

## TWO

Niala sat with her fingers clasped together in her lap, eyes closed. “He is an immortal being who can step into our world at will. He is unlike anything I have ever known!”

She shivered, as if those depthless black eyes were still upon her.

“Gaea is everywhere. She radiates all around, in everything. But he...he breathes. He has body and form.” Holding up a hand, Niala sighed. “But I get ahead of myself. Where was I? Oh, yes...”

I did not know the full reason they kept me alive when so many others died. I understood I was their talisman, but what I did not know I was destined to be a gift to their god. What better thing than a ward to offer the god who has so blessed you with successful ventures? They returned to their home wealthy with their stolen gains and wished to offer their most prized possession to their god in sacrifice.

There was no way for me to know where we were going. I had no understanding of a god who had a home. We have a temple for our use and we call it Gaea’s in honor of her, but truly, she does not live among us. We cannot go to her as I can go to you in your room. Our goddess lives in all things. Where we would find her dwelling? We would not, would we? And would not Gaea laugh if we asked her directions to her house? Yes... yes...so it is with Gaea. But these others...they have a place to reside if they wish. They walk with their feet in two worlds.

As I have said, this was over a great length of time and I began to change. I lay in terror at night wondering when one of the men would notice and I did my best to keep from them during the day. I knew they would see my breasts as they began to rise, so I bound them with strips of cloth.”

Niala paused and held her hands to her breasts. “Seire, I cannot tell you the pain that came from binding my breasts. Sometimes I could not draw in air and I would have to bite my tongue to keep from crying out. When my first blood came, I thought surely my disguise was over. I was certain they would smell it,

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or see it stain my clothing. I knew what would happen should anyone discover the truth.”

“What did you do?” Seire asked, her own heart beating hard.

“It sickens me to say,” Niala answered slowly. “Even though I cared for my tribe’s herds, I never ate their flesh and never helped with their slaughter. But that is what I did: I covered myself in the fresh blood of their meat at every opportunity to keep myself from discovery.

We arrived at our destination long after my capture. Many died in the wake of our path and there were others who had been collected to serve the same purpose as myself. The home of this god was high on a mountaintop. The trek up was difficult and very slow. There were times when my sides ached and I could not move, but was forced on. We all were. The closer we came to this fortress, the more excited these savages became. When we reached the gates, they all fell to their knees and begged entrance, though it was not allowed.

We sat outside in the cold for several days before we were bid enter into a long, stone hall that stank of blood and roasting meat. I was surprised to see how many were there before us, all besotted from the wine in barrels that lined the walls. Treasures of all sorts lay heaped around and many animals were waiting in pens for their turn to be offered up to this strange and vengeful god. The sounds were deafening, the smells sickening. I was not allowed food or drink and was made to stand tied together with the other boys.

Finally, we were taken to a huge hall, a horrible place! There was an altar so dreadful, I do not want even to tell you what it was like. I knew then I was to be killed and I thought I would swoon with fear. I would have slit my own throat just then without regret.

The chamber was dark and cold and echoed with their talk. The savages ignored us, for all they could think about was that finally, finally, their god would give them audience.

Behind the altar was a giant throne chiseled from the same gray rock as the rest of the castle. Everything was gray, like storm clouds as they roll in. Everything was shadowed, dark, bleak, frigid...” Niala closed her eyes and let the words roll off her tongue. She could see the temple as if she stood there once again.

“I had never seen anything so big or so grand. There were great arches sweeping upward to peak in a high ceiling. I could hear the faint sounds of birds that had found their way in to roost on the ledges. Slabs of the gray stone made up the floor, unevenly laid and clear of any coverings, as if waiting to catch the unwary whose errant toe strikes the edge to send him sprawling. Around the altar was a thick, black pool of dried blood. I knew it was blood from what was on the altar. And the smell...”

Niala stopped to catch her breath, for the fear lived again inside her.

“I do not know how long we waited. My feet and legs were numb and my

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back ached from standing. We had grown quiet and huddled together in a miserable clump. The men prayed to their god to grace them with his presence, telling him of their long journey and of the treasures they brought for him. Still, he did not come. I began to think them all fools and that this god did not exist.

Then, just as I thought I must surely fall over, one of the boys was snatched from the group, his throat slit and his body thrown onto the altar. It happened quickly, horribly and the rest of the boys set up a howling, clinging to each other. I thought I would vomit and that my bowels would spill upon the floor. I could not tear my gaze from the child lying there, dead and knew that, too, would be my fate. All I could hear was the sputtering of the candles from the spray of blood.”

Again Niala stopped and pressed a hand to her mouth. Seire patted her back but did not speak. After a moment, Niala went on.

