

## THREE

“There she is. The rising up of the River Maendre, a sight glorious enough for even a god to feel humbled!” King Hattusilis leaned forward on his mount, the reins held tightly in his hands. “She is magnificent, is she not?”

His gaze was riveted on a giant fountain of water shooting from deep inside the red cliffs before them. Midway up, it burst from the rocks with a roar, as if attempting to proclaim its greatness by imprisoning all other sounds within its own voice. Hattusilis shouted to be heard, glancing briefly at his companions before his gaze was drawn back to the thundering waterfall.

Telio, son of Hattusilis’ sister, said, “Truly, Uncle, it is exactly as you said it would be. I have never seen anything that rivals the beauty of this place. Our own lands pale in comparison”

“She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. See how she arches with the grace of a bird in flight, leaving behind a mist as sweet as any fruit I have ever tasted.” King Hattusilis followed the curve of water with his fingers, caressing the air as if he dipped into the river itself. Breathing deeply, he felt the kiss of light rain on his cheeks and the full flavor of the water on his tongue.

“The Maendre...she is everything I have been told. Since a mere babe, I have heard stories of this very place, where water meets sky, where rain is created from rock and all the colors of the earth bow before her in greeting. I confess I did not think she truly existed, yet we stand at her birthplace and witness her entrance into the world.”

“Uncle, I never doubted you would be able to find this place.”

The other two men who rode with King Hattusilis shared a glance, for they both knew the game Telio played. He was young and filled with his own importance, chosen for this campaign only because of the blood ties he had with their king. From the beginning, neither man carried any respect for the boy and, thus far, their thoughts remained the same. When Hattusilis placed him second in command, they both shook their heads and quietly went about the true art of war without him.

Telio nudged the taller of his companions with his boot and said, “You say nothing, Deimos. What do you think now of our king’s quest? Are these not the most magnificent falls you have ever seen?”

Deimos shrugged and fought the temptation to knock Telio from his mount right into the blue-green pool at the base of the Maendre. Instead, he concentrated on the indescribable uneasiness he felt since their arrival in these lands. Watching the tower of water as it spewed from the crevice in the ridge, he again felt the shivering of the land beneath his feet.

He had dismounted upon stopping and stood very close to the edge, the soft snorting of his horse by his ear. Nodding slowly, he deliberately ignored Telio and answered Hattusilis, “Yes, Hattu, the Maendre is indeed a thing of beauty.”

The fourth of their party was a grizzled man who had seen more campaigns than the king, having served Hattusilis’ father before him. His dislike of Telio went beyond compare, but as the king commanded, Zan obeyed. He merely grunted his response, knowing Telio cared nothing for his comments.

He had remained silent from the moment the four of them split from the army to trek up the side of the mountain for a view of the river they could only hear from the valley. The site of the great river was stunning, but he did not wish to encourage his King’s ramblings. Already Hattu sounded like a boy at his first mating instead of the great warrior he was.

Hattusilis grinned with idiot pride. “I feel this land beckons me, it waits for my embrace! I shall spread the wings of my kingdom over her.”

“All her riches will be ours,” Telio said. “And you shall be the most powerful king this land has ever seen.”

Zan’s snort rivaled the horses, but he quickly covered it with a cough. Deimos fell silent as a shudder crawled down his spine. Hattusilis was oblivious to their restraint, yet neither man was surprised.

Coming from the barren plains of the western steppe lands, where all that was seen were a few sheep and low scrub trees, the river was nothing short of a miracle. Shades of green covered the descending walls of stone as vegetation flourished with the abundance of moisture, growing into a lush basin at the bottom. The water spilled into a churning pool, eventually expelling into the riverbanks that wound away into the distance. From their perch on a rocky ledge midway up the waterfall, they could see coils of the river shining through the canopy of trees here and there like a giant serpent gliding across the countryside.

It was named Maendre for a reason. If they followed the path of the river as they planned, it would be a tiresome road, crisscrossing their own steps to keep with the waterway. As enamored of the Maendre as King Hattusilis was, Deimos knew it would be difficult to convince him to take a more direct route to their destination.

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Shifting restlessly from foot to foot, Deimos turned to Hattusilis with the intention of pointing out the folly of his plan, only to realize Hattu had never stopped talking. He was droning on about the Maendre as if it were his lover, his eyes alight with adoration.

