned that Iuz came from a land far south, a land known as Ninevah. However, to reach Ninevah, Iuz' ships would have to dock first in Crete and then Aegyptos. I knew that I could not catch them by sail, since they had departed long before I could have obtained a ship. But with Thunderfoot, my mighty steed, I could circle the Great Sea through Cannan, where I hoped to reach Aegyptos before Iuz and his crew.

The very day of my wedding, I returned quickly to the King, and promised him that I would return with his daughter. Then, I leaped upon my horse and left that very instant, not having thought to bring any water, food or clothing. All that was in my mind was to find Seline and nothing more.

For two days I traveled without stopping to eat or sleep. I watched as the sun rose and set, without tiring, without letting my horse a moment's rest. We moved at lightning speed, over mountains and through river valleys, beyond forests and lakes and barren plains.

At last, Cannan spread before me, a hot wilderness of hills and rugged terrain. I looked down upon the land and saw a city in the distance. I knew not which city it was, but later learned it to be the ancient city of Jericho. Wearily, I pushed my horse to the outskirts of Jericho, until even my godly steed collapsed with exhaustion. I leapt off of him and made the rest of the journey on foot.

Far below, I saw a fruitful pasture, and climbed down the hill feeling the jagged and broken rocks cut into my naked skin. I could feel my bare back boiling in the sun, knowing it was not the sun of Apollo, but the light of some other, unforgiving god. My throat had become as dry as the land and I could not swallow.

When I stepped at last on level ground, I saw that my feet and hands were bloodied and blistered, and I regretted not having worn any clothing. Unlike my homeland, here did nature thrash upon the body, so that a man could only live by struggle and tribulation. Here, in the land of Cannan, nature was not the friend of man but the enemy.

I walked for miles along the plain, until collapsing in a pasture, where sheep and cattle were grazing.

When I opened my eyes again, I found myself in a soft bed of straw. Leaning over me was a dark skinned woman with brown eyes and hair. She spoke to me in a language I could barely comprehend, but I understood enough to communicate. Her native tongue was Hebrew, but she knew a little Phoenician, which was similar to Hellenite. The

woman was holding a grail in one hand and a damp rag in the other. I asked, “who are you?”

“I am Sarah. My husband found you lying on the ground, out on his field. He found you without clothing and nearly dead.”

“I thank both of you for your kindness.”

“Well . . . we could not let you die. Kindness is the will of God. That is what my husband always says.”

“Where is he now? I must thank him and take my leave.”

She pushed me back into bed. “Rest now, you are not strong enough to leave.”

“But I must go . . .”

“No. You will sleep in my bed tonight, while my husband and I sleep in the stables. I have prepared an extra place for dinner. You must eat and drink before you can be well,” she said, lifting the grail to my lips.

I drank the bitter tasting water and wondered how such people could live day-to-day drinking it. But I was so thirsty at the time, I was willing to drink anything. Compared to the water which came from my mountain abode, however, it was filth. “I thank you again,” I said.

“Do not think of it. We are happy to share our home and our food. I would have dressed you in my husband’s clothes, but you are much too big for them. Before you leave, I will sew a tunic and make some shoes, so that you may continue your travels.”

Later that night, I gathered with Sarah and her family for dinner. I was surprised at how small the table was and the portions of food. Either the people did not like to eat much or had hardly any food to serve.

There were no chairs, so we sat on a carpet over a dirt floor. Nehemiah, the husband of Sarah, looked much older than she. He had a long gray beard and was poorly dressed. Resting alongside the table was his shepherd’s crook. Beside him was his son, Jacob, who looked no older than eight or nine.

Before we ate, the three said a prayer to their god, thanking him for their food. I wondered at that, at how they could thank their god for giving them so little. If it were Zor who gave so little, I would have cursed him. All that we had was flatbread with

no taste, a strip of lamb intestines, and dirty water. Such a portion could I have eaten in a single bite.

Little was spoken during dinner. It was a far cry from the screaming and arguing that went on during most Hellenite dinners. Then again, I had never eaten with such poor people. I was accustomed to the indulgences of kings and the feasts I had made for myself after hunting.

At last, the silence was broken by Nehemiah, “you did not tell us your name, stranger.”

“I am Dynotus.”

“And how come you to be lying unconscious on my pasture and naked? Were you mugged and beaten?”

“No, I was traveling south when I collapsed in exhaustion. I did not have any clothes, for where I come from, there is little need.”

“You are not from Cannan, then, are you?”

“No, I come from the north, from Hellas.”

“I have not heard of such a place. Is it near Syria?”

“Actually, it is further north, beyond the Great Sea, near Troy.”

“Yes, I have heard of Troy, but only in legend. I was told of the great, unparalleled riches of Troy. But that land was destroyed, wasn’t it, by your heathen gods?”

“And what gods rule this land?”

“No gods rule this land, but the god of Abraham and Moses, the god that took the people of Israel out of Aegyptos. We may not speak his name, but he is the one true god.”

“Your god does not appear to provide you with much,” I responded.

“He is all knowing and all powerful. All things work through his will. We do not have the riches that you have in Troy, because our god is a jealous god, and vengeful. The land of Cannan is in a state of famine because our king is unrighteous. But the twelve tribes of Israel care little for material wealth. We strive for righteousness. Such is the covenant we have made with him. He leads us toward righteousness. Do your gods give you that?”

“I don’t know what is righteous and what is not.”

“Righteousness is humility before god. Humility means, that if we are offered a great abundance of food, we take little. If we are given many fine coats to wear, we keep only one, and give to the needy. If we are offered many women to have fornications, we choose and marry one, and resist the temptation of the many. To indulge in the pleasures of wine, women and song, is to be unrighteous before the eyes of the Lord.”

“Forgive me, I did not wish to insult you. I only thought that you wanted to have more.”

“We did have more, once, when we were slaves in the land of Aegyptos. There, you shall find many gods, and riches beyond your wildest imaginations. But the land is corrupt and evil. They have gone astray and have given in to wickedness. They live from day to day without doing work. They have become sloths, forcing their slaves under whip and chain. And because of their slothfulness, they have degenerated to drunkenness and lechery. But long ago, we abandoned these things, to be poor but free, to worship our god and find righteousness through him.”

“I was going to Aegyptos. If your people came from there, perhaps you could help me find the way.”

And Nehemiah said, “I would not wish to help a heathen man find a heathen nation. But, I spoke to God before you awoke, and he told me to help you in any way that I could. Though I do not understand His purpose, I shall not disobey Him. The Lord God works in mysterious ways, and He has His finger on you.”

“Good, then perhaps you could tell me if it would be possible to reach Aegyptos from here, before the sun sets on the third day. It is all the time I have.”

“It could be possible, but only by chariot. Unfortunately, we have only an ass for plowing, and he is very slow. But if you wish, I shall give it thee.”

“No, I could not take your only mule. I shall go on foot, even if I do not make it in three days.”

“Then we shall offer you clothing and a satchel for bread,” Sarah said. “You will need much food for such a journey. We shall offer all that we have.”

“I could not take your food. But, if you wish it, I shall accept your clothing.”

“That is good. The sun of Aegyptos is not like the sun of Cannan. It will burn any man who goes there without protection, like the flames of a furnace. It is the hot sun of Re, the god they worship in Aegyptos.”

That night, I played with their younger son. The child had never seen anyone like myself. He would commonly ask how I came to be so muscular, and wished to know if I was stronger than Samson. Though I did not know who this, Samson, was, I told the boy that he was a weakling compared to me.

“Why must you leave us?” asked Jacob.

“I am on a quest, to find my wife, who has been abducted.”

The kid laughed at me, as if I was telling a fictitious tale, and replied, “are you going to fight the bad men?”

“I will fight and kill the bad men,” I told him.

“I think you could. But you hafta watch out for things in the desert.”

“What things?” I asked.

“Horrible things,” he answered, “things like monsters and giants.”

I laughed, “what monsters?”

“You know . . . giant scorpions, and large birds that eat horses; they live out in the desert,” he said.

“And how do you know so much?”

“I was told.”

“Told by who, your father?”

Then, he looked and pointed upward, whispering, “I was told by God.”

I laughed again, “don’t believe everything that God tells you.”

Suddenly, the door burst open, and there stood two men. Sarah screamed and grabbed the child, while Nehemiah rose and confronted them. “What are you doing in my house!” he cried.

“We have come to collect your taxes,” they responded.

“What . . . I owe no taxes,” said the old man.

“Well, you do now! Pay us or we shall take what’s ours!”

“I’m not afraid of you! This is a house of God. You cannot force us to do anything!”

Then, one of the men pulled out a short sword, saying, “you’ve been hearing too many stories about David and Goliath, old man.”

Sarah rushed over to her husband and tugged on his arm, pleading, “please, Nehemiah, don’t fight them!”

The other guard walked into the house and smacked Sarah across the cheek. She fell to the ground, bruised. “Please don’t hurt us. We’ll give you what you want.”

My blood boiled within, knowing in the blink of an eye, could I kill the two guards. But I waited to see, clenching my fists tightly, if I could use their intrusion to help me.

“Do you have any gold or jewelry?”

“My wife does not own any gold, nor do I. We are poor and only work enough to eat. But if you wish, I can offer you a few of my sheep.”

“Ha ha ha, we don’t want sheep, old man!”

“Please, we have nothing else!” Sarah replied.

Then, the men looked around the room, until they spotted the boy, “we’ll take the kid. We should get a lot for him in Aegyptos, if we sell him as a slave.”

Sarah burst into tears. “No! Please don’t take away my baby!”

Finally, I decided to act. I stood up and confronted the two men. “You don’t need the boy. Take me instead.”

“You? You would take the boy’s place, as a slave?”

“If you take me to Aegyptos, I will.”

“Well, you look pretty strong. We could get a lot for you. All right, mister, come with us.”

Sarah fell to my feet, kissing my arms and my cheek. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!” was all she could say.

“It was the least I could do. But don’t worry. I will use them to get a free ride to Aegyptos. They have a chariot.”

“But. . .don’t you understand? You will be a slave, the rest of your life,” said Nehemiah.

“Don’t worry. We Hellenites do things a little differently.”

Then, Sarah ran to give me the tunic and sandals she had made. I quickly dressed and prepared to take my leave. I said good-bye to my new friends: Nehemiah, Sarah and Jacob, but before walking out the door, Nehemiah approached me in secret. He handed me a large backpack that seemed to weigh a ton. “What is this?” I asked.

It is a stone plaque that I found buried beneath my pasture. When I prayed to God, he told me where to find it. He said that I should give it to you. I did not understand, but it is for your own safety. You must keep it until you find a place to make use of it.”

I opened the bag, finding a large, green, stone plaque. Engraved upon it were many Hellenic words, and beside the words were strange pictures that I could make no meaning of.

“The Lord said that it would be called, the Metamphrasis stone. Guard it carefully, Dynotus, for someday it shall save your life.”

“I will, kind sir. I do not know the purpose of this stone, but I shall carry it as your god commanded. Thank you, and may your god bless you and your family,” said I, before joining the slave traders.

The two men put me in the back of a carriage pulled by four horses. Looking back upon the house of Nehemiah, I saw it beginning to rain. It was a heavy rain, like one that only Zeus could bring, a rain that seemed uncommon in the land of Cannan.

Chapter 8

The two men sold me into slavery when we reached Egypt. Before they left, however, I was sure to break both of their legs so that they could not walk back to any home and kidnap more slaves.

It took us two days to reach the land of Egypt and by mid morning on the third day I was put to work in the desert. I was stripped of the clothing and sandals that were given to me by Sarah and was allowed only to wear a loin cloth over my crotch. Before they could come and confiscate my backpack, I was quick to toss it into the sand and bury it. The magic ring I still kept, hid under my loin cloth in a place that I will not tell. The clothes I had worn were sold to a clothing merchant who sold only to Egyptian citizens.

I was taken with a group of slaves into another chariot where I saw a magnificent sight, which astounded mine eyes. There before me was a massive structure made of stone. It towered many cubits higher than any thing made of man I had ever seen. Nor my Olympian home or the palace of the Spartan King, could compare to the edifice I saw. It was also unique in architect, unlike any I had ever known. It did not have pillars, windows, or any door opening, as did the Hellenite partenons. It was unique in shape, for it had a base of four points and at the top of the structure did the four points become as one. It was truly a magnificent sight. And all along the desert could I see, scattered across the sand dunes, the many structures that pointed to the sky like godly sized arrowheads. Upon the one we were approaching did I see ants crawling up and down its sides. Only until we came much closer, however, did I realize that the ants crawling on the edifice were not ants at all, but were men. And they were all dressed as I, wearing nothing but loincloths and laboring under whip and chain.

A dark skinned man wearing a strange headdress that resembled a hooded serpent approached us with a short black stick in hand. He pointed to the structure and began to speak, "here, witness the glory of the Akenset of Egypt! You slaves shall help in the building of the royal tomb, for his greatness, the Akenset, who died ten years ago. Since then the tomb has not been complete. Now what must be done, is to pull those ropes which are connected to the pulleys, over the scaffolding so as to place the bricks a top the tomb. You will pull with all your might. Any who I see not pulling shall be beaten. And if you let the rope go before the brick reaches the scaffolding, it shall fall on top of you and you will most likely be crushed. So remember, don't let go."

The rest of our lives were set with those words. As I played the endless game of 'tug of war,' with a brick that loomed above us that must have weighed thousands of tons, I wondered how I would be able to escape and find Seline. I knew that I had little time left. Before the sun would set on that very day, the ships of Iuz would most likely dock in either an Egyptian or Phoenician harbor. But escaping would not be easy. I found myself in the middle of the desert with no way of travel. All the horses and chariots belonged to the slave masters and they were very numerous and had many weapons. If I was to walk on foot, I would never be able to reach the nearest city alive, much less on time. The situation looked hopeless. The only hope I had was from a poor old man who told me that his god would be the cause of my salvation some day, due to an odd stone I could make no meaning of. I worked on all through morning till the afternoon. It was

then that I understood what Nehemiah had meant by the sun of Egypt. It was a literal inferno and it lit the sand ablaze like fire. At first my feet burned on the sand, and other new slaves did I see cry out in pain because of it. But eventually we became accustomed to the oven hot floor and no longer sensed our burning soles, as the numbed slaves I looked at yonder, those slaves who appeared to have been there all their lives. And upon them did I see boils and red torn skin, on backs and shoulders, from the burning of the Egyptian sun, which Nehemiah had warned me of. And yet, the slave masters were too cruel to offer any shade to comfort them.

All day the slaves worked through the heat. I saw young children, and old men who were wrinkled and near to their death, slave away while being slowly cooked from both above and below. It was almost like an inhumane torture. The only consolation the slaves were allowed was a puddle of muddy water which they used to drink out of and to bathe with. To cool the burning sun, often would they splash in this muddy water, like swine do in a pigsty. And like the slaves, beasts of burden were also used to help lift the massive stones. Behind us could I see: elephants, horses, and camels, being whipped and forced to pull. But the people there were treated no differently than the animals. And these horrible sights did anger me. But there was nothing that I could do.

Then I turned and looked beside me, seeing a strong slave who was in his mid-life and who had lice crawling in his hair, and knew that he had not taken a bath in all his life. And I asked, "how fares thee, friend?"

"It fares as it always has. This is a Hell we endure and that is our life." "Did you ever consider, perhaps, that there may be an easier way of constructing this thing?"

"I don't consider. Considering are things for the slave masters to do. We are slaves. We don't consider. We just work."

"Is there any escape?"

Then the man burst into hysterical laughter. "Escape? There is nowhere to escape to."

I looked beside me and watched, as an old man who had collapsed to his feet was beaten severely by a slave master's whip. "If I could help you escape and be a free man, would you help me?"

"How long have you been here, sir? It's funny, you know, because the new ones always think they can escape. But they learn quick. Those who even speak of escape are killed."

"Then why are you speaking to me?"

"Well, if I am killed, it doesn't matter now, does it? My life is shit, might as well end it."

"If you are willing to risk your life, then why not help me try to escape?"

Then the man pulled tightly on the rope behind me, "Damn it! This thing will never be fixed."

"Are you listening!"

"All right, what do you need?"

"Is there any time that you can leave this rope?" I asked.

"Only when we go to drink at the puddle. If we need to take a shit or piss, we do it while working. I'll tell you, I have stepped in a lot of human shit. Haven't you wondered why I stink?"

"Good, then go to drink as if you would. But instead, walk beyond the puddle and

reach the chariot. There beneath the sand shall you find a hidden bag. You must bring the bag to me. Then, I shall take care of the rest.” The man looked at me funny, then replied, “you’re a strange one, mister. But what the Hell. They say by helping build the tomb we will have a good after life with Osiai. But I don’t give a damn. They can keep the good after life for all I care. I’m quitin’ this shit.” Then he called out for his friend to take his place. And when he let go, he shook my hand, and at first I thought that I was not shaking a hand but a rough rock. For his hands had been so blistered that they had become as rocks. But I smiled at him as if I didn’t notice, and then watched him walk away. As he did, I slipped my ring back on my finger.

Before the slave I had talked to, took three steps, a slave master had already spotted him. “Halt! Where are you going?” he asked.

The slave turned to the slave master and answered, “Please, sir, I merely wish to get some water.”

“Have you had a drink today?” asked the slave master.

“No,” replied the slave.

“All right then, go, but I’m watching you.”

I knew that he could never find and bring back my bag if the slave master watched him. And so I called out, “excuse me! May I have a word with you.”

The slave master turned and gave me a surprised look. “What in Hell do you want?”

“Well, I was thinking that perhaps it would be much easier to build the tomb, if you were to use smaller bricks. That way, we needn’t all these pulleys and scaffolds and this lifting and heaving.”

The slave master looked at me and smiled, “that is actually a brilliant idea. Too bad, however, that slaves aren’t supposed to get ideas! Now you will get back to work and shut up!” Then he began to beat me.

I took several blows across my chest and over my shoulder, then raised my fist and clenched my teeth. When the slave master saw this, he said, in surprise, “where did a slave get a ring like that? Did you steal it! Slaves are not allowed jewelry! Give it to me!” he commanded.

“My pleasure,” I responded, and punched him in the face with all my might, imprinting my ring into his forehead. An arching wave of blood trailed his path to the ground. He lay there unconscious. But I knew that I was in trouble. Five other slave masters saw me and rushed over to where I was standing, having dropped their whips and sheathed their swords.

Meanwhile, the slave I had met was secretly digging out the Metamphrasis stone, and was bringing it to me without anyone having seen him. But before he could reach me, I was surrounded by angry Egyptians. They pointed their blades at me and cried, “prepare to die, you impudent dog!”

“I think not,” I responded, and turned my ring into a sword.

When the five slave masters saw the gleaming weapon in my hand, they all jumped back in fear. “What is this?” one asked. “He has a sword,” another one said. “Where did he get a sword? We need reinforcements. Call the others!” yet another cried.

“If I were you, I would get away.”

“Ha ha ha, you are in no position to make demands. Soon your head shall be on our spears, and we shall feed you to the jackals.”

Then I made a gesture toward the rope, placed the edge of my sword against it, and raised it again as if to strike.

"You wouldn't!" he cried. Then, seeing that I hadn't flinched, he tried persuasion, "the brick is still above us, you fool! You'll kill us all!"

"Well. . . life's shit anyway. Do it, pal!" said my slave friend.

I ignored the Egyptians and turned to him, pretending as if nothing was happening, and replied, "you know, I never introduced myself."

His lips cracked as he smiled, and said with similar ignorance, "hi, my name is Alheem."

I shook his rough hand again, "I am Dynotus. Did you get the bag?" "Yep," said he and handed it to me.

"This is madness! Drop the sword or we shall kill you!" threatened the slave master.

"Why should I? You were going to kill me, anyway."

Then the five gathered together and began whispering in each others ears. After that, one of them turned to me and said, "we've decided to let you live."

"Well, I don't know if I can trust you. Let me talk it over with my good friend, Alheem." And I turned to Alheem and whispered in his ear, "when I cut the rope, I want you to run toward the tomb and then duck low." He whispered back, "what for? We're all gonna die anyway."

"Trust me," I said out loud, and with that, I cut the rope. When I did, I saw all the thousands of men behind me sling shot backward as they no longer had the weight of the brick to hold them up. All the animals in the back: the elephants and the horses and the camels, fell on their faces, and the weight of the stone block quickly became too much for the few remaining who were holding it. Like a knife the rope sliced through their hands and up over the scaffolding, bringing the huge stone collapsing down upon us. Most of the slaves screamed and ran for cover. Others followed Alheem's example and ducked beside the tomb wall.

I merely stood. And when the brick came I lifted up my arms and felt it crash against my hands. I heaved in pain and my knees collapsed as I felt the weight of many tons pressed on top of me. Slowly, I rested the brick against my shoulders, and using every muscle in my body, did I lift it in the air and above Alheem and the few slaves which had survived. I looked over toward the Egyptians and saw the base of the tomb cube barely skimming their heads. They looked at me as if they were looking at a god. They were so stunned that they could not run.

I could only hold the brick for a few seconds. Eventually, even my godly strength surrendered to weight that immense, and I felt the stone tipping over. I watched as a drop of sweat ran down the face of a slave master in front of me. Then I saw the block crash down upon them and break their skulls like hard boiled eggs. But still I held the weight of the brick, for though it had fallen, one side of it rested on the ground and the other side still rested on my shoulders.

I knew that I could not put it down, for there was no where that I could place it, lest I place it over myself. Then I turned behind me and thought to rest the other end of the brick against the tomb wall. And so, I stumbled back a few steps, dragging it along, and met the people huddled in the corner between the brick and the tomb. But when I attempted to lower it against the wall, I found the length of it to come short. Then I heard

a voice behind me. “Drop it and run! It isn’t close enough. You have to get behind it, like us.” It was the voice of Alheem.

Though he sounded logical, I could not drop such weight. I found myself trapped. For my joints were locked into place and if I were to bend them so as to lower it, I was sure that the whole thing would come crashing down upon me. “I cannot!” I yelled.

Then, with my last burst of adrenaline, I heaved again and lifted both sides of the stone cube. But with that, I lost my balance and stumbled backward, and fell. I heard screams behind me, and a sound that was like an avalanche of boulders. When I opened my eyes again, I felt my muscles sore and found myself in darkness. In the near distance could I hear moaning. Lost, I called out, “Alheem!”

“I’m here,” he said.

“What happened?”

“You fell. You dropped the brick on the tomb and the tomb walls collapsed.”

“By Zeus! Did I kill. . .?”

“I think you killed most of us, and I think my leg is broken.”

“But how could this happen! I thought the tomb was made of solid stone? How could it collapse?”

“No,” said Alheem, “only part of it is solid. I think the bottom is carved out. But I wouldn’t know. This part was built by slaves many years before my time.”

“The bag, where is the bag I sent for?” I asked him.

“It is here. But whatever was inside it, is in pieces. The wall fell on it.”

“Well, why is it so dark?”

“Don’t you know? We’re trapped beneath a few thousand tons of solid rock . . . inside the tomb.”

Chapter 9

There was a positive side to being in the tomb, and that was that it was cool. However, it was as dark as night without stars or the moon. I stood, dusting the debris that had fallen on me after the collapse of the wall, and turned to find Alheem. "Where are you?" I called out.

"I am here!" he said with a grunt.

I followed the echo of his voice and felt my way toward him. Then, as I reached out, I felt his rough hand again, and knew that it could only be him. "Can you stand?" I asked.

"My leg is broken. I think a stone fell upon it. By the gods, of all the escape plans I've ever seen attempted, this one is by far the strangest."

"Do not fret, my friend, I shall help you. But first I must help the others, those who can stand." Then I followed the sound of the moaning, until I reached a huge boulder which rested as high as my shoulders. I called out, "who's there?"

"It is I, Nalfashee, and I think my companion is dead." Then another one called out, "over here! Help me, I am trapped beneath these rocks." "Nalfashee, are you hurt?"

"I cannot move. The brick has fallen on my waist. My friend was under it when it fell. But I managed to get half way through."

I slipped my fingers beneath the huge brick and lifted it up and over him. Then I reached out my hand and helped him to his feet. "There, my friend, you are free."

"Yes, thanks to you, I am free from Egyptian slavery. But, who among the gods are you? You must be an avatar sent by Tha. For no single man can lift the stone bricks that are used to build the royal tomb. Such a feat would take a thousand men and more. You are greater than a thousand men. You can be no man."

"I am Dynotus, but am no avatar. I am as real and as alive as you are. But I am the Son of Zeus. I am a demi-god of Hellas."

"By the gods, what would a demi-god from Hellas be doing here? Have you come to save the Hellenites from Egyptian slavery?"

"No, but I have come to save a Hellenite. A Hellenite that is very dear to me. But first, let me go save the other." And I walked over to where the second man was heard, and did call out, "are you still there?"

"Yes, but I have been buried by many rocks. You must help me, demi-god!"

Nalfashee and I helped lift the boulders off of the slave's body. We continued to work until he was free. Then the slave stood up, and said, "I owe my life to you, my lord! When we are free of this tomb I shall make unto you a sacrifice of blood."

"There is no need for sacrifices. I am only a man of great attributes and nothing more. And I do not know if we shall ever be free of this tomb. With your help, however, we might. What is your name?"

"I am called Malachi. I was a slave taken out of Cannan."

"Before we can attempt to leave this place, we must search and find all the survivors. Go with Nalfashee and try to find two wooden sticks the length of a man's leg. Then bring them back to me and help me carry Alheem."

"No, you should leave me to die. I am as a lame dog and should be put out of his

misery. There is no way out of this tomb. If any of you can find the secret path out, it will take strong men to do so.”

“No, Alheem, we shall not leave you here. You shall come with us. You appear to know a lot about the tomb. We will need your wisdom,” I said.

Then I walked around and listened to the sounds of moaning coming from behind a wall. “Behind this wall can I hear the sounds of men.”

“It must have been a wall that was created during the avalanche. We must have survived only because we fell into a niche in the stone. That means we are most likely trapped, as they are,” said Alheem.

Then, with all my might, I punched the wall from where I heard the pleading calls, and did make a hole through it and into another niche. Then, I turned my sword into a hammer, and did break away the stone that blocked my path, until I did create an opening large enough for me to crawl through. I crawled into the small space and met three more slaves. And they were known as: Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Haggai, and were also from the land of Cannan. One of their friends, however, had been struck upon the head with a large rock, and was stoned to death.

I brought the three out of the crawl space and met Nalfashee and Malachi, who had found two sticks and were fastening them with ropes they had made from the dead slave’s loin cloths. Then, they both helped walk Alheem, and with that were we ready to leave the tomb.

“You seem to be the wisest among us, Alheem. Tell us how to leave here?” asked Malachi.

“There is no way out. We are doomed. Unless my friend, Dynotus, can punch through the collapsed wall. But already it is blocked by the brick, which is made of solid stone, and is wedged into the wall with all the weight of the tomb upon it.”

“Well, I can try,” said I. Then I began to punch the wall with all my godly strength. But it was no use. I only made little potholes in the stone, and knew that there was more than twenty feet of solid stone to punch through, between us and the outside. “I’m sorry, it is hopeless. Not even I can break through this barricade.”

“What do you mean you can’t!? I thought you were a demi-god!” cried Haggai.

“I am. But this wall is too thick. Even Heracles could not break through it.”

“Thera. . .who?” asked Zephaniah.

“It doesn’t matter. There must be another way out. Why would the Egyptians build a structure with an inside but with no way out?” I asked. “The tomb is built to bury the Akenset. It is a shrine that contains the Akenset’s body and his gold. When those who built this put the Akenset here, the architects sealed the entrance from the outside. There is no way out, except for the dead,” answered Alheem.

“Oh, my God, my God, my God, we are going to die! We are all going to die!” screamed Haggai.

“Oh, shut up!” yelled Habakkuk.

“Wait. . .perhaps there is a way out. Perhaps the way out can be found in the Metamphrasis stone. It was gifted to me by Yahweh.”

“Yahweh gave you a sacred stone? Where is it?” asked Zephaniah. “It is here. But it is in pieces,” said Alheem.

“If we could only have some light, so that we could put it back together,” I

replied.

“That doesn’t matter. Even if it was in one piece, we cannot read it in the darkness,” said Alheem.

“Wait. . .give me the pieces of the stone,” said Habakkuk. And Alheem gave him the bag containing the Metamphrasis stone, and Habakkuk began to mumble some words that we could make no meaning of. “What is it?” I asked.

“Now I understand! Yes! Yahweh gave you a prophecy, and the prophecy was that you would find yourself within an Egyptian tomb. The way out is indeed through use of this stone,” Habakkuk said.

“But how do you know this?” I asked him.

“Because. . .I can read the stone. The symbols on its surface resemble the ancient writings of the Egyptian priests. They are hieroglyphics. And beside them are letters of a strange language that is similar to Phoenician, but can make no meaning of it.”

“But we are in darkness. How can you read without light?” I asked.

“Habakkuk has always read in darkness. He reads with his fingers, because he was born blind,” explained Zephaniah.

“The walls, can you read the walls!?” asked Alheem.

And Habakkuk ran his fingers against the wall and said that he could also read the hieroglyphics there.

“What does the wall say?” asked Nalfashee.

“I do not know. I can tell what the symbols are, but I do not know what they represent. I believe that it is explained on the stone, but I cannot read the language.”

“It is Hellenite, and I can read it. But not without light,” said I

“If we only had a torch,” said Alheem.

Then I had an idea. I told Zephaniah and Haggai to gather as many dead slave’s loincloths as they could find, along with any stick or staff. When they gathered these things, I wrapped the loin cloths around the stick, and then said, “all we need now is fire.”

“But where shall we find fire?” asked Malachi.

I answered him by taking two stones and pressing them together with all my godly might, causing them to become as molten rock. Then I touched the loin cloths together with the heated rock, and made a fire. “Thank god, we can see!” cried Haggai.

“Speak for yourself,” replied Habakkuk.

I took several minutes to put the pieces of the Metamphrasis stone together, as best as I could, and began to read the wall and translate it into Hellenite using the stone.

“What does it say?” asked Alheem.

“It tells something of the Akenset. It says that when the Akenset is buried in his tomb. . . . he rises out of his grave and. . . leaves the tomb to go. . . to the underworld. But. . .it says that any who attempt to steal. . . the Akenset’s gold and . . . leave through the Passage of Death, . . . shall be cursed . . . for all eternity.”

“Then that must be the way out!” said Alheem. “The architects of the tomb must have made an escape for the Akenset when he would rise to leave the tomb; through a path called the Passage of Death. Now all that we must do is find the Passage of Death, and follow it to the outside.”

“Are you mad! Did you hear what the hieroglyphics said? Any who walk the Passage of Death, shall be cursed for all eternity!” cried Haggai.

“You fool, that is only for fools to believe. It was written to scare away thieves

who would want to steal the Akenset's gold. But I do not believe in curses!" said Alheem.

"But what if it's true!?" said Haggai.

"Then stay here to die! You idiot!" Alheem argued.

"Enough! I shall go to find the Akenset's tomb, curse or not. Those of you who wish to come with me, may do so. Those who wish to stay here in the darkness, can suit themselves," I said. "He who wishes to stay, shall speak, now."

No one spoke, until finally, Haggai said, "well. . .all right. I shall follow you, Dynotus."

Chapter 10

When we sought to enter the inner chambers of the tomb, we first had to find a way to escape from the niche of stone we had fallen into. I searched the walls with my torch and found no exit from the crawl space. Then I used my fist, and began to pound on each wall and over every crevice, until at last I found a cleanly built hallway. Using my sledgehammer and with the help of the other slaves, I managed to clear the debris of stone, so that we made an exit large enough to walk through. When the path was clear we were quick to make haste, for our time was short. Though I could find any two stones and put them together under extreme pressure to create fire, my godly might could do nothing to find something to burn. At that moment my torch was made of a broken stick and a number of loin cloths wrapped together. However, when the loin cloths were to burn out, we would again be in darkness, and have no way to find the Akenset's tomb.

The tomb had many passageways and many levels. We traveled down several of them seeking out the resting place of the dead Akenset. As we walked deeper and deeper into the dark depths of the Egyptian dungeon, I could see our light slowly diminishing. Soon, I feared, we would have no light. Yet, as we walked further, the hieroglyphics on the walls became more and more elaborate, directing us to the right path. While we moved, Habakkuk, the blind slave, was feeling against the walls and describing to me the various symbols. As he called out the descriptions, I matched them with the Hellenite words found on the Metamphrasis stone, and learned more and more about the Akenset's ascension into the realm of the dead. It was this way that I found where to turn. For the labyrinth consisted of walls telling of many tales, tales of the Egyptian gods and of Egyptian history. Yet all those speaking of the Akenset, of his gold and of the curse, did help lead me. I knew we were heading in the correct direction, for the more Habakkuk read, the more horrible did warnings of the Akenset's curse sound. And the more we were told of the curse, the more did the others begin to fear. I could already see panic in the eyes of Haggai. His pupils danced back and forth and he trembled as a man who was sick. The hairs of his arms stood on end and he clenched his teeth and tightened his fists. Yet there was nothing he could do. Rather would he follow us to death, than remain trapped in darkness, within a giant crypt.

After a while of walking, Habakkuk stopped calling out to me. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I do not know what this is," he replied.

I placed the torch against the wall and saw a thick film of dust covering the hieroglyph. I dusted it with my fingers and saw the symbol that it represented. I could make little meaning of it, however, because I had only uncovered a small fraction of the message. But the symbol I did read, however, was the symbol for death. I dusted more and began to translate, "Turn. . .back! Turn back! For the. . .end of this. . .road. . .leads unto. . .certain . . . death."

"We must turn back!" cried Haggai.

"No! I say we march on," I said.

"But didn't you read the sign!? We are going to die!"

"Dynotus is right, Haggai. If there is an exit out of here, it can only be where the Egyptians would least expect us to go," said Alheem.

"Follow me," I said, and led them through the final corridor.

We walked several feet until we reached a dead end. "It's blocked off. We must have gone the wrong way!" said Nalfashee.

"No, it's here. It must be!" I exclaimed. Then I examined the hieroglyphics on the wall in front of us and read, "welcome . . . harbingers . . . of the dead . . . the Akenset. . . awaits within. . . his body. . . is prepared for. . . judgment. . . but take ye. . . no. . ."

"What is it, Dynotus?" asked Malachi.

"I don't know. The final symbol, it's not here. It's not on the Metamphrasis stone."

"But it must be. The stone was made by God," said Zephaniah.

"Let me help you find it," said Nalfashee, and he took the bag containing the Metamphrasis stone pieces and emptied it on the floor. Piece by piece we assembled the Metamphrasis stone, until we created a perfect rectangular tablet, a tablet, however, that was missing a small piece in the corner. "Where is it?" he cried.

"The piece must have been lost in the avalanche. We have no way of knowing the rest of the message," I said.

"The message doesn't matter. Let's hurry and see if we can break down this wall before our light is gone," replied Haggai.

I stood and pushed against the wall. But there was no door. Then I carved around the edges of the wall and saw that the outline of a door was present. But it was no door to be opened. "What is this?" I asked myself. "It must be a false door," said Alheem.

"Perhaps it is a door for the dead," said Zephaniah.

"Well. . . if there is a room on the other side, I shall find it. Stand back!" I yelled, and began to push with all my might against the wall.

Suddenly, the room began to rattle and shake. The others jumped back but I stood my ground. Then, the floor opened up from under me and I fell into darkness.

I do not recall how long I was unconscious. But I remember awakening and finding myself with no torch. I looked up at a strange light above me, and heard the voice of Alheem. "Dynotus, do you still live?" he asked.

"Yes! What happened?" I replied.

"You fell down a trap. But the door was there. It opened after you fell. I am amazed that you survived. I dropped a coin down into the pit and did not hear it land for many seconds. Surely, none of us would have survived such a fall."

"Where did you get a coin? And from where is that light coming from? Do you have the torch?" I asked.

"No, but I have an oil lamp. It is a lamp made of solid gold, my friend, as the coin. The others are exploring the tomb of the Akenset. It is magnificent. Never have I seen so much gold in all my life. It is enough to make us wealthy beyond all the kings of Assyria combined!"

"Did they leave you behind?" I asked.

"Yes, my friend, they left me because I could not walk. But do not fear. Help shall come soon. I sent Habakkuk to find rope. We shall get you out in no time."

Then I heard Habakkuk exchange words with Alheem. And Alheem called down to me, "Dynotus, I shall send down a rope to lift you up. Do not be afraid if it may look like a serpent. This rope is made of solid gold, and is fashioned in the shape of a serpent."

While I was down in the pit, I heard many screams. I learned much later what had happened from Alheem and Nalfashee, who had seen it all. They had entered within the

Akenset's tomb and beheld gold more bountiful than in all their wildest imaginings. Haggai, the arrogant one, was the first to enter. He grabbed hold of a lamp and entered the tomb. Then, he found a large bag and began to fill his hands of gold coins and gold artifacts. He filled the bag with all the gold and jewels that he could find. And he began to prance around and say, "I am rich! I am rich, rich, rich; rich beyond my wildest dreams! I am rich beyond the slave masters! No longer shall I suffer under the whip! No, now others shall be my slaves, ha ha ha ha!" "Perhaps it is not wise to take the Akenset's gold," said Habakkuk. "Shut up, old man! What do you know? The Akenset is dead! He doesn't need it!" and he uproared in laughter, "it's mine, all mine!" Then Haggai turned to the Akenset's sarcophagus, and his eyes lit up with greed, with the reflection of a large jewel that he gazed upon. The jewel was the eye of the Akenset on the sarcophagus. It was bright and red and must have been the size of a man's fist. And Haggai attempted to remove the eye but could not. "Damn it! It's stuck! Malachi, give me a hand with this, will you, and maybe I'll share with you some of my gold."

"But, Haggai, I don't really know if you should be doing that," replied Malachi.

"Don't be silly," he responded. Then he turned to see a jeweled dagger made of solid gold and studded with many gems, sitting on a table. And he lifted it in his hands and said, "this is perfect," and slipped the edge of the blade under the Akenset's eye, attempting to pry it loose. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Then, Zephaniah called out, "Haggai, I know what the hieroglyphic said. I think it said, 'BUT TOUCH YE NO . . . GOLD!'"

At that instant, the eye of the Akenset came loose, and fell into Haggai's hands. Then the room began to quake. The crypt filled with the sound of a loud echoey voice, "THIEVES! TAKE YE THY GOLD AND DIE!"

Then, the sarcophagus opened up before Haggai, and startled him, and the Cannanite slave looked down upon the mummy of the Akenset, and saw him rise out of his grave. Haggai dropped the gold and jewels as his throat was quickly twisted and then wrenched from his body. His head and spinal chord left a trail of blood as it rolled down the floor of the Akenset's tomb. Before Haggai's headless body dropped to the ground, the mummy leaped from his coffin and approached the others.

Nalfashee and Malachi screamed and ran out of the tomb while Zephaniah, the brave one, grabbed a golden sword and swung it at the mummy. The undead body of the Akenset took a blow from the golden sword. The blade sank deep into his bandaged shoulder. But no blood fell from that wound. And the mummy laughed. Then he swung his fist at Zephaniah, and sent him hurling through the air and slamming his back against the wall. The sword dropped to the ground beside the mummy. And the monster walked toward Zephaniah and wrapped his fingers tightly around his neck, and squeezed until Zephaniah was dead.

At this time I had just received the rope from Alheem. Hearing the chaos, I climbed as fast as my arms and legs could carry me, and when I reached the top of the tomb floor, I looked and saw the dead body of Malachi lying on the ground. His innards had been ripped from his body and his blood spewed across the room. Then I turned, seeing Nalfashee running down the corridor in the opposite direction. I looked back over to where Malachi's body lay, and saw a few feet beside him, Alheem and Habakkuk. In Alheem's eyes could I see real fear. He screamed in terror and tried to crawl away on his hands and knees, but could not, for his leg was lame. Beside him did I see Habakkuk, the

blind one, who stood there praying, not knowing of the terror that approached him and not knowing where to run. When Alheem saw me, he cried, "Dynotus, please! Oh god, please help me!!"

That was the first time that I saw the mummy. It looked like a man wrapped from head to foot in white bandages. But where his eyes would be, were two black holes, as black and as lifeless as the gloomy tomb dungeon itself. And where his mouth would be, was one long slit, that opened and closed as he spoke. Around his head did he wear a golden head dress that resembled the hood of a cobra, and sprouting from the forehead of the head dress were two fashioned serpents made of gold.

The mummy of the Akenset leaned over to grab hold of Alheem so as to take his life. Seeing this, I leaped over the body of Alheem and tackled the mummy back into the crypt; where we fought.

In the tomb I stood and when the mummy rose, I punched him in the face with all my might. Such a blow would have knocked the head off of any man. But the mummy merely shrugged it off and punched me in the stomach, sending me reeling. I returned his blow by kicking him in the legs. But he did not fall. Then the mummy went to strike me, but I was too fast for him and dodged out of the way. After evading his attack, I punched him again in the face, but he did not stir. And so I began to pound my fist over and over again into his face, his stomach, and his groins, but he merely laughed and punched me back, sending my bloodied face to the floor. Now, angered, I turned my ring into a sword, and swung at him, hacking his head off. The head rolled down the floor several feet. But it did not die. The mummy just stood there, with no head, until finally, he walked over to where its head lay, and placed it back on his body, as if nothing happened. Then he turned to me, and laughed, "THOU WHO TAKE THY GOLD SHALL DIE!"

"Never!" I cried, and ran at him, punching my fist with all my angered might, deep into the mummy's chest. With that I grabbed hold of his ribs, and tore his ribs out of his body. But he did not die. So then I reached in again, and pulled out his heart, and saw that his heart was not beating, and that bandages wrapped it neatly. "What in Zeus's name are you?" I cried.

But he did not answer me. And so I crushed his heart in my hands. But he did not care. He just laughed, and then punched me in the chest, and began to sink his fingers into my ribs. Then he brought his other hand around my neck and began to squeeze the life out of me.

I fought with him the best that I could. But it was not enough. The mummy was slowly draining my strength, and soon I could not resist him. I felt his fingers bury into my chest, to the point where I began to bleed. I knew then that I would die. It was only a matter of seconds before he would rip my heart or throat out. Then, I heard a voice behind me speak, "angered, undead spirit! I condemn thee to burn in Hell, in the name of Re-Horakhty, god of light!" I looked behind the mummy, and saw Alheem holding a flaming torch. To my surprise, the mummy's foot had caught on fire, and the undead Akenset began to scream in pain. With all the strength left in me, I pushed the weakened mummy away, and watched as he slowly burned and burned. The mummy turned in circles trying to extinguish the flames. But it was no use. The fire slowly engulfed him. It rose up from his legs and to his waist. Then it burned his arms and his chest, and finally his head. The mummy collapsed to his knees and I could hear him screaming and could

see the bandages burning off of him. And the fire slowly dissolved his bones and his mummified organs, until nothing remained but a pile of burning ash.

I turned to Alheem, and said, "thank you. That is the second time you saved my life."

"Ahh, but you saved mine, Dynotus."

"How did you find the fire?" I asked.

"Before you fell down the pit, you dropped the torch in the corner of the room. I found it unlit, but lit it again with my lamp. I thought that if a mighty blow could not stop it, and if a sharp weapon could not stop it, fire could then be the only thing.

I also read here the wall. It says that if the Akenset was judged by the gods to be evil, if his heart was heavier than a feather, would he then be condemned. There were many ways that the Akenset could be condemned. But the unholy and most horrible of these would be to become a living dead mummy. It says that only a man of impeccable evil, a man who is cruel and without compassion can be condemned this way. And if he was to be found, could his body only be destroyed by fire, and his soul, by the god, Re-Horakhty." "You read that? How did you have the time to, and how could you translate, and. . .?"

"I could read it," answered Habakkuk. "I did not need to translate it into Hellenite. For I had studied the many hieroglyphics of before, and remembered what each symbol meant. Then, with a bit of guessing, I understood the remaining hieroglyphics that were not familiar to me."

"Blind one, you are brilliant! Now, let us find the Passage of Death," said I.

"Yes, but should we not go find Nalfashee, first?" asked Alheem. I laughed.

"Yes, he ran like a cowardly woman. Let us find him and be gone."

"But, what of Malachi, Zephaniah and Haggai?" asked Habakkuk. "You mean, you don't know?" I asked.

"Know what?" he replied.

"I'm sorry, good friend. They are all dead," I answered.