“I do not know where he came from! He was simply there. This giant filled the stone seat from top to bottom. He was broad of shoulder, sitting squarely in the center, arms thick as small trees resting on the sides. My chest cramped so that spots danced before my eyes. I stared at his hands as they gripped the carved ends of the throne. His hands were big with long fingers. Hard, cruel fingers that could snap my neck with one move. I dared not make a sound, not even a whimper.

When he spoke it was deep, a vibration like the drums of this village calling us to gather and my eyes were drawn up to look at his face.” Niala paused, the memory returning with such force that her breath was once again pulled from her.

“When I looked at him for the first time, I saw fierce eyes, but his face...his face, Seire...as perfect as the sunrise...as painfully beautiful as the morning light across the water. He should have been grotesque, a monster!”

She looked down at her hands. “But he was not. He was fair of face and body and the ugliness I saw was in my own mind. I wanted to turn away from him, but I could not. His eyes were as black and endless as the winter night and every bit as cold. I shuddered and prayed I would die quickly, for although beauty reigned outside, there was no flicker of it within his heart.

He saw through me. I knew it instantly and of course he would, he was a god, was he not? I was more afraid at that moment than in all the time I traveled with the killers of my parents.

When he finally turned away from me and spoke to the men, I fell to my knees. I could not help it, Seire. I did not want anyone to see my cowardliness, but I could not stand any longer. I knew not what they said, for they all spoke in words I did not understand, but when I was released from my bonds, dragged forward and made to stand before him, I knew I would soon die.

They could not make me look at him! They tried, but I would not lift my head again. Even so, with my eyes downcast, I knew he watched me. I could

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feel his gaze upon me but I would not raise my head. I prayed to the goddess to take me into her arms at once and spare me the disgrace! The roaring of my own heart sent me into deafness and I could hear nothing else.

But then something, something, made me lift my head to meet his gaze, to show even though I feared him, I would not bow to him. He looked straight into my eyes and I was caught, pinned like an animal.

He seemed to know my thoughts and... I could not believe what I saw... the smallest movement of his mouth, a quirk, as if he laughed at me. And then he spoke again. His voice echoed in the great hall, a thunderous, angry voice. All around me, the men went silent. What next befell me defied belief.

A sword to my neck or a dagger in my heart, yes, but no... no what happened was my tunic was ripped from my shoulders, baring me to my waist. Warsus, that was the chieftain's name, stood over me, gaping at the bindings around my breasts.

"Aaice..." Seire moaned, covering her face.

"Yes, yes..." Niala agreed. "Warsus went mindless with rage, for women were not allowed in the temple of this god. It was the worst kind of insult! He stared at me with hatred, forgetting where he was. He pulled from his belt a knife and raised his hand to kill me on the spot. I was no longer afraid and faced him, waiting for the moment I knew would come.

Just as the knife was to plunge into my heart, Warsus gagged. His skin became as purple as ripened grapes and he fell over at my feet. The war god had not moved, yet I knew it was by his hand that Warsus was now dead. In another instant, the rest of the warriors choked, gasped and also fell down dead.

I begged for the boys, pleading for him to spare them. I cried and pleaded until he stood up and came to stand in front of us. He ignored the bodies and the filth, for he had eyes only for me. He was still tall and broad, but not so much as he had seemed while he sat in the throne. When I looked up into his eyes, it seemed again that he laughed at me.

And then he answered me in my own language, 'And what would you trade for their lives,' he said. I could not believe my ears. Suddenly, I was struck dumb and could not speak.

'You are bold to enter my temple, girl, and now you refuse to speak? What would you trade for them? Tell me now or you all are doomed.'

I finally found my voice and said, 'I have nothing to give but myself and that you already have.'

'Truth,' he answered. 'And so, because you ask it, the boys are free.'

The ropes fell from their hands and necks and he bid them to go back to the warrior's quarters. I could not help but ask what would happen to them. He answered, 'I do not care what befalls them. I have let them go and that is all I will do.'

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‘And what of me?’ I asked, but he did not speak again. Instead, he beckoned me to follow him into the depths of his fortress. The passages were narrow and dark, no candles or torches to light our way. There were many rooms off to the sides but he did not hesitate at any doorway, he just continued through this monstrous dwelling until we reached a staircase. There we climbed up and up and up. The stairwell was as dark, if not darker than the passages and I could scarcely see him in front of me. There seemed to be no one else there at all. Our steps echoed, but no one called out to us as we journeyed upward.

Finally, we arrived in a chamber lit by a large fireplace, its warmth welcome and the bright glow even more so. He left me standing by the fire while he went through yet another doorway across the chamber. I stared in wonder for, though the room was made from the same rough-hewn blocks of gray stone, set in the center of the floor were shiny slabs of black laid out in a spiral. Looped inside the spiral were slabs of red, going the other way. It shone just like that water, Seire!”

