

*Therefore, remember that formerly you  
Who are Gentiles by birth,  
At that time were separate from Christ,  
Aliens to the citizenship in Israel  
And strangers to the covenant of the promise,  
Having no hope and without God in the world.*

Ephesians 2:11-12 (The author's own paraphrase)

## **The Day When Canaan Fell**

**1. The Pearl**

**2. The Qedesha**

**3. The Chosen**

**Rafał Kosowski**

**THE  
PEARL**



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# ***Prologue***

DOZENS of black trails of smoke sloped down to the ground like long spears piercing the sky over the Jordan Valley. High up, from where they came, the dark indigo of the sky gradually transformed into the black void that stretched over the planet, but down on the ground, where their heads had hit, hell was burning, furious and merciless. Sand and rocks were boiling, melted by the uncontainable heat released by the falling stars, precisely guided with the Creator's hand. The deposits of petroleum, asphalt and sulfur stored under the surface of the ground instantly went ablaze like a volcano and the flames started to devour what for a long time merchants and nomads had enviously called the "Paradise Valley", the "Second Egypt."

A moment before the whole area really had looked that way—a green garden of abundance strengthened by the life-giving waters of the Jordan. That was all that human eyes could see here as they took delight in the beauty of the valley, but how different it looked in the realm of the spirit, where nothing could hide the truth. From that perspective, all the surrounding area was a crater filled with abominations and filth, the dwelling of vice and immorality, which scale and intensity had marked new and unmatched boundaries of human degradation. All the space around both cities located amidst juicy greenery was dense with personified evil. It had ruled here absolutely and was incurable. The same contrast characterized the First World, before the water apocalypse destroyed it—beauty

and evil intertwined with each other and indistinguishable for most of observers. Then time and again punishment had come but evil was still able to find the way to another “Paradise Valley”. The history repeated again and again as evil still hated beauty, and down through the ages the missed decisions willingly taken by the fallen creatures led them to the point in which every kind of order, even the most perfect, eventually yielded to chaos.

Hell was ablaze, burning the remnants of rottenness and decay. The punishment had to come for the perverted people had rejected the last chance of salvation. When the two *Messengers* had arrived at the city at dusk, after a while they didn't have any illusions as to the conclusions from that inspection. Dressed in human bodies they saw it for themselves what the locals were capable of—both adults and youth. They saw clearly the dark figures of their spiritual adversaries surrounding and permeating the people's hearts and minds. The faces of people and demons warped with the same grimace of animal lust and cruelty. Mingled with their victims, the soldiers of the Bearer of Light were mocking the *Angelos* and taking delight in their power over that place; their laughter passed by human larynxes proved unbearable for the holy messengers of the *Highest One*. And then it was clear that there was no way to meet the condition for which the place could be saved, the condition that the *Speaking-One*'s friend had begged for. That evil had to be burnt to the core, before it started to boast with its impunity and poisoned the whole land. Didn't the *One-Who-Is* say so?

The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great,  
...their sin is very grievous.<sup>1</sup>

The white-burning meteors had hit right on time and none had missed the target. They brought payment—precise and fair. Within minutes the “Paradise Valley” started to turn into a lake of boiling lava. Buildings sank under

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:20

the ground and the greenery got scorched, animals and people burnt as they personally paid the debt they had been taking with the Creator for years: the debt of patience abundantly shown by the Lord of Heaven and Earth, whom they had disregarded and instead took delight in satisfying their perverted instincts.

The heat was devouring not only their bodies, which were rolling on the scorched ground in dreadful convulsions—each of the condemned ones had finally felt what kind of poison their hearts and minds were saturated with, each of the satisfied lusts was coming back to them from the depths of the past and burnt them more acutely than fire. With all their beings they participated in settling the accounts of their lives, with all their senses they read the extensive obituary that showed the reasons for which they had to die.

The last righteous man, still bewildered by the painful events of the previous night, was already safe in Zoar. According to the command he hadn't looked back and with trembling he covered his head with the hood of his robe, not to share the condemned one's fate. He was too terrified to feel regret or despair having lost all he had possessed...

The *Highest One's* friend didn't sleep that night either, still bearing in his mind the conversation he'd had with his God, and in his thoughts he kept rebuking himself for the excessive boldness and obtrusiveness with which he bargained with the Lord of Heaven and Earth for the conditions on which the sinners could be rescued. But he couldn't do otherwise. He couldn't just listen indifferently of the destruction that had been decided, the destruction to befall also his nephew and his family, and maybe other righteous ones lost in the maze of evil.

But some voice in his heart kept telling him that all that bargaining was in vain, for the wise God knew everything and none of His decisions was taken in rush. Eventually, he rose from his bed and at dawn he went to the place, in which he spoke with the Lord a few hours before. Covering his eyes from the sharp rays of the morning sun, he nurtured illusions that his requests would be met. But what

he saw shook him through. Helpless as he was, he fell to his knees and watched Sodom and Gomorrah, a plume of smoke above them like they were enormous furnaces for melting metal. The *Speaking-One* was standing next to his old friend, whom *He* had visited the day before in the form of the Son of Men together with the two *Angelos*. Now *He* was with him again. Tears of sorrow were rolling from the old man's eyes.

“Not even ten of the righteous, my Lord? Not even a handful as small as that?!” Avraham sobbed. “Why?”

“Evil shall never be satisfied with thousands of victims, Avraham.” In *His* words one could feel regret mixed with determination. “It shall not rest before there are ten, even three righteous men calling upon My Name.”

The *Speaking-One* looked at *His* servant, aware that it was just him and Sarah—The Father of Many and his Princes<sup>2</sup>, that's why *He* had to trust them and protect them in that difficult way, before the Promise could finally come true. The couple of the righteous had trusted the *Highest One* that they would become a family, which had to survive to eventually become a nation. And that nation would have to be threshed and sifted, melted and tried, almost wiped from the earth and then renewed, they would almost drown in the flood of evil before the Mediator of the Covenant could come from it. And it was still a very far way to go...