"Yes, and Haggai was the cause of it. He woke the Akenset. He died because of his greed."

"May the lord rest their souls," replied Habakkuk.

Nalfashee was found a while later, and we made our way back to the Akenset's tomb. Habakkuk and Nalfashee helped carry Alheem while I led them through the Passage of Death. "I have never seen so much gold in all my life," said Nalfashee, with a tint of sadness.

"Yes, but you know that we cannot take any of it," said Habakkuk. "But why, the Akenset's ghost is gone? I don't wish to take a lot. Just one bag of gold, or perhaps the dagger, it isn't much! It is just enough to feed us for many years to come!"

The old blind man stopped and turned to Nalfashee, "young fool, don't you understand? The Akenset was cursed because he was a wicked man. Even the heathen gods of Egypt witnessed that. All the gold you see in this room, is the result of the Akenset's wickedness. It is because of his greed and his selfishness that we were forced to become slaves, and that so many of us died and others tortured to live below the worms of the ground, to live and be treated less than a man, less than a man that God made in his own image. We suffered to build this foolish structure to protect his gold and

to protect his body from the horrors of death. But he could not escape damnation. And, likewise, we cannot justify his greed by taking delight in the things that hath caused such suffering. The gold you see here was robbed and stolen and beaten out of innocent people. This makes it evil. And evil gold, we shall not take part of.”

“Habakkuk, forgive me,” said Nalfashee.

“Only God can forgive you, my son,” replied Habakkuk. “You have not sinned me.”

At last we found a door at the end of the Passage of Death. We left all the mountains of gold behind, and I punched my way through the sealed door until the light of day beamed into the labyrinth. “Thank God, the light of the sun!” cried Nalfashee.

I continued to break down the door until an opening was made large enough to walk through. We had just come out of the tomb when the sun was setting on the horizon. “We are free! Free of the Egyptians!” Alheem proclaimed.

“Where are we?” asked Nalfashee.

“We are on the far side of the tomb. Here the Egyptians shall never find us,” answered Alheem.

“But where shall we go?”

“I will return to my homeland. For unlike you, I am not from Cannan, which is north of here. My home is South, across the desert, in the land known as Ninevah.”

“Dynotus, where are you going?” asked Nalfashee.

“I shall go South with Alheem.”

“But why?” he asked. “Your home is in Hellas. It is north of Cannan. We should go North together, you, Habakkuk and I.”

“But the desert is far more perilous and Alheem cannot walk. He will die out here in the desert, unless someone helps him return to his home,” I said.

“What of you, Habakkuk, where are you going?” asked Nalfashee. “Though I would like to return to my home in Cannan, I cannot. I must stay and help Dynotus with Alheem.”

“Are you mad!? Have you any idea how dangerous the desert is? Do you know how far is Ninevah? You cannot cross the desert without food, water and clothing. You three shall surely die. Let us take Alheem to Cannan.”

“You may take him. But I shall still go South,” said I.

“Do not bother. I will not go to Cannan. I love my homeland too much and know that if I leave from here, shall I never see it again. I shall either find Ninevah or die trying to reach it.”

“You are fools! All fools!” cried Nalfashee. “You shall die in the desert.”

“So we shall,” said Habakkuk.

“All right, if I must go alone, I will. Good-bye, Dynotus,” he said, and shook my hand. After that, I never saw Nalfashee again.

We watched as Nalfashee diminished into the desert, and when he was nothing but a spec, I asked, “why don’t you go with him, Habakkuk? I can handle Alheem by myself.”

“Both you and Alheem saved my life. It shall be very difficult to survive out in that desert. And if you two are insistent on trying to cross it, then I shall help you,” answered Habakkuk.

“You are a very kind man. You remind me of someone I once knew. I Cannanite by the name of Nehemiah.”

“Nehemiah, the husband of Sarah and the father of Jacob?” he asked. “Yes, do you know him?”

“He is my cousin,” said Habakkuk.

Then I laughed.

Alheem, Habakkuk and I, watched as the sun fell into the earth. We watched, sitting against the base of a tomb brick, without a clue how we would cross the desert alive. And Alheem asked, “Dynotus, you still haven’t told me why you wish to go South? I have no idea why a man from Hellas would risk his life to go to Ninevah.”

“There I seek a treasure that was taken from me. I was to find it by the end of this day, either in Egypt or Xarthage, but I know that I am too late and must seek it in Ninevah.”

“What treasure could you have lost that you would seek for, that is greater than the treasure of the Akenset?” asked Alheem.

“The greatest treasure of them all, my friend, the treasure of true love.”

Across the desert there they strode
Searching for any shelter or abode
The sun sucked the water from their bones
Soon they'd die like Captain Jones
The looming vultures swept by and by
Waiting for their prey that they would die
For the humans throats were very dry
Round and round with hunger they would fly
"Look," said he, "an oasis near
"Now of our lives there is no fear"
Though sand billowed up in a blasting storm
"Moving the dunes in a twisted form
Only death now remained
In the birds beaks blood stained
Sucked on the marrow of those two
Who had done the Devil's do
And away for more prey they flew
Only food is what they knew

Chapter 11

The desert is sometimes referred to as the Fire Sea. I thought the name aptly suitable. In every direction that I looked, did I see nothing but sand. Oceans and oceans of sand stretched out before me. It rose and fell like heaping waves. It poured down hills like a majestic, flowing river. But there was no moisture in this sea. There was nothing but fire; fire in the sky and fire on the ground. And it burned. It burned the inside of my toe nails. It bit and gnawed at my skin like a thousand angry mosquitoes. My back and my arms began to itch. And when I scratched at it did I come up with a handful of dead skin. My whole body had turned pink and then a bright red color. And I wondered if not a scorpion or some other deadly poisonous rash had infected me. But it was none other than the sun; the blasted, infernal, god forsaken sun. It beat relentlessly on my back and chewed at my neck. But that was not the worst of it. I recall fondly the time that I began to journey out into the desert with hardly any clothing. I remember walking out on the hot sand with my bare feet and my bare back, and thinking that it was very hot but that I would endure. I thought about the itching and the burning and the shedding of my skin, and thought to myself that it would not conquer me. It would not be enough to defeat Dynotus. But I was wrong. The worst was yet to come. The worst was when I stopped feeling my skin. The worst came when I could no longer feel the itching and the burning and when I didn't care about how much skin was peeling off of me. The worst came: when I stopped sweating, when I couldn't swallow, when I couldn't speak lest I waste the moisture in my tongue, and finally, when I became afraid to breathe, for with every breath did my mouth become drier and drier.

The first few days of walking were easy. Alheem, who had lived all his life in Ninevah, knew that it was best to travel in the night and to sleep by day. And so, the first day of our journey, did we wait until the sun went down so we could walk by night. But without shelter or shade, we could not sleep in the day. Even with our eyes closed, the

sun was too brilliant. So we walked during the night and the day, without: food, rest, and especially, without water.

Up and over, up and over the sand dunes we went. Each and every time we reached the top of a sand dune, did I pray in my heart that I would see a city or any source of life, hoping to find water. All the while, Habakkuk and I carrying Alheem along.

“We are going to die, aren’t we?” said Alheem.

“No, we’re not,” said I.

“Yes we are. We were foolish to go on foot and without water. We can’t make it. We’re going to die.”

“We should find a city any time now,” I replied.

Then he laughed like a man gone insane. “There is no city,” he said. “Yes there is, and we are going to find it.”

“Ninevah is hundreds of miles from Egypt. How many miles do you think we’ve traveled? Huh?” he asked.

“Be quiet. You’re wasting moisture,” I told him.

He laughed again. “It doesn’t matter. I’m gonna die anyhow. I can’t feel my legs. I can’t feel my skin.”

“You’ll be fine when we reach the city,” I argued.

“We’re not gonna find the city, God damn it! Please, Dynotus, let my die here,” he said.

“No!” I replied.

“Look at me! Look at my lips!” he cried.

I looked down at him and saw that his lips had turned completely black. Every time he spoke a word, could I see them crack and bleed. “Alheem, you’re going to live,” I told him.

“I am not a demi-god, like you! I have lived all my life in the desert and I shall die here. Do you think that you look any different than I? You look just as horrible. And you shall die as well. Even you, the Son of Zeus, whose legs are strong shall tire. What makes you think, that I could ever believe that I would live? There is no hope.”

“But you will see, Alheem. I promise that we will find the city. We will find it just over this sand dune, I swear!”

“And if it is not there? Will you leave me to die?” he asked.

“If it is not near, perhaps I shall,” I whispered.

Habakkuk and I dragged him up to the top of the highest sand dune. As I pulled, I believed in my heart that I would see a city. I knew that the city would be there. I believed without any doubt that our salvation would come. “You will see!” I said excitedly. “The city will be there. The city will be there!”

When we reached the top, I saw nothing. There was nothing but endless sand, miles and miles of sand. “It’s not here,” I said with confusement. “Dynotus, I. . .,” began Habakkuk.

But I cut him off, “It’s not here!! Why isn’t it here!?” I screamed. Then I collapsed to my knees and wished to weep. But I could not for waist of water.

“Dynotus, let us be humble. Let us leave Alheem to die in peace,” said Habakkuk.

I grabbed the old man violently in my hands and shook him, screaming in his face, “your stupid God has forsaken us! No!! I will not give up! Do you hear me? I will

not give up!!!”

“Perhaps you can go on. But he cannot. Let him give up, Dynotus. Let him rest in peace,” replied Habakkuk.

“But we are so close,” I said.

“Look behind you, Dynotus. Do you see it?” Alheem asked. “Do you see Egypt? Can you not still see the tombs we left behind so long ago?” Then the rage subsided from me and I knelt down beside Alheem and said to him, “do you want to rest, my friend?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“All right, I will leave you for now. But you must tell me where to find the city. How far is it? And in what direction is it?”

“Go southeast for four hundred miles. It should take you two or three weeks if you move quickly.”

“But how could it be? We left Egypt two weeks ago!” I said.

“I hoped that we would find some shelter, perhaps an oasis or a new city. But I was hoping for a miracle. We left Egypt three or four days ago. If you do make it to a city, or find any water, I shall most likely be dead. Do not come back for me.”

“But I can’t just leave you here!” I cried.

Then Alheem looked up at me and said, “before you leave, tell me of your loved one. Tell me what she’s like.”

“Seline?” I asked.

“Yes, tell me of this, Seline. I have not been with a woman for so long. I do not even remember the last time I saw one.

“She is. . .she is very beautiful. Her hair is as golden as the sun. It is long and straight and runs over her shoulders and down her back like a white river. Her eyes sparkle like the stars and are as deep and as blue as the ocean. Her lips are like a flower. They are smooth and soft and smell like the daffodils. And when she smiles, you can see her teeth, that are as the whitest pearls from the sea. To gaze upon her naked and without her clothing, is to be blinded by beauty, far more beautiful and radiant than the goddess of love herself.”

“If she is as beautiful as you say. . .perhaps you will find the city,” he said.

“Why did you wish to know of Seline?” I asked.

“I do not wish to offend you or your wife, my friend. But a dying man can dream, can’t he?”

“I will grant thee your last request; the right to fantasy. Close your eyes, and in your eternal sleep, dream of everlasting love with this woman who’s beauty I have shared with you.”

“Thank you, Dynotus.” Then, Alheem closed his eyes, and died.

Habakkuk and I continued the journey alone. I could not help but feel remorse for poor, Alheem. I could not help but think that I could have done something to save his life. At least, I thought, he had died a happy man, dreaming of my wife. Soon, I knew, that I would die the same way.

We walked over many sand dunes until I saw what looked like two people in the distance. “Good Lord, Habakkuk, do you see it?” I asked. “You seem to forget that I am blind,” he replied.

"It. . . it looks like two people! Lying on the sand!" And I rushed over to where I saw them. But when I reached them, I saw no living thing. They were once men. But nothing remained of them when I arrived. Nothing except for two dried skeletons, some clothing, and what looked like a water skin. "My God, water!" I cried.

"Dynotus, a wise man is not so hasty in his conclusions," replied Habakkuk.

"But don't you see! They left their water skins! We're saved!" Then I knelt down to pick one up, and turned it upside down to my lips. But I felt nothing in my throat save for hot air. "I can't believe it! I can't believe this! It's empty!" Then, angered, I threw the waterskin with all my might into the air. "It's empty, it's empty, it's empty! Why, God?" I screamed.

"I knew it would be," replied Habakkuk.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Why else would two men die in the middle of the desert, if their waterskins had been full when they died?" he said.

"You're right. I am a fool. Let's move on."

"But we should rejoice, still. If they have left some clothing, we can take it."

"Who cares about clothes now!? I can no longer feel my skin. It doesn't matter if it all burns off. Let it. It's already going to peel away."

"But the sun does not only dry water from your tongue. Your skin also contains moisture. If you do not cover it, the sun shall merely sap it more quickly."

"You're right," I said, then reached down and picked up a chiton and a turban. But when I placed it against my back, I screamed in pain and tossed it off of me.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It hurts," I said.

"You must wear something. If you do not, you will die," said Habakkuk.

"It doesn't matter. We're going to die anyway. But I will not die in pain!" I cried.

"As you wish," said he, then placed the chiton on himself and wore the turban.

We walked and walked until I could not think anymore. I did not know whether we were alive or dead and at that point it didn't matter. The only thing I could think of was to walk. There was no other purpose in my mind but to stay alive. And I knew that the only way that I would stay alive, is if I walked. If I stopped to rest, I would never get up again, and I would surely die.

We had not spoken or acknowledged each other for many hours. Habakkuk was always quiet and did not like to speak under usual circumstances. But in the desert, the more you spoke, the more you wasted moisture. Yet, to my surprise, he broke the silence, saying, "Dynotus, I must go."

"Go? Go where?" I asked.

"Do you not hear Him?" he replied.

"Hear who?" I asked.

"Do you not hear God. He is calling me. He is calling me to join Him." "That is not God. That is the wind."

"The Lord God speaks to me through the wind. I can hear His voice. I must go to Him. I must go and be one with Him," he said.

"This is madness! Where do you expect to go? We are in the middle of nowhere."

"But God is here with us. He wants me to join Him," he said.

“Are you so insistent on leaving me?” I asked.

“I regret leaving you behind. But Yahweh says that you are not ready.”

“Ready for what?” I asked.

“You are not ready to leave this place. But I am old and have lived my years. The Lord has spoken to me and I must go.”

“All right, go to die if you must. But I shall keep on. I will not surrender,” I said to him.

Then he turned to me and said, “your wife is very beautiful. I have seen her with my own eyes.”

“But you are blind.”

“Blindness cannot hide true beauty. For the blind do not see as others do. The blind see the truth. The blind see through the eyes of God. And He has seen that she is very beautiful. Not her hair or her body, but I have seen her soul. And it is very beautiful. But it must be cherished and loved. You must love this soul to keep it beautiful, or it will die.”

“Tell me more, old man! What should I do?” I asked.

“You know already. Farewell,” he said, and began to walk away. “Wait, stay here! Stay with me, please!” I cried. But he did not answer me. He ignored me and continued to walk West, and walked until he disappeared into the desert.

I walked alone then. I walked until I could walk no further. Then I fell to my knees and began to crawl on the ground. I stared up at the sun and it blinded my eyes and I cried, “damn you, sun of Egypt! Damn you, sun of Ninevah. Damn you. . . Tha!”

And I crawled over each sand dune until I could no longer look up, but kept my head bowed and stared at the sand. Warily I progressed, with barely enough might in me to continue. Then, when I thought that I could go no further, I looked up, and saw a tree! And I stood, and looked down over the sand hill, and saw an entire group of trees! They were tall and beautiful and their bright green branches sprouted out from the top of their trunks. Excitedly, I ran toward them, knowing that wherever there are trees, is also water.

When I reached the trees I looked beyond them and saw that they were encircling an oasis. A small lake of crystal clear water spread out before me. I could not believe mine eyes. I cried out and rejoiced, “water! water!” And I ran to the lake, unbelieving that such a small droplet of blue could exist here in the middle of such a dry ocean of bronze sand. It was the most wonderful sight I had ever beheld. And I ran toward it, prepared to dive into the lake and to drink all that was there. But before my foot could touch the water, I saw a startling sight.

Out from the lake came three large bodies. At first I thought that they were large, man-sized fish. But then I looked upon them again, and saw, to my disbelief, three beautiful women. They were all as naked as the day they were born, each one of them stunningly beautiful. I could not believe such women could exist here. They appeared to be in full health, and though they were naked, their skin was not the least bit burned. Their bodies dripped with water and their flesh glistened in the sun. Their lips were wet with moisture. I do not recall what they looked like. But I do remember that each of them had different color skin, hair and eyes. One of them had light skin with curly blonde hair and blue eyes. The one in the middle had black curly hair and black eyes, and her skin was a dark bronze color. The third woman had red hair and light skin, and her eyes shined with an emerald green. And their bodies were thin and frail and their breasts were

large and plump.

They called to me with a singsong voice and I ran toward them. When they touched me, I was surprised to discover that my skin no longer burned. The one in the middle with black hair, kissed me on the lips and filled my throat with moisture, so much that I did no longer thirst. I turned to them and lusted for their flesh, and did make love to all three of them. Our lovemaking was brief but passionate, and when I was fully satisfied, they disappeared in my hands. Dumbfounded by these mystical, exotic creatures, I looked in the water to find them. But when I looked down into the clear blue lake, I did not see my own reflection, but instead looked deep into the eyes of Seline. And Seline's eyes became the pool of blue, and her face leaped out of the water and kissed me. I took a drink of her lips and watched as she rose out of the water, dripping wet and naked, and flew like a bird to the ground and landed before me. "Oh, Seline!" I cried. "I missed you so much. I love you with all my heart and soul. May we never part again."

Then she turned to me and said, "Dynotus, my dearest husband, make love to me here and now and never stop!"

I embraced her in my arms and felt her warm, frail body against my own. My heart raced with joy and I knew that I would never let her go. Then, I looked deep into her eyes, and descended down to taste her lips. My eyes were closed when I went to kiss her. But I tasted nothing . . . nothing but hot, dry, sand.

My body jolted in shock. Immediately I opened my eyes and found Seline gone. She had slipped out my hands and I hadn't even noticed. Then, I looked around me, and saw that the trees, the lake, and even the desert nymphs were gone. I was kneeling down in the middle of the desert. An oasis was nowhere to be seen. When I looked down into my palms, I saw that I had embraced a handful of nothing. My mouth had kissed and was full of nothing but sand. It was then that I collapsed. I spit the sand out of my mouth and wept. I wept with tears I knew not that I had, and cried out Seline's name. But she was not there to hear me. For she had never been there. And when I realized this, I fell deep into despair, and all went black.

Chapter 12

My story would have ended there if it had not been for an Ninevahan bandit who had found me. I was so near to death, that even with all his effort did he have difficulty reviving me. But when I opened my eyes at last, I found myself strung out on a bed and looking over me a frightening image of a man. He had no hair a top his head, but had much hair above his eyes and between his nose and his lips. His mustache was thick and black and fell down to his chin. His eyebrows were of the same thickness and color and stretched out to a point. His skin was dark and wrinkled and I could tell that he was a devout Ninevahan, desert man. But most striking of his appearance was his long, circular, golden earring, that he wore around one ear and which dropped to his jaw.

When he saw that I was awake, he smiled, and I could see that in some places he had missing teeth and in others had he substituted for them with gold. He had a big, burly smile, and looked like a man who enjoyed laughing a lot. Finally, he spoke, “good morning, effendi!” Then he slapped me on the shoulder so hard, that I thought that it would break.

“What, who?” I mumbled.

“I am Sabah, desert bandit, thief, nomad! And you are?” he asked. “Dynotus?” I responded.

“Good, I bet you would like to know where you are,” he said.

“Well, yeah,” I replied.

“You are in the caravan of Sabah! I was traveling through the desert when I found your body lying unconscious. I thought you were dead but when I listened to your heart, it was still strong. You are a very strong man, Dynotus. But how is it that I found you in the middle of the desert, with no water and wearing nothing but a loin cloth?” Then he laughed. “Were you mugged by desert bandits?”

“No, a group of my friends and I escaped from Egyptian slavery. We had nothing with us but our loincloths. We had taken no water.” Sabah laughed again. “Ha ha ha, you are lying, effendi.”

“No I’m not. Why would I lie?”

“Because no man could have made it this far out in the desert and have survived. By foot, Egypt is four or five days from here. A man would have collapsed either in the first or second day without water, especially a man who is foreign to the Ninevahan sun.”

“How do you know that I am not from Ninevah?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha, your skin is as white as the clouds, effendi. And your hair, it is too light. Tell me, what would a man escaping from Egyptian slavery be doing, heading for Ninevah?”

“I come from the North, from a land known as Hellas . . . I . . .”

Then he cut me off, “Hellas, yes! I have been there. I have traveled the world over, you see, for I am Sabah, a great adventurer. If you were heading for North, my friend, heh heh, you are as lost as a mongoose in a satchel. You have been going far South.”

“I knew that!” I answered.

“Then where are you headed?” he asked.

“I wish to find the nearest city of Ninevah.”

“Ha ha ha, a Hellenite man looking for Ninevah, having come out of Egyptian slavery. What a tale this will make!”

“Look, this is no joke. I nearly died to get this far. And I shall not turn back. I have my reasons to go there.”

“Well, effendi, you are in luck. For I, Sabah, am also headed for this city. But I still do not believe that you journeyed this far on foot and without water.”

“Perhaps it is because, I am a demi-god.”

“You are a demi-god? You, a little muskrat! Ha ha ha ha,” he laughed. “It is true. And if it had not been for you that saved my life, I would strike you dead for such an insult!” I cried.

“Well, you do look like a strong man. And I know of the valiant warriors that the Spartans are. You must be one of them.”

“I am.”

“Good, then let us be on our way, effendi. We have much to travel.” I sat up on the bed and touched my shoulder, “it is remarkable. I can feel my skin again.”

“Us desert nomads always come prepared. I had brought with me a special plant that soothes the burns of the sun. Your skin is dead but it shall grow anew. When it does, it shall be darker. But do not be too proud. You shall still look like a Hellenite banana.” Then he laughed.

“Do you have water?” I asked.

“Are you still thirsty, effendi?”

“I drank?”

Sabah laughed. “You drank like a camel, my friend. I wasted two whole waterskins on you. I still do not know why. But something told me that you were a very important person, who’s life I should save.”

“You see, I told you that I am a demi-god. I am also a prince and heir to the throne of Sparta.”

“And what is a prince and demi-god doing so far from his homeland?” “I am looking for his princess,” I said.

“Did she run away from you, effendi? Perhaps she went to Ninevah to find a real man!” He laughed.

“No, she did not run away! She was kidnapped.”

“And why do you think to find her in Ninevah?” he asked.

“Because she was taken by Iuz, Iuz the Cruel.” And when I mentioned that name, Sabah did not laugh. At last he stopped smiling. But even though I had become sick of his ceaseless laughing, I wished now for it to continue. Sabah stood to his feet, and I could see, hanging from his waist, a heavy, long, curved sword. “Get dressed. We leave by nightfall.”

“Wait, do you know Iuz? Do you know where to find him?” I asked. “Yes, and you were heading in the right direction. Alas, I wish I had not found you. I knew I smelled trouble the moment I laid eyes on you. I should have left you to die.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I know where to find Iuz. If you hadn’t met me, you would certainly never find him. Knowing that he lives somewhere in Ninevah is not enough. Ninevah is a huge land and you could search all your life and never even hear his name. But I could help you. With my help, you could find him.” “But that is wonderful! Perhaps that

is why you thought it important to save me.”

Then Sabah moved close to me and said in a quiet voice, “do you really wish to find her? Must you find this woman you seek? Could not another woman take her place? Surely you could find a wife just as beautiful in Sparta. Hell, if you’d like, I could offer you some of the finest women from the King’s harem, who’s beauty is so great, that they are unsurpassed by any you have seen!”

“No, you don’t understand, Sabah. I love her.”

“But if she has been taken by Iuz . . .”

“What, what is it?” I cried.

“You may not like what you see, even if you do find her alive.”

Then I grabbed Sabah by the neck and cried, “if I find my wife alive, I will take her back to Sparta and I will love her and be married to her all the days of my life! No matter what, Iuz. . .,” but I could not even bear to think about it. I could only think that I would love Seline forever, if I found her, regardless of anything.

“All right,” he said, “then we must move quickly. Dress, and I shall go help the other.”

“The other?” I asked.

“Didn’t you know?” said Sabah.

“Know what?”

“You are not the only stray one that I have found on the desert. There was also another. He wore no clothing as you, but had two sticks fastened to his legs, and he was an Ninevahan.”

“That is Alheem! By Zeus, is he still alive?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Sabah.

“I cannot believe it! I told him that we would make it to the city!” “And so we might,” said Sabah.

“But wait, did you find another, a third person?” I asked. “He was dressed like Alheem and I, but he was old and blind. He was from Cannan and spoke much about God.”

“I found no such person,” replied Sabah.

“Then we must go back for him!” I cried.

“No, Dynotus, searching for an old blind man wearing nothing and having no water, in the middle of the desert, is pointless. The only reason Alheem lived is because he is a desert man, like myself. But an old, blind man, is much weaker, especially one from Cannan. I am certain that he is dead. And if, for some reason, he is not, we could search for centuries and never find him in the desert.”

“Yes, I guess your right. Poor Habakkuk, the old fool, if only he had stayed with me. But he had gone mad, I think. I hope he found his God.” “Did he say that he saw God?” asked Sabah.

“Yes,” I replied.

Then Sabah laughed, and I was relieved. “Many have said that they have seen God, especially when they are out in the desert with no water. The desert can play tricks on a man’s mind, you know. Mirages, they are called.”

Yes, I think that I saw a mirage, a very elaborate one. But I did not see God. I saw three beautiful women, and they made love to me. It seems like a dream now but I could

have sworn that they were real.”

“Desert nymphs?” he asked.

“Yes, have you seen them?”

“No, and that’s because they don’t exist. That was a mirage.”

“But why women?” I asked.

And Sabah laughed. “We all see what we want to see, effendi.”

Chapter 13

Sabah was a great hero and warrior from what I had later discovered. It was remarkable luck that it was he who found me. He was kind enough to offer me clothing appropriate for the desert. I was given a pair of pointy shoes, a chiton, several sheets which I wrapped around my waist, and a vest to go over that. But most important was the shawl, that I wore on my head, and which covered the back of my neck and shoulders. This clothing was most important to block out the draining rays of the sun and to protect from being burned. Around my waist I was given to carry two waterskins. I was told that I should only take small sips of water every time that I thought myself thirsty, because that was all the water they were planning on giving me, and if I wasted it or accidentally spilt it, they would leave me to die. When Sabah asked me if I needed a weapon, I told him that I didn't. I kept secret the magic of my ring. Yet, I wondered why a weapon would be needed out in the desert. But Sabah did not tell me.

When Alheem was well, we began our journey. Though he still could not walk properly, he was beginning to limp around with the use of a staff. He thanked me for giving him the hope to survive and we set apart on our individual camels. Sabah had two horses which carried behind us a large carriage that contained all our provisions. He had brought thirty waterskins, food, a compass, maps, rope, and the items needed to build a lean-to. One of Sabah's cohorts accompanied the caravan while two of his others rode on camels with us. We had been introduced to his not-so-friendly men as: Jehan, Majid, and Raouel.

Unfortunately there were only three camels. Sabah rode by himself on a large two humped camel, while Alheem shared his one humped camel with Jehan, and I rode with Majid on his. Raouel stayed behind to watch the caravan. We were all certain to be equipped with waterskins, similar clothing, and weapons of all kinds. Sabah's men were sure to arm themselves with scimitars, falchions and daggers. Even Alheem took part in this. I, however, relied solely, and secretly, on my ring.

Before we departed, Sabah was sure to remind us the rules of desert travel. We were not to speak during the day unless we had an important reason. We were to breathe in through our noses and out through our mouths, lest we cause our mouths to become dry more quickly. And we were to cover our mouths and noses with a veil so that our lips would not crack. Lastly, we were to follow Sabah's lead at all times, lest we become lost in the desert forever.

I did not understand how Sabah, our new appointed leader, could find his way through the ocean of sand dunes. Regardless, I trusted him and in his ability to help me find Iuz, and then hopefully Seline.

I rode along on the camel and found it a strange experience. Never had I seen such an odd creature before. Unlike a horse, it seemed to stink as bad as its Ninevahan masters, and it would constantly drool and every so often spit out this white foam. The camel was truly a disgusting animal. But I had been told of the animal's amazing ability to retain water and understood why it was good for desert travel. Many times did we have to stop so as to give the horses something to drink. But the camels never thirsted and I never saw them fed water.

It was then that I thought of Seline. I remembered how she struggled again and

again to ride a horse. Likewise, I found myself in a similar position attempting to ride this foreign animal. As we went, I struggled to stay aloft. I thought the beast to be slow and clumsy. Though its hump did help me not to fall, I thought the camel's back uncomfortable and not suited to my rear like that of a horse. However, because I was such a good equestrian, I learned the ways of camel riding much faster than my wife had taken to horseback riding. I was surprised to discover that Sabah always led us between the sand dunes and never over them. He was sure to keep the camels and the caravan on low ground. Later he had explained to me the danger of huge sand slides which could occur when going up a sand hill. Such sand slides would cover entire hordes of men under thousands of pounds of sand. If they did survive to dig their way out, it would be a long time before they could be ready to travel again, and overall it was a most unpleasant experience.

After a whole day's travel I was neither weak nor thirsty. Though at times my lips did crack, and I did long for those days that I could leap into a flowing river in Hellas, and swim naked among the fishes, I had drank sufficiently and thanks to the wisdom of Sabah, did my skin not burn.

At night we could see by the stars. But we did not travel then. Instead we set up our lean-to and prepared to eat and sleep. Sabah built a fire to cook our food and we relaxed around it. I was thankful for the night. For it was cool enough to remove the shawl and the veil and I could breathe normally and speak as often as I wished. Even then did Majid, Jehan and Raouel remain quiet. But Sabah babbled on as usual. He talked about the desert and about the nomadic life. But most importantly he spoke about water. He brought out a waterskin and poured some water into his hand. His cohorts looked at him astonished, wondering why he would waste water in such a way. But he explained, "do you see this, Dynotus?"

"Yes, it is water," I answered.

"Being a Hellenite man, to you, water may not be so precious. But in Ninevah, this is not just water. In the land of Ninevah, water is more precious than gold. We see water as the very essence of life itself. We guard it and fight for it above all other things. To us, water is our god. And it is also the god of all nations and of all people.

But in Ninevah, water is scarce, and this is why we treasure it so. In your nations, water is so very plentiful, that you use it to bathe in and to swim in, and to play with. But to us, such use of water is looked at as a sin. In Ninevah, water is treated sacred. For we know that one man's use of water for pleasure, may be another nation's death for lack of it. For it is known that a man cannot live more than several days without water. Food he may go without. But without water he would surely die.

And what is water? Water is that which makes the plants grow. The plants are what feed the animals. The animals are what feed us. Thus, we are all made up of water. We ourselves would be nothing but dust if it were not for water. Our world would be as barren and as dry as this desert. But with water, all life is made possible."

"I never looked at water like that before. I knew that life came from water, but I never treated it as sacred. Perhaps I shall return with your message to the Hellenites."

Then there was a pause from the conversation, until Alheem spoke, "tell me, Sabah, why is it that we travel during the day but sleep in the night? I had always been taught, as a desert man, that it is wise to sleep in the day and to travel by night. For not only do we retain more water, but we can see our direction by way of the stars."

Sabah replied, "what you say is true, effendi. I make maps of the stars by night and travel in the day, having remembered what stars I had seen and where in the heavens they were. The reason I travel by day, is because it is far safer than in the night. As we nomads sleep in the day to conserve our moisture, so do the monsters. For it is they that we avoid, by sleeping at night, who hunt in the hours that the stars come out."

"Monsters?" said Alheem. "There are no monsters in the desert!" he cried.

Then Sabah laughed. "If you do not know of the monsters, effendi, I believe that you have been gone from the desert too long."

"When I was young and living in Ninevah, my father once told me tales. He used to tell me of the 1,001 Tales of the Ninevahan Nights. But it was all in myth that he spoke of monsters. They are merely stories to frighten small children from going out and getting lost in the desert."

"They are true," said Majid, who spoke for the first time.

"What is true?" asked Alheem.

"I do not know of Aladdin, or of magic genies that grant wishes. But I have seen things in the desert that would make your heart stop."

"What things!" he argued. "The only things alive in the desert are snakes and rodents and . . ."

Suddenly, Jehan stood up and pulled a dagger out of his belt. He then eyed Alheem carefully, and swung the dagger down toward his back! I jumped up and prepared for battle. Alheem screamed. And Sabah laughed. "Do not be alarmed," said Jehan.

"What is it?" asked Alheem.

"Ha ha ha, it was just a little scorpion. That's all. If it had bitten you, you would have died. But no need to worry, now," said Sabah. Then Jehan pulled his hand back, and I saw, impaled on his dagger, the largest bug I had ever seen. It was bright yellow and had six legs. It had two large claws like that of a crab, and a long tail which swung around and over its head.

"You know, these make good eating," said Jehan. "If you know how to avoid the poison."

"Well, if you call scorpions, monsters, then I suppose they are dangerous things out there. But they are not so dangerous that we should travel by day," said Alheem.

Sabah laughed, "there are scorpions much larger than those, effendi. Those of which are large enough to be called monsters. Sometimes they can be found during the day. I pray that we do not run into them."

"Just how big are these scorpions, Sabah? As large as my foot?" asked Alheem.

"The desert is a large and mysterious place, my friend, and there are things in it that we may search and never find. Ninevah is like the universe itself. These oceans of sand may contain that which we could never fathom," and then he leaned in closer, "or things no man has ever lived to tell about."

The next day it was hot. But that was nothing new. We gathered our things and set out for the city of Dur Sharrukin. It was a city built around and because of an oasis. But I knew that there would be trouble ahead. I remembered what Jacob, the young son of Nehemiah, had told me in Cannan. He warned of the very same dangers that Sabah had warned me of the night before. And when I went to sleep, I could not help but dream of hundreds, even thousands of little scorpions, that crawled into my sleeping bag while I

slept and stung me with their tails and inflicted me with their poison.

Then, while I was thinking of these things, Alheem pointed to something in the distance and called out, "what's that!?"

"I do not see anything," said Sabah.

"There, over the sand dunes! They're coming toward us!" cried Alheem.

Then he spotted them and yelled, "by Allah! Quick, dismount your camels and draw your swords!" And Sabah leaped off his camel and unsheathed his large scimitar.

"What are they?" asked Alheem, with a tone of panic.

"Scorpions," answered Majid.

At first I did not believe that we could see scorpions from such a distance. Either Alheem had incredibly good eyesight, or the scorpions were incredibly large. But by the time I dismounted my camel, I could also see them and I knew the answer. Scorpions, the size of horses, were coming toward us! "What the Hell do they want?" I cried.

"What do you think, effendi, they want to eat us," replied Sabah. "But scorpions don't eat people!" I cried.

"They do if we step in their nests. The giant scorpion sleeps during the day and cools off by burying itself and its eggs under a mound of sand. They are well camouflaged because of their yellow, desert color. Normally we don't see them during the day. But if we cross one of their sand mounds, where they have laid their eggs, they shall come out and eat us!"

Quickly, Jehan helped Alheem off of the camel and dragged him over to Raouel and the caravan. Majid and Sabah stood ready for battle, and I transformed my ring into a sword.

When the scorpions finally reached us, I could see that they were about six feet in length, and as they walked, did they make a loud rattling sound, like that of a rattling serpent. Three of them had come out to confront us. When the camels saw them, they turned and ran in the other direction. Behind me, I could hear the horses bucking and going wild. I knew that Raouel and Jehan were taking care of the animals. Yet, I feared of us being stranded. But there was no time for us to turn back. We had to face those monster and slay them, lest they slay us.

Like a bad dream come true, each of us fought with one of the scorpions. Sabah hacked and slashed at his with his large sword. Majid fought well too. But I had never been in battle with such a creature, and I knew not what to do.

I figured that the best tactic would be to stab at the creatures center, where I thought its heart would be. But as I swung toward it, did the scorpion lash out its claws to crush me. Quickly I evaded its snapping pincers and thrust downward toward its back. But the giant creature caught me by the legs and pulled me underneath its feet! I fell on my back and when I looked up, I stared squarely at the tip of its tail. Only moments remained before I would be stung and I did not know if I could endure poison from such a huge insect. Using my godly strength, I lifted up my hand and caught the pincer as it was coming down. I then swung my sword around again and cut off part of its tail. The scorpion scittered back in retreat. But I did not let it go. I stood up and hacked at its claws, chopping them off, and finally thrust downward stabbing into its heart, and from the convulsions it made, seeing that I had killed it. When the monster was dead, I turned around, seeing Sabah, fighting well with his scorpion, but Majid having much greater trouble. The scorpion fighting Majid seemed much larger than my own, and to my horror,

it had the man in its claw, and was slowly squeezing him by the waist. Majid called out, "Sabah, help me!"

"Be brave, Majid, and I shall come. But beware its tail. One sting from the giant scorpion's tail and you shall die instantly!"

"But I can't move! Help me!" cried Majid, and dropped his sword. With all my speed, I ran to save him. The scorpion had already unarmed Majid and was going to make its kill. As I reached them, I picked up the scimitar, which Majid had dropped, and at the same time swung my blade through the scorpion's tail, as it was coming down to kill him. A trail of black blood streamed through the air as the tail went sailing. Immediately I used the other sword to chop off the scorpion's claws to free Majid. The Ninevahan cohort dropped to the ground holding his waist, and I turned and hurled the scimitar at the scorpion. The huge, curved blade, went spinning into the air like a discuss, and stuck into the scorpion's side. But the bug still was not dead. It bled from the side, with the scimitar sticking out of it, and its claw and tail were gone. But it remained to fight. Angered, I punched the creature in the head, and heard a loud cracking sound. I had broken its shell, and finally, the scorpion died. Then, I turned to find Sabah, but saw that he was doing well. In fact, Sabah was standing with one foot on the scorpion's corpse and with the other foot planted on the ground. His sword was wedged deep into the scorpion's gut, having split half of the creature down the middle, from its head to its vertebrae. And, as always, Sabah was wearing his flashy, debonair smile.

Chapter 14

We had traveled more than two hundred miles and Egypt was but a memory. At last we began to see, far off in the distance, mountains. The mountains were a sign of hope to me. They were a sign that we were reaching the southern half of the Ninevahan peninsula. It was also a sign of a city. For I knew that it took more than water to build a city. It also took stone.

It seemed like an entire week had passed, since the last memory of us having done anything besides riding over sand dunes. The night was the only time we had anything to look forward to. At least then we could talk and eat. But the food was lacking and repulsive. I digested more snakes, rodents, and scorpions that I thought possible, and the only thing I had to wash it down with was a few sips of warm water.

As we ate, I became more and more aquatinted with Sabah's friends. To my shock, the more I talked with Sabah's allies, the more dreadful and boring did they appear. On the other hand, the more I spoke with Sabah, the more interesting, lively, and jovial did the man seem. No matter what things were going on, Sabah always seemed to have a positive attitude. I thought, perhaps, that even if we were to die and fall into the gloomiest pits of Tarsus, would Sabah's regal countenance not subside. How a man such as Sabah, ever became allied with his henchman, was beyond my comprehension.

Alheem was doing well. He was quickly becoming his normal self. He began to walk now without use of a cane, and I knew that it would only be a matter of days before he would be up and running. Yet something seemed to have changed between us, the day I left him out in the desert to die. After such an experience, I knew that I could never look at the man the same way again. I had given Alheem the hopes of loving my wife in his death dream, and I dreaded still the consequences of that action. I wondered if, perhaps, he had become jealous of my love for her, and wanted also to be loved in such a way. But I did not blame him. It seemed unjust that I, who for so many years had lived with such promiscuity and wealth in women, would also take this woman, Seline. For I knew that it had been years since Alheem had been with a woman. Such a thing to me was unthinkable. Even to not be with a woman for a week was strange for me. I did not know how such men could endure the loneliness of the desert. Truly this vast wasteland of nothing would remind one of the emptiness of his soul. As it reminded me of the hole that I felt in my heart for Seline. The dryness and lifelessness that I felt deep inside me, that could only be revived from the touch of a lover's hand, or the touch of my beloved Seline.

But as we trekked through the sand, I became more and more disparate toward my homeland. All the memories of my life in Hellas were fastly fading like that of a wonderful dream. And there was nothing that remained in my head but the awful reality of where I was. I could hardly sense the passage of time. And for all the weeks, was there nothing of significance in my memory, except for the fighting of the scorpions.

Nothing brought me joy but the night. For when I gazed up at the stars, I could still see the belt of Or looming over us. And I remembered the story that I had recited to Seline that first night we spent together, not making love but being in love. Each and every time I looked at the stars, they reminded me of her star like eyes. And though we were thousands of miles apart, I knew that that was something we both could share, even

if we were separated. In this one way, I knew, that Seline could look up at the stars, no matter where on Earth she was, and see Or's belt, and remember me. Then, on one fateful day, as we were approaching the mountains, I noticed that the horses were becoming uneasy. It was an odd thing to see, for I never knew that horses had the ability to sense danger, as sometimes dogs did. When I noticed this, I called out, "Raouel, what seems to be the problem?"

"There is no problem, Dynotus."

"Then why are the horses staggering?" I asked.

"They are just stubborn, that's all. They like to give me trouble." "Perhaps they can sense something that we can't."

"Don't be silly, Dynotus, horses never sense anything. They are very stupid, you know. Not like camel, which is very wise."

Well, I didn't quite know how to respond to this. Then, Sabah called back, "horses usually do not sense things. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" I asked.

Then I heard it. It was a loud, screeching noise, much like the sound that would come out of a hundred eagles caged together with an angered lion. A chill ran down my spine, as I turned to face the source of the sound.

There before me flew a creature. It was a thing of enormous proportions. It must have had a wingspan of about twenty or thirty feet. Its body looked to be about nine feet long, and resembled very closely to that of a lion. But the monster had huge talons for feet, and the head and wings of a gigantic hawk. When it cried out, it made a sound similar to a mixture of what it was, both a lion and a hawk combined. And it glided over our heads and back around, as if it was circling to make a kill.

"What is it!" I cried.

Sabah yelled, "It is a griffin! They have come for the horses! Quick, run and hide!"

"Hide?" I asked. "You mean it hasn't come to eat us?"

"Eat us? Griffins do not eat people, effendi, they eat horses. It is their favorite food. A griffin cannot resist the sight or smell of a horse!"

"But where did it come from?" I asked.

"The desert griffin lives in the mountains, there, near Dur Sharrukin, far South."

"But that's impossible. The mountains are still hundreds of miles away!"

"The griffin will fly for days in search of food. Sometimes they will reach lands hundreds of miles away. They move very fast and can see over much greater distances than an eagle."

"Look out! It's coming back around!" cried Alheem.

Quickly, I turned the camel around, so fast in fact, that I accidentally threw Majid from its back. Then I kicked my heels against the camel's side, but it did not run. "You stupid, camel, go!!" But the camel was as stubborn as a mule.

Meanwhile, the horses were going wild. They bucked and threw Raouel from the coachman's seat, and then began to stampede across the desert sands. I watched as the horses ran at full speed, carrying our carriage with it. As they rushed along, the carriage bounced up and down the sand dunes, looking as if it was ready to break apart. Majid, who had stood to his feet, called out, "Dynotus, what are you doing?"

"Someone must go after the horses! We can't risk losing the caravan. It is our

only hope of survival.” Then I leaped off the camel, and began to run toward the stampeding beasts. The griffin above me, swooped down in a magnificent dive, and lashed out its sharp claws to grab one of the horses. Unfortunately for it, the horses barely evaded the grip of the creature, and the griffin’s claws did nothing but tear into the fabric of the caravan. When this occurred, the caravan tipped over, and the horses were pulled back in the other direction. Still with the carriage strapped to their bodies, the horses turned around and started heading toward me. Yet they moved much slower with the hindrance of the carriage, now dragging on its side. The griffin made an eagle cry and swept down again to kill its prey. But I unleashed my sword and cut off the strings attached to one of the horses, freeing it from its impediment. The freed horse rocketed ahead, while the other horse almost collapsed with the weight now doubled upon its back. The predator, seeing the lame horse, swept down again and snatched the animal off the ground. It was truly an amazing yet terrifying sight, to see such a large and beautiful animal, whinny in pain, as the giant claws of the griffin sank deep into the horses body and lifted it up from the ground like an eagle would with a rabbit. I knew then that I would be too late to save the horses’ life.