Niala paused. “I still do not know what it was made of. But, no matter. My eye was caught by a giant sword hanging above the mantle and I gasped. I could not help myself, for the blade shimmered in the light, a glowing, living thing so beautiful it hurt to look at it. The wicked blade was broad and longer than I was tall, pointing straight down as if to pierce the top of my head if I stood too close. My gaze slowly rose to the hilt and found it to be plain, wrapped in unadorned leather, fit for a large hand. Of course, I knew who it belonged to. I was suddenly frightened and turned away lest it leap from its place and cut out my heart.

The rest of the room was sparse. Two chairs covered in red and black cloth near the hearth, low couches here and there against the walls, a few towering, unlit candlestands, and, on the other side of the room, a table with six wooden chairs. That was all.

There were other doors, great arches leading into darkness. I did not want to know what lay beyond that one room. I swear I did not want to know! I could scarce take in what I was seeing as it was.

It was a strange place. A temple, a place of worship, a slaughterhouse, a home. I shook my head, confused by it all. Gaea does not live in a dwelling. She dwells in life! Everything stems from her, into and out of her; she is everywhere, in all living things. She is nowhere and yet she is everywhere.” Niala shook her head. “I did not understand what manner of being he was.”

She grew quiet, unwilling to go on.

“What happened next?” Seire’s voice was strangely quiet. The old one’s face was turned up toward Niala even though she could not see.

“You know what happened,” she answered slowly. “I need not tell you.” Niala stood up and took Seire’s elbow. “It is late, old one, and we should try to find what sleep we can.”

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“Did a child come of the union?”

“A child?” Startled, Niala stared down at Seire. “No...no, there was no child. Why?”

“A very good reason for him to seek you out, even after all this time.”

“There was no child.”

“It would just seem a creature such as he...”

“Yes, it would seem so, but it was not.”

Seire heard a hint of satisfaction in Niala’s voice as they walked along the path toward the doorway nearest Seire’s quarters, but she asked no more about it.

Niala remained quiet until they reached the entrance to Seire’s room. “There is much more to the story, old one, but we both need sleep. Dawn will be here soon.”

“I suppose,” Seire answered, her body further hunched from weariness. “But I want to know what happened. How did you escape him? Why does he seek you now after all this time?”

With a pat on Seire’s back and a gentle kiss to the old woman’s cheek, Niala said with a heartiness she did not feel, “It was only a vision and all Gaea’s visions do not come to pass. They are warnings of possibilities. She plucks images from my memories to tell her stories and sometimes one has nothing to do with the other.”

“But this...being...what could he want with you now?”

“Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything. Tomorrow, we shall talk more of it with the others.”

“...yes...” With wheezing relief, Seire replied as she entered her quarters, “Yes, we will talk with the others.”

As Niala made her way along the dark corridor to her own room, she shivered, though she was not cold. The air around her was damp with heat, yet it was as if she waited once again for him, terrified, but fascinated. In her youthfulness, she had believed all he could take from her was what was left of her innocence.

She had stood shivering, in spite of the blazing fire in front of her. Numb with fear and resigned to her fate, she could think of nothing but the way the fire leapt about within its stone prison. The flames licked up the sides of the gray rock walls, looking for escape only to fall back into the bottom. There was nowhere to go. Its source was contained within the walls. It could not climb, or fly, or even creep out of its prison. It had no choice, but to stay until it was extinguished.

Tears pressed against her eyelids but she would not free them. They, too, must stay in their place for she would not be further shamed. She blinked them back and sighed, only then noticing he had returned and stood beside her. She

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had not heard his step ring against the cold floor.

“You must bathe, eat and then rest.” His voice was far less harsh than when he sat upon his throne.

Hugging herself, Niala shook her head and refused to look at him.

“You misunderstand me, little one. I do not pose a question, but tell you what you must do. In the adjoining room, there is a bathing pool filled with hot water. You have been long in your travels and you stink of the animals you kept.”

Niala hunched her shoulders and did not answer him.

“And you have not had food for days. I know the ways of my warriors. Even as a gift to their god, there is no need to waste good provisions on one who is doomed. Is that not true, little one? I see that gaunt, hungry look on your face. Here there is no need to starve. You will bathe first because I cannot stand the stench and then you will eat.”

He waited a moment and still she did not speak. “It will do you no good to ignore me. I will put you back among the men, if you wish. I am certain a female would be heartily welcomed as there are no others here. There is not a one of them would concern himself with the scent of goat dung.”

“How...how is it you speak my tongue?” Niala stuttered. It was almost as if she were drunk on wine; the words would scarcely form on her lips.