“Remember, Avraham, even the smallest remnant, even ten, even three righteous men persistent in prayer before my Face are powerful might, unbearable for the enemy, that's why the forces of hell would try to destroy them by any means. Now listen, Avraham, for the evil shall surely be reborn, if the inhabitants of this land fail to obey Me. Even though Sodom and Gomorrah shall always be the warning and the example of punishment for the ungodly, you are the one to become God's messenger for the peoples of this land, for there is nothing more important than to know Me as God of mercy and faithfulness, who does not want shedding of blood or revenge.

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<sup>2</sup> The meaning of the names of Abraham and Sarah.



“I have chosen you to teach your sons and the whole family to be righteous and honest, so that I can fulfill what I have promised you, Avraham. Through you, Amorites shall see what it means to walk with God. Be faithful and testify with your deeds that whoever serves Me, shall be blessed forever.”

And after a moment of silence *He* added with distinct sadness in *His* voice,

“But if they disregard your message and reject the One who lives and works in you, then the evil shall grow strong again, even more malicious and treacherous than in Sodom and Gomorrah... And then they shall have to die!”



# 1 *A Voice*

*Whether it speaks this only time,  
Whether it comes back in a year, ten years,  
Never pretend... that you cannot hear it!*

It was breaking through her dreams until she couldn't ignore it any more. On the verge of reality she listened carefully for its meaning and understood that it was an imperative. But it surely wasn't coming from the world of humans. It wasn't her beloved that was trying to wake her from dream. She would have recognized it at once. She focused on the person sleeping next to her. The man's breath was still deep and regular.

Only she could hear THAT.

The *Voice* ignored her chaotic attempts at understanding; it still remained unknown, still unrelenting. At last the girl opened her eyes but before she ventured any movement, she looked around carefully, as much as her position on the bed allowed. The chamber was sunken in darkness but it looked normal. No one seemed to be there.

"Aberes, get up and go downstairs" again sounded the words out of nowhere.

"Who's that?" she whispered shyly in the darkness, careful not to wake her husband. "Who's there?"

"Get up and go to the vault." Now it sounded even more urgent.

She moved the blanket aside and rested her hand against one of the wooden poles supporting the bed's canopy. She rebuked herself for that carelessness. Under the hand the wood creaked threateningly. She quickly moved the hand back. She looked for the slippers and with some difficulty slipped her numb feet in. The leftovers of

the sleep hampered her movements but a moment later she was ready to go.

Wrapped with a velvet cloak against the chill of the night she didn't question her courage to go at night to those parts of the castle in which even during the day chill and paralyzing fear were overwhelming.

From the foyer outside her chamber she walked several steps and turned left towards a staircase. Then she fingered the banister and carefully went to the ground floor. It was lit by torches fastened with brass fittings to the walls. The flames were calm. She cheered up.

Past the bend of the hall she saw a black recess in the wall where there was the staircase to the vault. Curious enough, it wasn't guarded by even one soldier.

"Where are the sentinels?" she thought. "The priest always wants to know if anyone's coming. Guards change day and night."

At that moment she realized that she'd never step willingly onto the forbidden ground—an uninvited guest, even as important as the khazanu's wife, wasn't welcome in the dungeons often visited by the messenger of gods and his hound. He was surrounded by an aura of fear and a look in his dark eyes meant one was far too close.

As if answering this hesitation, the *Voice* spoke with a warmer tone.

"Do not fear, no one knows you are here." Astonished, she found herself believing unreservedly and continued down the winding stairs. The steps were fitted into the wall of a circular shaft drilled in the granite of the rock the castle was built on. From the inside the stairs were not supported by any structure, so in the middle of the shaft there gaped a circular three-foot hole. A low banister was the only protection from falling down to the very bottom of the shaft.

Carefully making her steps she went down. There, still guided by the mysterious call, she turned left, where she heard a murmur of voices about a dozen steps away.

She couldn't recognize them from afar so she came closer, to a heavy wooden door. The narrow gap underneath the

fittings of the door only let out little light from the chamber. It only illuminated a small part of the stone flooring.

The mysterious *Voice* didn't speak any more, so she decided she should stand right there.

"But why am I here?" she wondered. "This must be a dream!"

The doorframe was fitted between two wide stone pillars with a simple triangular tympanum atop which almost reached the arched ceiling. The wide pillars could easily hide a person like Aberes and with a bit of luck a passerby wouldn't notice her at all.

Apart from the light there was also an emanation of a bizarre presence from the chamber, so hideous that the girl quickly looked elsewhere. She felt weird, as if standing on a narrow rock ledge over a hundred-mile deep precipice, in which a vociferous seven-headed hydra lay in waiting to drag a daredevil down.

She rebuked herself for that rampant imagination and instead focused on the conversation she couldn't easily make out. The tone of the speaker's voice made her tremble, so she fearfully pressed all the body hard against the rough wall. The man's presence in the city surprised her.

"*Someone must have brought important news*" she thought. "*That's why they've met.*" The priest would always stay in the temple west of the castle but the meetings always took place in this chamber.

The girl understood she had to ignore the fear, otherwise she wouldn't understand a thing of this conversation. This time an older man spoke, increasing the fear in her heart. His tone emanated with a sense of power and cold self-control.

"The recent change on the throne of pharaohs seems to be favorable to us. On the one hand, Egypt still holds Mitannia in an iron grasp and the princes of Naharin have to send carriages and carriages of valuables to Egypt and thus they deprive the North of support. For a long time they shall not pose any threat for our plans. On the other hand, Mencheperure and Nebmaatire have been the least

militant of all the pharaohs so far and sooner or later Syria and Hittites shall claim what is theirs. If we conduct our policy wisely and exploit all the circumstances, the matters shall go as we plan.”

“I’d like to know your shall concerning the fugitives, Master” spoke another voice unclearly.

“We shouldn’t have devoted so much attention to them and I do not wish to be bothered with them any more. For over thirty years they’ve been marching the desert, without a permanent home. I would like to believe that they shall become another nomad tribe without land and king and eventually they shall fade away among the dunes of the desert...” He walked a little in the room, fortunately far enough from the door. “It’s significant that they had come so near, to Kadesh-Barnea...”

“Aren’t you troubled that we still don’t know what part they shall play in our plans?”

“Leave that to wiser and more powerful ones than you are, Hetammu” the impatience in the man’s voice was all too distinct.