The griffin seemed satisfied enough with one horse and did not appear like it would return for the other. However, I saw, to my shock, the caravan that was still attached to the horse, be carried up into the air with it, lifted by the strength of the griffin’s massive wings! I knew then that my struggle was more important than for the safety of a horse. I had to stop the griffin to save our very lives. For within the caravan, was contained the thirty waterskins we needed to survive.

And so I whistled, as I often did with my horse, Thunderfoot, and saw that the second, freed horse, did listen, and come quickly to my aid. As the horse was moving, I leaped upon its back, and redirected its motion toward the griffin.

“I could already see the monster flying low above the ground. It had not yet achieved its maximum altitude for it dueled with the weight of the horse and the caravan beneath it. Kicking my heels against the horses’ side, I made it run across the desert at full speed. I had to move quickly lest I lose the caravan. The only way, I knew, that I could catch the griffin, is if I could climb on to the carriage, whose tip was now dragging against the ground. If I could leap into it before the caravan was made airborne, then I could save our water.

After riding for several minutes, at last I made it close enough to reach the wagon. But it would be a difficult task. I had to leap from the horse while it was still in motion, and then catch myself on to the wheel of the caravan. With all my might, I made this daring venture. After balancing myself on the sprinting animal, I jumped and barely caught the spinning wheel. But I was jolted and thrown back, and barely lost my grip. When my head stopped turning, I looked down, and saw the horse that I had just jumped off of, become smaller and smaller. It was then that I knew, the griffin had taken to the air. I looked, with terror, down at the desert far below me, and prayed to stay on, for I knew that if I lost my grip, surely would I plunge to my death. Still hanging on by one hand, I turned my attention to the wheel of the caravan. I looked and saw, that with my added weight, it was slowly tearing from its base! Quickly, I grabbed the wheel with my other hand, and lifted myself up so that I could grab hold of the caravan’s overhead canvas. I watched as the wheel fell for many feet, until it broke against the ground. Less than a second had passed between the time that I jumped from the wheel and the time that

it fell. Now I clung on for dear life on to the canvas. But because it was only a fabric, I knew it would not last. Soon the entire caravan would fall apart, and I had to grab hold of the only steady thing that would not break, the griffin itself.

I climbed to the top of the caravan and looked over the griffin's back. It's wings were flapping back and forth and the horse was still clutched in the griffin's talons, just barely alive, and bleeding terribly. I then made the leap and landed on my stomach. At that instant the caravan fell apart and dropped to the ground in many pieces. I didn't have time to see if the waterskins had broken. But now that the griffin was free of the weight, it became agitated by my intrusion. It screeched and bucked, attempting to throw me off. But like a bull rider I held on, knowing that if I didn't, I would surely die. The griffin swerved through the air, banking left and right. It flipped upside down and dived toward the ground, swooping upward only seconds before it would crash. But I held on. I held on, but knew that soon I wouldn't be able. I found myself with two alternatives. I could either ride the griffin back to its nest in the mountains, in which I probably wouldn't survive. Or I could slay the griffin, before I was taken a distance too great for me to return. And so, I decided on the later. But knew that if I were to kill the griffin, would I also plunge to my death. The only solution was to force the griffin to the ground. But that could not be done. Unless the griffin were to fly low on purpose, perhaps to grab an item.

I looked down and saw the horse below me. Using the magic of my enchanted ring, I created an ax in my hands. Then I reached down and cut off some rope that had been dDoriang in the wind, that rope which had once been part of the horses' reigns. Slipping the rope around the griffin's neck, and then holding it with my teeth, I swung down to the belly of the monster. Hanging on a rope by my teeth, swinging thousands of feet above the air, was not my idea of a good time. But I hoped my radical plan would work. Without hesitation, I used the ax to strike the creature's talons, and with that, freed the horse from its grip. The poor horse went plunging to its doom and I grabbed the rope with my other hand. But when I struck the griffin with the ax, not only did it become infuriated with me, but it also became much more agile, now that the weight of the horse was gone. So swift and furious did the monster now fly, that it was impossible, even with my godly might, to hang on. At last I was thrown off, and I plummeted forty feet, before I hit the ground.

Luckily, the griffin had flown low to regain its food, as I had planned. I only hadn't planned on the griffin gaining such mobility and tossing me off. For now the griffin had a personal vendetta, and it eyed me carefully, the same way that it eyed its prey. Then, it began to fall head first at great speed, so as to stab me with its beak! Standing to my feet, I turned my ring into a bow & arrow, and aimed upward. The griffin came closer. I pulled the bow string back. The griffin screeched. I stared into its eyes. Then I let the bow string go. The arrow sailed into the sky and struck the falcon head at an angle, blowing through the bottom of its beak and coming out the top of its head. The griffin was killed instantly. It soared downward, and then crashed five feet in front of me.

I turned to the griffin and saw its body lying beside the horse, both soaking in a pool of sandy blood. The threat of the griffin was over. But now I found myself lost in the desert. I had no idea how far I had traveled, and wondered if I would ever find Sabah and his men. But then it occurred to me, that Sabah and his men would not leave without the waterskins. So they would most likely search to find them and head in my direction. All I had to do, was find the waterskins and I would find Sabah. And if I didn't find him, at

least thirty waterskins would be enough for me to drink, while I walked to the city.

It took me several hours before I found the broken caravan. Luckily, I had set out in the right direction. I looked under a heap of broken wood and cloth, until I found the waterskins. Only a few of them were broken. Most of them, about twenty-four, were still intact. And half of them were full. I knew it would be enough for me to survive. But I didn't know if I would find Sabah, and it then dawned on me whether or not I should try to find Sabah at all. If we had lost four waterskins, and the caravan, I thought that we might not have enough water for all of us. Such a fight over the water could be a catastrophe. But I knew that I could not hide myself and the water from the others. For it was Sabah that had saved my life, and because of this, I could not take his life to save my own. And so I headed South, in the direction of the city, hoping to find my companions.

The heat of the desert sun made a watery appearance in the distance. But I knew that it was my mind playing tricks. I knew that it was nothing but an illusion that sometimes fooled inexperienced desert travelers. But it was out of this watery background that I saw three camels rise in my direction. And I knew it was them.

"Dynotus, I cannot believe that I found you alive! I thought you had been eaten by the griffin!" said Sabah.

"The griffin and the horse are dead. The other horse ran away and I could not find him. But I saved most of our water."

When Jehan saw the waterskins, he leaped from his camel and hugged them as if he was hugging his children. Then he uncorked one of the waterskins and did drink. "Oh, thank Allah, the water is safe!"

"The water is safe, but I left the food behind. Their crates were broken and I had no way to carry them."

"No matter, effendi. We shall eat from what we find in the desert. In this part of Ninevah, dwells much life. There are many snakes and rodents we will find to eat. But the important thing, is that you saved the waterskins," said Sabah.

"What's going to happen, now that we lost the caravan?" asked Alheem.

Sabah smiled. "No problem, my friends, there is no reason to be alarmed. Without the horses, we will just have to strap the waterskins to the camels. It will only take us slightly longer to reach Dur Sharrukin. But do not fear. There is plenty of water for all of us."

But both Sabah and I, knew that wasn't true.

Chapter 15

Many days passed. There was still the six of us. But only two waterskins were left. Due to our loss in water, Sabah ordered that we no longer give the camels drink. Because of this, all the camels collapsed. So we left the animals behind, and traveled on foot.

I soon came to dread, that we would find ourselves in the same position that Alheem and I had been in after we left Egypt. It was already becoming increasingly hot, and my feet grew weary of walk. It had been a long time since I enjoyed the pleasures and comfort of a soft bed and a full meal. All that we had to eat, is that which we found in the desert. And because we had no materials to cook with, all the snakes and lizards that I found, I had to eat raw.

When our water supply became alarmingly low, Sabah ordered that we should take turns drinking. Each time one of us wanted to drink, we had to wait our turn, until everyone else had drunk. I knew that salvation could only come when we found the city. Dur Sharrukin was our only hope. We had journeyed too far to turn back. But as the days rolled by, our mouths were more and more dry, and our stomachs more and more empty. All in the group became uneasy. I feared when the day would come, that our water would be so scarce, that each one of us would know that they would have their last turn to drink, before the last waterskin was empty. And knowing, that though the water was not enough for all of us, it was plenty just for one.

There was only one waterskin left, half full, and there was no city in sight. It was then that the conflict began. The inevitable started when it was Alheem's turn to drink. He had taken the waterskin and began to sip, when suddenly, Raouel cried out, "hey, you already drank! It's my turn!" And Jehan stepped forth, as if to confirm Raouel's comment, and snatched the water out of Alheem's hands.

Seeing this, I turned and said, "wait a second, I thought it was Alheem's turn. Wasn't it Alheem's turn, Sabah?"

"I am not sure," he replied.

"It was not Alheem's turn! And besides, he drinks too much. I think that we deserve to drink a little more, to make up for all that extra that Alheem drank," protested Raouel. It was the most I ever heard, come out of his lips.

"Please, my friends, do not fight over the water. If you like, you may take an extra sip," replied Alheem.

I saw Raouel and Jehan give Alheem a cold look. Then they turned from him and both did drink more than a sip.

At the moment, Jehan and Raouel seemed satisfied. But I knew that was only the beginning.

Several hours later, I thirsted greatly, and humbly reached over to Sabah, to take the waterskin. As I did this, I could feel a malicious stare pierce right through me. I turned and saw Jehan and Raouel, huddled close together. They stared at me intensely, and watched as I went to drink the water. But the whole time that I drank, they gave me a threatening look, as if I was doing something wicked. And they continued to whisper in each other's ears, things that they kept secret from the rest of us.

Then, the worst happened. It came so sudden, that I did not expect such a vile thing to occur. As we were walking peacefully, I felt a sharp pain thrust into my back. I screamed in agony and fell to the ground. Then, I swung my hand around, to feel what had hit me, and drew back a hand soaked in blood.

At the same instant, I saw Alheem look at me in shock, and then dash somewhere beyond my sight. I then heard him, screaming at Raouel. "You bastard, why did you do that?!"

"What do you care? He's a Hellenite pig! He is not like us, like you and me. We are Ninevahians! He has no right to be sharing our water!" cried Raouel. "This Hellenite pig saved my life and freed me from slavery! And I shall not betray him!" argued Alheem.

I turned to see what was happening, and saw Raouel, holding in his hands a bloody dagger, and grinning sinisterly. Beside him stood Jehan. "If you wish to take the Hellenite's side, then you shall die just like him!" And Raouel raised up his dagger, and brought it down upon Alheem! Alheem caught the blade in his hands, and fought with Raouel to push him back. Meanwhile, Jehan went to aid Raouel, but Majid threw himself at him, and tackled him to the ground.

Still kneeling on the sand, I turned to find what Sabah was doing. But as I looked for him, I discovered instead, a peculiar sight. A mound of sand seemed to be racing across the ground. It was almost as if there was something huge beneath the earth, and was parting the sand as it crossed our path. I saw it circle around us and then turn back toward the others. Looking behind me, a drop of blood had fallen on the ground from the dagger, and the thing was heading straight for Raouel and Alheem, who were still fighting! I stood half way up and cried, "look out!"

Raouel looked at me and laughed. "You stupid Hellenite, you expect me to fall for that old trick?" Then the sand exploded from beneath him, and I saw a thing so frightening, that I soiled my loin cloth. A huge, hairy thing, about eight feet in length, that much resembled an ant's head, burst out of the ground, and unleashed from its mouth, two pincers, which stabbed through Raouel's chest, and quickly sucked him into its mouth! Then, as quickly and abruptly as it had come, did it disappear under the sand. Nothing of Raouel remained, but his dagger and a pool of blood.

Alheem, seeing his foe fall right out of his hands, and the creature come inches in front of him, cried, "SHIT! What in Hell was that?!" "Dynotus, here, you take the water! You can have it, all of it, I swear!" cried Jehan, who's face was whiter than mine.

Then, I heard a whisper from behind me. "Silence, it will hear you." It was the voice of Sabah.

Alheem replied, quietly, "what was that?"

"I have heard of them before, but never actually encountered one. We call them, antlions."

I turned to Sabah and said, "is it going to come back?"

"Yes," he replied. "The antlion has a voracious appetite. It will continue to come back until all of us are eaten."

"Is there a way to kill it?" I asked.

"I don't know. No one has ever killed one before," replied Sabah.

"What do we do?" asked Alheem.

"Be very quiet. Put your hands on the ground. Can you feel it?" he asked.

"You could feel it all along, couldn't you?" I said. "You knew it was coming. That's why you didn't say anything about the fight."

"It's going to kill us. It's going to kill us all!" cried Jehan. "We must get out of here!"

Sabah warned, "stay down, Jehan! Don't move! It can feel your foot steps. . .!"

But it was too late. Jehan had already taken off running, and had dropped the waterskin as if it was an evil thing. I watched, in horror, as a stream of sand bolted behind him. Jehan screamed, as the antlion's head emerged from the ground and caught him helplessly in its pincers, then pulled him under.

"Oh well, never did like those two," replied Sabah.

"Yes, and that leaves more water for us," added Majid.

"Are you both mad? What does the water matter if we are all devoured by that. . .that thing?" cried Alheem.

"We can't move," I said. "It hunts us by sensing our movement. That is why it came to us. Our fighting must have alarmed it."

"But we can't sit here forever," replied Alheem. "We will have to move eventually."

"Well, we shall just wait until it goes away. Eh, effendi?" said Sabah. I turned to him and answered, "yes. That is a good idea. We will wait until the sun crosses the sky twenty degrees. By then it should be gone."

We waited.

Alheem looked to his feet and saw a snake slithering toward him. A drop of sweat poured down his cheek. He whispered to Sabah, "there's a snake. I must move or it's going to bite me. What shall I do?"

Sabah looked at him as if he was a total fool, and then gave him an answer by lifting up his scimitar and cutting the snake in half, without barely making a sound.

"I don't see it. Perhaps it's safe to walk now," I said.

"I suppose. All right, men, let's move," replied Sabah.

"Shouldn't we say a few words for the dead?" asked Majid.

"Oh yes," replied Sabah. Then he bowed his head and said, "dear, Allah, take these poor bastards to wherever they should go. Frankly, I don't give a damn. But if you do, let it be your will, amen."

Then we began to walk. But as I took the first step, my heart jumped with the sight of a sand dune, moving across the desert. But to my surprise, rather than it head toward us, it moved around us in a great big circle. "What's it doing?" I cried.

"It knows we're here. It's trying to trap us," replied Sabah.

"Trap us?" asked Alheem. "Trap us how?"

But we found out. I looked beneath me and saw the sand running over my feet. "The sand is moving! What's going on?"

But I did not get an answer. Instead, I saw all the sand that was within the circle made by the sand dune, fall into the center. To my horror, the ground became more and more inclined, as the antlion raced around us in tighter and tighter circles.

Eventually, a hole appeared in the center of the circle, and all the sand began to fall down the hole. It was as if the antlion was making a whirlpool of sand!

"Run!" I cried. And we all began trekking up the sand slope, fighting against the

teaming ocean of sand sliding beneath our feet, like bugs trapped in an hourglass. Sabah was the first to make it out of the slope. Alheem and Majid were close behind him and I was last in line. Then, suddenly, Majid slipped and fell backward! He fell, and took Alheem with him. They both tumbled in the sand, and I turned back and reached for them. But it was too late. Alheem had crashed on his back two feet from the hole and was slowly falling in. Majid wasn't far behind.

"Forget them! There is no way you can save them now!" cried Sabah. "Reach for my hand while I can still grab you, Dynotus."

But I ignored him and ran down the hill. I could not abandon my friend, Alheem, nor could I abandon Majid who stood up for me.

I quickly removed the sheet tied around my waist, and threw it down toward Alheem. Alheem turned on his stomach to face me and grabbed the sheet. Then, using my great strength, I pulled him up out of the hole. But as he was being dragged to safety, I saw the antlion's head appear out of the center! I knew that it was only a few feet away from Alheem and in seconds could it grab and devour him. But then, at that instant, I saw a shining scimitar fly into the air and sink deep into the monster's eye. While the creature recoiled in pain, I helped Alheem to a safe distance and then looked up at Sabah. Sabah had decided to help me after all. He had descended a few feet down the ramp and had thrown his sword into the antlion's head. I gave him a thankful look and then pushed Alheem up, so that he could reach Sabah's hand. I then turned around to find Majid, who was still sliding into the hole. I let the sand carry me down to him and reached out my arm. Majid looked up to face me and stretched out his hand. But he did not see the antlion which returned to eat him. "Quickly!" I cried. "Take my hand!"

But the antlion unsheathed its pincers and stabbed them into Majid's legs! Majid screamed in pain and in terror as the monster's limbs pulled him down into the sand. "Nooo!" I yelled, and slid down to the edge of the hole. I reached out and grabbed his hand, and pulled with all my might. Now, Majid was being torn apart from both sides. I pulled to free him from the monster's clutches. And I could see the pincer, which had cut into Majid's leg and hooked around it like a harpoon. To my utter horror, I gazed down into the giant bug's gaping maw and into a set of jagged teeth, as it sucked the man into its mouth. Majid screamed, "help me, Dynotus! Please, help me!"

But there was nothing that I could do. I knew that the only way I could free him, is if I pulled hard enough to rip his leg off. And that was something I could not do. I watched, and screamed, as Majid's hands slipped away from mine, and as he was eaten alive by the monster. It was a sight far too horrible to describe. So mortified was I, by the fact that I could not save Majid, that I did not even realize that I was sinking fast into the hole myself.

I slipped and fell further downward, and I could hear Alheem and Sabah cry out my name above me. After digesting Majid, the antlion emerged and stuck its pincers into my calves. I cried out in pain. But I was angry. And I was not ready to become the lunch of some desert creature. Using my trusty ring, I created a long spear, and as I was sucked into the monster's mouth, I grabbed the spear in both hands, and thrust the jagged edge deep into the monster's eye. Black blood splashed over my waist. But it did not surrender. And so I gave out a battle cry, and with all my might, pulled the spear out of its eye, and stabbed it again in the head. The antlion squirmed in pain but would not die. Then, in a fit of rage, I repeatedly pulled the spear in and out of the monster's head,

stabbing into it over and over again, until I had stabbed it several times in the eyes, the head, and the mouth. At last, the creature did not stir. Then, I grabbed the pincer in my leg, and with extreme pain, pulled it out of my calf.

I limped to the top of the sand hill and with the help of Sabah and Alheem, made it to level ground. "By Allah!" cried Sabah. "Are you all right?" Half my spear was black with blood. I leaned on it, lest I would fall, and said, "don't worry, my body can heal very fast. I'm sorry, though, I could not save Majid."

"That's all right, Dynotus, you tried your best," replied Sabah.

"Yes, you saved me, didn't you?" asked Alheem.

We walked over several sand dunes, finally free of the desert predator, and I said, "you were very serious when you warned us about monsters, weren't you?"

"Yes, but never had I seen anything like this. If it had not been for you, we would have surely died," replied Sabah.

"Perhaps we still will die," said Alheem. "There is no more water." Sabah grabbed the waterskin out of his hand, and turned it over upside down, as if he couldn't believe it. Not a drop came out. "We won't last another day," said Sabah, and this time, with a grim voice.

We were just coming over another sand dune when I replied, "we won't have to. Look!" I cried, excitedly.

There before us, was the most beautiful sight I had ever laid eyes upon. "Is it a mirage?" I asked.

And Sabah laughed more jovially than I had ever heard him, and he responded, "No, effendi! It is. . . Dur Sharrukin!"

"Yesss!!" cried Alheem, and leaped for joy. Then, he crashed on the ground and kissed the sand. "By Allah! By Allah! I am home! By Allah, I am home!"

Chapter 16

The city of Dur Sharrukin was a magnificent sight. It rested against the background of the desert mountains and shined brightly in the sun like a desert jewel.

We approached a high, whitewashed wall, and could see on each of the four corners of the city a guard tower. As we came closer to the city gates, the hundreds of buildings found within the city disappeared, and only the beautiful palace rose, highest among all in the desert.

When we arrived at the wooden double door, a guard dressed in black and wearing a black turban halted us. He was a huge brute of a man, with a thick black beard, and he carried a long scimitar off his waist, similar to the one used by Sabah. When the guard recognized Sabah, he smiled, shook his hand, and let us enter.

The city was crowded with thousands of people. I could not believe the dramatic change that had taken place. We had left a world of emptiness and had entered into a world of immeasurable fullness. It almost seemed as if all the people that could fill the desert had collected here to this tiny spec of dust on the face of the Ninevahan peninsula. But I knew why. The people had collected together to share in that wealth which the city could provide, the oasis of water.

Looking around I saw astonishing sights. People rushed back and forth busily as if they all had much work to do. I hardly saw any women, and those women that I did see, were usually old and were wearing the shawl and the veil. The men, however, were dressed as they pleased. Most of them wore a headdress of one kind or another. The most common was the turban and the shawl.

The more we walked, the more people I saw. People were everywhere. For each and every sand dune that I had seen in the desert, I think that I could also see one person in the city. They filled the streets buying and selling off of market venders. I heard the cry of a multitude of merchants speaking of various products that they sold. It was almost deafening to be constantly hearing about the freshness of certain fruits and breads and spices, and to hear about lamps, copperware, dishes, pots, pans, carpets, clothing, baskets, waterskins, livestock, maps, and a list of many other things too numerous to mention.

Most of the city looked the same. The houses were small square buildings made of stone, with thatched wooden rooftops and chiseled stone windows. But here and there could I spot some magnificent towers that appeared to be made of rich, white stone, that were decorated in Ninevahan design with many pattern engravings and tessellation's, and were topped with bronze domes with pointed ends. When asked about these things, Sabah told me that they were the pride and joy of the Ninevahan culture. The towers I had seen were called bosques. They were used as places of worship. Other palaces belonged to the King and to the rich allies of the King. These little towers that surrounded the palaces were called minarets, and they reached highest into the air.

Then, cutting through the noise of all the countless voices, did I hear beautiful music. It was a sound that came from a flute and it was unlike any flute playing I had ever heard. I followed the sound until I found a clearing of people. A group of Ninevahians had gathered round an old man who sat cross-legged on a Persian carpet, and who was playing a flute in his hands. Beside him was a basket, and as the flutist played, so did a large cobra rise out of the basket, and dance to the sound of the music. "It

is amazing!” I said. Sabah laughed. “Yes, the beautiful music of the Ninevahan flute players can soothe even the most cunning of creatures. Watch, as the flute mesmerizes the snake. The musician has no fear. He has complete control over the serpent, and it shall not bite him.”

“I have never seen such things,” I said.

“Come, effendi, there is much more to see.”

Across the street, we came across another gathering. Here, I saw a man holding two sticks of flame. And he began to toss the sticks from one hand to the other, without being burned. Soon, the man lifted yet another flaming torch, and then juggled three of them without being singed. Across from the man, was yet another man, and he was doing things I knew not were possible. Sabah called him a sword swallower. I watched, in amazement, as he took a sword that must have been two or three feet in length, and stuck it down his throat. Then, he lifted the sword back out of his mouth, and was completely unscathed. “What magic is this?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha, no magic, my friend, it is just a few Ninevahan peasants, who learn tricks to get some coins.”

We walked passed the man juggling fire and passed the man-eating swords, and I came across yet another strange sight. It was a man who was sitting cross-legged on a rack of nails, and was meditating, but did not appear to be in pain. “Strange sights I see in this culture.”

Oh, this is nothing. It is nothing but a child’s trick. The most amazing things can be found in the King’s palace,” replied Sabah.

“You know the King?” asked Alheem.

“Why, yes, he is my very good friend. He would be very kind to offer both of you a room to stay in, in the palace. What did you think, that you would sleep in the streets? Hah ha ha, the city would not be much salvation without any wealth. Poor people die here, you know? They starve on the streets. But I would not lead you to starve, my friends, if I didn’t know the King.”

Then I laughed. “You are friends with the king of this land? Such reminds me of my own friendship with the king of Sparta. Tell me, effendi, are you also in love with the King’s daughter?”

Sabah laughed. “No, my friend, she is the twin image of a dog! Ha ha ha, I think I would prefer the King’s harem girls. But a man such as myself does not fall in love. We prefer to live our lives free of confinement, and to enjoy all the pleasures that women have to offer.”

I slapped my friend on the back. “Don’t be so sure, Sabah, don’t be so sure. One day you may find a woman that will change your mind.”

As we headed toward the palace, I saw a market vender selling cherries. I was so hungry and thirsty at the time, and since I had not eaten anything sweet for months, I could not resist the temptation. I reached over and took a cherry from his basket, and dropped it into my mouth. The merchant looked at me strangely and said, “you had better pay for that!” “Oh, a thousand pardons, effendi, but I have no money.”

Then the merchant took out a long knife and said, “then give me your hand.”

“What, why?” I asked.

“So that I may cut it off.”

Then I realized that I had stolen from the merchant. It never occurred to me that I

was in a different land, and that the people there did not know me like the people did in Hellas. They would not offer me anything for free. "But it was only a cherry," I reasoned.

"Halt, my friend, how much did the cherry cost?" asked Sabah, who suddenly appeared to save me.

"I do not sell cherries by the one. I only sell them in bunches," replied the merchant.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Sabah.

"No," he answered.

Then, Sabah showed the man the bottom of his wrist. And it was there that I saw something, which I had never noticed before. Engraved on Sabah's arm was a picture. It looked like a curved sword and a star above it, and under the sword some calligraphy writings in Ninevahan. Upon seeing this, the merchant stepped back and apologized. Then he offered Sabah some cherries, and Sabah took a handful and walked away. "Here you are," he said, giving me the cherries.

"Look, I really didn't mean to steal them. I didn't think he would get so upset over one."

"In Dur Sharrukin," he replied, "the punishment for stealing is the removal of your hands. I know it sounds cruel, but you must understand that there is much theft here. For the market venders are also very poor and live off what money they make selling. But their tents are very open, and it is easy for a poor man in the street, to attempt taking something to eat. We can only deter this by such a harsh decree. Even still, however, there is much theft."

We continued to push through the crowds until we reached the palace of the King. Truly it was an awesome sight. It rested beyond a massive, octagonal plaza, where the wealthiest of the Ninevahan merchants could be found, selling clothing made of fine silks and pottery made of gold. They also hung expensive carpets with intricate, interwoven design and color, the likes I had never seen before, from their tents.

In the center of the plaza, was the most wonderful of sights to be found in the desert. There we stood before the oasis itself. And I knew that it was around this natural wonder that the city was built. The water from the oasis was just as blue and pure as it had been in my hallucination. Even the tall palm trees had been left intact. The streets of the city had been built around the oasis and they had formed a huge, circular, stone barricade, to surround the entire lake. People of all kinds socialized by this lake and others sat against the barricade and gathered water in their waterskins. Others just walked up to the lake and drank directly from it. But I also did see guards, watching the water, not allowing any to swim in or to pollute the lake. "Truly this is a miracle of the desert. Though there appears to be so much water, it is still amazing, that it has been enough to support the thousands of people who come here to drink from it everyday. Tell me, Dynotus, how is it that the lake has not yet become dry?"

Then, I thought about it, and replied, "there is probably a spring underneath the lake, that brings in water from an underground river, that originates in the mountains."

He looked at me oddly, and then said, "no, it is a miracle!"

"Well, miracle or not, I thank Allah, and am going to drink. I'm thirsty!" cried Alheem.

Then we all ran up to the lake, and did drink from the water. And at last, I drank

water that was good.

After filling our waterskins, we left the plaza and headed on toward the palace. The palace was made of solid marble. It rose far higher than any other structure in the city and it was immense in size. Around it were four towers called minarets. And hanging from the walls of the palace could I see huge balconies made of stone, and giant, arched openings, which lead into a green courtyard. Before we could enter further, two guards, who acknowledged Sabah and allowed us entrance, stopped us. We walked down a street made of stone and crossed a row of water fountains. Then we walked under an archway and entered the palace.

If the palace was beautiful from the outside, it seemed just as beautiful on the inside. Each wall was embroidered with Ninevahan patterns and colors, and others were inlaid with gold and precious jewels. The ceiling above us was three stories high, and I could see more fountains and balconies, and beautiful carpets on the floor and hanging from the walls. And the entire room shined with the brightness of the noon day sun, which beamed in through the many windows and archways. At last we reached two more guards, and a huge double door made of solid bronze. And beside these doors were two onyx bowls that burned a flame. "It is I, Sabah. I have returned to see the King."

"Welcome home, Sabah. But who are these two, who join you?" "They are very good friends of mine. This here is Alheem, a dignitary from the land of Egypt, and this other fellow is Dynotus, a dignitary from the land of Hellas."

"Ahh, the King will be pleased to see them. You may enter."

The King's throne room was even more rich and magnificent than the outer portions of his palace. Here could be found more marble and precious stones, larger and more elaborate carpets, silk veils that hung from the ceiling, many cloth pillows, golden bowls of fruits and water, burning lamps, and servants wearing purple vests and baggy pants, and turbans with sapphires, rubies, and emerald gems encrusted on them. But to my surprise, I saw no women. And I wondered if it was customary to have maid servants in Ninevah, as it was in the palace of King Demaratus in Hellas. Sabah approached the King, removed his shawl, and knelt. Then he spoke, "great King Sennacherib Hamid! I have come from a long journey and seek shelter in your palace." The King was a fat, hairy old man, who did nothing but stuff his mouth with grapes all day. But he was dressed in the most expensive of clothing and jewelry, and did reply, "you know that you are always welcome here, Sabah, but what of your friends? Who are they?"

"This here is Dynotus, Prince and heir to the throne of Sparta." Then he turned to Alheem and replied, "and this is Prince Alheem, and heir to the throne of Egypt. Well, actually, he was a suitor for the princess of Egypt, but he was kicked out, and then just decided to come here to Ninevah."

The King looked at Alheem oddly, then he said, "that's strange, he doesn't look like royalty. He doesn't look like he's taken a bath in years." Sabah and Alheem's faces turned red, and Sabah replied, "well, we have been wandering in the desert for a long time, and have grown weary, and had no place to take a bath. His royal clothes were robbed by bandits." "Goodness!" said the King. "Well, then, I offer him and everyone else who needs it, a bath and fine clothes. You may stay in my company for as long as you wish."

"Excellent, your highness, they will much appreciate it," said Sabah. "Yes,

and what of him, the Hellenite?" Then he asked me, "Shall you return to your homeland to be king?"

I stepped forth and answered, "Not until I have found what I came to look for."

"And what is it that you seek?" asked the King.

"I have come to Ninevah to find Iuz, Iuz the Cruel."

The King's eyes widened with shock at the sound of his name, as if even he, did fear him. "Iuz . . .? Why, why, . . . Iuz was here, just a couple of days ago."

Then, both Sabah and I, simultaneously cried, "WHAT!"

"Yes, he was here. He had come to see if he could sell a girl into my harem. Oh, you should have seen this woman! She was beautiful. But she wasn't like any woman I had ever seen. Can you believe, that her eyes were blue? Yes, her eyes were as blue as the oasis lake, and her hair, it was like the color of gold, and it was as radiant as the sun. Oh, I wanted to buy her, but he was asking for too much. He wanted a thousand coins for her! Well, I thought she was beautiful, but not worth a thousand coins. So he took her with him, and said that he would find another buyer who would be willing to pay such a price."

"Seline!" I cried. "Seline was here?"

"Seline?" said the King, putting his finger on his lips in thought, and then replied, "yes! You mean, Sali. That was her name! She was here just a couple of days ago."

Chapter 17

It took both Sabah and Alheem to hold me back, and to convince me not to run out of the palace and try to find Seline. Sabah explained to me that if I left the city without any rest or equipment, I would not survive out in the desert. He told me that if I wished, I could, with the King's help, leave the next day. But that it would be very difficult to find Iuz since he was not stationary. Sabah said that the only hope of finding Seline was to find where Iuz was taking her and to what King he was planning on selling her. At least, he explained, we knew what intentions Iuz had for Seline. But since there were many cities in Ninevah, all hundreds of miles apart and all ruled by a different King, it would be very difficult to find her.

That night, I rested. I was pleased to again indulge in the luxuries of a ruler's wealth. I was offered a room and was given a bath and fresh, clean clothes to wear.

When I left my room, I saw Alheem, and was amazed at how different he looked, since he had taken a bath. He was radiant with joy, as if having taken the bath was the most exciting experience he had ever known. We talked of the many things we had seen and experienced in the palace, and then we looked to find Sabah.

We found him in the largest room. It was far greater in size and wealth than both of our room combined. The room was situated on the third floor of the palace. He was standing outside on the balcony when we found him. Sabah turned to us and greeted us with a smile and a hug. "Come, my friends, let us join the King. For tonight, we have been invited to a banquet, and shall see the performance of the wonderful women of the harem!"

"What women?" I asked.

Sabah laughed. "You shall see, effendi. And if you like women, you shall love it!"

"Yes, it has been years since I have seen any women!" cried Alheem. "Oh, they are only the very best. Fine picked, the most beautiful women in all of Dur Sharrukin and of the most beautiful women in Ninevah, they belong to the King," replied Sabah.

We were led down a hallway until we entered a large, dimly lit room. Entering the room, lit only by candles, we sat beside the King and his chiefs, on colorful pillows that were placed on the floor. Everyone in the room remained silent, and I could tell that we were awaiting an event of great excitement.

Then, I could hear beautiful Ninevahan music, played by flutes, the lyre, and the drum, as I had heard before, and watched, as many candles were lit, introducing the appearance of a beautiful woman. It was the first time that I had seen a young, beautiful woman in Dur Sharrukin. She rose, and I saw that she was wearing many silk veils around her breasts and around her waist, and was wearing a silk shawl over her head and a veil over her face. The only parts of her body that I could see bare were her legs, her feet, her stomach, and her eyes. Everything else was covered. The many veils helped conceal her nipples, her hair, and her crotch entirely, but only one veil covered her nose and her lips, and I could barely make out a beautiful face behind that veil, accompanying her large, beautiful eyes. And though the veils hid much of her body, it was not enough to hide her beauty. For the shape and contour of her body was evident. I could tell that she

was an Ninevahan woman, for her skin was a dark bronze color that glistened by the candle light as if it had been waxed by oil. Her body was thin and frail, for I could see the curves of her bare stomach and her bare and naked legs. Though the veil was meant to hide her facial beauty, I could see beyond them a face of thick, voluptuous lips, and a wide but small, Ninevahan nose. But rather the veil make her less beautiful by hiding her beauty, it only seemed to accent her beauty more, for the veil covered all but her large brown eyes, which were uncovered and stood out, and I could see the depth and beauty in them, and in her long black eye lashes.

Hanging off all the veils around her body, were small gold coins. And I could see that the woman was well dressed in great wealth, for all over her hands, her neck, and her ears, could I see gold jewelry of all kind. As the music played, the woman began to shake back and forth. She moved her hips from side to side and made her stomach dance like a serpent. Her neck moved sideways as she danced, but she never turned her head. Every part of her body moved individually, dancing as if they had minds of their own, and she controlled all of these movements in a coalition of movements that created a picture of great beauty. And as she moved, did the gold coins hanging from her veil clang back and forth, making a music of their own. It was unlike any dancing I had ever seen. It was learned to an art, an art; like music, painting or sculpting, mastered to perfection. And truly, did this dancing make the Ninevahan music sound even more enticing, and the beauty of her body even more alluring. As she danced, every man's eyes were on her. But she did not look at them. Instead, she spotted me, and began to take quick glances into my eyes, every time she spun and twirled. The eyes of the woman glanced at me and made me wonder what thoughts prevailed beyond her mysterious veil. She tried not to reveal her interest in me to the others. But when she was done dancing, she twirled around several times, and unwrapped a veil cloth from her waist, and tossed it toward me.

The veil landed over my eyes and I was blinded for only a second. By the time I could remove the veil, the performance was over, leaving every male in the room drooling over the woman. When the lights went out, she kept her composure and disappeared as quickly as she had come, like a mythical creature, tip toeing out of the room with such elegance, that she did not even make a sound. "Who was that?" I asked.

"The most beautiful of my harem girls. She was born right here in Dur Sharrukin. Her name is, Ishtar," replied the King.

"Wow!" Alheem exclaimed. Then he whispered to me, "if I could ever find a magic lamp, with a genie who granted wishes, I think that I would wish for her. But it is only a fantasy. A woman like Ishtar would never desire a worthless Egyptian slave like myself."

"You never know," I said. "Someday, you could love a woman just as beautiful, if not more beautiful than Ishtar."

"But, did you take a good look at her? Have you ever seen a more beautiful woman in all your life? Even if I could find such a woman again, she would not be a peasant. She would most likely belong to a rich King, and could only be bought by a rich man with many coins. But I have no wealth."

"Never give up your dreams, Alheem. If you want something bad enough, no matter what it is, you can have it. This is my belief. And this is why I know, that I shall find Sali, and bring her back to be my wife in Sparta. You never know, perhaps one day, you shall even

make love to Ishtar.” “Be quiet, Dynotus! If the King hears you say such things, he could have our heads!”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t realize he was so possessive about his women.” Then, I heard Sabah laugh, and slap me on the back. Then he said, “so, Dynotus, what do you think? Are there women in Ninevah as beautiful as the women in Hellas?”

“Yes, she is very beautiful,” I replied.

“Would you like to meet her?” he asked.

“Well, I would like to give her back the veil she tossed me. But I don’t think that I should. . .”

Then Alheem interrupted, “I would like to meet her!”

“Sorry, Alheem, but the King would not allow it,” Sabah said.

Upon hearing this, I asked, “what do you mean the King will not allow it?”

“Well, I think the King knows that you were never a prince. He can tell by the way you speak and act. The mannerisms of a wealthy man are much different than those of a peasant. Even Dynotus, here, appears as if he has been in a king’s palace before.

Though he did not actually tell me of his suspicions about you, I know that they exist, and if he were to find out that the greatest of his harem girls was socializing with a . . . a slave. . . well. . . it just wouldn’t be right.”

When told this, I thought that Alheem’s heart would just burst. I looked at Sabah, for the first time with anger, but knew that I could not intervene. I had never believed in royalty, and always thought that the distinction between the poor and the rich had nothing to do with the value of a person. Even I, who was a demi-god, had lived among the dirt poor and like the dirt poor, not out of luck but out of choice. And had learned that the honor and wisdom of a farmer was no greater than that of a king.

“Well, what of you, Dynotus? Do you wish to see Ishtar?” Sabah asked me.

I answered him by standing and following him to a dark corner of the room, where Ishtar sat by a table. Sabah approached her, took her hand, and kissed it, saying, “I did not know that such a delicate flower could bloom in the desert.”

She looked at him and replied, “who is your friend, Sabah?”

“This is Dynotus, prince and heir to the throne of Sparta.”

I kissed her hand as Sabah had, and said, “here is your scarf, my lady,” and handed it to her.

She took it, and replied, “thank you. I hear you are looking for a princess?”

“Yes, do you know her? Her name is Sali.”

“I saw her,” she answered in a sweet voice, “she lived with us in the harem for a few days. But she was gone quickly.”

“Tell me, please, everything you can about what you saw when she came. How did she look? How did she feel?”

“Dynotus, must you have this woman in particular? Could not another woman take her place? Surely, I could think of some harem girls, who would like to go back with you to Hellas, and be your princess,” said she.

“But I don’t want them. I want Sali.”

“Ohh, aren’t we good enough for you?” she asked.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that I . . . I . . .”

Then she looked passed me and said, “the King is coming! I have to go!” She then grabbed her scarf and ran off.

Sabah turned to me and replied, “come, Dynotus, we have much to talk about.”

Sabah and I went to an isolated walkway from which we could look out and see the nighttime sky. There, he began to speak to me, “Dynotus, Dynotus, must you be so persistent?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Can you not forget your Sali, and take one of the King’s harem girls? I have spoken to the King, and he says that he feels for your loss. But you cannot continue to believe that you will ever find this Sali. Iuz is gone and finding him may be impossible. And even if we were to find him, what could we do? Iuz is very powerful, from what I have heard, and fighting him is asking for big trouble. The King has told me that he will offer you any of his harem girls for free. Even Ishtar, if you like, can be yours.”

“But I don’t want her. I want Sali.”

“Is this Sali so beautiful? Is she so beautiful that even Ishtar pales in comparison?”

“No, it has nothing to do with beauty. Ishtar could be considered to be even more beautiful. But that is not why I must have Sali.”

“Ahh, now I understand. You must think that Ishtar is a harlot for dancing the way she does. But let me tell you, Dynotus, there are guards in the harem that would stop any man who would even think of entering and lying with the women. And even those guards have their genitals cut, so that they could not fall under temptation themselves. I assure you that Ishtar is a virgin.”

“No, it’s not that! And I will never love Ishtar in any way, so forget it.” “Ishtar is more than beautiful, you know. She is very wise, and some say, that she possesses powers that will make you a very powerful king.” “Powers, what powers?” I asked.

“She is gifted with magic. With a crystal ball and with the sand of the desert, she can see things, know things, even move things with her mind. Many men are fearful of her powers, and this is why I did not tell you of them before, because the King thought that if people knew she had great powers, they would not marry her. But perhaps you are the type of man who likes the woman to be strong.”

“Yes, all these things are good. But I love Sali. I don’t love her beauty, I don’t love her for what she can do for me, I love her because she is Sali, and nothing more.”

Sabah slapped his hand against his forehead and pulled his hand down over his face. “All right, I give up. You know, for some reason I like you, effendi. I like you a lot, and this is why I wished to help you. I did not want to save your life, so that I could see you waste it away on this futile quest. I think you shall die an old, broken, disappointed man, effendi. When there is nothing you can do to have what you want, you should just give up and take what things you can have. You are a lucky man, my friend. Others would kill to be in your position. Others would kill to have a chance with Ishtar. But you are just too stubborn, and some day, if you live that long, you shall come back to me out of the desert, and tell me that I was right, and that you should have taken Ishtar to be your bride when you had the chance.”

“Are you going to come with me?” I asked.

“The desert is a harsh and terrible place, my friend, you know that. If I could help you in any other way, I would. But Dur Sharrukin is not a place that any man would want

to leave. Alheem and I are going to stay here, effendi.” “Well, it doesn’t matter. You have taught me all that I need to know, to survive out in the desert. I shall go alone.”

“I do not know how you can succeed, my friend, but I wish you all the luck,” replied Sabah.

“Wait, did you say that Ishtar has magic powers, and that she can see and know things that others cannot?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Then I must see Ishtar!” I exclaimed.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because, she could help me find Sali. You must tell me where to find her!”

“You must go back to the banquet hall, and walk down the corridor where we talked with Ishtar. That corridor will lead you to the harem. But you must be careful. The King does not allow any man to be in the harem, or any man to be with any of his women if they have not been bought. To go there would be a risk, effendi. If the King finds you speaking with Ishtar, he could cut off your head.”

“Well, it’s a chance I will have to take.”

Chapter 18

When I looked to find Ishtar, I was surprised that she had, instead, found me.

She had just come from her bedroom, meeting me down the hall that led to the women's chamber. And though it was dark, I noticed that she was lightly dressed in silky, see through clothing, made of the same fabric as her veil. It was just enough to cover her bosom and the area below her waist.

When Ishtar saw me, she began to dance as she had done before, but this time, more erotic. She moved seductively, back and forth, calling me with her body, her eyes mesmerizing as the flute player with his cobra. She danced, wild and spirited, lashing forth her arms and legs. Then, she spun on her toes, gently removing the veil covering her breasts, and turned, so that I could not see them. Facing me again, she carried the veil, using it as part of her dance, yet, always being sure to hide from me her nakedness. Soon, I realized what she was doing. She was teasing me, seducing me in a way I had never been seduced.

She danced round and round, and before long, dropped the veil on the floor. But she left me yearning for more, having now removed the veil around her waist and dancing with it. She moved toward me, then away. She danced with her back to me, shaking her hips, and then with her front to me, but never let me see more than she wanted me to see. She leaped toward me quickly, and with the veil she used to cover herself, did cover my eyes, and then quickly take it away and cover herself again. Sometimes, she moved swiftly enough to allow the air to hold her veil aloft. Then, before letting one side drop, was quick enough to catch it with her other hand.