He made a noise that could be called a laugh, but was more a snort. “I speak all tongues and why would I not? I am War. Everyone knows my name.”

“I...I do...not...”

“Your people do not know me? Do you tell me there is no violence? No fighting, no killing or beatings go on in your tribe? No one is envious or greedy or even stupid? Do you tell me all is always well and love...” the word twisted with scorn, “is forever present?”

From the corner of her eye, Niala saw him pace a few steps away and then return to stand before the fire. “If you tell me that,” he continued, “then you lie. How else did you come to be here in my temple?”

“I do not tell you anything except I do not know your name.”

“Hmmm...” he seemed to be weighing her sincerity. Finally, he spoke again. “And I do not know yours.”

“Niala,” she answered faintly, and then a bit louder with pride. “Niala Aaminah Zahava. It means golden gift.”

“Niala Aaminah Zahava, you are indeed a gift.”

Again, he sounded as if he laughed at her. Niala flushed and shrank further into herself.

“It is a pretty name. Niala, here I am known as Ares, the Destroyer. In other places, I am known as Enyalius, or Teshub, or a legion of other names. I have been called the Storm god and the War god, and sometimes....” His voice dropped to a hush. “I am known just as God.”

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He fell silent so long Niala could not help turning to look for him. He was right behind her, a grave expression on his face. "But it matters not what I am called, only that I am." He gestured toward the table across the next room.

The empty table was now filled to the edges with all kinds of food. Where it came from, she did not know, nor who brought it while she stared into the fire. She felt the hollowness in her belly from hunger but did not want to eat in front of him. She stayed her feet from rushing to the table but eagerness lit her face. She looked back to the fire, not wanting him to see her need.

"Ahhh..." Ares rubbed a forefinger along his bearded chin, slowly nodding. When next she raised her head, he was gone.

With no more thought, she began to stuff her mouth with fruit and bread, drinking great gulps of clear, cool water until her belly threatened to give it back. Once filled and still alone, she grew curious. She did not know where he had gone and, though she told herself she did not want to find him, she could not stop the childish urge to open a set of arched, double doors behind the table. They were heavy, but once started, they glided inward and revealed luxury beyond her wildest imaginings.

It was a pond enclosed in blocks of stone. A sweetly scented fog rose above a rippling pool of hot water. At the far end, in a hearth that went nearly from one wall to another, a huge fire crackled. Along one length were small doors cut with the same arch, with the same heavy and ornate handles as the big double doors. She crept into one to see what treasures a god might have hidden away. Instead of precious gems, she found a seat with a round hole cut out. Under it was a pot. She stared at it for long moments before understanding what it was for. Laughing aloud she said, "At best, I have used naught but a hole in the ground to relieve myself, this is truly set for a queen!"

Backing out, she looked again at the steaming water. Near it was a table that held drying cloths, perfumed oils, and a handful of mint twigs to clean her teeth. A beaten silver jug shaped like a horned animal held more of the cold, sweet water, another thing she was not accustomed to. All she had been offered during her years traveling with the savage men from the north had been stale water from stinking skins or a sour mash that made her stomach heave.

Chewing on a twig, Niala undressed and for the first time in many moons, unwound the cloth holding her breasts tight to her ribs. As they were released, she felt the rush of instant pain and cried out. Once she sank into the hot water, there was yet another thing she had never imagined, the pain eased and she began to enjoy the scented water. She stayed there as long as she could, floating on the surface, staring up at the rooftop. She was instantly entranced by the high dome and the moldings that danced across the ceiling, all the way down the four corners to the floor.

Gleeful, laughing people. Horned ones, half beast half man. Winged ones with pointed ears. Naked, lustful, wallowing together...largely erect and

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waiting...abundant breasts and heavy thighs...

With slow dawning, Niala realized each creature was happily, willfully making love to the next in such complicated positions she could not sort out who did what to whom. She stared in fascination and attempted to trace a hand, or a leg, or even a mouth, back to its owner only to be surprised at which being it was. When she found her own fingers slipping along her wet skin, she flushed deeply.

The ceiling was bewitched! It moved and changed just as the water did, seeming to mock her and her befuddled innocence. Yet, she could scarce pull her gaze from it. Her breath came rapidly and her heart pounded, for she realized it was this exact reason he kept her.

Frightened beyond words, Niala climbed from the pool and drew on a thick, straight gown that was much too large. She stood at the closed door for long, long moments while her knees shook and her gut clenched. He would have her and it mattered not whether she was willing.

For one fleeting moment, she considered rushing back to the pool and drowning herself. Would it not be better to die than to submit? With one hand gripping the metal pull, she turned back to look at the water. Did she image that it called to her? Did it beckon her back by name to save her from him?