“I have heard this country described as a land of smiling waters, more favored by the skies than anywhere else in the world. Is that not what we see before us? Exactly that, and more.” Hattusilis dragged his gaze from the causeway to scan the descending valley. “Already I hear the Maendre’s laughter and see the flourishing of plant-life from just this small view. There is an entire land yet to be explored with an abundance of game to feed our men and clean water to drink. We should be comfortable in our travels and soon...soon, we will find Najahmara.”

The beauty of the River Maendre could not be denied, but Deimos’ thoughts were more of the wilderness they were about to enter. A vast area by all accounts, the region was divided by two mighty rivers, the Maendre and the Bayuk. For all the pretty pictures Hattusilis painted, in reality, the land was more treacherous than the high plains. There well could be fertile farmland and rich cities beyond the woodland, but they first had to battle hillsides so thick with underbrush a man could be entangled and become food for the foraging beasts. Then there were the deep gorges cutting swaths across the valley. Once in their depths, there was no way out. A far cry from the magical land described by Hattusilis.

Deimos shrugged irritably. Hattusilis knew of these things as well as he did, for the stories of traders who traveled from one sea to the other were filled with the perils of this land. It was Benor, a traveling trader who caught Hattu’s attention. Benor’s detailed descriptions of a city he called Najahmara had brought the grieving and withdrawn king into action.

After the death of Hattusilis’ wife and child, he was frozen with sorrow. When a spark returned with the stories of Najahmara and he wished to take a campaign south, he was supported by his tribune.

Yet the tribune had not witnessed the full extent of his obsession, Deimos thought, an obsession that grew on a daily basis.

“Yes, Hattu, about Najahmara...”

“... their Queen...” Hattusilis scarcely paused for a breath, “...is said to be more radiant than the sun and her beauty rivals the finest jewels. Even the moon hides in shame in the face of this Queen.” Hattusilis lowered his voice. His next words were nearly lost in the rushing waters, “It is said she is not human at all, but a goddess in disguise. Perhaps even the mother goddess herself.”

Deimos stared at him, a sudden chill raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Perhaps there was some truth to the trader Benor’s foolish rambling, bespoken in the glowing voice of the king. Deimos had felt the disquiet from the moment he dismounted and now could put a name to the feeling: intrusion.

He should have known who called from the edges of his mind. The power of the mother goddess radiated all around them, beneath his feet, in the air he breathed and in the mist of the Maendre. This was her land they entered and they had not given her due respect.

He was surprised he did not recognize the power of the most ancient goddess of all, the one called Gaea. Listening closely, he waited for her voice to speak and heard nothing. Shaking his head, Deimos wondered if he was mistaken. Did he truly feel her power? Yet there, another tremor, as slight as a touch to a spider's web, unlike any other he had ever experienced.

"Hattu, there is more here than meets the eye. We must tread carefully, for I feel Najahmara may not be what you think it is."

"What do you speak of, Deimos?"

"This is a dangerous land and much is hidden from us. Do not be so arrogant as to think it will fall into your hands."

"You have doubt of my skills as a leader?" Eyes narrowing, Hattusilis turned to Telio. "Is this true? Does he question me?"

"It appears so, Uncle," Telio smirked. "He says he does not think we should invade these precious lands for fear of our lives."

Deimos cast his gaze to the ground and took a deep, steadying breath. Though he could not help the flare of temper that leapt up, he kept quiet. Telio was not a good influence, but he was the king's blood and Deimos dared not throttle him, though he wished for the thousandth time to do exactly that. He felt Zan shudder next to him and knew Zan picked up on his anger.

"We should go cautiously into this land," Zan said in a measured voice, not even knowing why he spoke thusly.

"You are afraid?" Telio mocked Zan as well, which brought a hidden smile to Deimos' lips. That one would not hesitate to find Telio alone and beat him senseless.

"No," growled Zan. "I am not stupid. I beg your forgiveness, my king, but we have shared many campaigns together and I must agree with Deimos..." The scowl he cast toward Deimos made it clear he did not like it one bit. "Something is afoot in this land and we must take caution."

Hattusilis sat in silence for long moments watching the rainbow of colors from the spray of water as it descended into the river. "We will proceed with caution, but make no mistake, my word is final." With this, he met each man's gaze and received a nod from each. "Good. Then let us make camp at the foot of the falls."

"There, my lord?" Deimos blinked, listening to the thundering of the waterfalls. They shouted now at each other to be heard, sleep would be next to impossible.