I watched now, my heart beating rapidly, my sweat pouring, and my mouth becoming wet with moisture. At last, she turned her back to me and dropped the final veil.

Though I had seen hundreds of women naked, never had I so anticipated the sight of one. For she had built my desire to know of her, and when I finally did see her, it seemed there was never such a beautiful sight.

With her unveiling, the dance ended. Ironically, however, the only hair of hers, which I could not see, was the hair atop her head. For though I could see her whole figure, she still kept hid her face, which was to me the greatest mystery.

Ishtar fell on her hands and knees, crawling toward me like a cat, and said, "Dynotus, take me!"

I removed the veil from her face and the shawl from her head, and saw her bundled, black hair, fall down to her shoulders. And indeed she was beautiful. Her nose and lips were just as I had seen them, except for that she had a small mole placed beside her lips, and a gold ring that pierced through her nose. Yet, other than those minor imperfections, she was like a goddess.

Then, I embraced her in my arms and while kissing her on the lips, removed my clothing, and pushed my naked body against her own, being ready to make love. And she cried anxiously, "make love to me, Dynotus!" And as I was about to begin, I stopped, pushing her away. "I cannot!" I cried. It took all the strength and will in my heart and soul to resist. I was so overwhelmed with desire, my blood burned so high for her flesh, that I could not believe it myself when I denied her. It was the first time ever having

denied a woman. And I thought, that in all my sexual experiences, never had I been so enticed into sex before. But my love for Seline was still strong, and it was strong enough to overcome my desire and push her away.

Ishtar looked at me, surprised, and replied, “why?”

“Because I am a married man, and have vowed to my wife that I would know no woman’s love beside her own.”

“Ahh, you are still thinking about Sali. How can you still be in love with her, when you have someone like me in your arms? Perhaps I cannot compare to her eyes of blue and hair that is golden, but am I not still beautiful?”

“Yes, Ishtar, you are very beautiful, and if I had never known Sali, would I make love to you now and a thousand times over if you wished. But I cannot. I love Sali too much to betray her.”

“But Sali was taken by Iuz as a slave. You will never see her again. Marry me, and take me back to Hellas with you.”

“No!” I cried. “I will find Sali, and make love to her, and there will be no other woman before her.”

“Then if you are so much in love with this woman, why did you come here to the harem?”

“Because, I have been told that you have special powers. I have been told that you know things and can see things that normal men cannot.

If there is any way that you can help me find Sali, or any way that you can point me in the right direction, you must.”

“All right, perhaps I shall. If . . . you do something for me.”

“What?” I asked. “What do you want? I will do anything that you ask.”

“Make love to me,” she replied. “And I will not only help you find your beloved, but shall tell you exactly where to find her.”

Then, I discovered myself in a dilemma. If I made love to Ishtar, I would be betraying my love for Seline. But if I did not make love to Ishtar, there would be a good chance that I would never find my Seline, and that she would most likely be forced to betray our love. And so, after thinking it over, I decided, “all right, I will make love to you, but only once.”

She smiled. “Good, let us begin!”

“No, wait, first you must tell me what you know. Then I will make love to you.”

“Well, if you must, follow me,” and she stood up, naked, and walked casually to another room, where I saw a large bed veiled by drapery. She reached beneath her bed and took out a small box. Then, she opened the box, revealing a strange book, a crystal sphere, and a pouch containing sand. Ishtar sat on the bed cross-legged, placed the sphere in one hand, and opened the pouch containing the sand. After a few incantations, she threw the sand into the air, and let it fall against the crystal ball. Then she closed her eyes and began to speak, “yes! I can see them. I can see Iuz and his caravan, and with him a large man carrying an ax, and within the caravan, Sali. She is being held prisoner.”

“Where are they going?” I asked.

“They are in the desert. They are heading south. No!” she cried. “No, he is seeking the other King. He is heading south to find the Dark King! But to find him, Iuz must cross the Enchanted Mountains, and travel through the Land of the Giants. No, this is worse than I thought!”

“Why?” I cried. “Who is the Dark King? Where is the Land of the Giants?”

Ishtar opened her eyes, put the crystal ball back in its case, and replied, “the Land of the Giants, is the part of Ninevah, that is not part of our world.” “What!?” I cried. “How can that be?”

“To reach the Land of the Giants, you must go over the Enchanted Mountains. But there is no way through the Enchanted Mountains, no way, unless, by magical means.”

“What kind of magical means, do you have the power to possess these means?”

“Yes, I have a way. But once in the Land of the Giants, there will be great peril. You shall encounter things that will make your battles with the giant scorpions, the griffin and the antlion, look like children’s play. Do you still wish to follow Iuz?”

“Yes, tell me what I must defeat.”

“Many dangers await any who cross into the Land of the Giants. But I also have the gift of prophecy, and can tell you that if you choose to go there, shall you encounter three great obstacles, all more terrible and dangerous than the last. And if you do reach the oasis city, Nether Sharrukin, that city that lies opposite of Dur Sharrukin on the other side of the mountains, you will face the Dark King, who is far more evil and powerful than Iuz, and who has given Iuz his power. It is he that Iuz seeks to sell Sali too. And it is he who you must confront, a man, if not a thousand times more terrible an opponent than Iuz himself.”

“Tell me, Ishtar, what are these perils? Will I overcome them?”

“I . . . I do not know. No, I can tell you no more. The Dark King can feel my presence. He knows that I am probing into his domain. I must cut off. . .”

“It’s O.K., Ishtar, I know enough. Now, tell me what I must do to cross the Enchanted Mountains?”

“There, you will find a great wind, a storm of dryness and of sand, but it will not be of nature. It will be a Great Elemental, a supernatural being that you cannot defeat by physical strength. You must capture this wind, in a magical container. Then, you must cross the mountains by air, not by foot. If you go by foot, you shall see nothing but the end of the desert. But if you use a magic carpet, you can fly over the mountains and into Nether Ninevah, the magical half of the Ninevahian desert.”

“Do you have a magic carpet and a magic container?” I asked. “Yes,” she said. “But I will give them to you, only after you have made love to me.”

“All right, I will.” Then she began to hug and kiss me, but I shunned her away. “Wait, let us not do it here, in the harem. If we do, the King may discover me and cut off my head.”

“So where else can we make love?” she asked.

“Why don’t I return to my room, and late at night, when everyone is asleep, you can secretly enter my bed, and we can make love there.”

“Well,” she said. “But you must tell me which room is yours.”

“It is the room on the third floor of the palace. It is the second one, beside the steps.”

She smiled, and whispered to me, “all right my lover, I will be there.” Then we kissed.

As I stood and dressed to leave, I said to her, “oh, be sure not to bring any light. There must be complete and total darkness when we make love.” “But why?” she asked.

“To be sure that we are not caught, O.K.”

“But no light at all? All right, I will try. I just hope that I can find my way in the darkness.”

“I’m sure you will find me just fine.”

When Ishtar awoke the next morning, after a long night of wild and passionate sex, she looked beside her to see that she was resting comfortably in the arms of . . . Alheem! She screamed, and the screaming awoke Alheem, who looked at her with a startle. “Ahhh!” she cried. “No, he fooled me! Dynotus fooled me!”

Alheem looked back to her and replied, “but Ishtar, was I not to your satisfaction last night. Didn’t you have a wonderful time.”

But she pushed him away and cried, “eww, get away from me you filthy slave!”

“But we just made love!” he exclaimed.

“I don’t care! Don’t touch me!” and she leaped out of bed, naked, and quickly found a robe to wrap around herself. Then, without bothering to gather her jewelry or her veils, she dashed out of the room. Alheem, also naked, gathered up the bed sheets and ran after her, yelling, “wait, Ishtar! I love you!”

Meanwhile, I was just beginning to pack my things for the long journey through

the mountains. I didn't know if I could overcome the Great Elemental that Ishtar spoke of, nor did I understand what she meant by the part of Ninevah not of this world. But I decided to go there anyway, even if on foot.

Then, I heard a voice from behind me, cry out, "wait, Dynotus!"

I turned to see Sabah and asked, "what are you doing here? I thought you were not going to join me."

"Well, Dynotus, I think you are a noble man. I know that true love is the greatest treasure that any man may possess, and even if there is a good chance that we will all die, I think it's worth the effort to help you get your wife back. It isn't just, that we live in such a world where hearts are broken and lives are shattered, because of the cruelty of evil men. Such injustices must be made right. I will follow you, Dynotus, and do the best I can to see that you find your Sali. Besides, I am dying to see a woman with blue eyes and golden hair, and to see if she is as beautiful as you have said."

"Well then, Sabah, I don't know what to say. No man has ever done so much for me. If there is ever anything that I can do for you when I return to Hellas . . ."

"Don't mention it, effendi. Let us return to the desert!"

Then I slapped him on the shoulder and replied, "yes, good friend, I guess it's just you and me, now."

At that moment, as we were ready to leave, I heard screaming in the distance. It was a woman's voice yelling, "get away from me!" followed by a man's voice saying, "but I love you!"

I turned back and saw Ishtar running out of the palace, wearing nothing but a robe that was wrapped around her body, and Alheem running after her, covering his genitals with a bed sheet. When Ishtar saw me, she screamed, "you bastard! You tricked me!"

"Well, you knew that I couldn't betray my wife. Besides, you, who should have remained chaste until you were bought, tried to seduce me like a whore, and then tried to sell yourself to me by offering your psychic knowledge, like a prostitute who pays her customers!"

Then, Ishtar began to cry. "I only wanted to be a princess! I thought that if we made love, you would forget your Sali and buy me from the King, to be your wife. But you ruined my life! You made me waste my virginity so that I could lay with a poor, worthless slave! Now, I am no good to the King. No one will want to buy a non-virgin harem girl!"

"I would want to buy you," replied Alheem, who wiped the tears away from Ishtar's eyes and embraced her in his arms, and began to kiss her on the lips and on the cheek. "Ishtar, please, did you not love me when you thought I was Dynotus? Did you love Dynotus for the person he was or for his wealth."

"I only wanted to be bought, so that I could be free of being a harem girl."

"Then if you could find it in your soul to love me, I promise you, that we will never live the lives of slaves. I will find a way to make all your dreams come true."

"I don't believe you! How can you believe in such fantasies?" she cried. "Ahh, but it was Dynotus that taught me, that if you want something bad enough, it can be yours. With you in my arms, I have everything I have ever longed to have, and I will do anything to pay the price for your happiness. Love will find the way."

Then, she looked deep into his eyes, and saw a beautiful gentleness and a sad, wistful yearning to be loved, and replied, “do you really think so?” “I know so,” and he kissed her on the lips. Then he turned to me, and said, “if this is what it means to be in love, Dynotus, then I understand your needing of Sali. It is something you could never have with any other woman. That is why Ishtar was not enough for you. But for me, she is everything I could want. And I can love her, the way she wished to be loved by you. I only wonder, if Sali loves you as much as you love her?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then the love must go both ways. Can this love be true between us, Ishtar?” he asked.

Then, an odd smile crept, and escaped from her pretty lips, but before she could respond, a cry was heard. “Guards! Guards! Someone has unclothed and kidnapped a harem woman! Quick, after them!” the voice cried.

I looked up, seeing one of the watch tower guards having spotted Ishtar without her veil. Ishtar turned to me and said, “oh no! What am I going to do? I can’t go back to the King. He’ll cut off my head, and he’ll cut off Alheem’s head.”

“You can follow us,” replied Sabah, “into the desert!”

“But I’m practically naked!” she cried. “I can’t go like this.” “Quick, Sabah, you take Ishtar and Alheem out of the city. I will gather what things we need.”

“We don’t need anything except for women’s clothes. I have extra clothing for Alheem, and my camels are equipped with all the supplies we need for desert travel,” replied Sabah.

Then I turned to Ishtar and asked, “do you need any of your magic items to help us on our journey?”

“Well, it would help if you could find my carpet and my lamp. But I don’t think you can go back for them. They are still in the harem and that is the first place the guards would think to look for you. But, if you can grab any carpet and lamp off the streets, I can make them magical.”

“Good, I will grab some clothes for you and try to get a carpet and a lamp. Now, run!” I cried.

The others ran off, out of the city, while I ran to the Fountain Plaza to find the things that Ishtar needed. As I ran, I accidentally crashed into a young woman wearing the usual veil and shawl around her body. I said, “excuse me,” then ripped all of her clothes off, as she screamed for help. I left her with nothing but her underwear, which was considered naked and obscene in the city of Dur Sharrukin, and ran off with her shawl and veil. All the other people in the plaza looked at her in shock, seeing her bare and uncovered face and her naked hair. It was truly a moment of shame for the poor woman, but I considered Ishtar’s need far greater than the needs of a culture and the following of its traditions.

Using my godly strength, I pushed people out of my way, and heard behind the cries of guards saying, “rapist! rapist, come back here!” But I did not stop. I kept running until I crossed a lamp store, and snatching the lamp off the table, did the merchant cry, “thief! thief!” Then I passed by a carpet seller, and snatched a beautiful Persian carpet, and the salesman cried, “thief!” Now, it seemed that all the guards in the city were after me. Some yelled, “stop, thief!” while others preferred, “stop, rapist!” But with my great strength, I eluded the guards, by pushing the people out of my path with greater ease.

And when I was complete with the woman's clothing, the lamp and the carpet, I punched a hole in the city wall and ran out into the desert. But the guards were close behind, and they followed with their scimitars swinging. Looking out into the desert, I saw Sabah and my other friends, waiting for me on camels in the distance. But Sabah, knowing my preference for horses, had left for me a horse to ride. And so I leaped upon the horses' back and with great momentum, rode off into the sunset, leaving the guards of Dur Sharrukin full of anger and defeat.

Chapter 19

I wet my lips and spat. The hot eye of Tha stared down at me. He watched me as he always did, with the eye that never blinks, only one that shuts at night. But as we were approaching the rolling dust ball of heat, near the mountains, I wished it would. It was enough to make one paranoid.

Sabah turned to me and flashed his gold tooth. The glare off it dazed me and made my head pound. "How much further," he asked.

"Not far," she replied. "Soon, we shall see it."

"Ishtar, my dear, back in Dur Sharrukin," began Alheem. "You never answered my question."

"Damn it! These clothes are awful. Couldn't you find something more delicate? I am a harem woman, you know. It isn't decent for me to be in such poor attire."

"Ishtar!" cried Alheem in frustration.

"Forgive me, I didn't have time to browse," I replied, sarcastically.

"A desert flower such as yourself should not travel on such journeys anyhow. Perhaps you hoped for a royal caravan on your honeymoon?" asked Sabah.

"Would you all just shut up! I am addressing my beloved!" cried Alheem.

"I am not your beloved you filthy slave and don't you dare call me that again!" cried she.

"But Ishtar, back in the harem, the way you looked at me. . .?" he responded.

"Well, we are not married. Not yet," she replied.

"But will you ever love me?" he asked.

"Never," she answered in a cold, hard tone.

Several hours passed with silence. Until at last my curiosity grew and I could not contain myself further. I turned to the harem woman and asked, "Ishtar?"

"What?" she replied.

"Do you remember . . . do you remember Sali when she was brought into the harem?"

Then, she spoke quietly, "yes. What of her?"

"Was she. . . did she look. . .," my mind raced to find the words but could not find them.

She merely answered, "no." But I wasn't sure what she had said "no" to, and was too afraid to ask. Then, Ishtar cried out, as if something stung her on the behind. "Water!" she gasped.

"What?" said Sabah, "already?"

"Oh. . . I tried to hold it in. But I couldn't. I didn't want to ask because I was afraid you would get mad at me."

"How can you be thirsty already?" he asked.

"Well. . . I didn't quite have a drink when we left the city."

Sabah's voice became deep and commanding, more of a restatement than a question, "you didn't quite have a drink?"

"Well, I was half naked . . . and . . . and they were chasing us . . . and . . ."

"You didn't quite have a drink!" he cried.

"That's all right, darling, you can have some of my water," said Alheem.

Ishtar looked at Sabah and gloated as if she had won an argument. Then, her irritated voice became calm and sweet, and said, "see, thank you Alheem."

Alheem flashed his cavity-infested teeth and whipped out his waterskin. Then, in a most unorthodox way, uncapped the flask and juggled it down his throat, tightly wrapping his lips around the opening. Ishtar gave him a repulsed look and when he handed it to her, she took it as if handling someone's used handkerchief or soiled underwear. She stared at the top of the empty waterskin as if trying to measure the exact angle that she would place it to her lips. And then, finally, broke down and cried, "I can't drink this!"

"Why not?" asked Sabah.

"I can't. . . I can't drink. . . rich harem girls do not share their water with slaves."

"Or their beds," I commented.

"Oh, you bastard. . . you think that's funny!?"

"Frankly, my dear, I don't. . .," but before I could finish, I felt the waterskin strike me on the forehead. It bounced off my head and fell to the ground, where it guzzled out on to the sand.

"You spoiled bitch!" cried Sabah, and slapped Ishtar across the face.

Seeing that, I punched Sabah off his camel, and he fell to the ground beside it. "What did you do that for, effendi?" he asked surprised, wiping his bloody lip.

"I don't know," I replied. "Because you shouldn't. . . you shouldn't hit a girl."

"Who made that rule? She just wasted a whole waterskin!"

"Well, you shouldn't have hit him," said Alheem.

"Thank you, effendi," replied Sabah.

"I should have hit him."

"What?"

"You can't be defending my beloved, it is my right."

"That's it, I've had it. I am not your beloved and I never will be. So stop calling me that!" she screamed.

Then, all of a sudden, I heard a rumbling noise that sounded like an earthquake. I whipped my horse to make him run toward the mountains, which, did I find surprising, were much closer than I had thought. When the sand rose up to confront me, like a giant beast awakened at our arrival, it filled the sky and ravaged the earth, collecting more dust as it moved and growing larger as it came closer. When its spiral arm came blowing through us, it felt like the sting of a million needles pricking into my flesh and plugging into my pores. It hugged me like an uncle who would not let go, and whose unshaven skin scratches against your cheeks and forces your eyes to close.

Sabah turned his camel around and attempted to cover his mouth with his scarf. Alheem dismounted in terror and pulled Ishtar by the leg to join his side. "What is it?" I cried.

Behind the sound of exploding air, I heard the muffled voice of Sabah reply, "get down! It is a sand storm! It shall pass!"

I could see the emerald jewel eyes of Ishtar widen in terror beneath a pink veil. Alheem, who had his squinted face turned away from the wind, reached out to hold her back. But she fought him off and got to her feet. Though the storm knocked her back, she tried again to stand and signal me with her hands. I knew she was trying to tell me something. And so, I leaped from my horse and ran to her, hearing her yelling but not

fully comprehending, “it’s not a -----! You must help -- get the l---!”

“What?!?” I cried.

“We’re ----- to die! It’s the elem----! Only my ----- can ---- it!”

I cried louder, “WHAT?!?”

Thereupon, she reached into a pouch nearby her camel and pulled out a lamp.

I asked, “what can we do?”

Then, I saw her pointing behind me. And looking back, I could see and understand at last what she was telling me. The sandstorm was not a normal sandstorm. Even though it was my first encounter with one, something told me that it was not common for them to turn the sky black, like the inkwell of the world had just spilled over. Nor did they have glowing, red eyes, with bodies like funnel shaped cyclones.

To my terror, through squinted eyes I saw the Elemental zigzag to where Sabah’s camel was, and watched it vacuum the animal into the air all the while neighing and bucking, as if the force of gravity had suddenly reversed itself and everything was falling upwards.

Meanwhile, Alheem and Sabah had drawn their swords and were swinging madly, as if fighting some invisible enemy. I ran to them and cried, “what are you doing?”

“Can’t you see it, effendi! It is some evil spirit in the wind!”

“But we can’t fight it with our swords!” I replied.

“What else can we do?” asked Alheem.

I pointed behind him, “look!”

He turned to see where I was pointing, and saw Ishtar, sitting fifty paces away from us, cross legged, with her eyes closed and her clothes flapping wildly, lifting her arms into the air as if praying to a god. In her lap, I could see the lamp. But I knew that she was having difficulty. The wind was so strong, it was blowing her on her back and the lamp out of her lap. “Go to Ishtar!” I yelled. “I don’t know how, but do whatever you can to shield her from the storm!”

Alheem nodded, knowing it was much easier to nod than to speak, and ran over to Ishtar without his sword. Then I looked beside me and saw Sabah, waving his sword and crying like a lunatic, “come on you coward! Is this the best that you can do! I have seen storms much worse than this! Let us see what you can really do! Ha ha ha ha!”

“Sabah, I don’t think it is a good idea to tease him!”

“Ha! What’s the worst thing he can do? Blow me down? Ha ha ha-ha!” And then, the Elemental did just that. A huge ball of sand exploded into bits and pieces of shrapnel, cutting Sabah’s scimitar in half. Then, he was lifted off his feet and thrown into the air. I don’t know where he landed. But I remember that he was blown beyond my sight, kicking and screaming all the while.

Fear overwhelmed me, and I crouched low to the ground and huddled into a ball, trying as best I could to keep the sand away. But it was impossible. Sand was filling up into my shoes, into my clothes, and in my eyes, up my nose, my mouth, between my toes and teeth, and sticking to my lips. Sand consumed my hair. Sand devoured me whole.

At last I stood, and saw Ishtar, still chanting, and Alheem trying to stand in front of her and block the sand. But it was futile. He merely had made himself into a sail, and was stumbling everywhere like a fool. Then, he lost his footing and began to roll like a ball. When he found his footing again, he stood up, this time angry, and finding a stone on the ground, threw it into the funnel. Something told me he shouldn’t have done that.

And I was sure of it when I saw the stone returned. But this time, it was larger; much larger. Somehow, the Elemental had changed it, using the sand and debris to collect on to the rock and turn it into a boulder. A boulder, that crushed Alheem, laying him flat on his back and unconscious, his forehead bloody.

I began to feel helpless. Nothing in my power could stop the Elemental from coming and killing us all. Troubling thoughts began to rise in my head. I worried whether or not Alheem and Sabah were dead. And whether or not Ishtar and I would soon be next.

Then, I remembered what Ishtar had said about the Great Elemental, and how there was only one way to stop it. Perhaps she knew the way. Perhaps her chant was in an effort to halt this transparent monster. So I ran to protect her, and saw that her hands were glowing, and that the lamp was also glowing with her. "Ishtar! Are you almost finished?"

"Yes, it took me some time, but I finally enchanted this lamp. Now it is a magical one. But it is still very weak. I need more time to instill the spell."

"What spell?" I asked.

"The spell that will vanquish the Elemental," she replied. Then, looking over my shoulder, she cried, "by Allah!"

"What is it?"

"It's coming! But I can't move! If I move from this spot, the spell will be broken. Hold me, Dynotus! You must not let me go!"

I grabbed her by the arms tightly, "I won't!"

Then, I watched, as the funnel came closer, and closer, and closer. And as it came, the winds became stronger, and it became more and more difficult to hold on. But I was determined not to let go of her. Even if meant ripping my arms off, with all my godly strength, I would not let go.

The Great Elemental engulfed us in its funnel, and I was plucked off the ground and into the air like Sabah's camel. But, I did not let go. I held on to Ishtar firmly, and took her with me.

There we were, hovering in the air, holding each other with both hands and being pulled away by our feet. The funnel had stretched us apart so that we were both spread out and face down over the Earth, rotating round and round with all the sand and floating debris within the cyclone. And between us, spinning like a top, was the magic lamp.

"Dynotus!" she screamed.

"What?" I cried back.

"One of us must let go!"

"What. . . but why!? If we fall from this height, we'll be killed!" Which, now that I think about it, was a funny thing to say, because I don't see how holding each other would keep us from falling. But it seemed logical at the time.

"Yes, but I have to touch the lamp. One word, Dynotus, that's all I needed to stop this madness! If I don't touch it, it won't work. You have to let go."

Though I felt that the bones in my fingers were about to snap, I said, "O.K., I can hold on with one hand."

"Which hand?" she asked.

It was an odd question that struck me surprisingly. Which hand? Which hand was stronger? With which hand could we hold on for dear life? I didn't know. And for a moment, I sat dumbfounded. Then, I assumed that it really didn't matter, and made my choice. Though for years I looked back and wondered whether or not it would have made

a difference. "The left!" I said, and we let go.

With that, my other hand gave way, and I felt myself being thrown into oblivion at such rapid speed, I became completely unaware of everything. For several seconds I was suspended in chaos. Then, I felt the hand of gravity pull me, and looked down to see that at last I was out of the storm, but was falling chest first into the ground from a great height.

Meanwhile, Ishtar reached for the lamp, just barely touching it with her finger tips, and uttered the word, "ALI-QUATAR!" All at once, the lamp exploded with brilliance, and like a drain in a bath tub, opened up and sucked all the wind into itself. A sea of sand fell from the grip of the funnel. And it, too, was sucked into the tiny space, imprisoned within the confines of the lamp, growing smaller and smaller, until the storm giant was nothing but a little breeze, wearily dwindling away.

Ishtar fell on her rear only a few feet from the ground and was not injured. I, on the other hand, was in much worse shape, and she ran to my side. If it hadn't been for my demi-god endurance, I would have died. But I still lived, only having suffered a broken rib. "Oh, Dynotus, perhaps I should have enchanted the lamp before we met with the Elemental."

I looked at her, speechless, too weak to complain. Then, gathering my strength, I spoke, "see if you can find the others."

Ishtar stood and searched for Sabah. She found him all right. And with her help, he lifted the boulder off of Alheem, who looked quite dead.

Ishtar burst into tears. "Oh, poor, love sick fool. Maybe I shouldn't have called him a filthy slave. He died trying to protect me."

Then, the dead smiled. Smiled, and kissed the living. Ishtar screamed and pushed him down. "You. . .you should have died, you pig!"

Sabah slapped Alheem on the back and helped him up. "You will have a nasty bruise on your head, my friend, but you shall live."

"Thank Allah, the storm is over."

I struggled to stand and joined them. "It was Ishtar who did it. We would have all died if it hadn't been for her magic."

"Ahh, so it seems you are worth something to us after all," replied Sabah.

Ishtar blushed, "yes."

"Well, we surpassed the Great Elemental. Are there any more surprises you would like to warn us of, **ahead** of time," I said, making the emphasis on the "ahead," part.

"Not yet," she said. "But it is time to enchant the carpet. That is, if we can find it."

"What do we need a carpet for?" asked Sabah. "All our camels and horses are gone. They must have stampeded out of here. We'll never find them."

"And our supplies," added Alheem.

"Gather the supplies. I think Ishtar will help us with the transportation," said I.

"Well, if we can't find the water, the quest is over. Hell, we will be over. If we go back to Dur Sharrukin, they'll have our heads. And if we stay here, we'll die of thirst," said Alheem.

The two men left, mumbling and complaining, while I stayed with Ishtar. Her beauty and magic skills were enchanting. And at the moment, she had let her veil down, fallen from the wind, and this nakedness of the face excited me. I found myself wanting

to taste those lips again. But I resisted. I looked away, and found the lamp, half buried in the sand, lying on its side. Picking it up and dusting it off, I asked, “do we still need this?”

“I don’t know. We might. You see, the Great Elemental is in there.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, that was the spell. The lamp imprisons elementals and lesser form of genie, depending on how powerful the spell caster.”

“Well, what if he gets out?” I asked.

She laughed. “He can’t get out unless someone says the magic word.”

“What word?”

“I can’t tell you!”

“Why? . . . OOPS! I understand. Maybe will need *him* some time.”

“Maybe,” she replied. “We can take *him* with us.”

By the time Alheem and Sabah had completed gathering the supplies, having found the water but not the animals, they joined us in a circle round Ishtar, who was sitting cross legged again and in the center of the carpet, which she had laid out on the ground. She was chanting as before, and her fingertips were beginning to glow. Then, she lifted her hands into the air, and began to cry out words that had no meaning to us. “Come, all of you, sit on the carpet. I will need your psychic energies for this.”

“This what?” asked Sabah.

We all sat on the carpet. Ishtar and I sat two rows in front, Sabah and Alheem were in back. We listened to Ishtar’s delicate voice as she told us what to do. “Now you must concentrate. Think about things that fly. Think about birds and clouds. Think about the sky. Think about the air. Think about the lightness of the air. Close your eyes and think about flying. Picture it in your mind, all of you. Flying through the air. You want to fly. You want to just lift off the ground and soar through the air like a bird, as light as air, light as a feather.”

“I fear your beloved is mad,” said Sabah.

Alheem turned to him. “No, I believe in her.”

“Yes. . . join hands with me. Join hands and believe. You must believe.” And we did join hands. And we did believe. “Fly. . . fly. . . fly. . . fly. . .,” she chanted, “float. . . soar. . . fly. . . lift. . . fly. . . fly. . . NETHEROUS-SHARRUKIN FLY!” And we flew.

We flew through the air on the magic carpet. And before long, we could open our eyes and look down in disbelief at the land below, the land racing beneath us at great speed. Ishtar squealed in joy, “YES! We did it! I didn’t think we could do it, but we did it! Our wills are very strong.”

Sabah laughed, “HA HA HA! Now this is the best way to travel the desert!”

At last, we flew over the dunes until we reached a sheer rock wall. It was a mountain side as steep as a city door and it appeared truly impossible to climb. No man could climb to such a place. And then I understood, why Ishtar had said, that we needed to fly over the mountain.

But, instead of going over it, she directed us toward a rocky ledge protruding out from the center of the wall, by pulling on the front tassels of the carpet. She made the carpet hover over the ledge, and then land. “Where are we going?” asked Sabah.

“To Nether Ninevah,” replied Ishtar.

“What?” said Sabah with a laugh, “there is no such place. That is found only in tales for small children.”

“Like desert monsters,” replied Alheem, sarcastically.

“Yeah,” giggled Ishtar, “and flying carpets.”

“All right, where is it?” asked Sabah.

Ishtar stood up and walked toward the mountain wall. Behind a mound of boulders was the entrance. She pointed and said, “right through there.”

The door to Nether Ninevah was a crack in the mountain wall that reminded me of the Kiathos back in Sparta. The place where young children and babies, born too sickly or deformed to be fighters, were slain against the jagged rocks of the womb shaped, vaginal opening of Mother Gia. The place where weak bodies were recycled back to the Underworld. And like the Kiathos, where a cold breeze blows from the tributary of the river Styx, so did the entrance to Nether Ninevah chill the air.

“We’re going in there?” asked Alheem, with a hint of fear.

“Yes,” replied Ishtar. “I’m going to help Dynotus. He will need magic to find his wife. If you don’t wish to come, you don’t have to.”

“If you’re going, I’m going!” said Alheem with a smile.

So we all went through the crack and ended up in Nether Ninevah.

Chapter 20

Entering the fissure like opening in the mountain side, made me realize that it was much more than just the entrance to a cave. It was a portal, a gate to somewhere else. Though I did not understand it fully, it began to appear that we were indeed entering another world.

As we flew through it on our magic carpet, like a thread through the eye of a needle, we saw strange colors in chaotic shapes and forms. It was like a dream where everything made little sense. It was like going through a multilayered tunnel with many facets. At the end of the tunnel was the light; a bright light in the shape and form of a fissure suspended in space. And when we went through the fissure, it seemed that we had made a full circle and gone back out from where we had come.

“What happened? We’re in the same place,” said Sabah.

Ishtar looked around with wide eyes as if seeing something awesome that we could not. “No,” she whispered, “this is it.”

“This is where?” asked Alheem.

“The Land of the Giants,” she replied.

“How do you know? This looks just like the same mountain and the same desert,” I replied.

“Yes, and look over there, effendi, that speck of white in the golden sea, is that not Dur Sharrukin? We are in the same place. We have gone nowhere. I told you there was no such place as Nether Ninevah.”

“You are wrong, Sabah, this is not Ninevah. If you remember, when we left, the sun was in the West and Dur Sharrukin was to the right. Now, the sun is in the East, and that city that you call Dur Sharrukin, is to the left.”

“Yes,” I said with surprise, feeling like a fool that I hadn’t noticed it before, “Dur Sharrukin was to the right of the fissure.”

“Wait, even the rocks down there,” said Alheem, pointing to a group of boulders one hundred feet below us, “they were on the opposite side. It is as if everything has switched places.”

“In a way, they have. You see, Nether Ninevah is the mirror image of Ninevah. It may at first seem the same. But, if you look closely, you will see that everything is backwards,” explained Ishtar.

“Then, if that is not Dur Sharrukin, what city is it?” asked Sabah.

“That, is the city of Nether Sharrukin. A powerful King, who is the opposite of King Sennacherib, rules it. Emperor Sargon II is very wise and has great powers that overshadow mine, and unlike Sennacherib, Sargon II is horribly evil.”

“And that is why we are here, isn’t it?” I asked.

“What?” said Sabah in shock.

“Iuz has taken Sali to Sargon II, to be sold as a slave, Iuz the Cruel. If she is there, he will find her.”

“But how will we defeat Sargon II?” asked Alheem.

“Sargon II is the least of our worries, for now. First, we must journey through the Land of the Giants to reach Nether Sharrukin.”

“Ishtar, you told me back in the harem that there were three deadly obstacles that I had to surpass in order to reach the city. Do you know what these are?”

“No, I cannot use my psionics here. If I do, Sargon II will know that we are coming.”

“Then we must prepare for anything.”

That night, we camped out on the mountain ledge. But I had difficulty sleeping. Again, I was plagued by nightmares. Nightmares, that I had almost forgotten, but had somehow revived themselves. One of which, was of me, wrestling with the demi-god, Phobos, the son of Ares, god of war, and was being defeated. This time, I remembered the dream more vividly. Phobos had grabbed and locked me in several holding positions and I could not break free. At last, he threw me to the ground, which I remember was on the same rocky ledge that I had slept. He hurled both of us dangerously close to the edge, and then began to choke me with his hands. I awoke screaming, and heard an echoey voice trail off into the sunrise following the night, “YOU CANNOT ESCAPE ME, DYNOTUS . . . you couldn’t this time . . . you never will.” Then, I felt a sharp pain in my throat, where it seemed Phobos had put his fingers to strangle me. But when I was fully awake, that pain turned into dryness. And I thought to myself that it was only a thirst in the middle of the night, and nothing more.

But nothing in all my nightmares, could prepare me for what I was to see next that day. It was the first of the three obstacles. And it was truly terrifying.

Ishtar had put the carpet away, for she had said that it was psychically draining of her mental and physical energy. Instead, we had to walk. And though there was no way that we could reach Nether Sharrukin on foot without running out of water, Ishtar assured us that when she gathered enough strength, she would be able to fly us the rest of the way. That, however, was more a danger than we knew. For if we could have flown that day, we would have avoided the first resident of Nether Ninevah; the thing that dubbed the desert, Land of the Giants.

We were trekking along in the deep plain with nothing but the hint of mountains fading in the distance, when suddenly, I believed to feel the ground move. At first, I thought little of it. Then, it happened again and with greater force. I stopped and cautioned to the others, “did you feel that?”

“Yes, it was like the belly of the desert just rumbled,” replied Alheem.

“There are no earthquakes here, effendis,” said Sabah.

But I felt it again. This time, knowing that we all had felt it. “Then what was that?”

Alheem’s face turned pale. “Perhaps it is another giant antlion.”

“No, an antlion could not cause the earth to tremble like that. If it is a monster, it must be something bigger,” replied Ishtar.

“Bigger!” cried Alheem.

Sabah placed his ear to the ground. “If it is something beneath us, I should hear it, whatever it may be.”

After several minutes of waiting anxiously, Ishtar said, “well?”

Sabah stood with a look of disappointment. “I don’t hear a thing. Do not worry, my friends, it is nothing.”

“Shit, Dynotus, you scare us half to death for nothing!” cried Alheem. Then, as he said that, I saw behind him, a **THING** come out of the ground about fifty yards away. It jumped out of the sand and came back down like a fish playing in the sea. But it was not

a fish.

It was light brown in color, almost invisible against the desert background. But it had scaly like skin, not like a reptile, but like a dried piece of flat dough. And it was divided into many rings which came together to form a tube like body, like the body of a serpent.

It swam back down into the ground and vanished, more than 150 feet from us. But even at such a distance, I could make out its description. For it was very, VERY big.

My jaw dropped from my skull and the skin on my forehead rolled back to reveal the red lines of my eyeballs. Seeing this, the others could tell that something was wrong. Sabah turned to see what it was that I was seeing, but he and Ishtar saw nothing but an eruption of sand and the shifting of the dunes. "What was it, Dynotus? Did you see it?" he asked.

"Huh?" I replied.

He gripped me by the shoulders, "did you see it, friend!?"

"Was it an antlion?" questioned Ishtar.

"Uh . . . I don't. . . I don't think so."

"Then what was it!?" cried Sabah. "Is it a monster?"

"I think," I mumbled with shifting eyes, the kind of eyes you see in a man who is in panic, "I think it's coming."

Sabah struggled to reason with me. "What is coming!?"

I don't quite remember what exactly happened next. But there was a BOOM sound, as if something had exploded, and then there was a sound like that of rolling thunder, as if God's rolling pin had just fallen from heaven to flatten the world. But it did not come from above. It was from underneath. And whatever IT was, it caused the ground beneath us to bulge and heave into the sky, and carried us with it, like bugs on a carpet that has just been folded. Alheem stumbled backward and fell down a newly made sand dune. Sabah, Ishtar and I, tried to catch ourselves by crouching low and placing our hands to the ground. And as we were looking down, I thought that I could see the dried, cracking, sour dough skin of the THING, break from underneath the sand. But this time, the picture of it magnified if not a thousand times, so that each crack and line of its flesh was at least a half-foot in width.

Just as quickly as it had come, had it gone. Alheem stood up and dusted himself off. "Well. . .that was definitely SOMething!"

"By Allah, what if IT comes back!" cried Ishtar.

"It probably will," I replied.

"Then we must run," cried Alheem.

"Run? Run where?" noted Sabah.

"Yeah, for all we know, that thing could be as big as the desert itself," I added.

"So what do we do?" she asked.

"Let us pray," answered Sabah.

"You, pray? You are not a god-fearing man," I said.

"No, but I am a fearing whatever that thing is, effendi!"

Then, I put my finger to my chin in thought. "I think, it was a worm."

"A worm?" said Alheem. "It was in my belief, that they were just a *little* smaller."

"No, it's a giant worm," I replied.

Ishtar moved close to me for comfort. "Wait, worms have teeth, don't they?"

“Yes, they have no eyes, no ears, they just have teeth.”

“By Allah,” cried Ishtar, pulling her hair, “that means it could EAT US!!” and she screamed the last two words.

But none of us noticed Alheem, who was looking around with dread. What we had failed to notice, is that a wide circle was being made. A circle that we were in the center of. a circle, whose borders were marked by the rising of many large, pearl white, pointy objects like flat tombs coming out of the sand.

When Alheem alerted me of this threat, it seemed that no one else quite knew or understood the dilemma. Quickly, I turned to Ishtar and said, “the carpet! We must get the carpet!”

“What?” she asked in confusion, “to fly?”

“Yes, hurry!” I cried.

“But. . .but we can’t. It will take some time and I don’t know if I can . . .”

“Do it now!” I commanded in a stern voice.

Immediately, Ishtar unraveled the carpet and sat in the center of it chanting. I turned my ring into a sword, and Alheem and Sabah repeated the action. We formed a triangle of three, looking outward at the rising circle. “What are we fighting?!?” yelled Sabah.

“In a minute we are going to. . .,” then, the ground beneath us gave way, and fell, as if we had been walking on a thin sheet of ice over a huge canyon, a sheet, having just broken apart. In the next split-second, we were suspended in mid air and falling fast. Dirt and debris were falling with us. I looked down and saw the mouth of the worm, surrounding us on all sides with triangular shaped teeth. And we were falling into it. Falling into a mouth as wide and as open as that of a whale, consuming the desert as a whale would drink the sea. To be devoured, not bitten or chewed, but devoured like a whale eating plankton, and we, the plankton, no more significant to IT; to that thing of immeasurable size.

All around me I heard screams, screams of helplessness. There was nothing that I could do. I was too distant. But there was help.

Ishtar had done as I had commanded. She was still in a trance, even as we were falling. Yet, she did not part from her magic carpet. She alone sat in the center of it, as it enveloped around her, her weight pushing it down and the sides upward. But, she did not lose her concentration. At last, she was able to make the magic work, and the flying carpet soared upward.

Luckily, Ishtar had placed the carpet in the center of the circle made by the worm. And, since sand in the center always falls in first and everything around it falls in afterward, Ishtar had been the deepest in the caverns of its throat. This was good. Because, when she made the carpet fly, she could reach up to catch us, who were high above her. And so, when Sabah, Alheem and I, saw the carpet rising out from the monster’s jaws, we grabbed on to it and let it carry us up.

Pulling and heaving, we made our way to the carpet floor. But we were not safe, not yet. For we were still in the monster’s mouth.

Then, the strain on Ishtar became too great, and she could no longer keep us aloft. She became dizzy and lost her grip, falling on her back and rolling off the carpet. Alheem was the first to see this, grabbing Ishtar by the arm and holding her.

Meanwhile, the carpet began to wave like unsteady water, and was beginning to

sink downward. I moved to the front of the carpet with great alarm, seeing what I could do to stop its descent. Remembering how Ishtar had directed the carpet using its tassels, I took both of them in hand and pulled up. And the carpet began to fly again.

While this was happening, Ishtar came to her senses, looking around in a dreamy state, as if she had just awoken from a deep sleep. Noticing her terrible surroundings, she screamed as if being murdered, and looked up to see Alheem holding her hand. "Don't worry, Ishtar! I've got you!"

"Please, Alheem, save me!!" she begged.

Alheem boldly let go of the carpet with his other hand and grabbed Ishtar, who was slipping from his grip, and almost fell himself if it hadn't been for Sabah holding his feet. At last, Alheem pulled Ishtar to safety, and she looked deep into his eyes and fell comfortably into his arms.

During her rescue, I was busy trying to keep the carpet aloft. But I was not doing well. Only until Ishtar regained control of it, did we really begin to move. But time was of the essence and already we had lost too much of it.

I gazed up for the first time and noticed that the mouth of the worm was slowly beginning to close. Because of its size, the worm seemed to be incredibly slow. But if its mouth closed, I knew, there was no way we could be freed of its belly. And so, Ishtar piloted the carpet, making it race at great speed, racing against time, racing against the worm whose lips had almost sealed our doom.

We made it. We made it so close, that the carpet had to turn side ways in order to pass between the creature's upper and lower teeth. But we made it, flying out of its mouth at the very last second.

Looking back down from many hundreds of feet, could we see the worm in its entirety. Only then, seeing, that indeed, it did resemble a worm, whose body moved tons and tons of sand, spraying it miles into the sky and across the desert in all directions.

It was night before we felt safe enough to rest again. But Ishtar assured us that if we did encounter another threat, it would not be the worm. She said there would be three. The giant worm was the first. And, she said, the others would be far worse.

There we sat, peacefully around a campfire, talking as if nothing unusual had happened. We even made Ishtar dance a little for our entertainment.

But later that night, I sat up in wonder, at the strange things that I had seen. I remembered the cracks in the monster's skin, looking closely beside the campfire at the tiny cracks within my own, terrified at the very thought of how big the worm must have actually been. Then, I closed my eyes to sleep.

I awoke to relieve myself of certain duties, when I noticed Ishtar's sleeping tent to be empty. At first, I was frightened. Then, I heard whispering. I moved quietly behind a tent, seeking the source of the sound, and found Ishtar lying beside Alheem. They were talking.

"Today, you were very brave. I did not believe that slaves could be so...so noble. Thank you, for saving my life," she was saying.

"And I...I apologize for taking advantage of you that night. I should not have."

"Oh, that is all right. I did have a good night, a very good night of passion. I...I did love you then, when I thought you were Dynotus," she whispered.

“Does this mean you love me?” he asked.

“Well, no, not just yet,” she answered. “But you must be gentle. You must be patient. Love isn’t like that. For some people, love is instantaneous. For others, love takes time.”

“But . . . could you ever learn to love a man like me?” he asked.

“I think . . . I could,” her words were strained and difficult. “And I have a great fear. It is a great foreboding fear of what is to come. Oh Alheem, this Land of the Giants is so dangerous, and after what we saw today, I do not know if we shall live another day to find true love.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” he asked.