But no. It was Ares the Destroyer who waited for her. He called to her again. There was no choice other than death and she was not willing to sacrifice that which was most sacred. He would have to take that from her as well, for she would not give either willingly.

He sat beside the hearth, leaning back, eyes closed, arms folded over his middle, his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. He seemed asleep. Niala stopped, uncertain now who had spoken to her just a moment before. Hesitating, she half turned away when he opened his eyes. Fear made her stumble and the tears she had held at bay slid down her cheeks.

“You are frightened of me.”

“And who would not be, my Lord.” she whispered.

“Come here, little one. Do not be afraid.”

Slowly, Niala went to stand in front of the fire, but not close enough for him to touch her. Too long she fought to survive, too long she kept her wits and strength about her, avoiding the men who made her prisoner. She would not simply go to him.

She held herself rigid and silent until she felt his hand upon her hair. He was behind her; she could hear him as he breathed. She trembled beneath his fingers. He did not laugh at her, but stroked her short locks and then her bared neck.

“How did you fool them, a mere girl-child? They could not tell you were female? Even with shorn locks you cannot hide your beauty.” With a gentleness she did not expect, he touched her cheek and felt the tears wetting her skin. His

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hand smelled of spices and warmth and made her heart jump.

“It will not be unpleasant, little one, I promise. I will not hurt you.”

The gown slid to the floor with the smallest nudge and he put his arms around her. He was much taller than she and bent forward, the curve of his body holding her in its embrace. She could feel his smooth skin against her back and the hardness of his erection pressing against her. Her trembling grew and the tears would not stop.

“Shhh...” he said, as he brought one hand up to caress her cheek. He followed the line of her chin to her neck where he paused over the frantic beating of her heart in the hollow of her throat.

“Please, do not...” she whispered.

He did not answer, but touched the triangular scar on her shoulder. He lingered there for a moment before his fingers glided downward to her small breasts. First one, then the other in a slow, feather-light drift and then to slide across her ribs as if counting each one before reaching below her navel. His palm was hot and rested in the center of her belly, fingers splayed against her flesh.

Niala twitched as if to move away, but he held her there until the heat spread to her back and opened like a fist along her spine. Her knees grew weak and she shuddered; sweat broke out and she gasped, arching her back. A great, aching need filled her body. It began between her legs, traveled down and rushed up through her chest to her face.

She cried out and sagged in his arms. He turned her to face him and his mouth came down on hers. She felt his teeth grind against her lips. With a jerk, she strained to break away, her mind clouded with a sudden terror that overlaid longing, but Ares would not release her.

“Niala...I bade you not to be afraid of me...”

Niala could not speak, for hers was a shadowy fear, undefined, but built of inexperience and the knowing that he was not human. “W...will you not stop...?”

“No,” he answered, drawing her close again. “For this is meant to be. I see more than you and there is more to us. You are but a child and yet a child of eternity. We are linked, you and I...”

Here he paused and looked at her with wonder. Tears had begun again and although she tried to hide her face against his chest, he tipped her head back with ease.

“Now I see...even though you are as bold as any man, you are yet untouched by one. Fool that I am, I should have known you have never received even a simple kiss. And why would you? Mortal man has no time for tenderness. But it is not so with me. I take pleasure in the act of love. It is what I need to wipe away the blood that is on my hands.

“Ahhh...” He sighed long. “Despite your bravery and cleverness, you are

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so very young. I know I should leave you alone, take you back amongst your people, anything but what I want..."

He sighed again and breathed her name next to her ear so sweetly it wrapped around her as soft as any fur. "Niala...I should leave you and your innocence for another time..."

On his inhale, he took her breath. "But I cannot..."

When his lips touched hers again, she did not fight him.

Heart pounding, Niala started up from a troubled sleep and gasped to see full daylight through the window. Pallin bent over her, face split by a huge grin, her dark braid tickling Niala's nose.

"Long have I awaited this day, mullah! To find you still abed with the sun fully up and everyone looking for you...it is too sweet..."

She brushed the end of her braid across Niala's upper lip and giggled at the look of irritation that crossed her elder's face. Never did a cross word come from that tender mouth, or such a flare rise in those autumn eyes as in that moment. Pallin could not contain her glee. She danced about as Niala tried to pull herself from the hammock only to rock back and forth and finally dump onto the woven rug on the hard-packed dirt floor.

Disheveled and flushed, Niala squinted at the window, "It is well into the morn, why did you wait so long to wake me?"

"Seire said to leave you alone, you were tired."

"Then why are you here?" Niala retorted, climbing to her feet.

"Because, Seire says, now you have laid abed too long."