“We can finish it on our own, Master. Even their gods deemed them useless” said the younger voice. “It’s enough to wait for an opportunity...”

“I can see the constant fire of revenge burning in your soul!” the tone grew colder, which was felt even outside the chamber.

The girl trembled.

„In that game your feelings are meaningless, so do not even try to impose your will on me, elevel!” A respectful silence was the only answer so he continued. “The Masters command us to wait. I sense a breath of their unrest and although it is barely noticeable, for mortals it should sound like a roar of a thousand thunders! The Enemy is unpredictable, I know something of *Him*. That old restless *El*, who cannot wait to rule over this land again...” He paused for a moment. “Once *He* was content with worship of just a few mortals. Now *He* is served by those whom *He* led through fire and water leaving nothing but ashes and dead bodies behind.”

“So much greater *His* fury when they have turned out to be a band of cowards. It may be their death sentence—they shall perish in the desert, should they make *Him* angry again.”

“You are looking too shallow inside the matters, which I find disturbing after I’ve taught you so much.”

“Forgive me, Master, but my father left me the legacy of those unpaid debts and if only there came an opportunity... Since the chase of Chorma I’ve been dreaming of dealing that final blow!” The man loudly banged his fist against the wall. “I wish I could charge on them with my jackals.”

“Your imaginary debts mean nothing. The Amalekites keep trying to destroy them but Habiru are still fortunate. I saw it with my own eyes and drew proper conclusions. Unlike your father! Do not forget that this ambition destroyed him. To repeat the same mistakes and yet anticipate desirable results is folly, and I shall not tolerate that in you! Besides, without the support of all your tribe there is nothing you can do. It is still too early.”

“Forgive me, Master” the voice of the younger man was confused but soon his doggedness prevailed. “I shall keep waiting until the right time comes, then I shall satisfy my revenge. If the gods allow me to.” He laughed with his characteristic reptile hiss, to which Aberes threw to the side like she had been touched with hot iron. He hated that snigger. Immediately in her mind she saw his eyes, equally reptile-like and treacherous.

As she moved, the cloak slid down her shoulder and when she leaned again on the pillar, the long silver buckle that pinned both halves of the cloak grated against the stone like a saw cutting hard oak wood. The echo reverberated off the arches of the corridor while the voices in the chamber grew silent immediately.

A frightened Aberes could hear nothing but her heartbeat and had to cover her mouth with the hand to muffle the intense hiss of breathing.

“*You stupid! You are noisy like an old pulley!*” she clenched her fist, furious at her own carelessness. “*Be quiet, Aberes, or you shall pay dearly for that!*”

She knew they didn't even have to check that. The priest was renowned for his gift of *seeing*. He could see the person or object he was looking for even from afar, despite obstacles between. The gods showed him everything like it was on the palm of his hand, be it across walls or rocks. He was said to have a horde of ghouls at his command. In his presence everyone was on vigil, wearing protective amulets, which didn't always help anyway, as the messenger of the gods could even hear someone's thoughts, especially when he needed to know their intentions. He was greatly feared.

The girl was trembling all over her body, while seconds dragged like dunes moving in the deserts.

The *Voice* returned immediately and calmed her down.

"No one shall see you. Trust me! Listen carefully. It's about your life..."

As if answering those words, the older man spoke.

"It must be rats. I do not sense anyone's presence. Speak, Hetammu, what news are you bringing?"

Aberes took a breath of relief and almost got glued to the wall to hear better. But the words of the younger man got her freeze with fear.

"What I have to say cannot be heard even by spiders and cockroaches, so will you close the *chetah*, Master?"

She was sure to be lost. Closing the *chetah* meant spreading a protective shield around the people, usually sorcerers, who wished to remain unheard and unseen by strangers. It was tremendously powerful protection, possible to be broken only by a mightier magus, yet between the ominous ruins of Shir-Ihen in the south and the fortified Megiddo in the north there was none mightier than him...

A moment later she could hear the men unanimously pronounce the magical formulae. They were such a complex and inhuman sounding system of guttural syllables and umlauts that listening alone was a torture. But Aberes was aware it wasn't the worst. She knew that if someone unwanted was too near and tried to eavesdrop the people who used the incantation, they felt like they



were cast inside a fiery furnace—the wretch could only run as far as possible and thus reveal his presence or—if they decided to retreat too late, they were caught by madness that wouldn't pass for a few days, leaving the mind scarred permanently.

Aberes felt her mind being torn by two opposite forces. On the one hand she remembered the reassuring promises of the *Voice*, on the other hand she knew that the time to get to safety would run away in a few heartbeats.

Instinctively she looked at the gap beneath the door. The color of light turned jade and grew more intense but besides that nothing dangerous happened.

Minutes were passing. The guttural voices behind the wall subsided and she was still breathing and felt nothing but trembling of the hands, then she calmed down.

*"It must be a dream,"* she thought and began listening intently to the conversation behind the door.

"I think we can get to the point," she heard the sound of the magus' staff move across the stone floor of the chamber. "All the kings to whom I have talked seem to favor our plans. However, they have the same objections towards Gemre. Those are their conditions in fact. You know well what conditions those are and soon they shall have to be met. Still, we have worked on Gemre for so long that I do not anticipate any obstruction..."

Aberes quivered at the sound of her husband's name.

"...That man still remains a mystery to me and I do not like secrets of human nature—too many unknown factors. That is what I think of Gemre..." he took a deep breath and exhaled for a long while, as if getting ready for meditation. "His virtue and steadfastness do not pose a threat anymore as we have been slowly burning out them with the fire of ambition, the fire still fanned with the sense of his self-greatness. He begins to believe that. He does not protest when I spread before his eyes a vision of ruling over the entire South and maybe the whole Canaan some day. The poison is beginning to work, pushing him into sweet numbness. Watching his dreams every now and then I notice more and more often the numerous images

of splendor brought by reign and power. He pays less and less attention to what used to be so important to him even a year ago.”

The girl admitted he was right. Under the influence of those two demons her beloved one had stopped caring about the affairs of Debir and didn't look after the prosperity of the people so much. Also towards her he was different. The conversation interrupted her thoughts.