“True, I still love Dynotus. But he will never love me. And so, I want you to take me. Take me into your tent and make love to me!”

“But we are not married. And . . . I haven’t bought you yet,” he argued.

“That didn’t stop you before,” she replied, seductively.

“Well, this time I wish to do it right.”

“Oh, if you must, you can buy me now.”

“Off of who?” he asked.

“Off of me, I own myself now, so you will have to buy me from me.”

“But I don’t have any money.”

“Oh,” she said, looking up to the stars in serious thought. “How about a trade?”

“But I have nothing, nothing valuable.”

“I go cheap.”

“You sound like a harlot!”

“No, I’ve never done this before. You shall be my first and my last. That way, I will be pure.”

“How much?” he asked.

She smiled, “one grain of sand.”

“A grain of sand, for such a . . . such a beautiful, desert flower?” he said softly.

“Yes!” she answered.

“But you are worth a million grains of gold to me! A mountain of gold!” he cried.

“The price is a grain of sand. Take it or leave it.”

He smiled. “A grain of sand it is!” he replied, and handed her a grain of sand on the tip of his finger. She licked it off and on to her tongue, and coerced him into kissing. They embraced and made love and after they removed all their clothing, Ishtar said, “Alheem, you need to take a bath. You stink!”

Chapter 21

The next day we flew. Even though it would take more time for Ishtar to rest every so often to regain her manna (that word she used to call her magical energy) we did not mind. For we did not wish to risk the chance of encountering another sand worm. And even though it was draining on Ishtar, the rest of us preferred the carpet over walking.

But that day started off differently. What I saw were things that troubled me, but also things that gladdened me. One major difference was in Alheem. That day he was radiant, simply glowing with joy. The whole time we were traveling, I never even caught a glimpse of him not smiling. When I asked what change brought about this behavior, he merely remarked that he was, “the happiest man alive!”

The other difference was in Ishtar. And though I could have easily guessed what good thing must have happened to place Alheem in such a good mood, I could not figure why Ishtar looked the way she did. For when I turned to look at her, and she noticed me looking, she would turn and give me an ear to ear smile. But I could tell that it was a pseudo smile; a smile no more life like than one on the face of a statue. And when I looked at her out of the corner of my eyes, I could see that something was wrong. She looked deeply disturbed over something. But, I did not know what this could be.

Often, I would catch Alheem and Ishtar giving each other loving glances. They looked as if at any minute, they would embrace themselves and make love on the very spot. But they did not. They hid their feelings from us.

Usually, I would be joyous to know of two people who had found love. A thing that I was not jealous of, but wished to find myself. But their love brought me no joy. For it was that secret dread, that terrible countenance on Ishtar’s face, that drove the joy away. So blinded was Alheem in his happiness, that he did not even notice Ishtar’s look. And I could not bring myself to ask Ishtar what the trouble was, for I feared that it would also trouble Alheem and ruin his one-day of seeming happiness.

But now that I look back on that day, I am forever in regret that I did not ask her right out. For if I had, we may have been able to avoid the disaster that befell us. The disaster, that befell on that terrible, terrible day; the second of the three tribulations.

As we were careening along, high above the world, Ishtar turned to me, giving me a false smile, and said, “Dynotus, there is something . . . something that I should tell you. Just in case we. . .,”

Then, I thought to myself, *‘this could be it! The secret that is troubling her.’* But it was not. “What is it, Ishtar?” I asked attentively, staring into her eyes as if to telepathically motion, to tell me what was wrong.

But she did not read my mind. She merely responded by saying, “I truly hope you succeed in finding Sali. I hope you find this true love. For I know how terrible it can be without it.”

“What are you talking about? You sound as if. . . as if you won’t be around to see it yourself.”

“I just thought you should know something. It might not be important. Because, we are moving very fast, and should be there in another day.”

“What is it?” I almost pleaded with her now.

“In three days, the city of Nether Sharrukin is going to disappear.”

“What!?!” I cried.

“Sargon II, who is a great sorcerer and conjurer, has put a spell upon the city. Every season, the city is transported to a different location. It can never leave the desert. But, it sometimes vanishes and reappears hundreds of miles away. Sometimes, it will slip into Nether Ninevah, where it is now. Other times, it can be found in our world.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” I asked.

“It is so that no one can ever find the city. For many have sought to find it, but few have actually succeeded. And most of those seeking it, are said to never return. They become lost in the desert.

Nether Sharrukin goes by many names and is legendary throughout Ninevah as the ‘Mystical City’ or the ‘City of Enchantment.’ Some say it does not exist, that it is only a myth. Others say, it is nothing but a mirage sometimes witnessed by tired desert travelers.”

“Well, we know it exists. But, how did *we* find it?”

“Through magic,” she replied. “Magic is the only map, the only compass for locating it. No other trace or clue of the city can be found. You see, Sargon II is very wealthy and very protective of his land, and fears any conquerors that might come to take his wealth.”

“So, if we do not reach the city in three days, it shall vanish?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “Vanish where, I do not know. But in three days, the new season shall begin, and the city will no longer be.” Then, she paused for a moment, and added, “but it is nothing to fear. With the speed of my magic carpet, we should be there in just one more day.”

This thing I had not known, and I was glad that Ishtar told me of it. And, even though it was hard to believe, I had already seen so many things of amazement during my quest, that I did not think it impossible.

Yet, I was still disappointed. For I had hoped that Ishtar would reveal to me her secret fear. And something deep inside me, said, that what she had divulged was of little relation to her uneasiness. She did not tell me the whole truth. And it worried me how she spoke, as if she would not be around to see the following day.

The second obstacle came unexpectedly. At first, it appeared to be nothing but a man, a man standing in the middle of the desert. Around him was only sand and the flat plain. And, as the perspective would change, when you come closer to an object, so did the image of the man become larger and larger. But the more we approached him, the more I grew afraid that this was no ordinary man. For it was, that at many cubits distance, much beyond reaching range, did he appear the size of Sabah and I. And as we came even closer, he appeared even bigger. By the time we were close enough to touch him, we could look up in awe and see that he was no man, but a giant. A giant that looked no different than a common Ninevahan bandit, except for his great size. For the carpet that we rode upon soared over the ground at a height of ten feet. At this height, we were halted by his waist belt. Looking up, we could see another ten feet, making him roughly twenty feet tall, as I estimate.

Being out in the desert and all alone, he stood like a tower in the middle of nowhere, rising above all else, being so huge that nothing could hide him and nothing

could shade him. He was a frightening sight indeed.

The giant was almost bald, save for a thick, black, braided lock of hair which sprouted from a small spot behind his head, and fell down to his shoulders like a Hellenite maidens pony tail. A green and blue tattoo was upon his forehead. But, it was not a symbol or a picture of an animal. Rather, the tattoo was like a pattern of intersecting lines and triangles. His face was rough and leather like, and his beard and mustache were black and pointy. On his one ear hung a large, gold, circular earring. And he was dressed in a purple and red vest over black and gold leather armor. His purple pants were wide and baggy. His feet were fitted in gold colored shoes which curved up and around to a point. A giant, brilliant scimitar hung from his waist. And in his hands was a giant spear, planted on the ground and reaching a little over his head.

No magic carpet could save us from this threat; not unless we were to rise above the reach of him and his spear. But by then, he could easily have smote us down. And so, we decided to negotiate.

Ishtar landed the carpet and we stood. The giant, who had just noticed us, looked down and laughed with a thundering, ominous voice, "HA HA HA HA! Little people!"

I looked up at him, "I am Dynotus, Son of Zeus. We mean you no harm."

Then, he burst into hysterical laughter like Sabah, so much that he placed his fists against his hips and cocked his head back laughing. Thereupon, he replied, "what is it, little man!? You think you can harm me!?" Laughter ensued again.

"Look, let me handle this," said Sabah, stepping forward, "honorable giant, we are nomads who have come from a far off land in search of the Dark Emperor Sargon II. We would be pleased if you let us pass."

"And who are you, little man?" asked the giant, "that I am to please?"

"I am Sabah, desert bandit and great adventurer!"

"I am Zahkar of the desert giants, noble tribesman and hunter."

"You hunt?" I asked.

"Yes, we giants must hunt food to feed ourselves."

"But what could you possibly hunt out here? How could there be enough food for a whole race of giants to eat?" I inquired.

"There is plenty of food. But it takes great hunters to make a kill. I am one of many. My tribe is coming soon. We hunt in packs."

"What do you hunt?" I asked.

"What else? There is only one thing for a giant to hunt, giant desert sand worms!"

"You hunt the sand worms!?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes," he answered.

"But how do you kill them? They are so big!"

"Desert giants are great hunters. We listen quietly for sounds of the worm. Then, many of us stab it with our great worm spears. It takes long hours of fighting, but when the worm is dead, our entire tribe can be fed for a week."

"Well, we seem to have made friends. Perhaps you could let us pass now," I replied.

"Ha ha, this I cannot do. Little people are forbidden in the Land of the Giants."

"But we must reach the city! What of them, are they not forbidden?"

"Zahkar knows not how the city came. One day, it was not here. The next day, it appeared out of nowhere. But we cannot kill them."

“Why?” I asked. “What is stopping you.”

“He is stopping us, the demon with red eyes. He guards them. But you are not one of them. He does not protect you. You are outsiders, strangers, and you must go or die.”

“No!” I cried. “We’re not leaving! Step aside or prepare to defend yourself!”

Sabah and the rest looked at me in shock, as if I had just sentenced them to death. Alheem, who looked as if he would soil his pants, said to me, “wait, you’re a demi-god, right? You could lift that stone block in Egypt, right? So you can take him. You’ve killed giants before, haven’t you?”

“Actually, I’ve never seen a giant before. And I don’t know if I can beat him, or even how I’m going to fight him.”

His eyes fell out of his head. “What! Well, what if he kills you!”

“Then, we’ll find out if I can beat him, won’t we?” I replied.

“Enough!” cried the giant. “Little people are unclean. They bring sickness to our land. Be gone or be dead!”

Ishtar jumped forward with an idea, “wait, you don’t have to fight him. We can just get on the carpet, tell him that we are leaving, and fly back the way we came. Then, when we’re too far for him to see, we can turn around and head back to the city from another direction.”

Alheem smiled at her, “yes! That is brilliant! I think that we should. . .,” but as I was looking at him speak, I saw a flash of chrome, a splatter of blood smear across my vision, and the body of Alheem fall with a scream. The next second, I heard Zahkar yell, “I said, ENOUGH!”

I looked around me in a daze, my mind trying to gather what so horrible had just happened so very quickly. In the blink of an eye, the inconceivable had occurred. But, I could not comprehend it. I was still confused, still in a state of shock and disbelief. Both Ishtar and Alheem were dead.

They laid in their own blood, their bodies mutilated and unrecognizable. Alheem was decapitated, and with the same stroke it seemed, Ishtar had been cut in half, severed from the waist.

Oh Alheem, my good good friend, my only friend, my noble friend, my wise friend, he was dead! Killed in such an ignoble way, with such dishonor, with such indignity, like an animal! Like a chicken to be cooked and eaten! And his beloved laying beside him, the beautiful Ishtar, whose delicate living hands I had so recently caressed, whose lips I had just kissed if not yesterday. Who danced and sang and coerced me to love her, and who found love with a worthless slave. A slave who once cared little for his own life due to his great despair. But, who, when at last found love, and found a reason to live this horrible life, was murdered, murdered on the very day, on the only day of his joy. For what? For what reason was all this taken away from me? My friends, my loved ones, my companions, who I would never see again, who I would never speak with again, DEAD, dead before I could say good-bye, dead before we could part farewell. Why??? Because of another’s impatience?

For a few seconds, the world seemed to go away. It all went away. But, when I came back, I came with a scream, a scream like a birth cry, a scream like a man with madness. I turned to the giant, and cried, “YOU WILL DIE!! I will cut off your head and bathe in your blood and eat your flesh and shit on your corpse!”

For a moment, the giant was intimidated. But then, he laughed. He laughed so

loud that his voice seemed to carry all throughout the desert. And thereon, looking low upon me, replied, “you wish to fight me? Ha ha ha ha, go ahead. I’ll let you hit me first. In fact, I’ll even close my eyes. Oh, wait, maybe you won’t be able to reach me, ha ha ha! I will get on my knees, little man, and you can hit me as hard as you can. Then, I will hit you back.” And he continued to laugh.

I looked at him with rage, clenching my fists, and watched as he got on his knees and closed his eyes. But, I did not wish to kill him that easily. I wanted him to feel pain, great, enormous pain before he died.

But when the attack did not come, he said, “why are you not attacking? Are you afraid, little man? Maybe, you wish for me to put my arms down too?”

I did not respond. But he put his arms down anyway, and closed his eyes.

Then, I could not contain myself further, and in a burst of fury, I grabbed my sword, leaped into the air, and stabbed the giant in the wrist so hard and fast, that all but the hilt had gone through his flesh. With that, the giant dropped his scimitar, the weapon he had used to slay Ishtar and Alheem, and screamed in agony, as blood began to spill out of his wound. I, in turn, lifted his huge sword by the handle with both hands, and heaving it into the air, tossed it outward with all my might. The scimitar flew like a spinning discus and cut off Zahkar’s head from the neck. His decapitated head went flying through the air, tossing out a stream of blood. And his limp and dead body crashed to the ground making a thundering noise like that of a collapsing mountain.

Finally, the laughing stopped.

Sabah and I spent the next several hours burying Ishtar and Alheem. We prayed for their souls to Allah, Zeus, and Yahweh, and descended their bodies, wrapped in the once magic carpet, into the ground with great delicacy, as if they were made of finely worked, clay-hardened stone.

We marked their tombs using the giant’s armor, breaking it apart and carving on it their names. And Sabah performed a final, nomadic, funeral ritual, involving the spilling of water over their graves.

Then, I wept. I wept, and said to Sabah, “it’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If I had just left them. . .they didn’t need to come. I should’ve known that it was too dangerous for them to come. This was my quest. And they died because I brought them here. They should’ve stayed in Dur Sharrukin. I should have told them to stay. But, I did not. I let them come and they died. They died risking their lives for my personal reasons. They died for nothing.”

“No, Dynotus, they knew the risks. You did not force them. They came of their own free will. But they were unfortunate. It could have been us, you know?”

“No, it’s my fault!” this time I screamed. I covered my eyes, hiding my tears, “you shouldn’t have come, either!”

“What?” he asked.

“If I die for this, I do not want you to die with me. Leave,” I said.

“But you need me, effendi. You need my help, remember?”

“Go,” is all I said.

“I will not leave you here to die alone. What if you get lost? You don’t know what the desert can do to a man. You’re not experienced enough to. . .”

“Go back to Dur Sharrukin, I don’t want you here.”

“But. . .,” he argued.

“Go!” I cried, throwing a handful of sand in his eyes. “Go, you stupid Ninevahan!! I don’t want you here!!”

Then, he said quietly, “well, if that’s the way you feel, I shall go.” He gathered his things and left. And I never saw Sabah again.

Chapter 22

Alone

I was all alone again

There was not a tree to comfort me

Not a single soul,

Nor bug or rodent for company

Not a voice to reply to my own

But my own echo

There was nothing but the whistling of the wind

But I had hope. That thing which had not escaped Pandora's box. That driving thing which kept me alive, hoping that I would reach the city of Nether Sharrukin.

In my loneliness, I thought of Seline. I saw her smiling face like the sun, whose picture lingered in my vision even after it became too bright and made me squint. But that time, when we were together, seemed so long ago, I could barely fathom or even believe it was within my own life time. So many things had happened since then. So many things had occurred since I had slept beneath her balcony window. It almost seemed as if I had died and been reborn a new person, a person much different than Dynotus. For unlike Dynotus, who lived in a big palace atop a mountain and roamed naked for most of the day, I lived nowhere. I had no home. I just walked the desert from place to place, seeking shelter, wearing heavy clothing to avoid the burning, speaking strange languages, having met many friends who were now gone or dead, and who was loved by no one. Indeed, it seemed, I had sacrificed much to be with my beloved. I had risked more than at first could possibly imagine. And for this, I felt like a fool, like a love-sick fool. For I had lost my will. I had lost my courage and my confidence. The desert had beat it out of me. And I was left with nothing, nothing but a foolish hope that slipped from my hands faster than the desert sand.

Soon, I believed, I would die. Without the magic carpet, a giant worm, the first of many obstacles, would have eaten me. The second obstacle eliminated three of us, and as Ishtar had predicted, it was far more terrible than the first. Now came the third and final obstacle, a demon with red eyes. And I had to face it alone, knowing that it was far more terrible than the other two, knowing it was something powerful enough to stop an entire tribe of giants, even though I could not imagine what it was.

Yet, even if I did surpass this final obstacle, I didn't know whether or not I could even reach the city on time. For Ishtar was gone, and her magic was gone, and without the carpet, I had no idea how long it would take to reach the city on foot, or even if I had enough water to survive that long.

But something pushed me on. Thoughts of giving up and going home never crossed my mind. Perhaps, it was because, I had nothing to live for back in Sparta, and if I returned, would I forever live in despair. Perhaps, it was the belief, that if I could but see her once again, all the pain and anguish that I had known would disappear.

The last tribulation did not come unexpectantly, and with the very first sign of him, did I know that he was it.

Upon the summit of another dune, did I come across a large flat plain, where the

city was visible and in clear view, something impossible to see from the time I had begun the quest on foot. And it was at that point, that a fiery light began to glow all around the desert, in all directions, for miles around, until the glow became a massive square fencing off the city from any further approach. Then, the glowing light rose up into the sky and became like a wall of fire, a fire that did not burn nor give off heat, but instead, blocked my passage.

When I touched this magical barrier, the texture felt as smooth and hard as marble. But when I struck it with my sword, the blade fell right through, taking part of my arm with it. "It's not real," I said to myself. "It is only an illusion."

Then, I heard a voice. Turning to the sound of the voice, I saw a great, big, ball of fire come out of the magical wall. The fiery wall vanished as if it were never there, and instead, gathered itself up into one form; a semi-human form that resembled a large, muscular man from the waist up, but had, instead of legs, a tail of red, glowing smoke. The being had a baldhead with pointy ears, and wore nothing except for a gold belt and golden bracelets. He had black, cat like teeth, and long, three inch, pointed finger nails as black as coal. The rest of him was glowing with the color of blood. Even his eyes were red. But they were bright, much brighter than the rest of him, blazing like a hellish inferno, blazing like the eyes of a demon.

"Most people run in fear, when they see the wall of fire. But you did not. You must be very brave," said the being.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am the genie of the Emperor Sargon II, and guardian of the city, Nether Sharrukin," he said in a gentlemanly voice, placing one hand over his chest and giving me a bow.

"A genie?" I said with surprise. "Yes, I remember Alheem telling me something of genies. But, I thought genies lived in bottles and granted wishes?"

"Ha ha ha, that is not true for all genies. Indeed, we have great powers, but that power can only be used in service to someone of lesser power. I am the humble servant of Sargon II who holds the lamp. I have been ordered to guard the city from intruders. Any who wish to enter are destroyed."

Knowing of what power a genie could possess, I decided to use my brain instead of my muscle, hoping to persuade or trick him into letting me pass. "So, it was you who stopped the giants?"

"Ah, yes, at least somebody recognizes my work."

"And you make the city disappear?" I asked.

"It was one of Sargon II's first wishes. It was his way of making the city unconquerable."

"Well, if you are so powerful, why do you listen to him? Why don't you just snap your fingers and destroy him?"

"Alas that I would, but I cannot. For he holds the magic lamp, and I cannot turn against him. Anything he commands, I must obey."

"Well, what if I steal the lamp? Will you then obey me?" I asked.

"Yes, but you cannot steal the lamp. For I have been sworn to protect his treasure, and the lamp is his most prized possession."

"Well, if you cannot turn your magic against him, cannot you just ignore his commands when he is not looking? Does he see you now? What force would stop you

from ignoring me and letting me pass?"

"No force at all, but if I do ignore you, and Sargon II finds out, he can imprison me within the lamp for a thousand years. That is a punishment too great to bear, and I will not risk it."

"All right, if you cannot let me enter, can you take someone out?" I asked.

"Hmm," said the genie in thought. "The King never wished for anything on that matter. Who do you wish to free from the city?"

I looked at him with growing hope and excitement, "it is a girl! She is my wife and she was kidnapped. Her name is Sali," I replied.

"Ha ha ha, a thousand pardons, effendi, but this girl I cannot free."

"You mean, you know of her!?" I cried.

"Of course," he replied. "She is one of the King's finest."

"My God, I cannot believe that I am so close! Why can't you release her!?"

"Because, the King told me not to allow anyone to take his treasure. Sali is one of his most beautiful harem girls. And his harem girls are part of his treasure."

"No!" I cried. "You mean, there is no way that I can take her back? I cannot even see her!"

"I am afraid not," he said in a cold, hard tone.

"No, you will let me pass!" I threatened. "You will let me pass or I will. . ."

"You will what?" he asked.

"I will fight you!"

"You, will fight me?" And he burst into laughter. "You cannot fight me."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because, with the snap of my fingers, I can make you fat."

At first, I thought that I had heard him wrong. "*Did he say, fat?*" But to my horror, it was true! I was fat, as fat as the King Sennacherib who was stuffing his face with grapes, too fat to even move a muscle.

"Or, I can make you old."

And I was old. Instantaneously, my body appeared as if it had aged fifty years. I could not believe my eyes. I was nothing but skin and bones. I was hunched over and could barely walk, let alone fight a genie.

"Or," he said with a wicked smile, "I can make you young!"

He snapped his fingers and I was young. So young, that all my clothes had fallen off of me, and I had to crawl out of, what seemed like a huge pile of laundry, to discover that I was no older than a newborn baby! Then, he snapped his fingers again, and I was back to normal.

"You see," he said. "You cannot fight me. So, just go away, or I will snap you into something much worse, like a rotting corpse."

"No, I will not go. I am not leaving without Sali. If you must, snap me dead. But I will not go of my own free will."

He folded his arms, perplexed. "Oh, you stubborn fool! I will not give you the pleasure of death. But if you will not go, I will turn you into a. . .," and this time, he slapped his hands, turning me into a desert rat. "Ahh, that's better," he said with an evil smile and laughed.

Then, suddenly, I changed back into a man. And he looked at me in shock. "What is this! I did not turn you back! How did you do that!?" he cried.

"I don't know," I answered.

"You are not a man!" he said. Now, he looked angry, and lost all his politeness, "who are you!?"

"I am Dynotus, Son of. . .yes! Yes, I am the Son of Zeus!"

"Are you a god?" he asked.

"No, I am a demi-god. That is why your magic will not work on me. Now, release Sali, or I will destroy you!"

But he did not reply. Instead, he growled like some strange creature, and opened his mouth to reveal extended fangs and a long, black, forked tongue, slithering in and out of his lips like a snake. Then, he grew larger and larger, and pointed his long, black finger nail at me, speaking in a devilish voice, "you will not survive! If it is a fight you want, it is a fight you shall get!" As he said that, fire came spewing out of his mouth like vomit, and his hands began to emit a web of blue and white electricity, like little bolts of lightning. Then, he channeled the electricity through his fingers and off his nails, flowing outward in a steady stream and striking me in the chest, knocking me flat and blackening my skin.

I arose but he was already upon me. Like some vicious animal, he attacked, sinking his three inch nails deep into my throat. I screamed and pushed him off, noticing for only a second that he was solid. But before I could attack, had he become like a vapor.

I stood to my feet in retaliation, gripping the blood that spilled from my neck, and grabbed the sword to my waist. Using the blade, I swung several times at him. But, to my surprise, found the blade to go right through him! It passed through his body as if he was nothing but a mirage. And all the while that I attacked, did he laugh at me, laugh at my futile attempt to harm him.

Angered, I dropped the sword and swung my fist. But my hand resulted in the same, and I almost lost my footing and collapsed into him. The genie continued laughing. And then, when I saw that there was nothing I could do to injure him, he cast out his hand and smote me down with another bolt of lightning. The current ran through my body, jolting me. I fell to the ground feeling the pain of my burnt flesh, knowing that only I could have survived such a blow. But not many more.

"You. . .you can't be invincible!" I cried, and ran at him swinging my fist again. But it was useless. This time, my entire body fell through, sensing nothing against my skin except for a gaseous cloud, and a bit of static which lifted the hair on my arms. Other than that, there was no effect.

And he mocked me. He mocked me by making his nails longer, longer than a beasts claws, swinging and tearing into my chest with all five nails, scarring me horribly and drawing blood. I screeched in pain. His claws were sharp and penetrating and the bolts bouncing off of them burned my skin like salt in an open wound. He attacked again. This time, gashing my face, leaving a mark from my eyebrow to my cheek. I swung yet again with no result. He continued to laugh and butcher me.

I could feel the blood seeping out of my organs and a heavy weariness coming over me. I was losing the fight, and I had not even touched him. My head was spinning too fast for me to think. I had tried punching him and slashing him, but had not tried grabbing him. And though it sounds ridiculous now, I tried it then. But before my hands were close enough to wrestle, did he vanish entirely.

Then, I felt his presence behind me, his claws ripping into my neck. The blood loss was too much, and I fell to the ground, nearly paralyzed.

But the genie did not finish there. He still wished to play, even though he had won. “Ha ha ha, if I cannot kill you with a wish, I will kill you the slow and painful way!” And he struck me with lightning a third time, singeing my claw wounds. I screamed in agony. “Do you wish to give up and go home now, Dynotus?”

I was about to say, “yes,” and plead for mercy, when he added, “or will you still stay to fight for this, Sali, girl?”

But with that, I became furious, crying, “Nooooo!!” I stood and attacked him several times, only to fan the smoke emanating from him.

In turn, he replied, “then, DIE!” And cast out both hands, letting forth a long string of lightning, giving me unfathomable hurt.

I lay there, crouched up like a ball and moaning. The genie looked down at me, and decided to finish me off with a blast of fire. And so he belched. He belched out a stream of flame, which burned my clothes and flesh.

Every inch of me was in pain. But the genie showed no mercy. For he was cruel, very cruel. And said with a wicked smile, “now, I shall feast!” Then, he morphed into a huge, red and black tiger.

With a feAresme growl, he leaped at me to instill the final blow of my slow and weary death. For there are two great deaths, unequivalent in suffering to any other. One is to be burned alive. The other, is to be eaten by a wild animal. The genie wished to cause me both. But, before the tiger’s mighty teeth could sink into my flesh, did I wearily turn myself to face him and transform my ring into a sword, manifesting it within his body.

Impaled upon the sword, a weapon he could not have possibly been aware of, the tiger, who was the genie, turned back into his humanoid self. And looking at his chest, did see his blood spill out from his black heart. The genie gazed at me in disbelief, his eyes rolling back, and screamed. He screamed, and with an explosion, did the very fabric of his being fly apart and turn to nothing, nothing but magical energy that sizzled through me.

I tried to stand, but I could not. I was much too weak, and all I wished for was to sleep. It seemed like a pleasant thought, and I had no will in me to resist. And so, I slept, out there in the middle of the desert. But before my eyelids shut, I did notice a vulture come and land beside me.

Chapter 23

Was it a dream? I do not know. But after blacking out, I remember seeing the land of Hellas. But it was not from the perspective of one standing on the Earth. Instead, I gazed down at the green hill valleys, the roaring oceans, and the teaming islands, seeing my homeland from a very high place as if looking down from Heaven or from some tall mountain.

Then, there was a soothing peace. It was a cool and pleasant feeling and I was very relaxed. Looking around me, I could see a massive temple, a temple like the Hellenite partenon, reaching up into the infinite sky, and beside it, I did see strange creatures. There were seas with playful mermaids and centaurs (half-man-half-horses), male and female, stomping along and playing games of love and romance. And I saw majestic pegasi, the winged horses, soar through the clouds and land like swanns into crystal clear lakes. It was beautiful beyond compare.

Turning to the steps of the partenon, did I see many human-like beings. But they were too beautiful and too perfect in form to be humans, and I knew that they were not. For all the men were enormously muscular and astoundingly handsome, and the women were of such grace, such beauty, that they were unlike any women I had ever seen. Their bodies were firm and strong, and many of them were naked. Others wore clothing, but only light robes and chitons. One woman was standing fully dressed in armor, with a Trojan like helmet, a shield made of sheep skin and a long spear, and was speaking with another woman who was dressed only in her own, long, blonde hair.

Curious, I walked up the steps of the temple, passing by other naked men and women, who were without a single flaw, but were as the marble statues made by Athenian sculptors, and entered within the sacred hall whose pillars were more than twenty feet in width.

Walking down the hall, I saw armor and weaponry of all kind, made of solid gold and silver. I passed one man who wore a lion skin over his shoulders with the lion's head still attached. I saw another man carrying a trident, who had the body of a youth and the wavy beard of a grandfather. And as he walked, did his feet make sounds like the ocean, like the sounds heard in a seashell.

It was then that I noticed for the first time, that I, too, was naked. And looking at my body in a reflective shield, did I notice that I was very muscular and handsome, and had not a single flaw on my skin. There was not a wound or sunburn, nor a single part of me discolored. I was from head to foot, the same pigment, as if I had never been tanned by the sun or had never worn clothing since the day I was born.

But something told me, that this was wrong. Something told me, that the image I saw in the mirror was not a true image. It was a lie. Somehow, for some reason, it was a terrible lie.

Then, there was a voice, and I turned to see my father. He sat upon a throne made of solid gold and raised a scepter encrusted with many gems, and his long, white beard fell against his broad shoulders. "My son, you have strayed far from your homeland. As long as you are gone, you shall begin to weaken. Your godly strength will fail you. And you shall not be immortal. You will know death, and it shall come after you, as long as you are away. Quickly, Dynotus, return home, or your wounds will never heal."

I looked at him, puzzled, not knowing what wounds he was speaking of, and

thereupon looked down at myself, at my mighty chest, and saw that it was turning strange colors. My skin was peeling and turning red, and claw marks started showing on my chest and on my stomach, and my mighty torso began to wane in size. It was then, in that hall, that I became embarrassed. For the first time in my life, I was ashamed, ashamed of my naked body, for it was no longer beautiful. It was no longer flawless. And I saw all the other gods, gathered together, sitting on tables and on stone benches, naked and drinking wine. And they were laughing. They were all pointing and laughing at my nakedness! And I wanted to hide. I wanted to run and cover myself with clothing, for I was so ashamed!

Then, in a dark corner of the room, I heard another laugh. But his voice was deep and feAresme, and I grew terribly afraid. For I knew that it was he, the one that was stronger than I. And he, too, was there, laughing at my nakedness, laughing at my imperfect body.

Only my father did not laugh. But his face was grim and angry. He lifted his golden scepter into the air and said, "remember, Dynotus, come home. . .come home, or next time, you will die."

I remember trying to look at him. But found that I was blinded, blinded by the glare of a jewel on his scepter, a jewel that hurt my eyes and made me squint.

When I turned away from the glare, allowing my eyes to adjust, I saw the blue sky, and where the jewel had been was now the sun. I was lying on my back and had been staring straight up at it. The peace and tranquillity that I had felt was gone, replaced by misery and anguish. The pain of my wounds and my burnt flesh seared back into me. And the heat and dryness of the desert was all around. At least, the gods were gone, too, and my ripped and torn clothes were still hanging over my body, so that I would no longer feel shame. "A dream," I said to myself, "just a dream."

Then, I felt myself in motion. Looking at my surroundings, I discovered that I was in a long chariot of some sort, a chariot being pulled along. "*Someone has found me,*" I thought. "*Again, I have been saved, perhaps, by other desert bandits.*"

I lifted my head and looked over the top of the caravan to see two people, dressed heavily in desert attire. They were so heavily dressed, in fact, that I could not even see their skin. So I decided to introduce myself, "hey, thanks for saving me!"

They did not reply.

"Hey, I really appreciate this. But, if you don't mind, can you just drop me off at Nether Sharrukin."

No response.

"Do you. . .do you speak Ninevahan?" I asked.

There was not a word.

"Hey! What is happening? Are you deaf?" said I, sitting up and touching one on the shoulder.

The cloaked figure turned to me, and from what I saw, did I scream. For it was not a man, not a man at all. He was. . .it was a creature of some sort. Its body was in the shape and form of a man. But its skin was green and patchy, like a reptile, and its head was not a human one. It was the head of a serpent! And it opened its mouth, revealing its long fangs and slithery tongue as if to speak!

I fell off the side of the wagon in horror, and rushed to my feet, seeing the caravan come to a halt. The creatures stepped off the wagon, and I could see that not even their

caravan was normal. Instead of being pulled by two horses or camels, it was hauled by two, giant lizards, a kind I had never seen before.

The snake men approached me, and I backed away in fear. "You're, you're not human!" I cried.

They only hissed in reply.

"Well, thanks anyway. You don't even have to take me to Nether Sharrukin. I can walk from here."

But they didn't listen. They each pulled out a sword, and motioned to me in a threatening manner. For they had not saved me out of compassion. They had saved me to be eaten!

Thereupon my magic ring did its thing, and turned into a magic sword. Swinging the blade several times for warning, I cried, "O.K., get back!"

But they did not retreat, and took the initiative to attack me. Their metal was fast and used with skill, better than many human soldiers. But they were no match for Dynotus. Even though I still felt weak from the fight with the genie, somehow, I had recovered. I had recovered closer to normal health than any man could have. And I wondered whether or not, it was more than just a dream, and my father actually had intervened and decided to help me.

Quickly, I parried their blows and returned with ones of my own, cutting deeper and faster into their scaly flesh. Soon, however, the combat became more than just a sword fight, for they began to use their deadly heads. I knew not how to win such a battle, for it was like fighting a man and an animal at the same time. I did, of course, have a great fear of their bite. And wondered, knowing what a normal snake bite could do, what would happen to me, if I were bitten by snakes with heads their size. Thus, I avoided their bite. I steered clear of their fangs with greater attention than their swords, for I knew what their swords could do to me, but had no clue as to their venom. But that dread cost me several slight blows to the body, ones that I was not quick enough to dodge or block, for they moved with incredible, inhuman speed.

My only advantage was my superior strength. And with it, was able to deliver crushing blows to my enemies. With one fail swoop, my blade severed the head of one snake man. The other was much faster. But in time, he too, fell to my might. For with my great strength, I did disarm him, and with a slight twist of my wrist, forced the point of my steel through his chest, killing him.

When the snakes died, they hissed and made a spine-tingling noise, an odd noise like that of sliding mud and rattling stones. Their serpentine necks stretched out and up into the air. Then, they went into convulsions.

I pulled my sword back from the second snake man and saw that it was stained with black blood. But the fight was not over. For there were more snake men. And I looked behind me to see four more jump out from the back of the caravan. Three looked the same size as the coaches of the chariot. But the last one who came out, was very big, and he hid his face behind a cloak like a druid. All I could tell of him, was that he carried a huge scythe in both hands, and had a long, purple tail which slithered behind.

Before the next fight could begin, I was quick to arm myself with a bow and arrow, using my magic ring again, and pulled the string back aiming for the middle one. That snake man stood without fear, hissing and threatening me with his teeth. But his unlocked jaw did not frighten me, and I released the string before he could bite. The

arrow sailed into his mouth, coming out the back of his neck. The middle one fell over dead. The other two kept coming.

I reached into the monster's throat and pulled out my arrow. Then, transformed the bow back into a sword, lifting it to block. But I was too late! The humanoid snake on the left, lashed out his head with such speed, that he caught me like a whip, his fangs sinking into my biceps, making two very deep and bloody holes. With that, my entire arm became paralyzed. But the snake man did not let go. He remained to fill me with his poison. I took immediate action, swinging my blade down upon his neck, chopping off his head. The dead body fell to the ground with a thump, but continued to squirm like a decapitated rooster.

The snake on the right pulled out a short dagger and stabbed me in the side. I brought my sword around, knocking the dagger away. Then, with all my might, hacked the serpent creature to the ground, slaying him.

During this time, however, I had forgotten all about the other, larger snake man. He came at me when I wasn't looking, using his huge scythe to hook my sword and sling it beyond my reach. Then, he attempted to raze me in half like you would raze a field of grass. I evaded this terrible fate just in time, and using my mighty fist, punched the long wooden shaft of the scythe, breaking it in half. The broken half with the blade, fell to the ground, the sharp end sticking upward. The lower, handle of the scythe, was still in his hands. Worthless, he threw it aside, and tried to tackle me like a wrestler. Yet, my might was superior still, and I bested him with a swift punch below his jaw, lifting him into the air with the force of the blow, knocking him on his back.

Any man having taken such a beating would be dead. But this creature was no man. And he was not dead yet.

He stood, letting his clothing drop, revealing his entire body. Indeed, he was a fearsome sight. Like a man, was he built with great muscle, and like a serpent, did he have many colorful, purple and red scales. All down his back and tail were various, diamond shaped spots. His head was like that of the gaboon viper. His eyes were black and soulless, and hanging from his puffy pink gums were enormous, one foot fangs.

I tightened my fists, and removed most of my clothing, wearing nothing but my loin-cloth. Then, I was prepared for battle.

As he approached, I kicked him in the stomach with all the force I could muster. But he only stumbled back a few steps. Then, he moved in a way I could not have been ready for. The snake man lashed his tail outward, so that it struck me in the stomach like a mace. Then, I felt myself suspended in the air, and could feel his leathery skin wrap all around me. My arms and legs were pinned, and I was slowly being squeezed to death.

Feeling my veins almost pop, I tried, desperately, to break free. But I was too weak. For my other arm was still paralyzed. Then, I felt his tail crawl up to my neck and begin choking me! Soon, I knew, that if I did not break free, I would die. And so, gathering my power, I bit him on the tail until his black blood was in my mouth, and pushed outward with my legs and my one good arm, until I freed myself.

I fell to the ground and rolled to a stand. But he came toward me again, this time lashing out his long neck so as to bite me. His aim was good, and if he had bitten me where he had attempted, in the jugular vein, I would not have survived. But I grabbed his one fang with my hand and pushed him back. Then, I kned him between the legs making him retreat in pain, and punched him so hard, that his tooth broke off. Finally, with a

fierce battle cry, and with all my remaining strength, I punched him in the gut. The snake man enveloped around my fist. With that, he was stunned, long enough to grab him and nail him on to the scythe blade, which was still sticking up. The blade cut through his back and came out of his stomach, and at last, he was dead.

When my captors were defeated, I searched their bodies and, taking the best clothing, dressed myself in garments without claw marks or blood stains. Then, I was sure to wrap my bite wound with a clean cloth, for my arm hurt badly. But, as far as I could tell, there was no effect of poison.

Looking at the snake men's giant lizard animals, I wondered about the strange creatures that lived in that other world, known only to me as Nether Ninevah, realizing there were far more things in it than giant worms, giant people, and genies. Perhaps, I thought, there was also a Nether Hellas, a Nether Egypt, and a Nether Cannan? What strange things could be on this parallel world? This, I did not know, and did not care to find out. All that I did care about, was completing my quest, my quest to find Seline. And I knew that soon, we would be together. Soon, after such a long time of separation, we would see each other, and perhaps, love each other. The anxiety was too great to bear.

But I had to be certain that I could make it. It seemed I had been unconscious for a great while, for my wounds had healed considerably, and I no longer felt fatigue. But I was thirsty, and looking in the snake men's caravan, did find water. Surprisingly, there were very few waterskins, and I wondered whether or not snake men had less of a need for water.

Then, I tried to use the lizards to take me to Nether Sharrukin. But they just ignored me, and did no pulling. For a long time, I tried to make the lizards go. I even tried getting up and pushing from behind. But they were as stubborn as a mule and did not budge an inch. At last, I gave up, and decided to make the journey on foot. Luckily, the snake men seemed to have been heading in the same direction that I was. Was their destination also Nether Sharrukin? Were such beings common in the City of Enchantment? The answer to these questions, I did not know. But, I thought that soon, I would find out. And so, I took what waterskins I could, and began the long march to the city.

I walked.

I walked for miles, endlessly, dragging my weary feet along, strengthened only by the knowledge that Seline was inside. She was inside the city. And I had to make it. I had to.

Minutes turned to hours and hours turned to more hours. I drank and drank until there was no more. But I thought, it did not matter.

Then, at long last, I came upon it. I looked at it, with much more excitement than when I had seen the city of Dur Sharrukin. And it was just as beautiful, just as magnificent. It was there in all its splendor, and the thought that Seline was somewhere inside, made it appear even more beautiful. It was like a dream, a dream that at long last had been fulfilled.

I raised my arms and dropped my waterskin, and looked at the sun that had so darkened and wrinkled my face. Lines began to show when I squinted. I hadn't shaved in months. And I wondered if Seline would even recognize me. Or if I would recognize her.

But I knew that she would. And I knew that I would. For no matter how much a person changes, his eyes are always the same. She would take one look at me, look into my eyes, and know that it is me. Then, at last, I would kiss her. I would kiss her for the very first time.

Yes, my heart burst with joy. I ran to the city now, literally ran and cried, "I'm coming, Seline!"

But in all my joy, I could not imagine. I could not believe. I did not remember . . .
THREE DAYS!

My heart stopped. It came to a grinding halt, as if I had been struck by a heavy weight. A weight on my chest far too great, far too terrible to bear. It dwarfed the weight of the Egyptian block. It dwarfed the weight of the tomb. It was like being struck down, struck down by a huge iron hammer. My muscles turned to pudding, my blood clogged, my lungs sealed, my whole being shriveled up in terror. Nether Sharrukin was no more. Where it had been, was nothing, nothing but the flat, empty wasteland.

Chapter 24

The city seemed to just fade away. I could see it one moment. The next, it began to fade, as if it were half there and half not. At last it vanished from view. It completely vanished.

THREE DAYS!

If only I would have remembered, perhaps I could have made it on time. Maybe, I would have done something. But I had forgotten. At first, I thought it unimportant. But now I realized, that it was the most important thing that Ishtar ever told me.

THREE DAYS!

Now, I was lost. Not only lost in the desert, but lost in my own mind. What could I do? Where would I go? In which direction had Seline gone? How could I ever find her? And, perhaps, most importantly, how would I survive? I was miles from the only city that I knew of, Dur Sharrukin. And even if I could reach the mountain entrance to where it was, how would I climb up it, without a flying carpet? Who would save me, or take me into their home, in a world populated by desert giants and snake men? All hope was lost. At last, I had given up. I would never see Seline again. And it was too late to go back to my home. I would never see Hellas again, either. Certainly, I would die.

And so, I walked out into the Land of the Giants, wandering aimlessly, wandering deliriously, waiting for my life to come to a subtle close.

There, in that desert, I began to lose my mind. I suffered from hallucinations and fell victim to strange thoughts. In front of me, I saw everything. My whole life flashed by. There was Zeus, my father, sitting on his throne. And King Demaratus, I saw him, too, standing at his banquet table and proposing a toast. There were his maid-servants, also, who I saw bathing me. I saw Astymeloisa, Ellena and Clytemnestra. One of them was teaching Seline to ride a horse. Another one, had burst into flames, right in the King's court. I saw Thunderfoot, my mighty steed, my faithful steed, where was he now? I saw Jacob, the young Cannanite child. And there was Majid, who defended my life, and the two traitors, I saw them too, Jehan and Raouel. But they were dead. How could I be seeing them. I must have seen someone else. And there were the slave masters, and the tomb, how could I forget that? There was also the mummy, who was burned to death. And what of Kirce, the evil Queen of Darkness? Was she not beautiful? Yes, she was. She was beautiful. And so was Ishtar. She danced for me. She danced beautifully. And the King. Boy, he was rich. King Sennacherib Hamid, he was very rich. But these sights couldn't be real. They were just mirages. They were only a product of my delirium. The madness that would take me, and kill me.

But what of Seline? I loved her. I saw her riding my horse. I saw her bathing by the river. I saw her smiling at the King's table, with her hair tied in two braids. I saw her sitting beside me on the mountain, at night, by a campfire. I saw her sleeping under a horse's sheep skin saddle. She defended my life. She threw herself in front of the soldier's sword. And she greeted me in the misty afternoon, in the fog, with tears. Yes, I do love her. I love her with all my heart and soul.

But the city faded away. Perhaps, it was not real. Maybe they were right. Maybe, it was an illusion. Maybe, even, Ishtar was an illusion. And Hellas, it could be an illusion, too. Yes, nothing could be real. Seline, though, was she an illusion? Is love just a mirage, that fades away as soon as you think it is within reach?