Pallin bowed her head, put her hands behind her back and balanced on her toes like a child would do when in trouble. Her tilted, brown eyes held a sparkle of mischief that could not be disguised as she peered up at Niala through black lashes. She was much smaller than Niala, with a fragile build that belied her strength, but lent credence to her show of submission. Still, her cheeks were tinged pink with the effort to show proper respect.

Niala frowned for a moment, then inhaled deeply and smoothed the front of her nightshift. The skirt was rumpled and damp with sweat and clinging to her in a most uncomfortable way. The dreams of invasion coupled with Ares the Destroyer seemed to cling to her in the same way though, as she watched Pallin, she could not help smiling to herself. Pallin had only just taken initiation during the spring gathering and her exuberance was often annoying.

"You are far past the age where such a stance will win me over and, as far as that old woman is concerned, I will have a word with her!" Niala said sternly.

Looking up at Niala, Pallin's laughter faded. "Truly, Niala, we were worried. I heard you and Seire return to your beds early this morning, but Seire would tell me nothing of why you were up. This morning, she said you needed to rest. She said..." Pallin stopped, biting her lip.

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“Said what?”

“Said you were not well.” With a light, quick touch, Pallin reached up to feel Niala’s forehead. “Indeed, you look as if you have a fever.” She withdrew at Niala’s impatient wave, but not before she felt the clamminess of her skin. “I am sorry I woke you, mullah.”

“You do not have to call me teacher any longer,” Niala said, softening. “You are one of us.”

“There are times I believe I should not be here, mullah...ahh, Niala... for I do not think I deserve it.”

“You have earned your place, dear one, or Gaea would not have approved.”

Pallin nodded, the deep black of her hair catching glints of sunlight. Across her back was the image of a great curved fish leaping from the water. It had been beaten into her skin during initiation, a symbol of her role as priestess and her connection to the element of water.

“I know,” Pallin said, “but I still wonder at my worth.”

Niala remembered how overwhelmed she had felt when the Corvidae was placed on her back, and again when the image of Kulika, the Blue Serpent, was etched onto her leg. The smoke laden with herbs to lessen her pain suddenly filled her senses, as did the sharp stinging of the tiny stone needles used to place the dye. It was a quick sensation, here and then gone. She recalled too well how she was bidden by Gaea to carry the image of her mate, her protector, and how that changed her life.

The upcoming girls were given many years to decide if it was the work of their lives for, once accepted, there was no release until death. Niala could see in Pallin’s face the right choice was made and she need have no fear that she belonged.

With this thought, Niala patted Pallin’s cheek and said, “Do not worry, you have not offended me. I should not be lying here like a lazy ox.”

“But if you could not sleep...” Pallin’s voice was hopeful to hear more.

“And I could not.” Ignoring her interest, Niala added. “I must bathe, dress, then join you for what...midday meal? Mercy, I cannot believe I did not wake up with the dawn! What of the girls and their lessons?”

“Jahmed took them over, though the children hoped to be let out of their studies when you were not there. And see here, I have brought you water to wash with and some fruit to eat if you did not feel like going about.”

“That was good of you Pallin. Please tell Jahmed I will be there soon.”

Dipping her head, Pallin withdrew and left Niala to ready herself for what was left of the day.

Niala poised at the entrance to the long, low-ceilinged room where everyone took their meals. It was an addition, like many other rooms in the temple, added as they grew to hold a large group of people. It was open and breezy, with three

doorways, one on each end. Another larger, double-doored entrance at the center of the outside wall opened onto an expanse of grass belonging to the gardens. Above the great room were the sleeping quarters for the younger girls, all of whom were now gathered together to eat but, instead, were chattering away like so many birds.

Watching them brought a surge of affection that lifted her heart. Niala smiled at their earnest faces, as the giggling, girlish talk reflected the most valuable lessons she could think of. The girls earned the respect and love of their sisters through listening. They learned humility by telling about themselves. They earned forgiveness and compassion from each other. There was no instruction that could come close to the gift they gave each other every day they spent together.

‘I will defend my people to the death,’ she thought fiercely. ‘Whatever I must do, I will do it.’

With this thought, she decided that she should not tell her vision to the others. After all, what could they do?

Nothing.

She straightened her shoulders and walked through the benches filled with laughing girls. Nodding and smiling at each as she saw them, calling out names, patting a few on their heads. The girls clamored for her attention, always, but more so on this day because she had been absent from their studies. They were happy to see her well and became louder in their quest to tell her.

Raising one hand, palm outward, Niala gave a signal all were familiar with. It meant to finish quickly and get back to work. Though each girl bent her head over her meal, the room was still far from silent. Niala smiled to herself and went on to her own seat next to Seire.