“That insolent lass can still threaten our plans” Hetammu hissed hatefully. “Whenever I want to talk to him about our affairs, immediately she is near. And she still has strong influence on him.”

“It depends what you talk about when she is near.” The tone of the priest's comment was very suspicious.

“Of course, I'm not so stupid as to reveal our secrets in her presence. Still I think that he shares his doubts with her, for whenever we start to discuss any matter only vaguely related to the change of powers in Canaan, she moves near him and starts to listen intently like she was afraid I could turn into a cobra and kill her beloved one.”

“What you say I find very disturbing. What do you intend to do about it?”

“Either I shall get rid of her myself or Gemre shall, when I show him the evidence of her alleged treason.”

“What evidence?”

“I shall tell you in a moment, if you allow me. Now would you, please, look at this, Master.”

Aberes could only imagine what he was about to show.

Hetammu got a little leather sack from behind his belt. It contained a clay tablet, small enough to be covered with two hands. He handed the tablet to the priest, who instantly read the dense cuneiform writing and looked with astonishment at the impression of the roll seal showing the identity of the author.

With yet deeper astonishment he looked again at the letter, then at the seal, and asked with a voice full of emotions.

“Is this an authentic letter?”

“It looks authentic, Master, doesn't it?”

“If so, then we were both mistaken about Gemre, and I cannot admit such a thought.”

“Don’t be afraid, Master. He’s neither so stupid or shrewd. Let me tell you where I’ve got it from.”

“Speak! You have intrigued me.”

The eleve’s eyes shone with pride at those words.

“Even the biggest villains and scum can be of some use.” He showed him a cylindrical seal, around which there ran a relief of a distinct crest. “The servant of ours, Glisha, useful though wicked, didn’t hesitate too much when I asked him to copy the king’s seal. This is the result of his work.”

At the mention of Glisha, Aberes clenched her fists. For almost two years, the city had attracted all the scum of Canaan or it debased its inhabitants, while the righteous were leaving the place and went as far as possible with no intention of returning.

“Amazing accuracy,” admitted the old magus, not even trying to find out how his protégée had been able to get hold of the original cylinder even for the time needed for copying it. But he’d been trained for such purposes.

“According to this letter, false though convincing, our king has been treating with the kings of the Retenu behind the Alliance’s back and without the knowledge of the most of his faithful counselors.”

The magus’ eyes shone.

“Were we to reveal that during the session of the Council of the South, Gemre would be finished and the price on his head would have him banished for ever. We keep a tight rein on him!”

„Exactly,” Hetammu said with a proud voice. “I can show a similar letter to his wife and with an authentic care open her eyes to his allegedly real plans towards her. She shall surely think I’m her friend and so she shall be doomed.”

“But we must find something against her as well. Have you thought of that?”

There was no answer, instead she heard the characteristic melodious rasp of two clay tablets rubbing against each other. The girl felt the worst was still ahead. She was right.

“Now, Master, you shall read a letter written by a person from the king’s closest circles—that is a spy of the North—snatched in the last moment before one of caravans carried it to Tell Al Amarna.”

There was a moment of silence, then she heard someone take a deep breath and exhale for a long while.

“I have failed to appreciate your ingeniousness, Het-ammu. You have acquitted yourself very well. Should pharaoh learn about our plans we would have to seek refuge, which would never be safe enough. This letter distinctly shows that near the king there is a traitor.”

“Needless to say, such news would affect Gemre’s feelings to his spouse, ha, ha” he chortled cynically. “We can also bring a scribe who shall confirm under oath having been dictated the letter and using the king’s seal she stole. Of course he’d be forced by her to do that.”

“She would be finished. Although I grow furious at the thought that so much effort is needed to secure ourselves against a girl from nowhere, not even a legitimate queen. At dawn I am going to Ashtaroth to win the support of Bashan. They surely know that Sihon has proved to be a far-sighted ruler and wants to cooperate. That is why they should do the same. I shall be back for the festival. And you must at all cost refrain from any action against the fugitives. Besides, the roads shall get filled with travelers, rich ones too, but primarily influential ones. Especially now, the Khetu must stay out of sight! Remember that. And you must fuel Gemre’s suspicions. Suggest skillfully that the plans are endangered and in Kiriath-Sepher there are spies from other cities. They might have gotten in the king’s nearest environment—you know to what conclusions he shall come, when there is time to dispose of the unwanted persons? But for now do not reveal your main assets. We do not know how the news of the wife’s perfidious treason would affect Gemre. It is still too early for that.”

Aberes crouched at those words. She couldn’t listen any more and got a notion, as clear as the words of the *Voice*, that she had heard enough and being there any longer she risked being exposed.

As silently as possible she moved away from the door and walked towards the stairs, yet the dreadful meaning of the conversation together with the gloomy scenery of the vault aroused in her a claustrophobic feeling. The corridor seemed narrower and narrower, like the closing mouth of a crocodile. A few steps away from the stairs she suddenly heard the magus' door opening.

The space under the ceiling trembled as the beings that held the *chetah* realized they hadn't fulfilled the task properly. Something was effectively limiting their vision, moving them to fury. They struggled wildly trying to free themselves from that veil but the adversaries were much stronger and utterly controlled the situation.

The echo of the opening door rushed after the girl and the torches around the stairs fluttered with a troubled flame. Her heart stopped for a moment.

"*There's no time, run!*" she thought and quickened the steps. Fortunately, the soles of her slippers were soft and made hardly any sound.

Though unaware of the struggle raging around her, she utterly sensed the danger chasing her. Finally, she got to the stairs and rushed up.

Now! Her invisible guardians released their grasp for a short moment and let the dark shapes catch up with the would-be victim. The air whirled and whipped the flames of the torches.

The girl was half way up the stairs but she was climbing too quickly and incautiously. At one moment she stepped onto the outskirt of her cloak. The fabric tore with a loud crack, the cloak slipped knee-low and almost jammed her steps. Aberes lost balance and had to put her hand on a stone step. A silent swearword came out her lips but it sounded more like a fearful groan.

With panicky movements she tried to free herself from the coils of the coat but she was all shaking and did that too impetuously. The buckle tore the fabric, the cloak slipped from her hands, flew through the poles of the banister and like an owl sailed down to the bottom of the shaft. The girl lunged forward to catch it but came short by half an

inch. She was sure she heard someone's malicious snigger behind her back...