No, nothing was real to me anymore. I ignored all the visions, all the voices and all the sights. They were not real. Only the desert was real, the desert and everything in it: the sand, the sun, and me locked in battle, fighting for life and substance.

The hallucinations went away. But I had no water. I needed water.

Then, I pissed. I pissed in my canteen. Well, it was a liquid. It filled my waterskin. And I thought, should I drink it? Should I? It wouldn't hurt. Yes, it might smell and it does burn a little. But it's still a liquid. Water is a liquid. Yes, I will drink it. But not now. I will wait. I will wait until I am thirsty. Yes, then, I will drink it.

So I wandered around, often stumbling over my own feet, carrying my piss in one hand. And I began to talk. I began to talk out loud to no one. "Three days," I would repeat, over and over again. "Yessir, three days. . .three, god damn days!"

After a long while, I stumbled over another sand dune, saying, "three days! Here today, gone in THREE DAYS! It's really kind of funny, eh, effendi? Ha ha ha ha, Sabah you old bastard, three days."

Then, I was thirsty. And I looked in my waterskin and thought, oh good, plenty of water left! So I uncapped the waterskin, and went to bring it to my lips, when I saw a strange sight. It was a man. I could see the silhouette of man walking up out of the horizon. "Is it an illusion?" I asked. Thereon, I dropped the urine, "no, it is a man. It is a man! Hello!" I cried.

The man called back, "Dynotus, is it you?"

"Yes, over here!" I replied.

The man walked up to me, and at first, when I saw him, did I think to myself, I know him! But, who is it? Then, with shock, my memory caught on and I realized that it was Habakkuk. "Habakkuk?" I asked, "is that you?"

"Yes, Dynotus, it is I."

"But. . .how. . .how can it be?"

"I have returned. Forgive me for leaving you, but I was called to do the Lord's work."

"Did you find God?" I asked.

"Yes, I found him. He needed me to be His prophet, and to pronounce judgment on the Kaldeans and on Zudah."

"How did you find me?" I asked him.

"My son, I have the eyes of God, now. I can see all things through Him. He, hath shown me the way."

"Did he send you to help me?" I asked.

"No, I have come to give you a message."

"What?" I cried, "only a message!"

"A message from God," he replied. "He says that you must have faith in Him, whatever name you give Him, whether He is your father or not. For He is one and the same."

"That's it?" I asked.

"No, there is more. He said, 'the water will come when you find it, and when you embrace it.'"

"When I find what?" I asked.

"What you are looking for," he answered.

“But I am looking for many things.”

“No, you are looking for only one thing.”

“That isn’t true! I am looking for water, I am looking for Dur Sharrukin, I am looking for Sal. . .”

“No, they are one and the same. You are looking for one thing. When you find it, everything else shall come. Life is not first. For God was first in all things. And God is love.”

“Show me the way,” I asked.

“This, I cannot do. But, God’s word could not be of much use, if his listener were to die out here.”

“Then, you will help me?” I asked.

“Only, if you believe in Him. Believe in His vision, for what you seek is also blind.”

“Whatever you say,” I replied.

“Good, then take this waterskin. It is filled with water that shall never wane in volume, and shall never be empty, before you find shelter.”

“Can you lead me there?” I asked.

“No, I have other errands to run. But I shall point you in the right direction. Go ye East, over that sand dune, and you shall come upon a little town, not many miles from Dur Sharrukin.”

“Thank you, Habakkuk!” I said.

“Don’t thank me. Thank Allah. Thank Yahweh. Thank Zeus, whatever you wish to call Him.”

Then, Habakkuk walked away, out in the same direction from where he had come, and the same direction he had gone when he first left to find God.

Epilogue:

“Then, I walked East, where Habakkuk showed me, and walked until I found that little village, Yeoman Ra, and until I found a little bazaar where I entered and met you, to whom I have told this tale.”

“By Allah, that is truly a marvelous story. One that rivals even the One Thousand and One Tales of the Ninevahan Knights. But truly, effendi, I find all this hard to believe.”

The man with the silver ring leaned closer to me. “Hard to believe, eh? Do you wish to see proof?”

Then, he stood up, and removed his clothing. And looking at his bare chest, did I see that, indeed, he was very muscular. He was muscular like a Hellenite god. But I was shocked also, to see his beautiful body scarred, all over his chest and stomach. He was all scarred with claw marks. Looking at them, however, I knew that those claw marks could not have come from any animal that I was aware of. They were not the marks of a jackal or any other creature. For each set of claw marks consisted of five grooves, resembling more the mark of nails found on a human hand. Yet, I knew that a man could never have made those marks or woman, for the size and depth of the wounds were too terrible. And the blistering of those claw marks, as if a hot poker had burned him, could not have occurred any other way. They were only consistent with his story of the genie.

Then, he turned his back to me, and showed me a puncture wound beside his vertebrae, which I had almost forgotten, when he said, “see, here is where I was stabbed, by the traitorous cohort of Sabah.”

Then, he lifted his pant leg, and showed me a horrible wound in his leg, which spanned the length between his ankle and his knee. It looked as if someone had stabbed him with a sword and then had pushed the sword up toward his waist, which could have happened, yet still, would be unusually and painfully rare. “Here is where the antlion stuck his pincer into my leg and tried to pull me into the sand.”

I looked at him in awe. True, a man may have gone to great lengths to fake those injuries. But such suffering only to tell a bard’s tale? Whatever, indeed, did happen to this man, was severe, and perhaps, warranted such a marvelous tale.

At last, he lifted his sleeve and unwrapped a bandage that he had tied around his arm, and there I did see an injury that could not have been explained otherwise. “Here, is where I was bitten by the snake man.” There, I saw two bite wounds, as if some huge cat, like a tiger or a lion, had attacked him. But around those bite wounds, was the flesh purple and puffy. Indeed, it did appear, from my experience with snake bites, that he had been bitten by a snake, a huge snake, one that would leave bite marks six inches across.

Dynotus put his clothes back on and sat down. “Now, do you believe me?”

“I believe you have gone through a great deal. And listening to this long tale, do empathize with your loss. It is truly a sad and tragic tale. At first, I thought to befriend you only so that I could fool you and take your silver ring. For I am nothing but a lowly thief. But now, I am ashamed, and would not think to rob a man such as you. Now, I only wish to wish you luck, that you find this great treasure. I wish that someday, wherever she is, you find your wife. For I have never known a man to love a woman this much before now.” The man looked at me oddly, and took a sip from his waterskin. Then, he stood up, and started for the door. But I halted him, “wait! Where are you going?”

Dynotus turned to me, and with weary lips replied, "I'm going out to look."

I extended my hand in friendship and shook with him. "Son of Zeus, I will tell your tale to all who will hear of it, and continue to let others know of you and Seline, until the gods turn fate your way and you find her."

Then, the tired man slapped me on the shoulder, "thank you, effendi. Tell them so that somewhere, someday, Seline will hear that I am looking for her and not lost faith."

Part III

The Nomad

Chapter 25

This is the beginning.

The weather was dry and cool. Seline carefully placed each step of her bare feet against the stony ground and looked out from the rocky ledge at the sea. The stones were round and slippery and jutted out of the ocean like massive pillars holding the sky, and jutting out of the sea and rock, the flat walls of her father's palace, overseeing the blue waters which curved in the distance with the curve of the Earth, and which wrapped around the misty hills across the harbor. She could hear the beating of the waves against the rock and felt the sea breeze blow her golden, silky hair into a twisted pattern, and made her light, frail chiton, dance around her body to flaunt her sinewy thighs and reveal her bare, jutting nipples. Her eyes reflected the pale sadness of her emptiness, but could not hide the beauty of the deep azure, which shined like droplets of sea upon her delicate face. The only thing more lovely than the parthenon, a woman; a woman in love and longing for her beloved to return.

It had been many days since he had gone. She feared him dead. Soon, she thought, if Dynotus did not come back to Sparta, she would lock herself in her room and die. Or, perhaps she would simply walk into the sea, one step at a time, and give herself unto the god, Thalassa, where her flesh would sleep on delicate sea lilies, and her soul soar unchained from worldly matter.

Seline could not turn away from the longing that resided within her breast, and beat in her heart like the teaming waves beneath her feet. Nor could she avert her eyes from the bearing shore.

For the time, only the sounds of the sea and the caressing of the winds could comfort her. Seline loved the sea, and looked out to it, trusting it would bring him home. But soon, she thought, even these things would pass away, even these hopes, with drowning tears. For he had gone in search of the Crown of Kirce, and none had ever returned from such an undertaking.

"But you must eat!" she argued.

"Take it away, Astymeloisa, I'm not hungry."

"But the King said you must. He ordered me to make sure you eat."

"I don't care what my father said. I am the princess, and I command you to leave me in peace."

Astymeloisa looked deep into her eyes. "Only one thing could do this to such a young maid. You're in love, aren't you? With him," she added coyly.

"Yes, and what of it? You will say nothing to change my mind."

"You know, the night of the banquet, I almost made love to him."

"What, you didn't," said Seline with surprise.

"I almost did, along with Ellena and Clytemnestra. He likes to have many women at one time."

"But, did he care for you?" she asked.

"No, he doesn't care. He doesn't know how to care. He just fornicates with us,

like we were harlots, and never looks at us again.”

“No, he. . . he’s not like that,” Seline protested.

“Yes, he is, Seline, and I think it best you forget him and marry someone more suitable.”

“Well, I don’t believe it, Dynotus loves me.”

“Yes, he will say that, but after he has his way with you, it will be all over.”

“But, he doesn’t care about that. I know.”

“How do you know?” asked Astymeloisa.

“Because he told me.”

“And you believed him?”

“Yes.”

“When are you going to grow up and realize that all men are the same? They only want one thing, and that is what’s between your legs. After they have it, it’s all meaningless poetry.”

“Your wrong!” screamed Seline.

“Oh, Seline, my dear, you are more than just my master, you are my friend. I love you very much, and believe me when I say that such romance only happens in fairy tales. The real world isn’t like that. The real world is cruel and unmerciful. Dynotus does not love you. How could he? You are only seventeen, an innocent child. You’re not nearly old enough to know what love is.”

“And what is love?”

“You will learn when you are older.”

Seline stood up. “When?”

“Look, if you won’t eat, at least take your clothes off. I have other chores to attend to and I can’t argue with you all day.”

“What age?” asked Seline, slipping her robe off.

Astymeloisa collected the piled and dirty clothes in a basket. “When you’ve had a man in your bed. Then you learn the true meaning of love.”

“But . . . it can’t be so. . . there must be more than that!”

Astymeloisa turned and started walking toward the door with the basket in her hands. “There isn’t.”

Seline followed after her. “What about what’s inside? What about the heart?”

Astymeloisa walked down the hall with Seline not far behind, opened another door, and placed the basket on the floor. “It’s just infatuation. It goes away after he’s had you alone.”

Now, Seline looked troubled. She grimaced and answered in a gentle voice, “but, he wrote me a letter. He wrote me a love letter.”

“All lies, now get in the tub.”

Seline entered the bath and Astymeloisa began to fill it with steaming water. “But, I thought he loved me.”

Astymeloisa knelt beside the tub with a bar of soap in her hands and began to scrub the princess. “I’m afraid not. Let’s just hope that he doesn’t return.”

Seline, her skin white with soap bubbles, looked down into the murky water, letting a long strand of hair fall and dangle beside her breast. Astymeloisa bared a smirk. But then, Seline lifted her head to face the maid-servant, her face full of tears, and in a weeping voice, replied, “I don’t want him to die.”

“But he’s a womanizer.”

“I don’t care. I love him, and if he doesn’t return, I’ll kill myself!”

Astymeloisa stopped her work, put the soap and sponge on the marble tile floor, and spoke in a soft voice, “you really do love him, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she answered, unable to stop the tears from flowing.

At this point, Astymeloisa fell deep into thought, stopping for a moment her tedious labor, and took in a heavy breath of air, as if to muster all her strength. “Well, there are those fortunate ones, those few. All my life, I never met a man who could love me for anything else but my body.

You don’t hear about it much, but it’s hard to keep your dignity as a woman when you’ve been beaten like I have. Worse yet, my husband forced me every night, and if I couldn’t or if I was too tired, he would beat me and then rape me. He never knew the meaning of love.

When I was told by the King to go to Dynotus’ bed that night, I did it because, just for once in my life, I wanted to know what it would be like, to make love to a man who didn’t beat you first. I thought of how special it would be, a gentle, kind love, even if only physical.

My husband could never resist a woman. I begged him, that if he could only love me in a violent way, to please, allow me the self-respect of having a faithful husband. But he couldn’t even give me that. Oh, he promised me, but whenever a young woman crossed his path, he was quick to seduce her. He was afraid of being discovered, however. Not by me, but by his fellow infantrymen. So, often, he would bring the woman home, and do it in our bed, leaving me to sleep on the floor. And on those days when he found a whore to lay, was I thankful. For on those nights was I left in peace.

Today, at least, my bruises are healed. But never will I regain my self-esteem. He has taken that away from me forever.”

Seline looked at Astymeloisa in utter horror. “Oh, Astymeloisa, I’m so sorry, you must be thankful that he died at the hands of Dynotus.”

“Thankful, never, I still mourn his death.”

“But why?”

“Because he was my husband, that is why, and I loved him. I had to love him.”

“But surely you rejoice, at least, at night, that he is dead?”

“Part of me does. But, part of me still needs him. Because a woman needs a man as much as a man needs a woman. And he was the only man I knew.”

Astymeloisa’s words buried deep within her bosom. Seline strained herself to accept the harsh realities which had been exposed to her, and with great difficulty, retorted, “perhaps, you’re right. Perhaps I should listen to you. Maybe love is a terrible thing.”

Now, Astymeloisa stood up, angrily, and in a commanding voice cried, “NO! Never say that! Love is the most wonderful of things. I was told by the King to convince you to forget about Dynotus. But, now that I think back on my ordeal, of my fate, I cannot bring myself to lead you away from this true love. For those who find it, are truly gifted by the gods.”

Seline looked at the woman who was bathing her, confused. “But. . . I thought you said. . .?”

“I tried to fool you. My experience with love has been a nightmare. And with the

wrong man, yours could be also. But I know that your loved one is different. Tell not the King anything of what I am about to say, for I now directly disobey him, which is something I have never done, even when he asked me to forsake my marriage vows. But this thing I cannot do. I cannot lie to you.

If Dynotus does return, I would think it wise to marry him, Seline. For on the night of the banquet, he denied me. I offered to share his bed. But, he turned me away. He ignored the pleasure that my flesh could give him and let me sleep. It was the only night, under the protection of the King, that I was free of my husband and did not have to endure the wailing cries of his mistresses from our bedroom wall. Since then, I honored the man, Dynotus, for he gave me more dignity, and made me feel more decent, than I had ever felt. It was then that I realized, he was different, that he was special. And I longed to have him my husband and not the wicked man I was arranged to wed.”

“Oh, Astymeloisa,” cried Seline, “thank you for telling me the truth.”

Astymeloisa hugged and kissed her on the cheek. “Now, please, do not tell the King of what I said.”

Seline stood and stepped out of the bath as Astymeloisa began to pat her dry with a towel. “I won’t.”

“You know,” Astymeloisa said with a smile, “I bathed him in this very tub.”

“You did!” replied Seline.

“Yes!” And the two giggled.

Two weeks had passed, and there was no sign of Dynotus.

Once again, it was time for Seline to take her bath. But this time, as she disrobed, Astymeloisa looked on her with dread. “Seline! You’ve become like a nimble tree branch! And your skin, it is as a white ghost.”

“I’m fine.”

“But, I must tell the King. Your ribs appear from beneath your skin!”

“If you tell the King anything, I’m going to tell him what you told me about Dynotus.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“I would and I will.”

“Well, I’m not going to bathe you until you eat something!”

“I don’t care!”

“Seline, listen to me, I’m going to bring Clytemnestra and Ellena, and if you don’t eat, we are going to force it down your throat.”

“If you do, I’ll just vomit it.”

“Look, stay here and don’t move,” said Astymeloisa, running down the hall and calling for the maidens.

Ellena and Clytemnestra returned soon with Astymeloisa. Ellena was carrying a plate of fish and rice. “Now, eat!”

Seline turned her head, “no.”

“It’s for your own good,” urged Clytemnestra.

Ellena cut a piece of kalamari with a fork and thrust it against her lips. Seline pushed her away. “Princess, please!”

“No.”

“If you don’t eat, we’ll hold you down and force feed you.”

“Try it.”

“You give us no choice,” replied Astymeloisa, and with the help of Clytemnestra, grabbed Seline by her hands and feet and pinned her to the floor. Seline squirmed until she broke free, and kicked the plate of food out of Ellena’s hands. She then bolted out of the room.

Astymeloisa and the other maid-servants chased her through the palace until they arrived at her bedroom door. The princess quickly ran into the room and locked it shut.

“Now what do we do?” asked Clytemnestra.

“Go get the King,” ordered Astymeloisa.

Soon, King Demaratus arrived, pounding on the door. “Seline, my dear, open up.”

“No.”

“Well, at least let us bring you something to eat.”

“I won’t eat it.”

“My dear, why, why do you allow your old man to suffer.”

“Because you made me suffer, father! It’s all your fault!”

“What have I done? Tell me so that I may undo it.”

“You cannot undo it, father, for you have killed my beloved. You sent Dynotus to his death. And now, you will carry the guilt of my own.”

Chapter 26

“The wench!” he cried, slamming his fist down upon his throne. “She continues to resist me!”

The old man in the dark shadow stepped forth, carrying himself, wearily, on his rotted wooden cane. Then, in a craggy voice, replied, “why don’t you just force her. You are the King, you can have whatever you wish. If a woman will not give herself to you, you must push until she does, break her like a wild horse. If you desire, my lord, I could do it. My disciples can beat her into submission so that she is too weak to resist.”

The King jumped to his feet and cried as if in horror, “NO!” Then, he returned to his seat, retaining his composure, and replied calmly, “no, that will not be necessary. In time, she will learn to love me.”

“I say, Emperor Sargon II, it sounds as if your heart is growing soft. Why, when in her presence, you do not even wish me to speak of torture.”

Sargon II laughed. “You haven’t changed, my friend, you are as cruel as ever. But let us not dwell on these matters. Truly, I do not care for this girl. She is a worthless slave, just like any other. It is only that. . . .she is the only woman of my harem whom I have not had. And I do not wish to offend her with your horror stories until after she has given herself to me. Women are so much better when they do not fight you.”

“Ah. . . . yes,” he said with a wicked tone, “playing with the girl’s heart, are you? You are truly more cruel than I, my liege.”

“Enough of this issue!” Sargon II commanded. “Women are simple pleasures, nothing more. I wish to speak of more important things.”

“I’m afraid your fortune looks black. I have read the signs and gazed many times into my crystal ball. Each time, the circle crosses the same path.”

“No, not more bad news!” cried Sargon II, tightening his grip on his black beard. “First, my genie disappears, leaving my city stranded in this god-forsaken place. Then, I repulse my most beautiful and most expensive harem woman! Now this! Tell me, old man, what is this dreadful future that you see?”

Iuz leaned back on his cane, and out of his cloak brought forth a clear, spherical object, circled with gold rings about the size of his palm. Then, shutting his dirty, wrinkled eyelids, began to speak, “first, the land will suffer a great drought. . . . a famine. Death will sweep through the land and the people will cry out in rebellion. Out of the chaos, a stranger will appear, a nomad. With the coming of him, will be the coming of great things. The people will rejoice. But this man, this mysterious man, will hunt you. He will find you here, in this very room, and finish your life.”

“What!” Sargon II screamed. “This cannot be! Who is this man? Why does he hunt me? How have I wronged him, to have him be the cause of my death?”

“I do not know who he is. His face is shrouded in darkness, with a black veil and a peasant cloak. He walks the desert alone and an aura of hatred and vengeance surrounds him. Indeed, a man you have somehow wronged shall destroy you. Your own cruelty may be your undoing.”

“Then we must find him!”

“How?” asked Iuz. “You have done such things to so many, it could be one in a thousand; perhaps, an escaped slave, or the family of a slave? Maybe it is someone from a land you have conquered, or a person whose home you have robbed or loved one you

have butchered? It may even be someone whom you have tortured, just for the pleasure of watching him quiver in agony.”

“It does not matter who it is. Send Trax and his men to find this nomad. Furthermore, I decree, that there shall be no new citizens in the city of Nether Sharrukin. Any who dare enter the city from the desert shall be put to death and any nomads found in the desert shall be killed.”

“But. . . master, you cannot change your fate. This very decree may be the thing that will change your future for the worst. Killing all nomads found in the desert is madness!”

“Tell me, Iuz, how can my fate be any worse? What could be worse than my death?”

“I . . . ah. . .”

“Enough, I have no further need of your council. We have spoken and it is time for me to return to my duties. Do as I command and return only if your black arts reveal to you any new information.”

Chapter 27

The galley was the “Sargon II.” Below her, the sea was a dark blue green and gradually changed to deep blue. She looked over the railing and saw the waves roll by; the white, spermy foam and bubbles that spilled out over the edge from under the boat, and spread outward in the shape of a “V” as the ship cut through the water. The light of the sun cascaded over the waves and sparkled, white and brilliant. The wind was vicious and blew strands of hair in her eyes. It filled the sails and moved the ship along the Hellenite peninsula. The clouds were white and puffy and speckled the canopy of heaven. Indeed, it was a perfect day for sailing.

Seline looked at the blue and closed her eyes and let the god of the winds take her. And as she stood in ecstasy, she tore a piece of her garment off and tossed it into the sea. Perhaps, she thought, the sea nymphs would take it to Thalassa.

In the distance, the houses looked like little brown squares spotted all along the forest green hills. She watched, helplessly, as the last remaining image of her home shrank from view.

The fleet joined the Sargon II and nothing would stop them. As much as she loved the sea, it could not change the fact that she was a prisoner in her own land and on her very wedding day. For though she had been on ships before, never had she been on one with a black flag picturing a long curved sword and a twelve pointed star.

At last, her moment of tranquillity had come to an end, as the gruff voice behind her commanded her to move on. Unknown horrors awaited her, she knew. But she could not bring herself to think on them. Her life and dignity as a princess were over. All that was pure and innocent of her would be taken away. She would no longer be the daughter of the King, but a captured slave from some far off land, belonging not to her beloved, but to a cruel and heartless barbarian. At least, she could think of herself as once being the wife of Dynotus, if only for a brief time, when her whole universe came to a stop. Perhaps, she thought, the gods would be merciful, and let her die before becoming a slave.

As for Dynotus, she trusted he would save her. But by then, what would she become? What new person would the barbarians make of her, as their slave, that, like they, would be unable to know love and thus be unable to love Dynotus? The very thought terrified her beyond the fear of death, and so she wished for nothing but it to come swiftly and peacefully.

“You sure are a pretty one,” said the man behind her, “what is your name?”

Seline did not reply.

“Come on, tell me your name!”

Still, there was no response.

“Don’t you know she can’t understand you?” said another. “She doesn’t speak our language, you fool, she only speaks Hellenite.”

“Well, the bitch doesn’t need to tell me her name. We can give her a new one.”

“Yes, look at how she’s dressed, like a whore.”

“She allows us to see her face and legs, she must be a real slut. I bet she has gone with every man in the village!”

“Dressed like that, how could she not have?”

“Well, all the Hellenite women are dressed such. They’re all whores.”

“Indeed, and this one here’s real fine.”

“Let’s call her, piglet!” And the men burst into hideous laughter.

“Yes, our little piglet, to do with as we please.”

“Trax didn’t tell us we couldn’t, so let’s take her down stairs and do her.”

“Hey, friend, some of us have women back home.”

“So what, this isn’t a woman, this is just some Hellenite bitch. She doesn’t count. Besides, they’re off far away and I’m gettin’ real stiff for this one.”

With all the laughter and all the lustful looks, Seline knew they spoke of her. Still tied with her hands behind her back, one sailor lifted a dagger to her face, as if to threaten to slit her throat. But she did not back down from this. She merely stared into his eyes, which, for a moment, startled the sailor. But, to her disappointment, did not bring him to kill her. Instead, he pushed her forward, making her walk.

The boat was old and rickety and squeaked as she crossed the wooden planks. Splinters bit into her bare feet and made them bleed. But she did not give the sailors the pleasure of knowing her discomfort. She merely continued to walk, allowing the splinters to dig deeper into her skin, and bloodying up the floor as she went. The sailors, on the other hand, did not seem bothered by the splinters. They all wore leather boots.

At last, she was brought into a small dark room below deck. She was forced into the center with all six men surrounding her. Then, she was tied by her hands and feet, and suspended in the air with a large hook which hung from the ceiling. One of the men reached out his dirty, fish smelling hand, and began to fondle her. “What pretty hair she has.”

Seline closed her eyes and clenched her teeth. Oh god, she thought, this is it. This is the moment. *Be brave, Seline, don’t let them see your pain. As much as it hurts and as horrible as they make you feel, you must remember that somewhere, Dynotus holds you dear to his heart. They can do what they want with my body, but they will never take my soul. My soul is mine and my husband’s only.*

Yet, alas, if only Dynotus had taken me when he had the chance. But now, I must give myself unto them, those vile, wretched creatures. Oh, why god, why was I not given a chance, just one chance to know it pure? Why must the first time be used for their greedy, selfish, lust? Could not have I died, instead, a virgin?

“Look, she’s crying,” one said.

“But we haven’t even touched her yet.”

“Women are like that. Now, don’t be a wimp, take your pants off.”

Astymeloisa, my good friend, you endured this every night and you survived. I shall be strong, like you. I shall persevere and overcome. I shall be strong!

“Wait!” a voice cried out. “Don’t touch her, she is mine first!”

“Trax, we did not know that you were coming to. . . a thousand pardons.”

Trax pushed the man aside. “Did you beat her?”

“No, she did not resist.”

“How do you expect a woman to be obedient if you do not beat her?”

“Forgive me, Trax, we did not. . .”

“Silence!” he commanded. “I will do it myself.”

Seline heard the sound of a belt unbuckle. Then, she felt her chiton being taken off and felt a cold chill run through her. She began to tremble, but did not know whether

it was due to her nakedness on that cold windy day, the shame of being stripped of all her clothing before a host of hungry eyes, or just due to her fear; the fear of pain and the fear of being defiled, defiled of all that she cherished and held most dear.

“So, you are the wife of Dynotus. Ha ha ha ha ha, lovely to have you in my company.

What you were about to experience, will be nothing compared to the suffering that you will endure under my whip. And when you are not being beaten for my enjoyment, will you be available at any time to any crewman on board. I’m sure they’ll be pleased to know that whenever they get lonely, they’ll have more than just their hand to play with. And it does get very lonely out at sea. Yes, my dear, in time, you will beg to be raped in preference to the whip.

For now, however, you will not be so lucky. For today, we learn the meaning of the word, ‘obedience.’ And like any good dog, you will learn to obey! But do not be discouraged, my pretty. Perhaps, some day, you may work your way up, from a sex slave to a work slave. But by then, you won’t be much to look at, anyhow, ha ha ha ha!”

This cannot be! I cannot live this experience, Astymeloisa. Set my soul free, like your own, so that I cannot feel the pain!

Suddenly, stepping forth from one corner of the room, as in response to her silent prayer, did appear, Astymeloisa, the maid-servant.

“Shh, do not fear, Seline, the gods have not forsaken you. Thalassa sent me to help. You will not be tortured this day.”

“But. . . Astymeloisa, . . . where did you come from!?! I thought you died, burned to death by the poisoned Crown of Kirce?”

“Huh, who are you talking to, bitch!?!” questioned Trax, looking around the room, but seeing no one.

Astymeloisa smiled. “I am dead. I just came to give you a message. Do not give up on love. It shall prevail in the end. Now, I must go.”

“But, Astymeloisa, wait,” and Seline reached out to touch her, but her hand struck nothing but vacant air.

Thank you

“Crazy bitch!”

Trax arched back his arm to bring down the belt, when suddenly, a voice cried out, “STOP!”

Trax the Torturer turned to see Iuz, Iuz the Cruel. “Master, what brings you here?”

“You fool, you almost damaged the girl.”

“But, she is my slave, is she not?”

“No, she is my slave, and I say she goes unharmed.”

“But why?” asked Trax.

“Can’t you see? She has blonde hair and blue eyes! Do you know what a price I could get for that girl, if I sell her into a harem? A King would pay a fortune! But he would not pay one copper cent, if she were delivered with torture marks.”

“I see. Forgive me, my lord. I suppose, I’ll just rape her.”

“You will do nothing of the sort and neither will any of your men. I will take from him his manhood, any who attempt to touch this girl in any way.”

“But why?” questioned Trax. “The King would never know?”

“Because she is a virgin, that is why!”

“How do you know?”

“Honestly, Trax, are you so stupid not to realize, that the daughter of a King could only be a virgin before her wedding night?”

Late in the afternoon, Seline could see out of her confinement, from a small window, the waves having become erupting hills, and the salty foam a soapy web of white. From one corner of the world, the penitent sun cast its glow over the water and outward into nothingness. Looking back, the mainland was but a silhouette.

As she hung in the dark, cold and alone, her bare skin exposed to the continual soaking of sea water, she thought on her benevolent father, and her kind maid-servants. Already, she missed her home and her people. But most of all, she could not stop thinking of Dynotus. She simply closed her eyes and tried as best she could to ignore her current plight, and mustered all her imagination to escape, and relive her tender moments with him, if only in her mind. But her home was far away. At least, thank the gods; she remained untouched that day.

Seline hung there for weeks on end. All day and all night she would hang. She would sleep hanging, eat hanging, and relieve herself hanging. At times, she was fed by the same sailors who almost raped her. But, most often, she was under nourished, which only brought her back to her original ailing condition. From time to time, she would go days without food and water.

Though she was not physically tortured, Seline felt that their neglect was a form of torture just as horrible. Sometimes, she even thought it Trax’s own doing, being sure to have her fed only enough to keep alive. On cold days, when she became sick, not one sailor was kind enough to cover her. She coughed and vomited, but they still left her hanging, and did not care for her in the least differently. And though she was never touched in a sexual way, the sailors would often stare at her for hours through the window, often fantasizing of her, and often masturbating in front of her.

On one stormy night, the galley rocked back and forth, making her stomach turn. It seemed as though nature itself had stood up in protest, against her inhumane treatment, but could do nothing to change her awful fate.

From the square wooden opening, she could see the water fall from sight, and then rise again until all she could see was a wall of water. Seline could feel the teetering of the galley and hear the squeaking of the ship as it tipped on its sides. The sea was becoming turbulent, and she hoped the storm would come and wipe them away. At least, it would be better than being held at the mercy of Trax.

Many days of sailing passed, but Seline was unable to tell just how many, and did not know how much longer she could endure this kind of torment. Her only hope was that she would be treated a little better when they reached land. She still did not fully understand, why she had not been physically abused, but was thankful for its absence. Nevertheless, she feared that bigger plans were install for her. She knew, at least, they would have to pass many islands to be free of Hellenistic territory, to reach the end of the Great Sea, where they could begin their longest trip; the trip to Ninevah.

Chapter 28

It was a cold night. Zimimmar and Amon were packing their things away on their camel preparing for the next days journey. "It is awful quiet tonight," said Amon

"Yes, too quiet," replied Zimimmar.

"Perhaps we should go back."

"No, you fool, we'll be caught."

"But they didn't see us."

"It doesn't matter. They will catch us. If they find that bracelet on your arm, it will come off!"

"The bracelet?" he asked.

"No, you fool, your arm!" replied Zimimmar.

"It is a lovely bracelet."

"Did I teach you nothing about stealing?"

"Yes, I know, never rob a member of the cloth and never rob royalty."

"But did you listen?" asked Zimimmar. "No," he answered, to his own question.

"We can never go back there again. Besides, it is over two days journey from here."

"Where shall we go, then?"

"I don't know, but our water is running out. We must find a small town, and hide there for a few days."

"I know, let's wait here, and sack anyone who wishes to find the city."

"That's been done before."

"It's still a good idea, is it not?"

"Perhaps, but I don't know. Tonight, the moon is full, and do you know what that means?"

"What?" asked Amon.

"There are jackals roaming about. Whole packs of them," replied Zimimmar.

Then, a sound came from a nearby bush. "What was that!?!?" cried Amon.

"Shh, quiet you fool, it may be a wild beast. Go hide!"

The two men fell on their hands and knees and made their way quietly toward the bush. "What is it?" whispered Amon.

"Wait, I don't know. It looks like. . . it looks like a man."

"A caravan?" asked Amon, excitedly.

"No. . . no tent, no wagon, no camel, just a man," replied Zimimmar.

"Could he have come from the city, looking for us!?!?"

"No, he does not carry a sword, unless it is well concealed. And he cannot be from the city, we would have seen him."

"A man who walks the desert alone, with no camel. . . it must be him, the Nomad!"

"Oh, be quiet, Amon, I don't believe in such nonsense. There is no such man as the Nomad. It is just a folk tale."

"No, Zimimmar, it is true!"

"You idiot, he's just some poor fool who lost his way. . . perhaps he has something of value."

"No, Zimimmar, don't!" cried Amon.

But Zimimmar just ignored his friend, and stood to his feet, unsheathing his

dagger. "Hold, stranger, who goes there?"

The mysterious man kept his face hidden in shadow, behind a black veil, and did not step closer to reveal himself. "I am just a poor traveler who has lost his way. Perhaps you could show me where to find a village or a city. I need water."

"I can show you where there is water. But first, step into the light, and let me see your face."

"Forgive me, kind sir, I did not wish to be rude. Allow me to introduce myself." The stranger stepped into the light, uncovering his face, revealing a light skinned man with large brown eyes and a thick brown beard.

Zimimmar laughed before the man could continue. "Tell me, stranger, where is it that you have come from?"

"From a land far off," he replied.

"And how is it that you travel alone? Have you no fear of bandits? They roam around here a lot."

"I do away with bandits quite easily. They are not a problem," the stranger replied in confidence.

"Are you a fighter, then? Do you have a sword?" asked he.

"No, I carry nothing but my waterskin and my lamp."

"Ha ha ha, come out, Amon, this man is nothing to fear. He is just a poor fool who is about to lose his lamp."

Amon stood, and stared at the man intently, but could find nothing to be afraid of. And so, he unsheathed his own dagger, and motioned to the stranger to give up the lamp.

"If you want my lamp, you must come and take it from me," replied the stranger.

"Don't play games with us, now, fella, just hand over the lamp."

"If you intend to use those daggers, my friends, I suggest you use them now. For I will not give you this lamp."

"You must be more foolish than I thought, effendi. All right, you forced us to this. But do not say, that we did not give you a chance to go unharmed." Then, Zimimmar and Amon rushed toward the man, holding their daggers up high, and attacked.

In response to this, the stranger threw down his cloak, and waited for the daggers to come down. The next thing Zimimmar knew, his arm was broken at the elbow, and the dagger was now in the hands of the stranger. Next, he felt the top of his skull collapse, as the stranger's fist smashed into his head, sending fragments of bone and brain matter flying into the air like pieces of a broken egg shell. Not surprisingly, that was the last thing Zimimmar ever felt.

Meanwhile, Amon noticed the stranger's foot lodged between his stomach and his intestines, long before the dagger ever hit its mark. Then, the next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground in excruciating pain, finding it a bit difficult to breathe and coughing up blood.

The stranger walked over to where the bandit was lying, and lifted him high into the air by his scarf. "By the way, I forgot to introduce myself, they call me, the Nomad."

Amon took several seconds to muster up enough breath to speak. And when he did speak, he sounded like an old man choking on a rib bone. "Oh, forgive me, master, I had no idea it was you! I would have never attempted to take your lamp if it had not been for my foolish master, Zimimmar! He forced me to do it! Please. . .please don't kill me!" Then, Amon wept.

“Well, I suppose I could let you go. But you must take your things and leave this place at once. Never shall I hear of you robbing the people of this city. And if our paths ever cross again, you had better run like a jackal, because if I catch you, I will rip off your head and eat it.”

At that point, an odd sound came out of Amon’s mouth, like the screeching of a bird, then followed by, “a thousand thousand thank you’s, my good master . . . you shall never see me again!”

The Nomad dropped Amon, who landed on his rear and scuttled to his feet. Looking around the camp sight, all he could see was his camel, his tent, and Zimimmar’s body lying on the ground, with no head, in a pool of blood. He ran to the camel and reached into his bag, pulling out a waterskin and a torn, faded map. Then, too afraid to gather the rest of his things, he sprinted away, in the opposite direction of the city.

Amon, who had little rest that night, walked with heavy foot. Day came, and with it, the scorching rays of the sun. The cool, moonlit breeze, was but a memory. Having drunk the very last drop, he left his waterskin lying on the ground and continued his endless march. He felt tired, beaten, but knew he had to go on. Looking at his map, he was unable to find a city or a village for hundreds of miles in any direction. At least, he was close to a mountain range. Perhaps, he thought, he could make it to an oasis, or a river flowing from the mountain. And so, with these hopes in mind, he began to walk due north, toward the mountain, knowing that soon, if he did not have water, he would shrivel up and become food for the vultures.

By late afternoon, Amon found that he could barely continue. Soon, he knew, he would collapse. He was almost to the mountain wall where he hoped he could find some shelter and rest, but doubted he could finish the journey. Why he had been so foolish as to leave his camel behind, he did not know.

At long last, Amon felt a brush of cool wind coming from the north. He looked up, and was astonished to find a huge cave in the distance, about a hundred feet away.

Oddly enough, the entrance to the cave was adorned by two, gigantic, stone figures. Each figure stood parallel to the other, and must have risen above the ground several hundred feet. Looking more closely, he could tell that the figures were actually monuments depicting strange monsters, with bodies like lions and heads like bearded men. Bewildered by this strange sight, he walked on, wondering whether or not he was seeing true or seeing, instead, some elaborate mirage. Then, a beam of light punched him in the eyes, blinding him. Moving away from the path of the sun so that he could see, Amon squinted, allowing his vision to adjust. After a few seconds, he looked back again where he had seen the cave, but this time, noticed something even more amazing.

Up on a flat-top hill, a majestic, white city appeared before him, its marble towers soaring high into the heavens. “This cannot be,” he muttered to himself. “It must be a mirage.”

Amon unfolded his map and searched several times, but could find no city drawn at his location. Surely, a city so grand and magnificent, would appear on the map, he thought. Indeed, such a structure would take years to build. How could he not have heard of it, or seen it before when crossing these mountains? It was impossible. “No,” he said to himself, “it cannot be real.”

Then, to his surprise, Amon heard the sound of hoof beats. Excitedly, he turned to face the sound, and saw three black horses being ridden by three men in strange attire. They wore black and red vests with black turbans. And gleaming brilliantly in the noon day sun, scimitars hung from their waists.

Soldiers?

He wondered.

Here?

Unless . . . they came from the city.

It doesn't matter. They will take me to their city! They will save me!

"Over here!" Amon cried, jumping up and down and waving his arms.

The horses turned and started running toward him. One of the men pointed and said something to the others, but Amon was too distant to hear. Then, to his surprise, he saw the man on the lead horse draw forth his scimitar, and lift it in the air as if going into battle.

Strange, why would he do that? He couldn't possibly be thinking to. . .

Suddenly, Amon felt the equestrian's sword sink deep into his shoulder. Wearily, and in shock, the desert bandit fell to the ground, feeling his life slowly slip away. With his final breath, he looked up from where he was lying, and saw all three horses standing around him in a circle. The men were speaking of him, but he wasn't sure of what. He could only make out one word before he died, "nomad."

Chapter 29

“Bring me another drink, wench!” cried the drunken man, throwing the cup at her.

The tired girl, her muscles throbbing, her bones aching, her skin bruised, bent over in humility to pick up the cup. The drunken man laughed and pulled at her dress as if to strip her. She did not speak or even lift her head to look at him. She merely tugged back, trying to put her clothes back on. Another bandit yelled at the drunken man to leave her alone. But the bandit did not care for her. He was making fun of her, making obscene comments about her womanhood. And though she hated him with all her soul, she could do nothing. At least, she thought, they were kind enough to let her wear clothes and walk around freely, even though she was a slave. It was far better than being treated like an animal.

Seline could barely understand their language, making out a few simple words. But the more she learned, the more she hated her captors. Once, she believed some of them to be kind for not hurting her. She remembered when she was first released from the ship’s basement. Her arms and legs had grown so numb, she could barely walk. Her skin had become so cold and sickly, that she quivered at the first touch of cloth. But when the old man saw how sick she was, he ordered her to be dressed and fed properly. Soon, her health returned, and she had high hopes that the old man had some sympathy for her. But she was wrong.

One day, after carefully listening to them speak, she learned the words, “thank you”. Eager to tell the old man, she accosted him, letting her sad eyes fall upon his, and said in broken Ninevahan, “thank you”. Perhaps, the old man did not understand. But when she spoke, he became very angry, and slapped her, leaving a purple bruise across her cheek. Seline ran to hide herself in some dark alley, sobbing the rest of the night.

Before long, Seline was so afraid of her kidnappers, that she could not even speak or look at them. Then, she discovered that the old man forbade punishing her, not due to sympathy, but because he did want her beauty ruined. For he had plans to sell her. And she understood, then, why she was not raped. They meant to keep her fresh and desirable, like meat, so the man buying her would want her, and have his way with her. Thus, it was only a matter of time.

Seline still kept close attention to their speech, however, hoping to learn their language and somehow, seek help. But, no matter where they took her, whether to a small village or a city, the strangers of the land ignored her. She desperately hoped for someone to look into her eyes and see her pain, realizing her plight and attempt to steal her away. But none seemed to care. They treated her no differently than Iuz’ livestock. She was simply, his property.

Iuz owned her, she knew that, and there was no escape. She was a thing, an object, with no feelings, no hopes or dreams. If only they could know the emotion bottled up within her soul. If only she could confide in them, or in anyone who would understand and care for her. But there was no one. She was alone.

Seline approached the big jugs to get the drunken man another drink of ale. The night was cool and pleasant, and the sand soothed her aching soles. She had seen strange and beautiful cities in the land of Egypt, witnessed the vastness of the open desert, learned of the scorching heat, and dressed in strange clothing covering all but her eyes. Indeed, it was a new and adventurous experience. But an experience dulled by the

knowledge that she could not reach out and touch these things. She could not explore them and ask of them. They were as foreign to her as if she were in Sparta, as if seeing them through a magical window.

Since they had begun the journey in the desert, however, Seline was much happier. They no longer needed to tie her up or keep her locked in a room. So, she had greater freedom to roam. For they knew she was not stupid. She would not try to escape out in the middle of the desert, without the provisions only they could provide. But, at times, she thought to run away anyhow, even if it meant dying of thirst. Killing herself, would be the only way she knew to get revenge, making their efforts futile and leaving them without profit.

Seline returned with the drink. The man grabbed it from her, chugging it down.

She was so tired. If only she could sit, if only for a moment. But they would not allow it. The men partied. They told jokes and stories, ate and became more drunk, and sat leisurely under the tent on colorful pillows. Often, they would get cramped from sitting, and order her to bring more pillows. And if she did not bring the ones they wanted, and quickly, they would punish her, making her do more work. She learned what each Ninevahian wanted, however, and did what was expected of her without being told. But she could not sit down.

Yes, she was not proud, but she was a good, hard working slave. They tossed food, plates, and clothing on the floor, and made her pick them up. She cooked and cleaned and put away their things for the next days journey. In the morning, she was the first to wake, being sure to pack their sleeping bags and fold their tents. And the job she hated most: cleaning and feeding the animals. The horses were fine, but the camels wreaked. And she could not use water. She combed them and bathed them in oil, then fed them and shoveled their droppings. And for payment, she was allowed a couple hours sleep and leftover food. Often, still, they spared too little food and she had to steal from the animals, being careful not to be caught.

“Bring out the musician!” cried one of the bandits.

The musician was an old man from the village. He walked heavily with a cane, holding a small wooden flute in his other hand. His knees shook as he took a seat, looking around the room at the drunken men. The musician appeared uncomfortable inside the tent, as if he did not wish to be there. His eyes revealed a man of deep, thoughtful intellect, of divine wisdom far beyond anything the bandits could comprehend. But he was poor and humble, and could not resist their goading. As if to spot a man of his own heart, to inspire his musical piece, he looked around the room. His eyes shifted back and forth in vain, reflecting nothing but his hollow hearted audience. And then, he smiled, as if looking at a beautiful flower, Seline realizing that, for the first time, a man’s glare had pierced into her own. The musician coughed into his fist and began to play.