Jahmed, with her dark skin and many braids, looked up at Niala with honey brown eyes and a flash of well-kept teeth. There was a shyness that was disturbing and Niala wondered once again what Seire had told them. Jahmed sat beside Inni, who was as pale as Jahmed was dark. Tiny freckles marched across her nose and her hair was yellow like sunflowers, tied back in a single, narrow braid that fell down between protruding shoulder blades. Inni did not smile. Her slender lips were pressed together as if she was angry, but her blue eyes held anxiety.

“Are you quite rested now?” asked Inni. “Staying up all night is for the young ones, Niala...”

“Yes, please, I know.” Niala held up her hand. “I am sorry to have caused alarm, but we can blame it on this old one, here, who could have told the truth and woke me up.”

“What truth?” Seire lifted her head and grinned. “That you could not sleep for dreams of an old lover come back to haunt you?”

“Indeed,” Niala murmured, hoping the rest of her vision had not been

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revealed.

“I have not known you to take a lover, since...well, since I can remember,” said Jahmed. “I have wondered why you did not, for there is no lack of those who want to share your bed. Now I find you have one hidden from us!”

“Yes, and how is that?” asked Inni with lifted eyebrows. “How do you hide a lover from us?”

“I do not, good sisters,” Niala answered, casting an evil look at Seire, though Seire could not see it. “The old one tells tales of long ago, before I came here.”

“So why do you dream of one from the past? Perhaps he is saying it is time for you to choose another,” said Pallin timidly.

“Or is he saying he will have you back?” Inni spoke with harsh surprise in her voice. “Is that what is to happen, Niala? Is he going to steal you from us?”

What will happen to all of us if he does?

Inni did not say it, but the meaning hung before them as if she had. A tiny flare of fear ran through them. It was clear to Niala that Seire had told the rest of the vision. She sighed inwardly and worked to keep from showing her own concern.

Jahmed put her hand over Inni’s and squeezed, lacing her fingers through Inni’s. Inni paused to exchange a glance with Jahmed, her own fingers tightening. No words were spoken, but eventually Inni shrugged her thin shoulders and let a slight smile tug at the corners of her mouth. Jahmed smiled back and, for a moment, they were lost in each other. When Inni spoke next, it was with a softer tone.

“Who is this being that threatens us?”

“I am not certain that...” Niala began.

“Oh, but he does,” cackled Seire. “It is clear he is angry and seeks his revenge. How else can he tear you from us unless he destroys everything?”

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” Niala scolded Seire, who had the grace to show contriteness, even if it was only a small amount. Niala spoke again to the other women. “The one Seire tells you about...I do not wish to frighten you with tales of his doings.”

“Who is he?” asked Jahmed softly.

Niala stared at her simple fare of cheese, flat bread, honey, and a handful of grapes as if an answer would appear within the food. Slowly, she said, “He is War.”

“What?” They all spoke at once. Pallin dashed to her feet, unable to sit still. “What do you mean?”

“What are you speaking of?”

“He is an immortal being who brings destruction and death as his companions.”

“Impossible!” cried Inni.

"I do not believe such a creature exists!" gasped Pallin.

"Niala, perhaps I am simple-minded, but, a god? A being named War who invokes violence? The only violence I have known has been at the hands of men." Inni clucked her tongue and shook her head.

Seire continued to laugh heartily as the room full of girls turned in unison to stare at their table.

Jahmed stood up, clapping her hands. In a ringing tone, she addressed the long tables of wide-eyed young women. "The meal is ended. Quickly now, clear away the dishes and food and go to your next lesson. If you await one of us, then study, for there will be consequences for those who do not know today's work."

The girls scurried about in their rush to do as Jahmed instructed. Niala concealed a smile as she watched the solemn expressions on the youngest of the children, while the older ones cast curious glances back at the five women as they completed the cleaning of tables. The room was emptied within a matter of moments.

Niala felt the swell of pride as she watched the last to leave, a young woman called Ajah who herded the rest of the girls from the room. The little ones tugged at her sleeve, asking questions in shrill voices. Ajah gave gentle pushes to the girls while murmuring answers and the last they saw of her was a quick smile thrown back their way.

"Ajah is ready," announced Seire.

"Ajah is ready for what?" said Pallin, leaning toward Seire.

"To be initiated," answered Seire matter-of-factly.

"But...but that means..." Pallin's mouth fell open. "You are not going to...die...?"

"Does it have to be death that leaves the door open? I have already told Niala..."

"You have already picked your replacement?" huffed Inni. "That is not up to you, and whether Ajah is truly ready..."

"Stop, all of you." Jahmed spoke with patience. "No one is dying and, for now, no other is to be initiated." She exchanged a glance with Niala, who continued to smile. "Let us return our focus to this vision Niala has had."

"Ah, yes, the one who comes down from the sky to bed you," snorted Inni. "The one you do not tell us about until he threatens us."