Enough! The mighty messengers stopped them again.

Aberes was shaking like a leaf. There was no time to go down as the men would surely have gotten to the stairs by then. She must be far away and safe. Not good! Leaving any evidence could prove fatal. She prayed that no one saw the coat on the floor. With a bit of luck the dark fabric could remain there unnoticed until the end of the world. But if she wasn't so fortunate and someone noticed a short flicker of a torch reflected off the silver buckle? What then?! There was no time to think.

"If you trust me, everything shall work out fine" the *Voice* whispered.

"But if they find it, I shall be finished!" she snapped with the last gasp.

She got to the ground level of the castle. She looked around and calmed down—the hallway was still empty. She rushed upstairs and soon was safe.

"*For now, at least*" she thought fearfully of the evidence she'd left. Gemre was still fast asleep so she slipped under the blanket, nestled into him and tried to fall asleep. But she couldn't. She'd heard too much. So far she hadn't realized in what danger she was, but if nothing changed in Kiriath-Sepher, there was much to be afraid of. On the other hand, she wasn't ready to run away and didn't even consider such a move.

She waited for the *Voice*. It may again tell her what to do...? But there was silence around. For a long time she tossed and turned on the bed in anguish. Eventually, when the sky outside turned grey, she fell asleep.

The *Voice* didn't speak that night and for many more nights to come.

## 2 *Shadows in the Dark*

*A troubled mind and a doubter's heart  
You wonder how you ever got this far  
Leave it to me  
I shall lead you home<sup>1</sup>*

THE pink sunshine spilled lavishly all over the hill slopes. It slowly reached deeper and deeper to the hidden valleys and gorges and woke the life sleeping there. Low mists were still covering most of the fields and the opposite hills that blended into the distant grey background looked like the sails of a ship sailing towards the sun on the dark sea. Even in the midst of the buildings their beauty attracted the gazes of the inhabitants making their way towards the market square.

The windows of a temple situated on the hill west of the city gave off chants of monks and priests celebrating the morning ceremonies to worship the gods. But the tones of music didn't reach very low—at the height of the trees they mixed with the twitter of birds, and when they reached the roofs, they were attacked by the rattle of carriages and human clatter until there was nothing worthwhile left of it among the streets.

The market place was a world of its own. Shoppers streamed among the stands, their sharp eyes searched for the best goods, under the feet after rolled there rotten fruit thrown aside by the sellers as they sorted them earlier that morning. A homeless dog somehow managed to snatch a piece of meat dropped accidentally by someone and now the animal was running away in zigzags trying to avoid the stones hurled at him. The owner left his wife and kids at

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<sup>1</sup> Smith M., Kirkpatrick W., I shall Lead You Home

the stand and tried to chase the four-legged thief but the more he was losing distance, the worse were the swear-words with which he commented the dishonorable origin of the canine lineage. Several children, whose parents were working at the market, watched that comical scene and laughed heartily holding their bellies. Such amusement was scarce. At last the man stopped, cast a few more words at the kids and at the sight of their laughing faces he cheered up, smiled widely and returned to work.

The streets running off the market square like pokes of a wheel were full of the servants carrying the bought goods, sedan chair bearers were rushing around after their business or politics.

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Aberes woke suddenly as if emerging from deep water with barely any air in the lungs. She struggled hard to calm down her shaking nerves, then she looked at her husband. He was still lying still. She couldn't see his face as he was turned the other side. She bent over him to try to wake him gently. She couldn't possibly wait any longer to talk to him. She had to be the first to do so. He had to hear from her and no one else about what had happened last night and what the two villains had been scheming behind his back. She felt like in a race against Hetammu, where Gemre was the prize and the loser lost everything. Before she had a very clear dream, in which she ran out of the castle to catch Gemre. Her husband was leaving far, far away, unaware they were both doomed. She shouted at him but he failed to hear that, he kept riding his way. And a moment later, like from nowhere, Hetammu turned up, joined the king and said something to him as he looked her way with a cruel grin. Then she woke up.

Despite the *Voice's* assurance she was still afraid—in the daylight it seemed so unreal, while her fears intensified. She was afraid that somehow those two would learn about her night escapade, find the coat, do some magic and even from among the moss-covered stones of the walls



they would extract the name of the lonely person who had visited the forbidden place last night. Then they'd have no other way than to reveal the evidence of her assumed betrayal. She'd lose everything.

The man was breathing deeply. She touched his arm. He twitched.

“Wake up darling, we must talk” she whispered loudly. „Darling...”

He took a deeper breath then exhaled loudly. He'd always do that when waking. She stroked his cheek. The roughness of his skin surprised her. She felt strange dust on her fingers. She looked at them fearfully. Fine dust of the desert crunched softly, being ground between the girl's shapely fingers.

She looked at her husband again. Surely he was waking for good as she noticed him trying to open his eyes. He turned his face towards her. For a moment she forgot about the mysterious dust and smiled beamingly waiting for him to open his eyes. She longer to talk to him, feel the warmth of his arms, return to the real world again. Then she saw who he was... And she couldn't stop herself from screaming!

\*

A young girl put the basket on her head and turned into the street that led towards the castle. In the gate she did her best not to pay attention to a group of guardsmen but they kept staring at her with lustful gazes and commenting the shapely figure and alluring movements of the hips. One of the soldiers started to imitate her walk and proud face and he did it with great exaggeration. The girl just snorted, craned her head even higher and walked into the yard.

“Don't you leave us, Padriya. Without you the watch is torment. We are withering without you!” They pretended to be begging her desperately and the loudest was the handsome captain. “Don't you leave me, flower. I want to make you happy, sister of the gods! I dreamed about you all night. It must be a sign of some kind...”

“I also dreamed about you, Pa-Dyeku.” She turned for a while and the surprise on the young man’s face was the proof that he didn’t suspect the cruel tease. “I dreamed I was carrying a basket full of cabbage heads. One of them was yours, even its gaze was as pathetic as yours! It really must have been a sign of some kind, my pitiful admirer.”

A burst of wild laughter of the guardsmen resounded behind her.