The music was soft and gentle. But it was beautiful. It was so beautiful, that the musicians of Athens and Sparta could not compare, could not even come close to his talent. And it was sad. Oh, so sad, full of pain and yearning, full of such emotions no man could possibly understand but him. He was like a god. And, . . . just for a moment, the bandits were captivated by the music, touched as if by some spiritual finger that reached into their icy hearts and freed their souls from an eternal life of cruelty. But, unfortunately, it was only for a moment. The next moment, the bandits realized what the

old man was doing, and they became angry. Yet, before one could speak, they were thrown aback, stunned, as the man let out into song. His voice was in tormenting disharmony, but his words were soothing and kind. He cried out, as if singing at one's funeral, and then, Seline understood. The song was about her! She could just make out a few words, but it was, indeed, about her! How did he know?

He sang her tale, "OF . . . THE LOVER WHO . . . LOST . . . AND WHO IS FORGOTTEN . . . LET HER . . . WHO CANNOT LIVE . . . LET HER, OH, Allah . . . HAVE MERCY . . . she waits . . . do not forget him . . . oh lover . . . wait . . . OH, BARREN LAND. . . OH, THIRSTING, . . . a young flower, a child taken . . . and father waits . . . a King will die of grief . . . far away, alas so far . . . the loneliness . . ."

Tears welled up in Seline's eyes. The bandits, angered, threw pillows at the old man. He stopped, looked at them and shrugged, as if he did not know why. But he knew. They all knew. But not one person mentioned Seline, they did not even look at her. They merely cried, "play something else! We don't wanna hear no sob story!"

Seline slipped out the back unnoticed. She walked several paces from the tent and sat down. It was a cool night. The gentle breeze blew her veil back. She carefully slipped her fingers behind her head and, looking around, took off her shawl, letting her bundled blonde hair fall to her shoulders. Using the veil, she wiped her eyes, not knowing whether the old man's song helped to give her hope or gave her a hopeless yearning to be loved. Part of her wanted to forget him. If she lived the rest of her life alone, she could not bear the thought of never seeing him again. But if he somehow returned, if he did. . . find her, but no, it was impossible. She would only see him, if in her dreams. Unless, he could feel her; unless their love for each other was so strong, like two magnets, he would be drawn to her, no matter how far away, their two hearts would be drawn together through time and space.

Seline sat up with her hands clasped around her knees. "Dynotus, where are you tonight? Do you think of me this very moment?" she whispered. "Can the wind carry my voice to you, and let you know, I love you? I wait for you? Can you not hear me, can you not close your eyes and see me, touch me with your soul? Reach out, my love. . ."

Then, some force of nature compelled her to look up, and there she was reminded of a story, the story of Artemia who fell in love with Or , and who accidentally shot and killed him with her arrow. And she remembered that stars are forever, and like love, never disappear. The whole world rests beneath the stars, she thought, and no matter how distant, every man and woman can look up and see the constellations. And she knew that somewhere, Dynotus was looking up at the same stars and thinking the same thoughts as she, and with that realization, no longer felt alone. As long as they could both see Or , she would never be alone, she would never be too distant for him to find her.

"Someday, we will be together," she whispered.

Only for true love do the stars shine. All others are but candles that fade away. But true love is forever. It is that which burns in the heavens and which acts as a beacon to guide the sailors of the soul across the sea of passion. It is the beginning and the ultimate end of all things, the Alpha and Omega. Love is that which lives forever.

Chapter 30

“It is unwise, I fear, for you to be, should I say, so presumptuous.”

“What do you know, Harim, I suppose you have a better plan?”

“No, but give me time and I could devise one.”

“Enough of your babble, I know how to get into a wealthy man’s pocket better than all of you. And I guarantee that by three days time each of you shall dine with golden spoons!”

“And what makes you think that this King is any richer than any other? There is a famine coming, you know, and it is said to make a rich man poor and a poor man dead.”

“Shut up you pompous fool! This King is not like the others, he has a magic genie with a horde of unimaginable wealth.”

“Magic genies, indeed, these are children’s tales, no?” whispers Harim, turning to his pal, Jhozar.

“You cannot deny what your own eyes have shown you. How could such a city be? Appear in such a place as this with no word from any traveler of its existence?” argued Albaba.

“Does anyone have a light? Mine just burned out.”

“I do.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, but what of this cave? What are these stone centurions guarding its entrance? Perhaps this place is forbidden. Perhaps the ancients who built these ruins do not wish us to invade its property. Perhaps those men having found this cave never returned to tell of a mystical city. Did you not think of that, eh, oh wise, Albaba?”

Albaba cocked his head back in laughter, than slapped his friend across his bearded cheek. “You are a sly one, my friend, but one day your wit will get your tongue cut out! Now see, the people who built the city must have found a way in through this cave to the top of the mountain. There is no other way they could have built such a magnificent city. Indeed, the great descendants of the cave live now directly above us.”

“But, Albaba, legends have it that the city moves. It appears and disappears where no men can seek to find it.”

“Nonsense, I know there is a secret passage into the city from this cave! We shall find it tonight and we shall invade tomorrow night!”

“I don’t like it,” says another’s voice, “what if we get lost?”

“Yes, what of the serpent people?” a small voice questions.

“Yes. . . .,” replied Albaba coolly, “what of the serpent people?”

“Ha-ha-ha, he believes in serpent people!”

And they all burst into knee slapping laughter.

Chapter 31

Never before in her life had she seen such wealth. Wealth beyond imagining. Gold drapes and diamond studded seat cushions. Clothes made of fine silks and carpets with woven intricacies unmatched in any thing she had seen back home. Curious, with such wealth, she wondered, where were the women? She was almost afraid to ask. But the more she was forced into the city and quickly into the palace, the more she wanted to see. The more she wanted to explore what seemed the endless caverns and passageways of its immense rooms. Room after room, level after level, each more amazing and more breathtaking. Each more beautiful than the room before and each time in disbelief that something even grander could lie beyond the next veil or the next hall of veils.

The solid gold throne of the fat King dismayed Seline, how could such a grotesque man sit on such a priceless treasure? How if not in a million eons her father afford such wealth, did this man with a peculiar fascination for grapes own?

“Your majesty, King Sennacherib, I have returned from our plunder in the north and brought you its finest and most beautiful treasure!”

The fat man spit out a seed which landed somewhere on a marble tile floor engraved with golden tessellations, and let the wine spill from his lips from his solid alabaster goblet. He propped himself up on his pillow and wiped his brow. “It’s hot in here? Is it not?”

“Eh?”

“Is it not hot in here? I’m asking you a question!”

“Indeed, your majesty.”

“Fanner! Where is my fanner!?”

Curious, the fanner is a man. Where are the women?

“About the **girl** your majesty?”

Me? What about me? I’m the treasure? I’m not so beautiful, what is he talking about?

“Do I look like a cobra to you, Iuz?”

“A cobra. . . sire?”

“Yes, do I look like a cobra? Do I have to repeat everything around here? Hey, my back itches. Where is my scratcher? SCRATCHER!!!”

“Why do you ask, my liege?”

“Because, you play me like a cobra in the streets. Anyone can see that this girl is just. . . is just a girl.”

“Oh yes, now I remember. Do you have your glass eye to see more carefully, King Sennacherib?”

“All right, but a man such as myself can tell what a girl is worth these days. Someone bring me my glass eye.”

A man dressed fully in black walks up the many steps to the King’s throne to deliver on a red pillow a small, transparent, spherical object. The King places the glass to his eye making it much bigger. “Ahh yes, now I can see! Yes, this I did not see! Take the veil off.”

Trax removes her veil and shawl. “As you can see,” Iuz coughs into his hand, “the girl has blue eyes and gold hair.”

“Magnificent! Unlike anything I have ever seen! Blue eyes and golden hair! Why,

she could be the very prize of my collection. Where ever did you find her?"

"Oh, we found her in a village some place north."

"Yes, but does she have any. . . .ahem. . .disfigurements?"

"See for yourself, sire. Seline, be a good girl and show the King. . . . yourself."

"Yes, Iuz," whispered Seline as she obediently removed her clothes and let them pile on the floor.

"Oh, let me see your hands."

She raised her arms.

"Mmm, looks good. Turn around."

"Ah, very nice. She looks a little pale though. And she isn't very spirited, is she."

"Oh, they're all like that, sire."

"Huh, what?"

"Girls from the north, sire, they're all a bit pale I'm afraid. Cold weather you know."

"Yes, I know. Wish we had some."

"What, cold weather, my lord?"

"No, spirit! The girl has no spirit! Can she dance?"

Trax turns to Iuz, "the King is blind and dumb."

"Indeed, he is a bit stupid, hahaha, cough, hack."

"Eh, what was that?"

"Nothing, sire, I was just saying that they don't do much dancing up north I'm afraid."

"Well, we will have to remedy that. I'm sure Ishtar can teach her."

"Hey! Did I say you could put your clothes back on!"

"So, how much for her?"

"One thousand coins," replied Iuz.

"What. . . a thousand. . . that is far too much. I hardly think. . ."

"A trifle for you, my lord, I'm sure."

"But how could I make a profit at a thousand coins!?"

"The old fool, all he can think about is food! If I had a thousand coins, I sure would know what to do with her."

"Take it or leave it. There are other Kings who would be willing to pay."

"Alas, I am afraid that I cannot afford her at the time. But maybe you can find me another blue eyed one, eh? A cheaper one perhaps?" the King asks.

Iuz whispers into Trax' ear, "don't worry, we will sell her to, Sargon II, he 'knows' what to do with women, harhar, ack!"

"Hey, I can't hear what your saying."

"Thank you for your time, King Sennacherib, we shall take her some place else."

"Oh, well, your not leaving right away are you?"

"In the morning, yes," replied Iuz in a raspy voice.

"Then, if you must, let her stay in the harem. She could learn a few things in there, just by speaking with Ishtar, you know."

"Yes, but. . ."

"And it's good for protection, you never know who might sneak into her tent. Besides, she looks like she could use a good washing."

"I thank you, my lord," Iuz says with a bow.

"Servants! Take this young lady to the harem and give her a bath! And burn those awful clothes and give her new ones for Allah's sake!"

Seline began to feel at home again. But this time, she wanted to eat and was perfectly willing to be bathed. How she longed again to be treated like a princess, something that at first she had despised but after being treated like a slave longed to be once more.

At first, she was escorted down a long corridor beneath many archways to enter a room guarded by two men with black skin and black clothes. In their hands did they hold wide curved swords. The men did not speak or even look at her. After entering the room, Seline, or, Sali, as she was now called, was astonished to see a large room filled with awesomely beautiful women not wearing so much as a stitch of clothing. When she turned to talk to the guards, they were gone. Some of the women turned to stare at her and she felt embarrassed, not that she was naked but that she had blonde hair and blue eyes. Sali stood out like a white eggshell on a black asphalt beach. Every woman had bronze skin and black hair and all of them had either brown or black eyes. But she had very light, pale skin, gleaming golden hair and eyes like the Aegean Sea, as she remembered her love telling her once. What was she doing here with these women?

Then, a curtain could be heard being pulled away and another woman stepped forth. But this woman was far beyond beautiful, she was almost a goddess, like the mythical nymphs Sali had heard stories of back home that could kill a man with but a look. This woman, Sali knew, was like that. And though she was dressed in a beautiful flowing gown of many bright colors and slightly transparent material, studded with gold embroidery and jewelry of all kind, her awesome figure was clearly superior to any in the room. Her skin was a dark bronze color and her hair was straight raven black. Her mirror like eyes were emerald green and they may have been the only green eyes in the room. Yet, strangely enough, she had a gold ring in her nose.

The woman stretched out her hand and before even introducing herself, ran her fingers through Sali's hair. Sali was so embarrassed in her current situation that she could hardly complain. "Like. . . gold," the woman whispered.

Sali felt that her pale white skin and bony figure was hideous compared to this nymph goddess, but the woman continued to stare at her in fascination. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Who are you?"

"What? I'm sorry, I can't speak Ninevahan," replied Seline.

"My eyes were thought to melt any man's heart, but they are but emeralds compared to diamonds, how dare you come here! I am the most precious gem in this harem!"

Sali fell back, astonished at the outcry. "Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry."

"What? Can't you speak?"

Now, Sali felt an overwhelming sense of sadness. If only she could understand! If only she could speak with these women, maybe she could find a new home, maybe they could help her! "I. . .," and she began to cry.

"My name is Ishtar."

The strange and beautiful woman led Sali to a stone fountain where some women were bathing. Water was running from the trunks of marble elephants against their laps.

The woman removed her clothing and got into the water. "Come," she gestured with her hand.

Sali cautiously stepped into the pool and felt a great sense of satisfaction. She was so tired, her muscles sore and her skin dry, and the water was pleasant and soothing. She drank of it and submerged herself in it, then felt a longing to go skinny-dipping as she had done so often in the Hellenite seas, even though it was strictly against her father's wishes.

After a pleasant romp in the pool, some women came and dried her with wooden sticks. Then they poured scented oil on her and rubbed it against her skin. They brought some fine new clothes and dressed her in them, and the same they did with the beautiful woman.

A very young girl approached the goddess and handed her some jewelry. The Ninevahan nymph began placing the jewelry back on when she stopped and handed one of the matching bracelets to Seline.

"Wh. . .what? For me, but I couldn't!"

The woman gestured forth again, more insistent the second time.

Sali took the bracelet and said in broken Ninevahan, "thank you."

"What is your name?" asked Ishtar, then she pointed to Sali and asked again, "name?"

Sali pointed to herself and in Hellenite answered, "I am Seline."

Ishtar giggled. "Saaally. . .haha. . .Seline."

"Yes," she smiled, perhaps for the first time in a long while, "Seline."

"Come with me, then, Seline," said she, an exuberant expression on her voluptuous lips.

Ishtar led Sali back to the main room and into her bed chamber. The two girls sat on the bed and stared at one another. Sali smiled at her and she smiled in return. It was an awkward moment.

The green eyed harem woman extended her hand to take a lock of the other's hair, she drew it across Seline's eyes and said, "gold."

"I. . .I don't understand."

Ishtar pointed to her bracelet and said again, "gold."

"Yes," Seline proclaimed, "I think I understand." Then, the girl from Sparta lent her hand to touch her, placing the tip of her finger on Ishtar's nose ring and repeated the word, "gold."

Ishtar smiled and nodded her head in agreement, "yes, gold!"

Seline touched her hair and said in Hellenite, "gold."

"Gold?" asked Ishtar in the same language, pointing to her nose ring.

"Yes," she nodded and smiled, "gold."

"I suppose you are a slave and have been taken from your home, no wonder you looked so sad. . .so lost. And I am befriending you, who will soon be taking my place. Alas, what a fool I am. I should hate you. But I can't. There is something about you. . .something," said Ishtar.

"You beautiful," said Sali pointing at her.

"Hey, you do know some words. You must be wanting to learn. Yes, I can teach you."

Sali squinted her eyes and shook her head.

Ishtar pointed to her lips and then made a gesture as if tracing the path of air out her mouth. "Speak, eh?"

Seline smiled, "thank you."

King Sennacherib actually convinced Iuz and his men to stay a few days. And in those few days did Sali learn everything she could from Ishtar. Ishtar taught her how to dance and how to speak and learned all the manners of a harem woman. Sali and Ishtar grew to be real close. And at long last did the stranger from Sparta know some happiness.

Sali not only grew in knowledge but so did she in health and appetite. Color returned to her cheeks and she gained some more weight, which was actually good considering her body composition, and she came to be known throughout the harem as one of the most active and playful of the women. And though she stood out like a light among them, no longer did she feel apart from them. At times, the women would still stare at her strange beauty, and there was not one among them that did envy her and did not believe her to be the most beautiful among them. For Sali had grown in maturity and in beauty since she had first come to the land, a thing that every woman whispered as each day passed, "isn't Sali looking even more beautiful today?" But it was something that Seline herself failed to realize. And in the room where they did go naked, did she boldly enter, and make the others lay distant from her so as not to be compared by the black guards.

Soon, Sali learned to love her new friends and her new position in life and hoped at least that it would remain awhile. Besides Ishtar, there was also this one girl who was her friend. Her name was, Allahna, and she was well known for being thought quite mad. Everyone knew that Allahna would never be bought, for she had lost her virginity long ago and at times as well boasted of it and of her sexual promiscuity. Even Allahna knew that she was worthless and that no man would pay a copper cent for her. But she really didn't care all that much. For though all the other women dreamed of being married and taken far away, Allahna had grown to like the harem and saw it as her home. She was also well known as one of the longest living female residents of the palace, older even than Ishtar. And though she was not overly beautiful, Allahna was known for her dance, a dance that was said to be irresistible to men and rivaled even that of Ishtar. Perhaps she had a natural born flexibility, for her body could undulate in ways to some, even harem trained women, thought impossible. At times, Allahna's dances were so provocative, that they would throw the noble men into an angry stir. Other rich men, astonished at what she was willing to do on a dance floor in front of hundreds of strangers, became highly disappointed when offering outrageous amounts of money for her and learning that she was not a virgin. In fact, King Sennacherib was once offered more money for Allahna than for Ishtar, which almost tempted Sennacherib to lie about her sexuality. Rumors have it that the gold measured in the tens of thousands of coins.

Anyhow, Allahna loved to play this game, a game that she invented where she and the other harem women would see who could make the guardsman have an erection first. Naturally, Allahna was very good at this game and won most of the time. But the game was so fun that all the harem women got into it and got a great big laugh, considering that the guardsman were not supposed to get erections nor even look at the girls, for fear of the high punishment of castration. Allahna, however, was well known for having seduced and slept with almost all the guardsman.

One day, Sali watched, fascinated as Allahna and the girls played this game. Sali laughed so hard that her belly hurt. Then, Allahna came tugging on her arm, “come on,” she said, “it’s your turn.”

“What! Oh no! I can’t!” cried Sali, half laughing and half terrified.

The girls were all laughing and having a good time when, suddenly, they all stopped and left Seline laughing by herself. A cold shudder of fear ran down her back as she turned to see the girls with impassive, stone faces, all hiding or turned away from the room entrance. Seline turned to look at the archway and saw a horrible sight there, the man she knew all too well as, Trax the Torturer. “Hey, girls, you can keep your fun. I just came for the girl. She doesn’t belong here with you anyway.”

“Oh no! But you can’t!” cried Sali.

“What have these girls taught you, bitch! Have you forgotten how to obey, or DO YOU WANT ME TO TEACH YOU AGAIN!” he screamed.

“No!” cried Sali, “no, I’ll come, please, just don’t hurt me.”

Sali turned to face her friends, but they were all turned away. Not one of them looked at her. Again, she felt the shame, the feeling that she didn’t belong, the feeling that she stood out. I am alone, she thought.

She began to gather her few belongings when Ishtar came from her bed chamber and embraced her. “I will miss you,” she said to her.

“Yes, you are my friend,” Sali replied in somewhat Ninevahan. “Thank you for everything.”

“Don’t forget what I taught you.”

“I won’t.”

And as Sali turned to leave, she faced Ishtar one last time, took her hand and pressed it against her chest, then, with her two index fingers, drew a heart in the air and pointed again to Ishtar’s chest. “Gold,” she replied.

Chapter 32

The cave continued another hundred yards until they came to a startling halt. The band of men stared at what appeared to be, to their amazement, an underground pool of water. Natural stone pillars reaching into the water as if holding up the ceiling, and glossy flesh colored stalagmites reflected from the pool's crystal clear surface. Mountain formed archways could be found going in every direction. The air coming from them was cool and moist.

"Where to now, effendi?" asked Harim.

"Give me the map," answered Albaba. "Well, we're not over the city, not yet. We need a few more hundred feet."

"But how do we cross?"

"Look here, boats," someone said.

"You see!? That is proof that there must be a secret entrance into Nether Sharrukin, why else would they have made boats?"

"These boats look old to me, perhaps ancient. How do you know that these people do not come here to get their water, or, maybe they like to explore the cave. It may have riches of its own, you know," replied Harim.

Albaba ignored Harim and announced, "we will use the boats to cross."

"Are there enough of them for all of us?" asked Jhozar.

"Yes, I say ten of you take one boat each. There are six all together, we may leave those two behind," Albaba answered.

For the next twenty minutes, the bandits struggled to balance themselves on the boats. Most of them had never seen a boat before and several times did they tip over. Fortunately, the water near the cave entrance was not deep. Otherwise, they would have surely drown, since very few of them had ever seen enough water to swim in much less know how to swim. At last, all four boats were ready. It took some ingenuity to figure out that the long wooden stick in the boat is used to push them along in a certain direction. And, at times, the boats would crash against a stalagmite or two almost breaking and making the bandits panic. Soon, they learned to have their weapons out, however, ready to stop the boat from crashing into any more rocks.

The man navigating in the back discovered, to his surprise, that the long stick no longer touched bottom. He didn't want to think how deep the water could be, knowing his dislike of the sea and his inability to swim, but used the hanging rocks and walls for leverage to push.

From here, the journey was very slow and time consuming. But the thieves were sure not to move too fast, lest they risk their boat crashing and breaking apart. They also had to worry about stalagmites that were too low, which really was a bit humorous at first. They would be drifting along when suddenly, someone would cry, "oww!" The rest would turn around to see a man holding his bruised head. And when it happened to enough of them enough times, did they look up in dread lest they be pummeled by the stalagmites again. Indeed, by the time they reached dry land, much ducking had occurred and many heads throbbed.

Happy to be free of the boats confinement, Albaba and his men lit more torches and walked further on into the darkness.

“Bring the ladder here.”

“There?”

“Yes, bring it over here.”

“I can’t see. It’s much too dark.”

“Ahhh!” a scream echoes throughout. “You fool, you hit my foot!”

“Thank you,” another voice replies.

“How can you be sure it is here, effendi?”

“I know, Harim, I found the secret entrance,” Albaba lifts his torch to the rock ceiling being careful not to slip and fall, “see the outline?”

“That?” he asks. “Let me see the map.”

Albaba lowers his torch and rummages through his backpack’s many contents until he brings out a long folded and tattered sheet. Then, he hands it to a man below.

“That would put us directly inside the palace!”

“Ah, all the better then to find the treasure.”

“Ha, Albaba the Great Thief, indeed, without me you would be nothing. What if we come up directly into the main guard’s quarters? We will be done for!”

“What if we come up directly into Sargon II’s treasure room?”

“Or throne room.”

“He-he-he. . .heh,” another laughed distant.

“What are you laughing at!?” Albaba cried.

“What if. . .he-he-he. . .what if it leads into the harem with all the women? . .he-he. . .heh.”

“I tell you the man is mad, first serpent people, now this, geez, why did we hire him to join our party?” asked Jhozar.

“An interesting thought though,” an old grimy voice replied.

“Well, there is no other way into the palace and we have been searching all day. I say we take the chance and if so, fight our way out,” Albaba said.

“No, we can’t invade a foreign city by ourselves and escape, especially with all of its gold. We must be cunning like the snake, not brutal like the tiger. Else we shall all be slain,” argued Harim.

“Come now, there are forty of us, what ill prepared army in its own bedroom can withstand the unorthodox strategies of the mightiest band of thieves Ninevah has ever known? I think none. For all those that oppose me and wish to follow Harim, let them do so. But I shall push open this door and live the rest of my days a rich man! Who amongst you is with me!”

“I am!!” they all cried, all but Harim.

“Then, ugh, follow, uggghhhh! . . .the door won’t open.”

“Most likely because it is not a door, ha-ha-ha-ha!” laughed Harim.

“No! I can feel it moving, it’s just too. . .eeerrrrggghhhhyaaa. . .heavy,” Albaba panted, beads of sweat falling from his face.

“Let me try, I am strong,” said Jhozar. And Jhozar pushed and pushed up against the ceiling, but it did not budge an inch. “I can feel it. It **is** a door. But it is much too heavy. Perhaps there is something laying on top of it.”

“If only we had a battering ram,” said Albaba.

“You and your stupid plans, I told you it wouldn’t work,” Harim continued.

“Silence!” cried Albaba angrily, “another word from you and I shall cut your throat!”

“I know,” said Jhozar, “let’s get all our materials and forge a battering ram.”

A half hour passed and the men had assembled what appeared to be a makeshift tree trunk. The trunk was made of the ladder, bits and pieces of firewood, and some burnt out torches, and was tied together by many items of clothing. Then, four men, including Albaba and Jhozar, pushed against the ceiling entrance with the trunk. But all was futile. No matter how hard they pushed, it just didn’t seem to open. After an hour of struggling, the forty men were ready to give up when suddenly, a strange and unfamiliar voice called out from the darkness, “wait.”

“Eh? Who is it?” asked Albaba.

“It is I.”

“I who?”

“I who wishes to get into the King’s palace just as you.”

“Are you a new recruit? Your voice sounds, unfamiliar.”

“I am just a humble nomad. But I can help you. I can open the door.”

“Well, then, man, if you had an idea why didn’t you speak up?”

“I just needed to address some issues, questions if you may.”

“Questions? Whatever for. . . .”

“If you wish me to help you . . .”

“Ah, yes, I understand. You wish to get a higher cut for your help, is that it? A man of my own covetous heart indeed, what do you want?”

“No, you may keep the treasure. I have no interest in it. I only wish to know, when you do plunder Sargon II’s palace, what do you plan to do with. . .the women?”

“He-he-he-he. . .”

“Shut up!” Albaba screamed. “The women, I see what your heart desires now. Well, we shall rape them of course, and you may have two of them if you like.”

“No, you may take the gold, but you must leave the women alone.”

“What. . .you want all of them?”

“Hey, what gives him the right to decide what we do with our women!? Before we went on this crazy mission we decided that the treasure should be divided evenly,” argued Jhozar.

“And in that you are correct, my friend, but the women do not belong to Sargon II, they are not his property. They belong only to themselves. They are people, just like us. Or should I say, just like me.”

Now, Albaba grew suspicious. “Who are you?”

“I am the man who travels alone and on foot. I am he without home. I am the ever questing stranger. I am the Nomad.”

“Men, bring him to me!” cried Albaba in terror.

In the distance, Albaba could see a torch go out and hear the sound of daggers being unsheathed. Then, an awful cracking noise could be heard echoing through the cave followed by a scream. And then another crack and another scream. . .and another.

“I’ll take care of this,” said Jhozar, unsheathing a scimitar and walking off into the darkness.

Suddenly, bits of bone and blood covered half of Albaba’s face, but it was not of

his own. The master thief turned to run, but an incredibly powerful force gripped him by the neck and suspended him from the ground. Albaba was brought back to where he originally stood and was released enough to gaze at his captor, but all he could see is a face masked in shadow.

“You. . .you killed all my men.”

“All but one, I believe. Harim ran away.”

“Th-the legends are true! You **are** the Nomad!”

“Yes, the legends are true,” and those were the last words Albaba ever heard, as his head was torn from his body.

The stranger known only as, the Nomad, unraveled the makeshift battering ram to release the ladder and used it to climb to the top of the cave ceiling. Then, with a mighty heave, pushed until the roofing was removed and at the same time, hearing a thunderous crashing sound. He reached up into the opening until his hands pressed against a smooth stone surface, then used the surface to lift himself up and into the space above.

The Nomad found himself standing in the corner of a large room with marble tile floors and marble stone walls decorated with all manner of gold embroidery. To the left and right of him, huge archways ten feet in height led to other rooms. And marble statues of robe clad women standing twenty feet high, known to him as, kore, were placed on each of its four corners. All but one of the statues were standing. The fallen one was at his feet, having once stood in the corner where he now presided. And upon seeing the fallen statue, did think to himself that it was no wonder the door was as heavy as it was.

The man knew that unless the palace was empty, someone had to have heard the statue fall and would soon come to investigate. But it did not matter. He was prepared to confront and slay all of Sargon II's men if need be. For Dynotus was certain that somewhere within the palace walls, a harem women named, Seline, dwelled, and he would not leave the palace alive without her.

Chapter 33

Sargon II was a handsome man, she thought. His slick black beard and mustache were always neatly trimmed and combed to pointed edges. And his darker than night clothing, a skintight outfit as black as his hair, was all he ever wore in the palace. The outfit covered him from neck down as if one piece, and at times he wore gloves and boots to match. Upon his throne, however, he was fond of his black turban, neatly decorated with a long plume and a very large ruby.

At times, his immense wealth would be displayed as jewelry. In his hands did he hold a solid gold and heavily bejeweled scepter. The scepter itself could have been worth hundreds of thousands of coins. It was a terrific thing to look at. It was one and half feet in length and was made in the image of a serpent, an Egyptian cobra to be exact, with the snakehead at the top. Along the handle were gems of all kind and the eyes and hood of the serpent were made almost entirely of gems. Placed atop the cobra's head, at the very peak of the scepter, was a ruby a size that Seline could never have imagined. The ruby was egg shaped and slightly bigger than a man's fist! Indeed, the golden cobra scepter was but one of the priceless treasures of Emperor Sargon II.

But compared to other Kings, he was not overly boastful. His true wealth, indeed, far exceeded anything she had ever known, she knew, far beyond the Akenset of Egypt and the King of Dur Sharrukin. Her father, he was but a poor man in comparison. But the King was a miser. He dared not give out his treasure or even himself spend it. Rather, he hoarded it in a vault and kept it secret to all but his most trusted of servants.

When leaving the city to do battle, the King liked to enter combat only with the finest of weapons: swords made of gold and silver studded with precious gems, and armor made of similar content of equal if not far greater value. But, unlike the King of Dur Sharrukin, King Sennacherib, stripping Sargon II of all his treasure did not defame him. In fact, to strip him of his wealth would at most show his true strength. For all his wealth and power served merely as a mask to hide his true value. The true man, she knew, was worth every dinar he possessed.

Unlike Sennacherib, whose wealth served only to spoil him of his physical and mental attributes, Sargon II was a slim, well bodied man, with a mind as sharp as a raZeus and with all the knowledge and education of a master scholar. Most of his time he would spend either studying or practicing to fight, and, indeed, he was good with a sword. When conducting business, Sargon II was received only with utmost respect and admiration. None dared speak of him as his back was turned. And those who despised him, most wealthy land owners filled with jealousy, spoke of him in fear, for they knew he could not be fooled. He did not speak much in court, but when he did speak, the people listened. His powerful voice demanded attention. But with a soft voice, could he charm any man or woman. Indeed, Emperor Sargon II could be described as a wealthy, strong, intelligent, highly charismatic man.

So, why did she dislike him? No other woman could resist his advances. And though they knew of his promiscuity, they still swooned to his very touch. Sargon II had a thousand harem women, all as beautiful if not more than Ishtar. But Seline could not love him. Besides the fact that she was a married woman, Sali knew that she could never love a man like Sargon II.

To those that Sargon II befriended, were they treated with the greatest

magnanimity. To his many women was he a prince and did treat them no differently than a princess. On the other hand, to those that Sargon II made enemies, was he unmerciful, incapable of compassion. The harem women refused to believe his cruelty. How could they? How could a man that treated them so kind treat others so cruel? Because he was an evil man; a truly evil man. Like a snake, he was cunning, a master of deceit. With his lies, did he seduce millions. If Sali was not older and more mature, perhaps, she too would fall for his trickery. But she was wise enough to know better. She was wise enough to know the snake that he really was.

Even more curious, still, was the face of Sargon II itself. The more Sali looked at him, the more she started to notice peculiarities. First of all, there was a mark on his face, a small burn mark on his left cheek that sort of resembled a serpent. Secondly, she noticed something strange when he spoke. She did not know what it was at first. But then she realized that she had never been able to get even a glimpse of his tongue. Only once did she think she had seen the very tip of it, but then it was gone. And each time that he did speak to her, would she as best she could resist his soothing words in search of it. The third and final peculiarity, and perhaps the most horrific, was his eyes. There was something about them. They were black, but sometimes lit up like a brooding storm. They looked almost . . . inhuman.

The room where Sali was kept, almost forced her to sit in a seductive position; though she did not want to appear that way. And the clothes that Sargon II gave her to wear, made her look even more desirable. She sat on pink and violet colored pillows, the colors of the gods that rested on even more decorative Persian carpets. Unless she laid over them, they were most uncomfortable to sit on. Sometimes, when she heard Sargon II coming, she would stand, just to turn him off. But after a while, it did not matter to her and she knew it did not matter to him. Any way she posed, he was hooked. Her clothes were made of light, sheik material, the same colors as the pillows. And though they were comfortable to feel, they made her uncomfortable to know that Sargon II could see right through them. Unfortunately, she had no choice, Sargon II offered her no other clothing and she doubted that other clothing even existed, considering the other harem women's attire. Of course, it was far better than being nude. At least with some clothing, she could fold her arms and legs and somewhat hide herself. But over all it was a futile effort. Bodies he had seen enough of. What really attracted him was her blonde hair and her blue eyes, and if she could cut her hair and pluck out her eyes balls, she would. But her resistance only seemed to lead him on, further into an obsession with her. Perhaps, no woman had ever resisted him.

At first, Sargon II brought her into one of his finest rooms, or so he said to her, a room in the tower where she was free to do whatever she wished. The room was large enough to roam and complete with a balcony, bed and bath. She was given a chest where she could place all her belongings too. And, Sargon II promised, no man or woman could invade her privacy or enter her room without her permission, even Sargon II himself, or so he oathed. However, Sali was not allowed to leave this room, and only Sargon II had the key to its door. Thrice a day, Sargon II himself would come to bring her food: breakfast, lunch and dinner. And every day, he asked whether or not she wished for something. "Anything you desire shall be yours," he would say. Sargon II was so polite, in fact, that Sali felt compelled to let him in. He would sit and talk with her for a while,

and then, leave. When Sargon II started making advances toward her, only then did she push him away. The King kept his composure, but, deep inside his eyes, she could see his fury. He spoke gracefully and with all the manner of delightful whisperings. He spoke to her in a deep, soothing, hypnotic voice, and she could not hide her delight in it. That was part of the reason she even allowed him to attempt to seduce her. The other was that she was horribly afraid of him. Emperor Sargon II was so polite and so kind, that one could not believe it; it was too superficial, and she could see straight through it. Seline never trusted people who were too polite, for she knew their little mannerisms were nothing else but a guise to hide their true intentions. And it scared her to think that if she insulted him by not being polite herself, would he simply go into a rage and force himself upon her. Rather, she teased him, a little more each day, giving him a false belief that some day he would have her, and that there was no need to become angry. But each day, it became more difficult to accomplish this. Each day, he walked away more and more frustrated. At times, she feared his composure would break and that he would lash out and strike her. But some force kept him back. It seemed to her that he was unusually patient. Any other man, she thought, would have raped her by now. So what made him different? Was he truly a noble man, or could it be, even, that his feelings were sincere for her, that his obsession was beyond lust?

Late at night, when Sali closed her eyes to sleep, she could, at times, hear him scream like a mad man, and heard the sound of breaking things. Then, later on that same night, could she hear the sexual wails of his many harem women. It only made her more afraid of him.

And then there were the gifts. They just kept coming and coming, every day, a bigger and better one. He brought her all kinds of clothes, clothes of every color and of the finest material and workmanship. And all kinds of jewelry: rings, earrings, nose rings, bracelets, anklets, necklaces, tiaras and many more, made entirely of gold and gems: rubies, sapphires, emeralds, topaz and amethysts. There were also many items made of alabaster and pearl. After awhile, Seline's entire chest was filled with gold and gems, so much that she had to remove clothing from the chest to contain it all. And Sargon II was invariably sure to inform her of his immense wealth and of numerous other treasures that he could also offer to her, if she wished it. She never did ask anything of him, however, but as if she would, he continued to shower her with gifts. And every time that he brought a new one, would she marvel at its beauty and he delight in her acceptance of it. But in truth, she would rather throw them out her balcony window, for they held no value to her. Rather would she have her freedom. But, to be polite, she was certain to wear what he gave to her, even the nose ring, which seemed to make him very pleased.

One night, when Sargon II came to visit her, Sali lay on the colorful pillows wearing her robe as usual, a gold and gem studded tiara, a shawl with golden coins hanging from them, a silk veil over her nose and lips, a gold ring in her nose, long gold earrings from her ear lobes, several gold and gem studded necklaces, gold and gem encrusted bracelets, gloves made entirely of pearls, gold rings on all ten of her fingers and gold anklets around her feet. Indeed, she appeared far wealthier as a slave than when she was a princess. But all these things did not make her feel like a princess. Rather, they made her feel heavy, as if chains that tied her to the ground and imprisoned her. "Welcome, Emperor Sargon II," she said. She spoke in Ninevahan.

“Seline, my dearest, my love, how are you today?” he asked.

“I am fine and you?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me.” Then, Sargon II smiled. “I have another surprise for you!”

“Another gift?” she asked innocently.

“Ha-ha-ha, this one I know you are going to love. It is unlike anything I have given you before.” And he brought forth a large black box. “It is made of a new and highly rare gem.” He opened the box and inside was a huge necklace. “See how they sparkle!? They are called, diamonds, found by my servants far in the distant lands South. Are they not beautiful?” Each of the diamonds were the size of a walnut and woven into the necklace were more than twenty of them.

“Yes, they are beautiful.”

“Still not as beautiful as you, eh?” he asked.

“Alas, these gifts bore me,” she replied.

“What!? Do you know how much this necklace is worth? There is a famine coming, you know, and things are more difficult to obtain now.”

Sargon II almost went into a rage when Sali halted him with an alluring tone, “if you really want to make me happy, if you really love me. . .”

“I do! With all my heart and soul!” he proclaimed.

“You would give me a gift, a truly wonderful gift.”

“Anything your heart desires, my beloved, ask for all of Nether Sharrukin and I shall gladly give it thee.”

“Then, oh mighty one, you would give me, as a gift. . .the key.”

“The key?” he asked. “What . . . oh, yes.”

“If you truly loved me, you would trust me.” She shifted her legs to a more revealing position, “you would allow me my freedom.”

“My dear, if the tower is too small for you, I could call my builders and. . .”

“No, Sargon II,” she whispered, looking deep into his eyes, “I desire, only, the key, and nothing more.”

“No,” he smiled. “I will not give you the key.”

Damn, you saw right through it. What does it take to fool you?

“I will do better than that,” he said. And he ran to the balcony window and threw the key into the midnight air. “There shall be no more key, Seline, the palace is yours. You may roam free anywhere, in any room you like.”

“Whenever I want?” she asked, even more passionately.

Emperor Sargon II paused for a moment. He spoke almost as if it strained him to do so, “whenever. . .whenever you like, indeed.”

“Oh, mighty King, you are truly wonderful!” she exclaimed.

Sargon II reached out his hands to embrace her, and she reluctantly fell into them. He went to kiss her, but she turned just in time to save half her lips from his. He slipped his fingers beneath her shoulder straps, and she became terribly apprehensive. “No!” she said, and pushed him away.

He kissed her neck and cheeks a few more times, then pulled away, but did not let go his arms from around her waist. “Please. . .Sali, what’s wrong?”

“I. . .I’m sorry. I just don’t feel good tonight. Why not another night, when I feel better?”

“Of course, my lady, forgive me. I shall be going now.”

“Goodnight.”

“Ah, and goodnight to you, may all your dreams be pleasant ones.”

Chapter 34

And there it was, a great veil in the great palace. And the Nomad standing there. What led beyond its veils, he thought, something he could kill? Or were those women giggling inside the room? Would he see his beloved too soon and with one look, lose all anger and hatred as he had that day when fighting his people in his own land? Would he lose the tight grip he had on his bloody dagger and trade one lust for another? A part of him hoped not, the physically stronger, god part. Yet he could not resist the temptation to look on. Could his wife be among them? The human part was stronger, still, the unbridled instinct superior.

Dynotus pulled the curtain aside and gazed among the many women. They shrieked and ran to conceal themselves. But it was no thing to Dynotus. Seline wasn't there. Satisfied, he turned to leave, when, suddenly, a dark silhouette passed his field of vision, one he could just barely make out behind another veil. The silhouette, he knew, was of no woman. The Nomad rushed into the room with stealthy foot, having left his boots in the statue room behind, still keeping his identity a mystery by his muddled cloak. The frightened women distanced themselves, but to their surprise, he ran beyond them and out another veil.

The hall was of less lighting. But he knew it to be the same from which he had come, one of two halls running parallel with many rooms in-between. The figure before him was short and stumpy. At that moment, he heard a strange and yet familiar voice. It was harsh, raspy. The man's back was turned and nothing appeared of him but his dark brown trappings. But he knew him, the old man. And *he* carried discourse as with thin air. Then, Dynotus looked over the old man's shoulder and saw a clear crystal sphere in his palms. From within it, the reflection of a black bearded man wearing a turban could just be made out.

"My master, I knew it, I could feel his presence the moment he arrived. It is the one we have been looking for, it is the Nomad! It was as I had expected but could never have believed or hardly remembered, but I know who he is and what he wants."

"Who is he?!" demanded Sargon II.

"It is the girl's husband, he has come for the girl. . . he has come for Seline. . ."

The black bearded man fell aback and turned pale white as if stricken with horror, his jaw dropped and his eyes widened. He lifted his hand over his face as if some disfigurement had suddenly inflicted him. Then, the glass turned black, lifeless. One hand tightly clenched the old man's shoulders. "No!" he cried as he turned.

"Black mage, you will die this day."

"You. . . who are you?" said the ancient man.

"Look closer," said he, pulling back his hood, "I am Dynotus of Sparta, Son of Zeus. You took from me my wife and tormented her for ten long years. You said that I would never see her, but you were mistaken. I **will** see her again, over your dead body."

"No. . .," the man begged, "you would not be so cruel as to kill an old, defenseless man."

"Yes I would." And there was no doubt in that grim voice.

"Please!" he cried. Then, very quickly, he reached into his pocket bringing forth a small object clasped between his three fingers. Dynotus, even quicker, grabbed his wrist and squeezed until the hand opened releasing a jade glowing beetle. The old man gasped

and the gem like artifact fell to the floor.

“Not again, Iuz. I have learned from my mistakes.” The Nomad, then, his hand still holding Iuz’ wrist, squeezed tighter until the bones in Iuz’ forearm snapped. Now, in excruciating pain, the evil mage fell to his knees. But Dynotus showed no mercy. He lifted his dagger and thrust it into Iuz’ chest, then, with an equally swift movement cut his jugular.

The white tile floors of the palace hall were no longer white. They were red. And an old man’s decrepit body lay there unmoving.

The throne room was usually a peaceful looking place. It was a place littered with pillows and carpets and tapestries, tables of fruits and wine and silk veil drapery. A red carpet ran down the middle of it and along the sides were red pillars. Usually, a pedestal with a silver, bronze and gold throne would be accompanied by a black bearded man smoking an alabaster pipe. But at that moment, there was no such man. Rather, fifty men dressed in black and red, all holding scimitars, were prepared to fight, their weapons drawn. Some of them were archers. Curious, though, why they had all been assembled, all to fight one man. Could they not have simply sent a party to find this intruder? Why assemble an army of soldiers to wait and guard the throne room doors? Anyhow, those were Trax’ orders and his orders came straight from the King himself.

All eyes were on the door, a huge double door more like a gate standing 30’ high and 15’ wide, made of solid bronze with engraved pictures of a tiger and a cobra. The handles of the doors were of solid gold serpents and onyx bowls of flame were on the right and left of them. Considering their immense weight, these doors were almost never closed. Most had never even seen the doors closed before, and to close them took four men. Orders were to kill the first man who stepped through those great double doors, then, but how was one man expected to open them?

<<CLICK>>

The doors opened. A man stepped through dressed in a light brown cloak. Archers pulled back their strings. Then, a door in the far wall opened and another man walked in. This other man was the very image of decadence, images of death adorned his person. He wore a skirt of human fingers and a helmet of some great horned beast’s skull. But the man had only one arm. Where his arm would be, instead, were two metal poles connected by a hinge as an elbow. And a huge double bladed ax was at the end of the makeshift arm. “Is it really you, Hellenite man, do we meet again for the third time?”

“Do not speak to me, I am not the same man you knew ages ago. Since then, has this thing invaded my soul and somehow changed me, a dangerous thing. So do not call me, Dynotus, know me as, the Nomad. For I have come to give it back to you, this thing that you left in me. And when I leave here today with your heart in my hands and return to my own land, only then, may I be Dynotus.”