"Yes, there. We will have the splendor of the Maendre to sing to us."

"You mean we will have the noise to keep us awake." Deimos interrupted,

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ignoring the new flash of irritation crossing Hattusilis' face. Instead his gaze swept the skies. "There are several hours of daylight left, let us move further down the riverbank to a quieter, more level, and..." he paused to wipe the spray from his face, "and less damp place to pitch camp."

"Your King has spoken. Go set up camp," said Telio, with a sneer.

Hattusilis said nothing; he turned his mount and began the trek to the bottom of the ridge, shoulders tight and squared. His army waited there for his signal, restless and weary from riding since dawn. Knowing they were close, Hattusilis pushed hard to arrive at the falls and knew, as a good commander, he should release the troops from their pain and allow a bit of play. Speaking for himself, he could not wait to shed hot leathers and sink into the waters of the Maendre, to wash away the stink of his body and the haze of travel.

His former good mood did not return even though no one offered further challenge. Zan and Telio went about arranging the campsite, much to the relief of the men. Deimos spoke not at all to him, choosing instead to withdraw from the preparations. After bathing and then eating the evening meal of flat bread, dried meat, and a handful of figs, Hattu lay in his tent alone, with thoughts of Deimos running through his mind.

Though Telio was young, he was family. Hattusilis knew he gave Telio rank and privilege beyond his experience, but could not yet trust Telio in battle. He was happy the boy turned out to be a favorable captain, for he did whatever Hattu bid, and was confident Telio would grow into his role.

But of late, each time Telio caught Hattu alone, he complained bitterly about Deimos. Hattusilis was deeply disturbed by these comments. Telio said the men did not like Deimos and they did not trust him. He said Deimos gave rise to their anxiety because he walked as if on air and made no sounds, appearing and disappearing so quietly even the beasts became agitated. Telio said the men were afraid of him because, during battle, his gaze seemed to cut through flesh causing terror and instant retreat without bloodying his weapon.

Hattusilis had not noticed such things during a skirmish. He saw only a great warrior who fought well and gave allegiance to his king. Still, Hattusilis could not help but wonder if his confidence in Deimos was misplaced. Though he was an outstanding commander, he was a strange one. And, after all, what did he really know of Deimos? Without explanation, he had shown up beside Hattusilis during the bloody quelling of the cursed sand-dwellers, fighting boldly, but appearing more foreign than those they fought against.

Deimos went without a beard when it was unthinkable for any man to do so, and wore his black hair shorter, letting it lay in curls across his forehead and around his ears. He had deep-set brown eyes that were always guarded, often distant, as if his thoughts were roaming elsewhere. His nose was long and narrow, his lips thinner, his chin prominent. His skin was fairer than those of the steppe lands, but ruddier than the sand dwellers, and he towered far

above the legions of men he fought beside.

He talked neither of his homeland nor of any family and he would never indulge in drink or idle conversation. If it was not about battle plans, he withdrew from the ranks to be alone. He played none of the idle games and he took no interest in any of the women who followed the troops.

Hattusilis could not readily blame him for that, however, for those women were a filthy lot, coarse and loud-mouthed, spreading their legs for any who would pay. He, himself, stayed clear of them, though he knew Telio sought them out on a regular basis. He attempted to curb this behavior, for the women caused more than a few to die in jealous rages, yet Telio persisted and Hattusilis finally looked the other way.

He knew Deimos held nothing but scorn for Telio in return and, perhaps, that was the root of Telio's complaints. But there was some truth to it all. Just like this night, he had no doubt Deimos would wander off and not be seen again until they were ready to take up their journey. And where did he go? He would never say.

With an irritated snort, Hattusilis turned on his side. He did not care what Deimos did or did not do and it was time Telio learned to keep his thoughts to himself. They had arrived at the Maendre and, soon, they would find Najahmara and the queen he wanted so desperately to take as his own. For that, Hattusilis decided, he would ride with a band of demons. Closing his eyes, he sought the refuge of sleep, though it did not easily come because of the incessant thundering of the falls.

Deimos did not wait for the vast legions of men to settle into their encampment before he slipped away. Though he was commanded to oversee a part of the army, he had no interest in it and left them to take care of their own comfort. His only thought was on the presence of the earth goddess he felt as soon as his feet touched the ground at the head of the Maendre Falls.