“What a witty way to win women over! We must teach our officer some courtship, he’s doing so poorly.”

“Shut your mouths, if you want to keep your teeth! You shall see she shall be mine.” Despite the embarrassment he kept a straight face and watched Padriya walking away. “Old Melcha foretold that and the temple fortune-teller is never wrong.”

He was still looking at her and got rewarded for that. Just before she entered the door, the girl looked at him coquettishly and smiled mysteriously.

“Did you see that, you scoundrels?!” Pa-Dyeku was triumphant. “You shall be drinking wine and dancing at my wedding, though I don’t know if I should invite you, sons of bitches. But the drinking after the watch shall be on me. We shall drink for the charms of sweet Padriya.”

“Now you’re talking, cabbage head... captain I mean.” One of the guardsmen clapped his hands out of joy but the object of his mockery clenched his fist and pretended he wanted to punch him.

“Forgive me, I was only joking, oh dignified captain!” The soldier moved back at a safe distance.

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Pa-Dyeku’s prospective wife walked along the corridor to the castle kitchen and together with the other cooks took care of the breakfast for the court. When the bowls were full and ready to serve, she went upstairs to let the kha-zanu’s wife everything was ready.

Carefully, she entered the vestibule of the chamber and called the young queen. At the same moment she heard

her horrible scream. It pierced her through and through. Her first reaction was to run away but the loyalty, or rather hearty attachment to the queen got the better of her. With trembling hands she opened the light door and entered the room imagining some unearthly things that could be awaiting her inside.

Her lady was kneeling at the verge of the bed with a wild expression on her face, her gaze fixed at the crumpled sheets like there was a venomous snake lying there. She was all tense and ready to run, like a bristled cat.

“Lady, what’s happened?” The servant got to Aberes with one leap, knelt on the empty side of the bed and took the queen’s sweated face in her hands. “Easy, my lady, easy. It’s just a dream! You’re safe! It’s alright.”

At least there was some reaction. The eyes slowly returned to the reality but the face was still pale, like covered with mist. The tension started to leave her body. Only now did she feel how exhausted she was. She fell to her side on the bed, gasping heavily.

“I dreamed that I wanted to wake the king. He turned his face to me but instead of him... There was that... That repulsive...” The memory returned. Aberes’ eyes again took on that frightened expression. She couldn’t cough up any word.

“The king got up an hour ago” Padriya again tried to calm her down. “Whatever you dreamed about, it was a nightmare. It’s gone now.”

“Instead of Gemre, in the bed was that hellish Het-ammu...” she spoke with her eyes fixed at some indefinite point ahead. “He was all covered with the dust of the desert... Before I woke, he managed to hiss it out that...”

“What did he say, lady?” asked Padriya to interrupt another moment of nervous silence. Now she was afraid too.

“I don’t even remember his words exactly...” She sat up and moved her feet closer to her side and embraced her legs with the arms. With her face pressed against the knees she made another attempt at saying what she’d heard. “That was a short sentence in some foreign language but

it carried so much evil and hatred that at the memory of it my blood runs cold in my veins!”

“Don’t you think about that, lady. You’d betted not recall the words of the people from your dreams. It’s a new day.”

Padriya moved the curtains aside. The light of the morning flooded all the room. From the walls the women were being watched by Baal’s divine wives. They looked as if they’d just stopped the gods’ dance to see the reason for the commotion in the chamber. The naked goddesses looked captivating and Baal was the embodiment of masculinity and desire. The paintings were so true to life that a person looking at them would unintentionally be carried by thoughts and emotions to the hot and passionate rituals of love that were held every month around the numerous temples and sacred groves all around Kiriath-Sepher.

Every time Padriya visited the queen’s chamber and looked at the walls she regretted not being able to pay more attention to them. Now she felt the same way but suddenly she remembered the handsome Pa-Dyeku who almost ate her with his eyes whenever she walked past the gate during his watch. She chased away the lascivious thoughts. He’d rather visit the throne room, where on the walls there heroes were piercing grotesque monsters with their swords. And she would also love to stay in the chamber for longer to learn those interesting stories but the throne chamber, like the royal bedroom, was for the royal couple or could sometimes be visited by the court officials. Padriya’s visits were usually very short. She thought this time it would be the same.

“Your highness, it’s time for breakfast. Everything’s been prepared.” She wanted to leave, when she heard the answer.

“You needn’t to call me that way, you know that. Wait a minute, Padriya.” The woman’s tired voice stopped the servant half-step. “I don’t want to stay alone. Maybe it’s just another dream, like in old stories.”

“Or maybe I should call some older woman? She could examine you, make you some herbal brew. Maybe the bad dream came out of some disease?”

“Herbs shall do me no good, my dear.” She looked at her heartily, grateful for the care the girl manifested. “Is King Gemre in the castle? I must talk to him!”

“No, lady. At dawn he departed to the barns with a hundred men detachment.” Padriya was taking Aberes’ clothes out of chests. “He should be back at dinner.”

“Yes, the shipment of homage to Egypt. It’s late summer already, this heat shall kill us at last... The festival of the Hurting Anath is in three days’ time. I feel her pain all around.”

At last she dragged out of bed and with a tired pace walked up to a small altar and lit some incense. With her hands clasped she asked the gods for purification from the night’s fears and for safety. In the middle of the litany she felt painful emptiness, like her prayer got stuck at the ceiling and hung from there like cobweb together with other unheard invocations.

*“How many such empty words and orations are stirring under the ceiling?”* she thought disheartened. It showed on her motionless face.

Padriya was unsure about what to think of the queen’s sudden pessimism. Always smiling and bursting with energy, even when troubled, now she was on the brink of depression.

“Soon, early rain shall come and everything shall turn green again.” The servant tried to chase away that gloomy mood but Aberes seemed deaf to all that.

“Was anyone with the king apart from the commander of a hundred?” she asked as she bent over a bowl of water.

“I don’t know, they set off with all the detachment, still well before dawn.” She suddenly understood who Aberes was asking about. “As far as I know, the Khetu are due to come back in autumn.”

“You know a lot, Padriya.” Aberes started to dry her face with a towel and scrutinized the servant girl from under her long eyelashes. Her wet hair got stuck to her cheeks and deepened the anxious expression of the face.