“You speak nonsense, fool, I will have your fingers and my men will feed your body to the dogs. I told my master about you and he strangely posted fifty men to guard. I told him that he need not worry, that I alone could take care of you. But alas, here are fifty men. No man can defeat fifty men, Dynotus, no man. And even if you could, there are fifty more waiting outside.”

“You speak true, Trax, I cannot defeat fifty men. No, I will save my sword for yours and Sargon II’s blood. But know that these fifty men and a thousand more, could

not save you from this,” and Dynotus reached into his backpack taking out a lamp.

“Ha-ha-ha, a lamp? Have you gone mad, Dynotus, you wish to destroy us with a lamp?”

“The Great Wind Elemental, Trax, I will warn you to leave this room at once. Though I do not wish to spare your life long, only as long so that I may be the one who takes it. Your men, however, may die by the fist of the Elemental.”

“Enough of this. Guards, kill him.”

“Ali-Quatar!”

The lamp began to shake. Dynotus let go of it and ran into the other room. All of a sudden, a cloud of smoke appeared, and the warriors who had run to attack were dumbfounded. “What is this?” they cried.

Then, the black cloud began to swirl. It spun faster and faster and the wind began to blow. Trax, being close to the door and heeding at last Dynotus’ warning, ran for cover in the next room. The guards, however, decided to ignore the wind and run after the Nomad. But before reaching the doors, the wind became stronger and pushed them back. “By Allah, what IS this thing!?” someone asked.

Soon, the fifty men could lean up against the air as if it were a solid stone wall. The wind had become so powerful, in fact, that many began sliding and falling on their backs. Next thing they knew, they were on the floor and very quickly thrown against the wall. A black cloud of massive swirling chaos ensued, the men in panic and disorientated. Screams could be heard throughout the palace. Some of them attempted to escape, but none of them could reach an opening. Men were flying about in every which direction. Tables, fruits, carpets, and tapestries were floating in the air. One man struck the ceiling so hard his skull was smashed. Another man ran into another man and they both died from the incredible impact. Swords were lost and flung about cutting through arms and legs and torsos. A man being spun about saw a severed head fly by. Other limbs were soon to follow, trails of blood following behind. A huge onyx bowl struck a man in the head and they became one. Another man dragging against the floor was crushed by a two ton throne. Yet another man, believing he had found safety in holding a pillar, discovered to his terror that the pillar had cracks in it. The next minute, the whole pillar came tumbling down and he too was crushed beneath it. And yet another man managed to reach the double doors. He clung to them for dear life, his hands gripping the handles desperately attempting to open them. Fortunately, his wish came true, and the doors did open. Unfortunately, the huge bronze doors fell on top of him. He was killed instantly.

Screams combined with the howling wind and the shattering of the room’s contents made for a most wicked noise. But the most terrifying of noises was not a noise at all, but the horrible silence of death.

The men had been thrown about like playthings by the Elemental and within the confines of that small space did it grow larger and become even more powerful. Soon, the very walls of the palace room came down and It escaped into the desert at last from whence it came.

Dynotus did not need to open the bronze door again, for there were no doors to open. Rather, there was a large opening like hole in the wall leading inward.

The once beautiful room was utterly in pieces. Nothing remained of it intact. Even the walls had collapsed. The roof was completely taken off. Dead bodies lay everywhere, some in pieces, others flattened like insects under walls and pillars. The floor was painted

red. Bones, stones, and bits of metal lay beside each other. Some of the bodies could be found stamped into the remaining pieces of the wall and others into the floor. And if the Nomad did take the time to count them, would he find not fifty but one hundred bodies, for those in the adjacent room were killed as well.

Dynotus stepped inside what a minute ago had been a chamber of death. His face was grim, impenetrable. In the right corner, he heard a coughing. Could someone have survived this? The Nomad freed his sword. Some debris moved and a hand poked through. Pieces of the wall were lifted off the ground and a body rose, unsteadily but surely. It was Trax. Still, he lived. And he looked deep into Dynotus' eyes, a look of rage, charging at him like a bull with ax arm overhead.

Very quickly, the man of Sparta lifted his sword to block. The ax recoiled off the blade with a metal scream and a spark, Dynotus taken aback for a mere split-second. Then, returning bluntly with an attack of his own, one that chopped Trax' ear off. The agonizing scream that was to ensue is beyond description, all that can be said is that Trax' went into a berserking frenzy, striking Dynotus' blocking sword several times like a man gone insane. At last, the blood loss was too much and the Torturer fell back, numbed. With one final swing, Trax was finished, his body, head and ear beside themselves.

Dynotus discovered his sword bent. So he threw it on the floor and took an ax found nearby . . . as a substitute.

Behind the wall of debris the hero found another passageway. The room at the end of the hall was large and circular. Wide spiraling stairs of ever diminishing length led upward. The steps were shortest in the center and grew out near the end. The first was about 4 feet on its long side. A strange light could be seen illuminating the marble steps in which the Nomad could see his reflection. The railing was supported, or decorated, by strange pillars thin at the top, fat in the middle and thin at the bottom. A terrible calm loomed above. Cautiously, he made his way up.

As he progressed, he noticed the East wall disappear and it be replaced by a series of columns. Hanging from the ceiling between the two columns was a red velvet curtain curved and decorated with gold color tassels. The light at the top grew brighter, but the silence heavier. Then, Dynotus felt a sudden pain in the side of his head. Things became blurred. He found himself half sitting on the edge of a step. When his eyes focused, he could see a man dressed in black with a black turban and beard. He held a gold and jewel studded scepter; blood dripped from it. And something else was at his waist.

As Dynotus regained his senses, he noticed his ax gone. It had fallen beyond his reach down two steps. The dark man smiled a wicked smile. "You must be Sargon II," said Dynotus.

"Fate has it that you will kill me. Or so I have been told. But I have decided not to believe in fate. If you were to come secretly and stab me as I slept, or if you were to have poisoned my dinner or defeated me on the battle field, then I would have believed. But you, you come here during the day, make yourself and your intentions known to all and expect to get away with killing me. No, I do not believe that. I am too wise and you are too much a fool for that to happen. I am lucky, indeed. For I caught you off guard. And you came here to fight me in open confrontation. You don't know who you're dealing with. You don't even know what I am. And I am going to kill you."

Now laying on his stomach, the Nomad reached for the ax. But his efforts were brutally halted. He cried as an excruciating pain cut through his hand and made a hole in the step, leaving him to face the shining silver blade of Sargon II's sword, a sword more magnificent than any he had seen. A sword that had run so deep into him, that from a kneeling position could he see its serpent entangled gold hilt and handle. "AHT! I don't think so," said Sargon II. But Dynotus wore his ring on his right hand, not his left. And in that moment of desperation, turned his magic ring into a short sword and hacked Sargon II in the abdomen. The King, unable to have suspected the weapon's sudden appearance, recoiled in pain, freeing the Son of Zeus's impaled limb. Then, Dynotus noticed it, the King bled black blood.

And Dynotus stood, half of his left hand hanging from a piece of flesh attached to the other half. But he did not cry out. Rather, he used the thumb of his free hand to disrobe himself, revealing his tone muscular body. Sargon II raised the Serpent Sword in both hands and dropped the scepter from the stairs letting its large ruby shatter against the floor.

The duel began. But Emperor Sargon II had the upper hand, literally. He fought on higher ground and had use of both arms, striking with greater force. Dynotus was quick to defend, however, never letting his guard down, his skill never failing. But he was impressed, still, at Sargon II's lightning speed. Each time Dynotus made an attack, Sargon II was sure to parry and come back twice as fast, though he wielded a long sword and in both hands; his reflexes were almost . . . inhuman. The sword was just as magnificent. No matter how hard he hit it, all his godly might could not break it. And Dynotus had been well known for breaking swords.

In the beginning, Sargon II was gaining ground, Dynotus being two steps below him and then gradually three and four steps. Soon, Sargon II was too distant to make a killing blow, only enough to nick and scratch. Sweat poured from Dynotus' tired body, his wounded hand unbearable. But he parried and swung with all his might at last making a hit, slashing Sargon II in the shins. The King, with bleeding wounds in two places, stumbled backward, and the Nomad started to gain ground. The two fought for ten minutes. The Son of Zeus, slowly but surely, worked him up the steps, pushing him back. Sargon II continued to bleed on the floor. At one time, Dynotus almost slipped on the blood. And the steps were becoming smaller, making it ever so difficult to keep balance. Finally, they found level ground on the top floor of the tower. The light from the top, he could now tell, came from an open window.

The window was directly opposite the doorway leading down. The two circled each other like combating eagles. At last, Dynotus and Sargon II switched positions, the window at Dynotus' back. With a powerful stroke, Sargon II's sword broke past Dynotus' defense and sent the hero tumbling backward with a bloody gash across his bare muscled chest. Then, the Nomad felt an acute pain in his lower back as something hard hit him from behind. It was the window ledge as he had run into it. The Dark King took this opportunity to make an additional attack. Dynotus mustered enough strength to block almost losing his weapon. But with muscles weakened and sweat covered palms, the Nomad lost his grip and was unable to respond. Sargon II sunk the Serpent Sword deep into his nemesis shoulder making him kneel beside the window ledge pinning the back of his neck against it. Finally, the snake moved in for the kill with a thrusting motion to Dynotus' throat. Cheating Hades yet again, the Nomad dropped his sword to

catch the arm of his opponent. The two struggled for no more than two seconds, the fingers of Sargon II's free hand wrapped around his adversaries neck forcing it down against the cold stone wall of the window's edge, his other hand distantly pushing the blade down. Finally, Dynotus placed his foot beneath Sargon II's stomach and kicked with all his remaining will. The King was thrown back across the room and through the doorway, down the stairs and to the floor of the first level.

The Nomad stood, rubbing his soar neck and wounded torso. He hurt bad. But what of the King? Was he dead? He turned his sword back into a ring and listened, but heard nothing. He made his way down the steps and finally, to his shock, found the King lying on the floor, his head turned backwards. Sargon II had broken his neck falling down the stairs. He was dead.

As Dynotus went to leave, he heard a strange noise below. It sounded like a hissing. He turned to find the body gone. Then, stepping out of the shadow of the corner, the King emerged. His neck still appeared broken. And even stranger, pieces of his flesh where Dynotus had cut him were falling. The Nomad watched in awe as the man's skin began to peel. Human flesh spilled to the floor like cast off clothing. And when he looked at the whole picture again, did he see not a man, but a creature, a man-like creature with sand colored scales for skin and a head like a monstrous Egyptian cobra. And a long, black, forked tongue slithered from between his lips. Evidently, Sargon II was one of them. He was a snake man.

The creature spoke with a voice somewhat like Sargon II, but different somehow, words almost painful. "I love Seline, you shall not have her."

"What do you know of love? You are not a man."

"And you are no more a man than I, demi-god. But if you insist on fighting, I will die for her."

"She is my wife!" Dynotus cried.

"Then fight for her!" cried Sargon II.

The snake man leaped at Dynotus with nothing but his claws and fangs, but the Nomad left him to land on his face having retreated up the stairs. The cobra followed him with awesome agility, but not before Dynotus could pick up the ax. Sargon II lunged with his head as if it were a sword, attempting to hook his venomous fangs into his despised foe, but the Nomad kept him at bay swinging the ax chaotically. Three-fourths of the way up the stairs, the King found his sword and hacked at Dynotus. The more than man less than demi-god turned, the pain returning to his back, flailing again and taking away part of the railing. But the snake moved with unmatched speed, at the same time mesmerizing him with the flapping of his hood and the swirling colors of his eyes. Dynotus, mind spinning, suffered several open wounds by the blades edge. His blood ran like water from an urn. His body felt warm and cold, his vision smeared. He could see Sargon II, or what Sargon II had become, open his mouth and sink his fangs in between the neck and shoulder. He fell, paralyzed, his body icy cold. His skin crawled and his hands trembled. His blood coated Sargon II's teeth. He was far too weak even to lift the ax. But at last, turned his ring into a dagger and hid it close behind his forearm. He waited as Sargon II went to make the killing blow, then stabbed him with it. The monster hissed but was not dead, only injured. But to Dynotus' horror, the dagger had hooked into its reptilian skin, impossible to be removed. Thus he escaped into the tower.

In the next second, the King had mustered his strength. But Dynotus was nowhere to be seen. Sargon II was half-dead and confused. Even as a monster he had lost too much blood and endured too much pain. But a man had come to kill him and then coward away to safety in the tower. No, he could not let him live. Even if meant his last dying breath, he would make sure of Dynotus' death. "Come out and fight me, Hellenite demi-god. She has nothing to lose by your death. I know you do not fear for your own life. If you did, you would not have come all this way for a woman. But your quest is over. All you have now is your revenge. Sali is dead."

"You lie!" a voice echoed forth.

"Tis' true, I did not wish to believe Iuz' prophesy at first. But all he has foreseen has come to pass. And I could not bear the thought of another man loving her or any of my other slaves. So I arranged for all their deaths. . .and though I loved her, I did order Sali to die. . .as well. Why. . .why should she live to indulge you? My riches are mine and mine alone."

Silence was the only reply.

Dynotus' life was fading fast but he stood still with his back to the wall. His eyes were focused on nothing but the tower entrance. Then, he heard a sound like running foot steps. Emperor Sargon II rushed into the room. Dynotus swung the ax, a monstrous screaming cobra head cast out the palace window.

Chapter 35

The giant Egyptian scarab-Ninevah beetle still made its way, slowly across the blistering sand carrying what scrap of food it could scavenge. The desert chameleon still crawled beneath the rock for shade. Vultures still circled over their sun-dried prey. The two-humped camel still carried its master's bounty. Elephants were still trained for battle in Xarthage. Slaves continued to work on the royal tomb in Egypt. Young nymphs still ran uninhibited from their lustful lovers. Priests still preached and murderers still murdered. Men became conquerors and kings fell from grace. Wars were fought, civilizations died. The oceans still moved and the mountains remained still. Clouds continued to loom over the horizon, the sun continued to beat upon the land, and the Earth still rolled along its belly from East to West.

Until that one day, when the crops vanished, the farm animals turned over, died, and the oasis' dried. Blankets of dust 10' high, covered the Earth like a shroud of mourning. There was no joy that day. Seline was dead.

Chapter 36

I should take this ivory dagger and plunge it into your heart, you bastard, you lecherous fiend! But she could not bring herself to kill him. He lie there, so peacefully, so innocently sleeping. But she knew what he was. He was a monster. He was the monster that changed her life forever. But I could kill him, she thought. It would be worth it. Even if to die here, alone, a harem woman, or forever be the servant of that boorish snake, the King. No, I cannot do it. But I have dreamt of it, time and time again, robbing him of his manhood, stealing from him his life, bringing him to his knees in agony. She lifted the blade, closer to her bosom. She ran her fingers along its cold shaft. She felt its smooth, ivory handle, one of Sargon II's many treasures, no doubt. Mere thoughts of her home and of her lost love, and tears welled in her eyes. She wiped them with her hair, and let them drip along the hilt. The emotional pain, humiliation, and physical torture was more than enough to justify herself in doing all that she could do to him, thoughts of home. But something inside, held her hand back. She could not do it, no matter how hard she tried. She could not bring herself, convince herself to murder. And ironically, the nostalgic memories of home prevented her. What was that small voice in her soul telling her? Who was it? At first, she could barely recognize it; it had been so long. Then, the voice of her heart became clearer. It was the woman she once was, the innocent girl who lived in a Hellenite palace with her father, the King. I am not a murderer, she told herself. I am a princess, though this man would have me a slave. And all the dignity that I could muster, has he torn from me, has he violated and if not physically, spiritually raped. But what greater harm can a man do to oneself, then to make himself a murderer and to justify that murder by vengeance? No, I will not have you make me a murderer. . . a monster like yourself. I am a princess, and this dignity I shall keep. But by the Three Fates, I swear, may they judge you with the same kindness you showed me.

Sali left the dagger on the ottoman beside his bed, and with bare foot, silently crept out Trax' bedroom window. Upon jumping on the ledge, the bones in her feet snapped, and the sleeping giant lifted his head, adjusted his pillow, and turned on his side continuing to snore.

The night was cold and windy, a night no different than any other. The canopy of heaven, ablaze with starlight, revealed to her the path she would take. These points of light that would lead her North to the village she had heard of in passing conversation, and the gleaming, white, full circle, that could replace all the oceans greatest treasures, these were her diamonds; this was her pearl. No gift, given to her by Sargon II, would she ever keep, only the clothes he gave her; for she had no others.

She looked out across the dunes. It was a silent, unmoving ocean. More so at night, for it appeared blue. How could she cross it? Then, like an answer from God, a horse neighed in the distance. It drew her near. . . it called to her, it summoned her.

The tree branch was not too far to reach. It was not a natural grown tree, but one placed solely for the amusement of the King. Sali reached out her hand and grabbed it, then swung her leg around it and hung on tight as she slid down. But someone heard her. Inadvertently, her fall had awaken a palace guard, the ones who were to stay awake and keep watch during the night. He, in turn, woke his friend, and they went in search of the source of the sound.

Run Sali, run. You're almost free. Run to the stables.

The guards found a broken branch and footprints. The feet were small and bare. They followed the prints to the stable.

Sali pulled the latch, unlocking the wooden gate, and pulled the gate away. She entered the fenced in plot of land where the horses were broken and searched desperately for a horse. But it was dark. The stables reminded her of the ones her father owned, the ones she would play in as a child and later, as a teenager, would secretly go to ride the horses. Then, she heard the neighing. She ran to it, her heart racing, and found a beautiful, black stallion behind a locked gate. She looked at it. It looked at her. She tried to touch it, but it neighed and bucked. You're a wild one, aren't you? Oh my. . .you are the King's horse! And she grew afraid, for she had learned stories of other men who tried to tame this wild beast, and lost their lives in the process. Only one man, Emperor Sargon II, could ride it; and the horse knew its master. Then, suddenly, Sali heard a sound behind her. Oh my God, they found me! I must find a horse, she thought. But something told her. . .it's all right. A strange, womanly instinct told her that the horse would not harm her. And why should it? She knew how to ride a horse. She had been taught on the wildest of steeds. And there had been another horse like this one. . .an all white horse that also knew its master, and that could not be tamed by no other, but by her. Indeed, that was a mightier horse still, a demi-god of a horse; the black stallion could not compare to that one. Besides, what have men used to break you: whips, ropes, cruelty? What about . . . a little kindness?

Sali reached out to touch the creature and it did not sway from her hand a second time. She stroked its fine mane and whispered delicately into its ear; take me, good steed, take me to freedom and I shall set you free. Then, she released it from its pen and it broke loose. The horse did not come gently, but she managed to jump on its back just as the two guards spotted her. "Look, someone is stealing the King's horse!"

"Go, stallion, go!" she cried. And the horse ran with such great speed the likes no man had ever seen, as if it too, wished to be free. It was no unfamiliar thing to Sali, a horse gone berserk and running toward a fence. But she held on and braced herself as it leaped over the fence and continued to run. Sali looked back and smiled as the palace shrank from view.

The two guards found their horses and followed after her. They beat the horses with switches to make them run faster. Sali heard them approaching and looked behind her. The guards, fearing their deaths for failing to save the King's horse, shouted curses and beat their horses more. But it was futile. They were much too distant and her horse much too fast. Still, they continued a long chase through the desert, where the only sound was the whistling of the wind and the beating of horse hooves.

During the chase, Sali fell into a state of rapture, her heart beat in rhythm with the horse's every stride. The cool night air blowing her hair back, the diamond sky and the infinite plain of freedom, after being a slave or being confined to one place or another for ten years, brought her to near ecstasy. The horse moved her swiftly between the dunes, and she did not even think on it, on where she was going, or dwell on the fact that she was riding a wild horse like no equestrian could, to wherever it would lead her. No, only the speed mattered, the faster the better. She wanted the night to never end. . .the chase to never finish. This was her moment of triumph, a moment that would last forever in her mind. And even if she were to die the next day for lack of food, water, or clothing, it did

not matter. At least, the death would be hers. She could own her fate, whatever it be, not one chosen for her or given to her.

At last, the three came to a deep canyon. Now, they planned to trap her. For the canyon was about 10 feet wide and hundreds of feet deep. But she would not slow down. She merely snapped the reigns to make it go faster. And then, as the canyon came closer, she clutched the horse's neck for dear life, closed her eyes and prayed. But Sali opened her eyes too soon, looking down the void beneath her, and an arrow of fear ran through her. Then, for a brief moment, it seemed as if the horse had grown wings and was flying. Until, at last, it landed on steady ground and continued its run as if nothing had come in its way. The guards' horses, on the other hand, did not even attempt to make such a leap. They stopped long before reaching the edge.

On the night that Albaba and his thieves met the Nomad in the cave beneath Nether Sharrukin, two guards watched, Sali, a harem woman, race across the desert on the King's own black horse and escape to freedom.

Chapter 37

On a fair stretch of land the wandering Nomad at last came face to face with his greatest nemesis, the demi-god son of Ares, known as Phobos.

"Hail, Dynotus, come hither so that I may converse with you."

"How know you my name, stranger, I am the Nomad."

"You are Dynotus, or so you once were."

"Speak beggar, lest I wrench from you your head."

"Ah, brave words from a man whom I have defeated time and time again."

"What is this you speak of?"

"I speak of you and me, I am your match, I am Phobos."

"Ah, so you too have come to pick the bones of this carrion worn soul?"

"No, I have come to help you, open up your eyes."

"Why for all this time have you plagued me? Begone or kill me, I care not which."

"Ah . . . but you do. You do, Son of Zeus, for I know that your Sali is not dead."

"What? You lie!"

"See for yourself, yonder there in that small city is a woman named, Sali. She is your Sali. Go to her, why do you hesitate?"

"No, answer my question first, why do you plague me so? Or is this yet another trick you play to claim triumph over an already ruined heart."

"You plague yourself, not I."

"Explain."

"Look at yourself, how does a god tremble so under the guise of a man? Why, Dynotus, command the sun, if you will, to depart into the hills if you so wish it."

"I cannot."

"And why?"

"It is my lengthy absence from my home land."

"No!" cried Phobos.

"What then?"

"It is this thing the mortals call . . . love. All gods avoid it, if they can. Take what pleasure you will from woman, but let not her claws take hold of your heart, for a woman devours a man's heart like a hungry lion. She makes all men foolish enough to gamble with her feeble, and makes men of gods."

"My Sali is not like that!"

"It does not matter! You love her, and that is an emotion unworthy of a demi-god such as you once was, a proud specimen of all that is virtuous in men. Women have no virtue; they are like scavengers that prey on what Prometheus did not give to man. But they yearn for his heart, for it is man's heart that makes him man, surrender it and you become no better than she."

"And why tell me this? Sali has shown me no ill-will."

"But you grow weak because you are apart from her, she has your heart and you are without one. She prospers while you suffer, and for what? Her feminine virtues?

Those are a selfish emotion. Love disguised in the semblance of the ultimate good, when it is nothing but the exploitation of another for personal gain. If the love is strong, each day you wait, with fear, to see if your love will be returned, and if it is you

are satisfied until the next day. The love is returned upon the promise of a lie, the promise that you are needed more than you need. And love strives upon doubt, one's doubt that he or she is not as needed as they need. But when the lie is revealed, when the doubt is vanquished, the love is not returned and you are crushed; and the one holding the heart retreats. It is a cruel, foolish game."

"No!" cried Dynotus. "The act of loving is the joining of two souls. For a soul, a heart, love, they are one and the same. But each man and each woman is born but with one half heart, one half soul. And when a man or a woman finds this other half, they are joined to become more than the sum of their parts. Man is man and woman is woman, but together they are more. Apart they can survive, but only as half, and never whole. If what you say is true, if my feebleness is due to the absence of my love, then if she lives I will become more than man, more than demi-god."

"Poetic . . . but what then if this man or this woman be separated, say, by death? What becomes of this man or woman with no heart or soul at all? How do they live? Or do they simply pine away like Echo, so that they may be joined in Hades?"

"No . . . death cannot stop true love. True love is destined by the Fates."

"Then why!" Phobos cries, "is there so much misery in this world? Why is there such loneliness, such emptiness? Would it not be better that each kept to his own, and took what he could partake from the other?"

Why hath not the Fates shown such mercy to all? Where is your good fortune? Where is your Sali?"

Dynotus paused, but only for a moment, before grabbing Phobos in a rage and lifting him up into the air, crying, "Because of YOU! You are the fear that feeds on men's minds, you are the element that prevents lovers from finding each other. Good fortune is free to all man, but you whisper lies in the back of their heads, you persuade them to choose the coarser path, and they are the worser for it!"

"Let go of me, Dynotus, give up this foolish journey and return to your homeland, lest you die here of despair."

"Never! I will give up when I choose, but NOT because of you! I will no longer listen to your lies, leave me, Phobos, leave me lest I wrench open my skull and pull you out by force!"

And in his mighty arms the Nomad threw down his foe. Ares's son fell emitting a sound like rolling thunder.

Phobos looked up at him, "A pity, my father had high hopes for you. A warrior such as yourself could have become a great conqueror, now I suppose we will have to wait for another such great man. What a waste of a life, Dynotus, giving it to a woman and not to war. A true pity indeed."

Phobos disappeared from Dynotus' dreams, perhaps, forever. Now it was time to end the searching.

Chapter 38

“Settle down children,” she could be heard calling. A single ray of sunlight cascaded into the dimly lit room where forty bronze youngsters meandered into a group like marbles in a bowl. Their voices hushed, legs folded, all eyes fell on her, a tall middle-aged woman.

Her eyes were shimmering pools of blue, her pupils a black ship sailing the Aegean Sea. These were not common to those of her village, but jewels of a different hue, whose lack luster harem rivals were shamed to compare. Nor were these the eyes of one foreign to travel, but had seen what in a multitude of lifetimes, pains and joys, most heroes could only dream. But beyond all this, they were sad, the kind of sadness that stems only from great loss and sleepless nights of yearning, recorded and played over and over again in her mind until it had no meaning, when all the superficial attachments wilted away and nothing but the root of it remained.

The well ran no longer plentiful. There was seldom water, and consequently, food. She needed to keep the kids occupied, help them to think on something else but hunger. But even Sheherazad would have difficulty taking their minds off food this day.

“Tell us a story,” one of them said.

She dove deep into herself to bring something out. Her mind, like the well, was empty. But then, something caught her eye, a man in the streets selling ornaments . . . a pearl necklace. “Let me tell you the story of the beautiful princess and the pearl necklace.”

“Yeah!” they all cried.

“Well, once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess with a beautiful pearl necklace. The necklace was made of only the biggest and brightest pearls in all the sea. Then, one day, the pearl necklace broke!” All the kids gasped. “Yes, it broke!” she overstated, wide eyed, motioning with her hands as if breaking some invisible necklace, “and all the beads fell into the sands of the desert. What was she to do? How was she to carry all these beads?”

One kid answered, as if the question had been personally addressed to him, “Couldn’t she just put it back on the string and tie it?”

“Ah, yes,” she paused, “but the wind blew very strong, blowing the string away. And she couldn’t find it.” They all sighed. “And so, the fair princess gathered all the beads up into her apron and started across the desert.”

“Why was she crossing the desert?”

“Maybe she was going to meet her prince,” answered another.

“Now wait, I am telling this story! The princess was in fact, umm . . ., on her way to meet the prince, yes! And she desperately needed the pearl necklace, for that she would use as her dowry. But as she was crossing the desert, her arms became very weary, and she was losing more and more pearls! At long last, when she thought that she could not hold her apron up any longer, she saw that there was only one pearl left! But now that there was only one pearl, she could easily carry it in the palm of her hand. There was no more need for her to carry it in her apron. And so, she easily made it to her prince. Unfortunately, she only had one pearl to give him, and she was worried that he would not marry her for so little. But when he opened her hand and saw the size and the beauty of that one pearl, he said to her, ‘I have never seen anything so

beautiful in all my life. For this single pearl, I shall marry thee.' And so, they were wed and lived happily ever after."

"Yeah! Tell us another!"

She had been fortunate with her last story; she did know if she would have such luck again, and the children were becoming restless. But there was one story she knew well, a story she had not yet told them.

"Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess . . ."

"What was her name?"

"Her name was, was. . ."

"Was it like your name?" a little girl asked.

"Yes, my dear, her name was Selina. And Selina came from a far away land where there was no desert, only mountains and ocean. It was quite beautiful."

"And they had water?"

"Oh yes, food and water like the King! And there she met a very handsome man . . ."

"Was he a prince too?"

"No, but he was handsome. And the princess loved him very much." She took a long pause. It was that same look she often had.

"On their wedding day, pirate bandits sailed into the harbor, kidnapping her, and put her into a harem, the harem of a cruel King."

The children sat spellbound. "Then, one night, she escaped! She had come to a village late one night on the back of a wild black Ninevahan mare. She was found sleeping, taken from the steed and cared for by the women of the bosque. When she came to full health, she was a curiosity to all. No one in Abu-Zabu had seen one as fair skinned as she. And she could only relate to them her name, for she withheld her tongue and kept locked the secrets of her past. But she was kind and hard working, and soon came to be loved by all, living in the orphanage helping the children."

"But . . . what about the handsome man?"

"Oh yes," she replied. Her eyes fell heavy, and in a very matter-of-fact tone said, "One day she met up with the handsome man . . . and they lived happily ever after."

"Yeah!"

"OK, no more stories for today children, run along." They all scurried off, all but one. It was Iza, a girl in her seventh year. "What is it, my dear?"

"I had a dream."

Whatever matter presented itself before her, Selina looked beyond it with that self same, lost, quizzical expression, searching to find something. All the world, it seemed, was a veil, hiding the face of her loss. "Oh," she said, kneeling to meet her gaze. "Tell me."

"OK, last night I dreamt that water fell from the sky . . ."

"Oh dear," it seemed that they had been thinking about it. It was inescapable, even in their sleep. But this one looked cheerful. "Water from the sky?" she repeated, "What a fanciful imagination . . ."

"Maybe it's a sign," she whispered, as if to keep it secret.

Selina could not bear the thought of shattering her hopes. But she knew how rumors spread amongst them, better kill the plague before it spread, she thought. "Iza. . .," she began. "There is no water."

“But . . . what about what you said? About dreams?”

Selina didn't know what to say. How could she do this to her, so young? How could she tell her? “Sometimes, Iza, dreams are just dreams.”

“Don't dreams come true!?”

“Not always, Iza.” It pained her.

“But what about all those stories?”

“Just stories.”

“Even if you believe really hard?”

“I don't know, Iza, maybe, maybe.”

The little girl's eyes watered. It was too much to waste. But she ran off crying.

The village of Abu-Zabu was small, unlike the walled cities bustling with life. Yet there was still some trace of the tent markets selling fruits, fabrics, and pottery, the bazaar where dancers twirled and stout men ate swords and swallowed fire. Every display of human oddity could be found here, a haven for the lost and the poor. This is where Selina found herself, doing her duties as any good woman of the bosque where she lived. It was the largest of the many mud brick buildings in the village, complete with four spiraling minarets. Here in Abu-Zabu she was to remain a recluse, her golden streaks of hair bundled beneath her shawl, living day to day settling not with her hopes, never her deep secret passions fulfilled, but accepting gratefully the cold dish life had served her, the apathetic fate of living with content and nothing more. Each and every day Selina would wake before dawn, washing clothes, sewing, fetching goods, tending to the animals, teaching the children, and bringing water from the well. For this she was paid a daily meal and a place to sleep. The women's quarters was a pen of cots set apart from the bosque, for women were not admitted therein. Her only possessions were two changes of earth-worn rags and a drinking gourd with which to fetch water. Even with the drought, Selina might hope to scrape enough to wet her tongue.

To the other women she spoke rarely, and when she did speak, it was only to ask what task needed doing. Though she had grown fluent in this language once alien to her, she remained a near mute. The other seven women gossiped of her whenever they could, at times even in front of her, believing that she could not comprehend their quick speech. Selina was called by many names, most of which were: curious, pig-faced, mule, whore, and most of all, dumb. But she did not respond to these insults. It was as if she did not even hear them. Something lost inside of her would have thrown rocks, or would argue the point, since the only ones she really spoke to were the children, and they said nothing of her but beautiful, graceful, and wise.

Once, when the head-maid, Gilda, a bearded heaping mound of a woman, heard Iza call Selina beautiful, Selina was taken to her cot, stripped naked, and beaten with a wet straw. Hence forth, the children only praised her in secret. As time grew, the children came to love her more and more, and the maids became more callous.

At night, Selina would escape in her dreams. Dreams of mountains, big, white, and jagged, where the salty sea spray filled her nostrils and the wind played with her hair, where she would run naked along that beach when she was very young, daintily placing each smooth bare foot upon that mucus-stained, coral rock, those were the days of carelessness and far away places . . . and sometimes in her sleep she could be heard whispering a single word, “Dynosus.”

One day, as Selina and the women were hanging clothes, Gilda was gossiping to the others of a stranger who had entered town. This stranger, she was saying, was quite fierce looking, and then she went on to talk about the Nomad.

The Nomad, the wandering, one-eyed, demonic fiend, dressed in the guise of a man, slew women and children by the thousands, roaming the desert alone, stalking weary travelers at night and murdering them only to satisfy his dark, lustful urges. At times, it was said, the Nomad would enter a village, plunder it of its goods, kill the men, rape the women, and devour the children. Surely if this stranger was indeed the Nomad, she was going on, they were all doomed.

When they had all finished with that chore, Gilda asked Selina to bring water from the well, if she could. Selina obliged, placing her drinking gourd on her head, wrapping her face with a brown scarf, and proceeding to walk into the street.

It was still early morning, and the sun was just coming up over the horizon as Selina strode into the center of town. There were few men around and even fewer women. To those men she did see, Selina was certain to avert her eyes lest she be called a whore and thrown out into the desert to die. It was at this time, as she was coming to the well, that a man appeared. It was he, the wild roving madman the legends spoke of, the Nomad.

Selina did not believe all the stories she had heard of him, but she was afraid of he who spoke of mad things, of giants and demonic djinn, of half men half serpents, and of worms that swallowed men whole. He stood hunched over a wooden cane the shape of a serpent, draped in nothing but rags, with a hood covering the top of his head. An old, bronze, rusted tea kettle hung from his waist. His thick jagged beard branched out like a wild bush, and his dark matted hair matched it perfectly. His eyes had all the gleaming of a madman.

What was he doing here in Abu-Zabu, she wondered? What did he want? Then, a horrible thought crossed her mind. What of the children? What of Iza? Had he come to satisfy his cannibalistic appetite?

He turned to her. "Excuse me, young lady," he said in a coarse, raspy voice, "I have had nothing to drink in many days, could you help me turn this winch?"

Selina knew she was not allowed to speak to men. But he was an old, haggard man needing her help. What harm could it do? Perhaps she could learn more of this so called, 'Nomad,' she thought. Though she might be his first victim, it did not matter to her. She was not her own, only the children mattered to her. Her eyes jolted from side to side, and then she spoke, "Certainly."

She placed the drinking gourd to her feet and approached the winch, turning it slowly with her hand. The man did not budge from his position, but remained uncomfortably close. She could feel his warm, quick breath against her cheek. She did not wish to be rude, telling him to move, and at the same time she feared for her life, if she should anger him.

The sound of barren stone echoed up through the well as the bucket hit bottom. "I'm afraid, good sir, that the well is dry."

"Eh? Dry did you say?" He placed one hand on her waist. She looked down at his hand, then back up at him, "Please, our village has suffered a great drought. Go some place else for water."

The old man slid his hand further down, to her rear. “No!” he said, “bring it up! Bring it up! The bucket is full!”

Strange old man, she thought to herself, and continued to turn the winch in the opposite direction. As she was turning, the task became increasingly more difficult. She stopped, looked at the winch, but could find nothing wrong with it. And so she continued to turn, and at last, could see the bucket rise to the top brimming with water.

“You see!” he cried, pointing to her. “If you hadn’t believed me, you would have left empty handed!”

“B-but, how . . .”

“Forget it,” he said, handing her the bucket. “Take this to the children, they need it more than I.” All of a sudden, his voice became quite clear.

“No,” she said, pushing it into his arms, “you deserve it, please take it.”

“If you truly want to pay me the favor, come see me tonight.”

“What? But I can’t!”

“I can meet you there, behind the alley, where no one will see!”

“You . . . you are a lecherous fiend!” she cried, taking his hand off her and pulling away with the water.

The man walked off, dust swallowing him whole, and without turning back proclaimed, “Tonight!”

Night blanketed the village like a giant’s bed sheet, and the moon and the stars shown brightly. Beads of sweat formed on Selina’s face and dripped off her chin. She turned on her side, her back, her stomach; she beat her cot with her fists, but she could not sleep. Her encounter with the Nomad plagued her mind. She had been unable to work, and story-time with the children resulted in the rehashing of old tales. He even haunted her dreams, and now she wondered if he might take vengeance upon the children for her refusal to meet him. Still, offering the water had been a kind gesture, unless through some vile act of sorcery he had concocted it to poison them. At last, she jolted to a sitting posture, and seeing as how the others were asleep, tip toed ever so quietly to the exit.

The sound of her bare feet sticking to the stone floor and the pop of her ankles drummed in her ears it was so quiet. She froze, hoping no one had heard. It seemed no one had. She reached the open archway, blocked only by a long, hanging veil, for they had no doors, and tossing her shawl and scarf about her, escaped into the night.

Upon reaching the alley where they were to meet, the cloaked figure stepped out from the darkness. “I knew you’d come,” he said.

“What do you want of me?” she asked.

“I want you,” he said, “I have come for you.”

Her gaze fell. “I understand,” she whispered, removing her scarf and shawl. Her long blonde hair fell to her shoulders. She was quite beautiful. She reached under her robes, but he grabbed her hand, stopping her. “Are you chaste?” he asked.

“Wh-what?” she muttered.

“Are you a whore!?” he screamed.

“Why do you ask that?”

“Because . . . a married woman sleeps only with her husband!”

"They were right about you," she replied, "you are quite mad. Now if you do not wish to have me, please let me go."

He released her hand. "Woman! Are ye so blind!" Then, he let loose a series of strange sounds, like those of a ranting madman, yet strangely familiar to her.

"Please," she begged, "I don't understand!"

He raised his hands to his face and trembled, then buried himself in them, combing his fingers through his dark hair and muttering more phrases. "I am here *for* you," he said. "I am your genie, what is your wish?"

"What do I wish? What do I wish?" she repeated, "I don't know."

He stepped closer to her, standing only inches away, "Yes, you do. Has it been so long that you have forgotten your dreams?"

"What do you know about my dreams!?" she cried.

"Everything," he said gently, "dreams do come true, you know," he cupped her hands in his.

She pushed him away. "Why have you come here? Why have you come here to torment me!" She burst into tears, "Go away or I will scream!"

He reached out to her, "Seline . . . have you lost all hope?"

"Hope?" she wiped her eyes.

"Hope is like a string of pearls, you know."

Selina cocked her head back screaming, "Madman! Madman!"

The Nomad ran off.

The next few days passed with no trace of the Nomad. But everywhere Selina went, they spoke of him. New rumors arose regarding him and her. Some said that she was of the same evil heritage as he. Others suggested that she was virtuous upon meeting him, but upon hearing the madness from his lips her mind turned to evil. And the least of them believed that she had merely fallen victim to his sexual prowess. It was after a great deal of time that this news reached the ears of the children. So when story time came again, the children asked, "Tell us, teacher, who is the Nomad?"

"Children . . . please, listen to me! The Nomad is a bad, bad man! Stay away from him, or he shall make off with you, and feed you to the jackals!"

"Tell us a story about the Nomad," one boy asked.

Selina looked dumbfounded. She did not know what to say.

"I'll tell you a story about the Nomad!" cried Iza. All eyes turned to the little girl. "The Nomad is not a bad man. The Nomad is a very good man. The Nomad has super-strength and kills big monsters, like giant scorpions and griffins. He rescues maidens in distress. The Nomad is a hero!"

"I heard he eats maidens," remarked one boy.

"Oh what do you know, you're stupid!" said Iza, grabbing and pulling his hair.

"Silence!" said Selina. "Let's not speak of such things!"

Then, a horrid wail hushed them all. The children recoiled in terror, leaving their seats for the corners of the room, and their teacher abandoned and in the center of the room alone. "Selina!" It was the voice of Gilda.

Selina scrambled to her feet, turned, and faced the woman. "Yes, mi lady?" Her voice had lost all force, all power of command, leaving her with nothing but a whimper.

"Come here young lady." Selina followed Gilda outside and into their sleeping

quarters. "Sit down!" the head-maid commanded.

Selina sat on her cot.

"Now, tell me, who is this person, this Nomad?"

"I know nothing, mi lady."

"Yes you do!"

"I swear to you, I don't!"

"Well, I will tell you who he is. He is a raping and pillaging bandit, that's who he is! Did he touch you?"

"No . . ."

"Liar!" cried Gilda, beating her with her fist. Selina crouched into the fetus position with her arms overhead. "You are a whore! You have always been a whore; white skinned, blue eyed, urine-haired whore! You belong with him! I am not going to beat you, Selina, you are too good for that! I shall cast you out, with him, with that Nomad!"

Selina sat in her cot, crying.

"What are you waiting for?" cried Gilda, grabbing her arm and lifting her up.

"Go!"

"Please, if I must go, let me have my gourd so that I may have some water," she begged between sobs.

"And waste it on you! Get out I say! Out!"

"Please, how can you be so cruel?"

"Out!"

Selina ran out of the bosque and into the streets. The children called after her but she did not turn. She ran until she could run no more. Blinded by her tears, she spotted the well and collapsed just a few feet from it. It was late afternoon then, and the people were beginning to gather. She clawed her way to the rim of the well and rested her head atop it, letting her shawl fall to the ground and her hair dangle against it. Her tears rolled down the sides of the well and into the dirt, and that was the only water that could be found there.

Soon, a crowd gathered about her. They pointed their fingers and whispered to each other rumors they had heard. Some laughed at her. Others, instead of helping her, threw dirt and rocks. But she ignored them; she ignored their taunts and jeers, and mumbled to herself.

"Listen!" one of them said. "Listen, she is trying to say something!"

"There is no hope . . . I can't believe, I simply can't believe anymore . . .," she could be heard saying, over and over again.

"Eh? What is that she is saying?" someone in the crowd asked.

"She is mad!" one woman cried, "mad like the Nomad!"

"Let us stone her!" they all said.

One man picked up a stone, but before he could throw it, another man in the crowd cried, "Stop!"

"You?" said the man with the stone, "What are you going to do, madman, rescue her?" They all burst into laughter.

The Nomad drew a sword from his cloak and chopped the other man's hand off. Blood squirted into the crowd. Their stones fell. "Yes," replied he.

“By Allah! The legends are true!” one woman screamed.

The Nomad swung his silver sword in a semi-circle over his head. “Stand back I say!” The crowd moved away. The Nomad approached her, placing his hand to her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

“You should have let them stone me,” she replied.

“But why?” he asked.

“I have no home,” she cried, “no family. I am nothing.”

“You have me,” he said.

“Who are you?”

“Someone who loves you.”

She stood, looking into the well. Then, ever so slowly, stepped up on to the well wall, and peered into the darkness. “No,” she said. “There was only, will only be, and can only be one man for me.”

“What about me?” he replied. “Don’t jump.”

“You?” she laughed, teetering over the edge. “You don’t know what it means to be a man. You could never be such a man.”

“Wh-who is this man?” asked the Nomad.

“I have not spoken his name in ten years, but even in death shall I remember him. This man I speak of, his name is . . . Dynotus.”

The Nomad stood tall, letting his garb fall to the ground. And there stood a young, muscle-bound man, scarred and blistered and bitten.

He grabbed her by the arm and turned her, saying, “Foolish woman! I am Dynotus!”

She looked into his eyes, and he looked into hers, and they did not speak. She floated down from the well and orbited about him as the Moon goes about the Earth, and he about her, and they stood and looked at each other. The mob cowered away in shame, and the children gathered around the two. Tears of joy rolled down his eyes, as did hers.* She tried to speak, but no words could be found on Earth or in Heaven to describe her feelings. Then, at long last, she said one thing, and one thing only in perfect Hellenite, “D-Dynotus, are you here?”

He embraced her, saying, “Yes!”

Seline and Dynotus kissed. And then, water fell from the sky.

*Legend has it that Seline’s tears became an oasis, and that this oasis, called, “Seline’s Tears,” lasted for a thousand years and is still in use today.