Gaea was long thought to be dormant, her energies lying at the root of all life, but uninvolved in the cycles of her children. This is what he was told and this is what he believed until now. Was it Gaea he felt? Deimos did not know for certain, only that the surge of energy at the falls was not caused by any being he had ever encountered before.

He escaped into the night, away from the stirrings of two thousand soldiers and the slaves who fed them, so he could better listen to the sighing of the earth. Restless energy crawled up his spine as he sat at the pinnacle of the falls. Staring out over the basin, he watched the wandering lights from torches and the stationary fires marking the camps of the army below.

With no more than the shimmering starlight to keep him company, Deimos waited. He wanted Gaea to speak to him. Directly. With words or images. Appear to him, show herself to him, even if that is something she had never

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done. He called out to her softly, asking that she give him some proof of her wakefulness. Was it Gaea or the rumblings of another immortal who held the lands of Najahmara within her grasp?

Why this land? Deimos thought, as he idly tossed pebbles at the water.

What was it about this land that brought Gaea into his awareness? Before they reached the Maendre, the earth was as always, a grateful solidness beneath his feet, but no more than that. He gave no thought to the spirit that dwelled within, for she was only a legend amongst his kind. An ancient being, who gave them life and then withdrew from it as if her duty was fulfilled.

Those like his father and grandfather took it for granted Gaea no longer was interested in the lives of either mortals or immortals. She birthed the races and then receded like the tides. Or so everyone thought. Deimos felt the force beneath him and knew it was Gaea, though she remained silent.

Power radiated out like fingers, dancing along his arms and legs, touching his face, tweaking his hair. He shivered as tiny bumps rose on his flesh, though he wore the heavy riding leathers and long sleeve shirt of the northern lands. He sat up straighter and jerked his head from side to side, once turning to look over his shoulder. He saw no one, smelled no one.

As he turned back to stare over the encampment, he saw the small flames suddenly grow into rivers of fire flowing from the center as if an elemental blew outward, sending its breath of flames rolling across the men. He heard shrieks of agony, heard the sizzle of flesh and smelled the charred remains of humans burned beyond recognition. With a shout, he leaped to his feet only to sway and nearly tumble into the Maendre.

Scuttling backwards, Deimos tripped over a root. He rolled and came to his feet again, gasping. As he swung back to look over the encampment, he saw the roaring flames were no longer there. All was quiet. There was no shouting, no screaming, just the usual barks of laughter and bits of talk echo up through the darkness. He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed hard across his face before looking out once more.

The sprawling jumble of an army and its followers was spread out through the foliage near the banks of the River Maendre. The torches and campfires were once again flickering lights dotting the shores. As he stood balanced on the edge blinking rapidly, he thought, 'Why? Why would I see such a thing?'

Was this Gaea's message?

"She sends a vision of terror?" asked Deimos. His skin prickled with alarm, for he had no doubt she knew who he was. And why he was there.

But why did she care?

Just as quickly, he knew the answer.

Najahmara.

Of course.

There was something in Najahmara she protected.

## *Ruth Souther*

As soon as this thought occurred to him, there was a calming sensation, as if the earth exhaled in relief.

“But Gaea, I belong to War. I walk this land with a purpose.”

An angry wind blew through the tops of the trees, whirling down to catch him unaware. It tore at his hair and clothing, howled in his ears and swooped down the side of the falls to cause flames to flare and then die. Darkness fell all along the riverbanks as men clung to their bedrolls. Slaves struggled to calm the mounts, tents were overturned, and everywhere there was shouting. The wind came and went rapidly. When it was gone, Deimos held up his hands, palms out.

“Peace, great mother,” he said softly. He had asked for an affirmation and he had received it. He was now compelled to seek out Najahmara, out of courtesy to Gaea. To at least see what it was she kept there and what it was she did not want Hattusilis to destroy.

There was a fleeting moment when Deimos thought perhaps he should inform his father of this place called Najahmara, a place Gaea kept as her own. He should tell his father about Gaea. Clearly, there was more here than meets the eye. He really should inform his father of his discovery.

Yet, in the end, he did not. He was curious and not a little unsettled by Gaea’s message. Besides, she spoke to him, not to any of the Ages. She ignored them to the point they believed her dormant. Why should he tell them her secrets?

As if in agreement, the earth shimmied.

Deimos smiled.

He began to search for Najahmara that night and discovered it was no easy task. From his stance above the Maendre, Deimos reached out for the peculiar pattern of contraction and expansion that happened when a human breathed. With each inhale, the energy was disturbed and with each exhale there was a mingling of mortal essence with the immortal world around them.