“The kitchen is a very chatty place, your Highness, and you can hear a lot about a lot of things, not just cooking

dishes...” she replied as she handed Aberes a dress. “And we all know what haunts the castle, well, the entire city, when Hetammu and his demons are coming. Like a hail cloud was coming.”

“*This time it shall be a hail of stones*” she thought miserably and then added aloud, “Hetammu has already arrived, so either he’s left his gang near Beer-Sheba and soon he shall go back there or they shall follow him here. Last autumn they spent over a month in the city. Many families are still mourning.”

The servant shuddered and said with a fearful voice, “I saw the Amalek rush after Gemre. But I don’t know if they met before the king’s departure.”

Aberes bit her lips and her pulse quickened suddenly.

“I heard him last night but no word to anyone about it, do you understand?!” she looked tensely at Padriya. “It may be a short visit and soon he shall be gone but I doubt that. Let me go and eat something. I may feel better then.”

Padriya sighed and followed Aberes.

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He felt he had to see him immediately before it was too late. He stood up before he’d finished his meal and ran out of the chamber. A few monks followed him with their eyes and then looked at each other meaningfully—a “desert devil”, for them he shall always be one.

The command was still resounding in his mind, like it reverberated furiously off the hills surrounding Nunkur. He sensed them around, more numerous than usual, so unfailingly the time for action was coming. How he longed for it to go as planned, instead of being thwarted unendingly, impeded on every step by some petty unexpected obstacles.

A few invisible shapes were moving ahead and behind him. The others were still quarter a mile away. They were surrounding the target that was making his way towards the gate of the castle. They were trying to influence his thoughts and make them flow peacefully, so that the more

and more submissive mind could be ready to take the seed, like fertile soil. But again something was thwarting them. Despite the intense efforts the man was still disturbed. His thoughts were running towards an urgent task, insensitive to the messengers' suggestions. Such lack of effectiveness could mean only one thing.

*"The Adversary!"*

The commander's quick thought was received by the other demons from the host. Drunk with fury they left the target and started looking around vigilantly. The *Adversary* had either arrived there before them and distributed *His* troops or *They* were just approaching like a white avalanche. Instinctively, the demons waited for a sudden blaze that had always accompanied the Adversaries' appearance, painful and paralyzing. Sometimes that one short moment of shock proved decisive.

*"Sebaoth, the host of the One-Who-Is! I can sense Them!"* quick words-thoughts, then a rush of others followed. The evil beings were flinging accusations at each others like thunderbolts.

"Where are our guards?" The pitch-black shadows roared and tossed around the man, who was just stepping onto the square in front of the castle. "Those blind fools should have let us know immediately and counteract!"

The demons from the detachment were mere legionaries, thus unaccustomed to use the cool, superior tone of the hellish aristocracy, who despised primitive offends and swearwords. The upper classes were fond of sophisticated euphemisms, which cut deeper than fiery swords. They took delight in the art of biting criticism, the art of lawful derision, the art perfected for countless centuries. If aimed at the foe with right force and at the right moment, it was able to ruin a lot of careers in the courts of the satanic duchy. Rank-and-file demons, on the other hand, loathed that pathetic rhetoric and chose to use more direct means of expression. Harsh curses and offences proved more useful especially at the moments of failures, when one had to defend himself against accusations. Then it was most important to achieve an instant effect in the eyes of the comrades.

“We didn’t notice them, so shut your ugly mouths!” The guardsmen tried to mask the fury that vibrated in their voices. “They haven’t been seen for a long time here.”

“You lousy liars! For weeks something’s been thwarting our plans. It must have been *Them* from the start.” They spat with concentrated hatred at the very thought of the *Adversary*. They resembled furious hornets. “The *Host* always appears out of nowhere, especially at such important tasks so you should have sensed *Their* presence from dozens of miles away!”

“But it’s you who are allegedly that famous special task force!” The guardsmen were striking back as they warped their jaws in hateful grimaces. “The elitist detachment of damned losers! That’s what you are!”

“Silence!” roared the captain and paralyzed the demons using all the authority he’d been given. The subordinates went silent, suddenly lost for words like pounded with a mallet. With satisfaction he observed their helpless fury. Reprimanded with his power they found themselves unable to make a slightest movement, they only stared at him hatefully, while he prolonged that torture of idleness, making them keep quiet and wait until he graciously spoke. “That game can still be won. Has Kab-Seqnu departed from Gaza yet?”

The captain had at last released the grip and allowed them to speak.

“We’re still waiting for the news” the fury was slowly subsiding in their voices. Again they focused on the task. “He should be on his way, of course under escort. He responded to our suggestions seriously and became suspicious.”

“Perfect. Make sure He arrives here before the end of the preparations, and thus make our man return to the castle very late...” He cast a venomous look at the man but he dared not approach him, deterred by the power of the *Host* shielding him. They must have been very near, he sensed that. “We must make sure he’s be too tired and furious to speak to her. And for days to come it shall only be worse. But don’t you spoil anything now!”



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Hetammu had an impression that something was going wrong but now again he focused on the task. He quickened his pace as he walked across the monastery's large yard towards the stables built into the outside wall. Through the open gate of the stable a stable-boy noticed Hetammu appear in the side door of the main building that lead to the yard straight from the kitchen and the dining-hall. He was walking with a brisk pace, almost ran, bent slightly. He was looking around vigilantly like he sensed a faint scent of prey hidden somewhere outside the walls of the monastery. He resembled a desert predator on hunt and despite his age of almost fifty he looked twenty years younger. He emanated with stamina and energy. But the slim silhouette masked a body was tough and muscular, hidden underneath the dark robes. Every muscle or sinew was ready to execute an order quickly and determinedly. He was like a steel spring wound up to the limits.

The desert jackal Hetammu set off for a hunt, and the servant knew such pose and was aware of the consequences if he happened to be slack in executing his commands. So he cast the brush and started to put on a thick blanket on the back of a pitch-black mare called Serpeth. Hetammu dashed inside, pushed the servant away and fastened the last straps himself. Then he jump-mounted the horse and made a short whistle. The steed rushed out of the stable almost as fast as their invisible guardians.