"There are many things that go unseen," Niala murmured, undisturbed. "Here, we know only Gaea's grace and goodwill, but in other places there are beings that fulfill the worst nightmares of the mortal world."

Jahmed turned to Niala. "Though I have been with you for more years than I care to recall, I was not born here. I know there are other ways outside ours. I just do not see how he connects to us."

"You bedded this one?" Pallin nearly choked. "I...I can scarcely believe it."

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“It was a long time ago.” Niala rubbed at a spot on the table. “A very long time ago.”

“But now he seeks you out?” Twirling one braid, Jahmed stared at Niala with half-closed eyes. “I fear if he is angry...”

“I do not know that he is angry. It is his nature to go where there is violence. Indeed, I cannot say if he brings violence or if it merely draws him. In my vision...” Pausing, Niala twisted a small piece of bread between her fingers. “...it was Najahmara that was under attack. He watched just as I watched. He did nothing and I...I did nothing...”

The terror relived itself and Niala shuddered as it flashed before her eyes.

“Tell us,” said Jahmed.

“I cannot...”

“Yes, Niala. Let us all hear of this fearful thing. Perhaps we can understand better what it is about.”

With hesitation between words, Niala related the vision to them. Her voice was low, nearly inaudible as she told them in detail of the destruction. When she finished, Niala exhaled and added, “It seemed as though it was Najahmara that was attacked, though I cannot be certain. I do not know what was meant by it all.”

“It is a warning, to be certain,” said Inni.

Jahmed nodded, pursing her lips. “A warning, yes, I agree. But, I wonder if it is not meant to say we have unrest within our own city. Niala, you know I speak the truth. We have had much disagreement of late within our city.”

“Yes,” nodded Inni. “We have had many quarrels over land since those who came by sea joined us. We should not have let them stay.”

“How could we not?” said Pallin. “We do not turn away those who would live amongst us. It would be against Gaea’s will.”

“Her will is that we live well and in peace,” answered Inni with a sharpness that brought a startled look to Pallin’s face. “Those who have come to us of late do not seem to understand that. Just yesterday I had to stop a fight over a basket of fish. Fish! There is more fish than any could ever eat and these two fought over a handful. I am sorry to say, it seems there is more of that every day.”

“There,” piped in Pallin. “He is drawn to the quarrels in our city. We must stop the petty arguing and he will leave us in peace.”

“Oh, indeed, let us stop fighting over fish and that will keep this god from our midst,” snapped Inni. “I am certain that is all he wants of us.”

“Shush,” interrupted Jahmed. “It may be Gaea tells us of some storm that is to come and all she can pluck from your thoughts is this being.”

“Were you thinking of him?” asked Pallin.

“No,” Niala answered slowly, “Yes...I do not know, but a day does not go by that I do not think of him. Perhaps I invoked him myself.”

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“Perhaps,” said Seire in a suddenly strong voice. “Perhaps you call him here, perhaps you have need of him.”

“No! No, I do not.”

All the women fell silent at the pointed tone of Niala’s words.

“What does this do to our celebration?” Pallin hovered near Niala’s shoulder.

“It does nothing to our celebration,” answered Inni. “Why would it?”

“I...I just wondered...”

It would be Pallin’s first time to stand before the people as right hand to the goddess during ritual. She was both frightened of her role and excited, wanting it more than anything else. She would hold space for Gaea while Niala called her into their midst. Pallin would act as her handmaiden while Gaea was with them. She had seen it done many times over and she knew she could do it. Yet, she could not help her worry. What if she did not do it right? Would Gaea be angered? Would she be asked to leave the sisterhood?

Pallin stood twisting her hands in her skirt, looking at Niala. Niala smiled and said, “You will do fine, Pallin. You will make us all proud. The harvest celebration will go on as planned, for we have an abundance this year and we must thank Gaea for her generosity.”

Standing, Niala addressed them all. “As for this vision, it will be clear soon enough. I can think no more of it, now, for there is much work to be done. I hear the drummers have already started up for this afternoon’s practice and that can only mean we also need to be busy.”

Each woman nodded once and rose to help clear the table. As Seire hobbled past Niala, she whispered, “Do not be angry with me, Niala. I knew you would change your mind about telling them and they needed to know of this evil.”

“Old woman, you overstepped your place.”

“We must fight this together. You, alone, cannot shoulder this burden.”

“But it is mine to bear. I do not want others harmed because of it.”

“No one needs to be harmed. We will find a way to stop it.”

“We do not yet know what comes our way, Seire.”

“Whatever it is, we will stand together as we always have. And my hope is more will be revealed during the harvest offerings, if not before.”

“Perhaps,” Niala mused. “Perhaps Gaea will give us answers.”

Inwardly, she was not so certain Gaea had an answer.