Najahmara was not the only existence in the lands they crossed. Each time Deimos found another isolated pocket of mortals, he grew excited, only to find they were no more than scattered tribal bands on the furthest edges. People who made their homes wherever they stopped for the night. He would go and stand near their camps, scanning across the tattered tents and meager possessions until he assured himself they were not what he sought. Then he would reach out again until he found the next group.

Deimos moved from place to place with little effort. If he were asked how, he would say it was a matter of concentration. He could not do these things when he was a child. He walked where he wanted to go and dressed himself like any mortal. When he was young, he did not have the extra sense of energy that now allowed him to travel quickly, to be present in the mortal world or

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keep himself invisible to their eyes. It was the same ability that let him bring forth something from nothing or, by the same token, make something go away.

He realized early on in his life that if he did not know this way of being, he would never have choice. Those immortals who did not become skilled at the art of will never left their niches, whether that be forests, waterways, or the netherland that could not be seen by mortal eyes. Deimos refused to be trapped. Therefore, he learned and he learned well.

His father called it arbitri, at one's will and pleasure.

"Have what you shall have, be where you shall be, but know it is by your own will and pleasure. No other can do it for you." His father's words rang in his ears as surely as if he stood next to him. Deimos twitched, glancing over his shoulder just in case that resonating voice was not his imagination. If Ares called, then Deimos must obey and return home to Athos, but he did not want to leave just yet.

There was much left for Deimos to discover about the world and his interest in Gaea and Najahmara knew no bounds. Yes, he should advise Ares of Gaea. He should tell the Council of Ages she was active. He should. He knew he should. But he would not, for he wanted the moment to himself.

When at last he found Najahmara, the sky hinted of daylight. He was on a dusty trail blazed along the top of a ridge with scrub bushes clustered on the very rim and thick grass growing down the rounded backside of the mount. Toward the city, it was steep and rocky, with small trees and thick brush speckled between boulders. Deimos could see the path continue, sloping downward until it reached the valley and the shores of a large lake. On the other side, the path went on across the back of the ridge and wound down into the depths of a thick forest where it was lost from his sight. The forest was ominously dark and convex, with the boughs of the trees creating a thick canopy. The first rays of rosy dawn could be seen streaking the sky behind the trees.

Across from him, but somewhat lower, was a long, wide plateau with five tall, white stones arranged in a half-moon. He could feel the vibrations emanating from it from across the valley and knew he had indeed arrived at Najahmara. A large burned out area was in the center, a fire circle, but otherwise the plateau was clear. It, too, gently sloped downward until it reached a grassy meadow cut through by a wide river. He knew it had to be the Bayuk, for the twisting Maendre emerged from the forest and wound through the valley until it reached the lake, pouring into it just as the same body of water swallowed the Bayuk.

Three bridges crossed the Maendre, which had narrowed considerably from the headwaters. One was near the forest, one led directly through the center of town to a sprawling building and the third was on the outskirts of the valley. Huts dotted the land, interspersed by patches of yellowing grains and dark green rows of trees. As the living quarters spiraled inward toward the central

building, the huts became closer together with squared corners and bigger, with flat rooftops instead of the rude thatches.

Deimos guessed the oddly shaped building was a temple of sorts, though not a pretty one, or grand. It was not even decorated in any manner that would let him know who it honored yet, he knew without being told, Gaea was resident. He could see the first signs of life in curling wisps of smoke rising from cook fires and a few people moving about as they prepared the morning meal.

He knew he should return to the encampment and at least pretend he had slept, but he was not yet ready to leave Najahmara. As the sun's rays began to seep over the top of the wooded area and lay across the blue-green waters of rivers and lake, it was as if the valley was encased in liquid light. Dew glittered like jewels on the grass and the thick leaves of trees he could now see were loaded with either fruit or nuts. The grain, nearly ready for harvest, took on a glowing red-gold appearance, like fire straight from the heart of the earth. The squat buildings, nondescript in the dark, were made mostly of the same white stone that stood tall upon the plateau and laced the side of the ridge that descended to the edge of the valley.

The center building, constructed in a rough semi-circle, was made partially from the white stone and partially from tan mud bricks. The combination gave it a somewhat scraggly appearance, haphazard, as if slapped together here and there whenever someone felt like it. It was amusing and, yet, he found himself drawn to it. From this core place of Najahmara, he felt strong waves of energy flowing outward.

A thrill of excitement filled him. What if Gaea, after all, was embodied and resided there? No such thing had ever been suspected, or even taken as a serious thought. Gaea was the Earth. She did not take physical form as did all the others. Or she never had, to anyone's knowledge. Would not his father, and all the Council of Ages, be amazed at his discovery? Perhaps not pleased, Deimos thought, but still quite amazed.

With his gaze riveted upon the rounded building, Deimos took himself down into the city of Najahmara and straight to the entrance, but did not dare go inside. There were no doors, only an arched entrance that led into the dim depths of the building. No statues, no carvings, not even an urn decorated the front. The entry jutted out, as if it once had stood alone, and was constructed of rough mud bricks. There were no stairs. It simply went from the path to the inside. It was perhaps the width of two men lying end to end and went straight back until it connected up to a larger part of the building, which was constructed with slabs of the white stone. The deep angles contained neat rows of plants, some flowering, some cut back to short stalks.

There were no openings cut out on the side that faced him other than the main entrance. He could not see inside, though he longed to know what lay hidden within. Sorely tempted, Deimos hesitated toward the doorway and then

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drew back into the shadows as he heard voices.

Two women emerged, one old and bent, gray with age and leaning on a staff. The other was tall and straight with bronzed skin and auburn hair in a long, thick braid. The old one's eyes were blinded and she turned her head from side to side as she slowly moved out onto the dirt path. Deimos stared at the tall woman, for he glimpsed the energy that had drawn him to her doorway. The pattern was subtle, easing around her in a serpentine fashion, seen here, felt there, in an elusive sort of way. She did not project the immortal strength that others of his kind did, but it lay within her just the same.

He could not decide what she was. He wanted to touch her, to see if by laying his fingertips on her skin, he could tell what energy was suppressed inside her, yet he dared not show himself. Instead, he watched her with keen interest. Her face was an oval, with high cheekbones and slender brow over slightly slanted golden eyes. Her lips were full, slightly parted and tilted upward as if she were about to smile. Her chin was held up, her body was strong, her shoulders squared and, though she wore an ankle length gown, the material could not disguise full breasts and rounded hips.

Her sure movements and graceful steps instantly captivated Deimos as she helped the elder one along the street. She inclined her head down to speak to her companion and her voice was music to his ears. It lilted up and down with an amused undertone that made him shiver. He could not help himself; he had not seen a woman of such beauty for an unimaginable time. Following along behind them, he skirted the edges of the low buildings, taking care he did not bump into those who emerged from their doorways to greet the two women.

From that, he learned their names. The old one was Seire Neval and the other was Niala Aaminah. Both were greeted with reverence and, in some cases, a bowing of heads. Both women responded with smiles, waves, and the occasional moment of conversation that happens between mortals: how are you, how are your children, your beasts, your possessions... whatever was on their minds came out of their mouths.

To this, Deimos shrugged irritably. He did not care how they fared. He listened only because it gave him opportunity to hear Niala's voice again and again. He was left wanting to speak with her, to know who she really was, or even what she was. Was she aware of the spark that resided in her? Perhaps not. She seemed overly comfortable living as she did, within this mortal community, and he could not imagine such a life.

Deimos lived among the warriors, but not fully. When he felt stifled, he roamed about at night, going into the realms of other beings for entertainment. He returned to the realm of War whenever he was bidden and bore his responsibility there in a most serious manner, yet he could not tear himself fully away from the mortal existence. He was plagued by the desire to be close to humans. He knew his father was deeply annoyed by it, yet he could not turn

away. Not yet.

Lost in his thoughts, he strayed in front of the two women, who paused to speak with three tousled children gazing up at them with adoring eyes. He stood staring at them in a sudden fit of gloom and was startled to see Niala Aaminah raise her head and smile at him. Slowly turning, Deimos looked for another the smile would have been meant for and saw he was alone on the path. She met his gaze, still smiling, though her eyes held a question.

Deimos let his mouth quirk up in response, then he ducked his head and with his heart pounding, he rapidly walked away. She had seen him! She should not have been able to unless that air of immortality was stronger than he thought.

As soon as he rounded a corner, he left Najahmara and returned to the encampment, but his mind was not on that of moving an army. He did not respond to Zan or Telio and scarcely answered Hattusilis. He could not stop thinking of Najahmara and the secrets there