Hetammu saw Gemre mid-way from the castle. He hit Serpeth's sides with his heels to catch up with the riders as fast as possible. Khazanu was just riding passed the gate ahead of a hundred soldiers. The king was saying something vehemently to the commander of a hundred, who was riding by his side. He almost shouted. Hetammu couldn't hear the words but from Gemre's face and gesticulation he understood they were in a hurry and the king was in a bad mood.

"Damned homage" he said to himself as he rushed towards the street that led towards the north highway.

“Soon Nebmaatre won’t dare send even the whole army to get our wealth. Yahaaa!” The horse quickened even more.

When at last he caught up with the two men riding in the front, he slowed down so violently that both Gemre’s and the commander’s horses got startled. The men eyed him down with angry looks.

“I salute you, king of Kiriath-Sepher!” the salutation wasn’t faked. Deep in his heart Hetammu still liked his peer. “I’m glad I managed to meet you, Gemre. We must talk.”

“I greet you, Hetammu. I don’t find the time very fortunate to talk.” His tone sounded annoyed. “Today we have to send that damned duty. All day wasted. I trust that only one day, if the gods are gracious. But when the rabišu arrives and starts sniffing around to find quarrels in a straw, it shall all take much longer. And the festival of Anath is in three days’ time. So let me go about my business and if you wish, you can visit me tomorrow. But next week is even better! So go your way, unless it’s something very urgent.”

Hetammu, still undiscouraged, grinned secretly as he looked at Gemre, who was looking ahead with a grim face.

“As you wish, my lord.” He replied with faked indifference and turning his horse he said nonchalantly. “Our old magus must be exaggerating his worries. We can talk about that even after the festival.”

“Ullisukmi?” Gemre frowned at him and twisted the reins around his hands harder. He always did that whenever he was worried. Hetammu noticed that and grinned ugly. The horse also sensed the rider’s disturbance and threw his head. “Wait, Hetammu! What matter can make the great master so worried?”

“I’d prefer to talk without witnesses” he said with a hushed voice and looked meaningfully at the commander riding on the other side, so the king told the man to go to the back of the column.

They had some free space around and a little time to talk. They were headed for Nun-Hatti—a village located almost two miles away from the city, in the north of the valley Nunkur. Every year it was the place where the king

met the chiefs of villages and settlements subject to the king of Kiriath-Sepher as well as supervisors of a few mines of gold, copper and precious stones spread across the whole mountainous area, together with elders of the major houses. They all brought the declared amounts of agricultural produce and treasures of the land to be meticulously counted by accountants and chiefs in the king's presence. As early as in the spring, an official letter had been sent to the pharaoh, in which it was solemnly declared that in that year the city would again be able to meet the required amounts of duty to be sent to Egypt, as the expected crops were rather abundant. The gods hadn't failed and had blessed Kiriath-Sepher again.

It was late summer. The grain had been stored in barns for a few months now, fruit harvest was almost finishing. Also first olives were picked and a lot of superb quality oil was pressed, which was very valued in the west, so was the ruby-colored wine maturing in gigantic tubs. Sheep and horned cattle were good-looking like every year and even after the shipment of a few herds to Gaza more than enough of them would be left. The seaside Egyptian garrison was rather numerous, because that city, like Jaffa, which was located forty miles away, was an important administrative center, thus the vassals had the duty to cater for their needs.

Gemre was in a relatively good situation. He wasn't required to supply troops for strengthening the Egyptians regiments as Kiriath-Sepher was regarded first of all to be a center of learning. It only showed how little the pharaoh knew about the plans of his vassals for the nearest future. Egyptians despised that "science" as in their opinion only great kingdoms could have true thinkers. Apart from that, the city was located far away from major trading routes so its khazanu wasn't responsible for the protection of the caravans. Another important factor was the infamous neighboring city of Kiriath-Arba<sup>2</sup>, with which Gemre's city had always had good relations.

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<sup>2</sup> The former name of Hebron

Still, a rabišu—an Egyptian commissary stationed in Gaza—could come and make sure in person that the duty was sent as required. It happened rarely that he visited areas within his province but it might happen any time. And who could know whether matters would go worse then? If it turned out that after taking abundant crops the amount of duty was just a little fraction of the province's income, then—despite protests of the *heta*—as Egyptians called the subjected Canaanite kings, who were for them merely mayors of the cities and not legitimate kings, then the amount of the duty could be increased for that one time. And in the years to follow, the rabišu could come a few more times to see whether the locals weren't too well-off and whether the pharaoh and his garrisons should have a bigger share in that abundance. And it wasn't a secret to anyone that the commissaries often lawfully kept some of the duty for themselves, while unlawfully they took even more for themselves. It had happened that the commissary demanded as much as two thousand gold shekels while the pharaoh seemed blind to that outrageous lawlessness and didn't react to the desperate letters in which the *heta* begged for an intervention. The appearances of peace at any cost—that was the motto of Amenhotep—the third pharaoh that bore that proud name.

Luckily for Kiriath-Sepher, the present commissary in Gaza was Kab-Seqnu, a wealthy and reasonable man. He was merely half-blood Egyptian but enjoyed the pharaoh's immense trust. He had a lot of important things on his mind and didn't bother with intervening with the interests of cities located in the dangerous mountainous areas of Canaan, which had never been supervised too strictly. Of course, he checked carefully whether each of the cities met the requirements as for the duty and he intervened only when there was a evident delay in the shipments but that didn't happen too often.

Apart from that, the rulers of those cities just were too insignificant. The politics of Egypt was focused mostly on the great kings, such as the rulers of Mitanni or Hatti, who usurped the status of brothers equal even to the pharaoh.

It was that direction that any threat could come from. The probability of a rebellion in the areas east of Gaza was regarded in Egypt as negligible.

“News has come that during the festival spies from Gibeon or Urusalaim can appear here, disguised as pilgrims” Hetammu said with a hushed voice. “For a long while we have known that Adoni-Cedek would love to play your, my king, role in our plans.”

Intentionally he concealed the recent shift of politics of that most important of the southern cities, of which he’d heard from Ullisukmi. The king would learn about that in the due time. And it may be the ruler of Urusalaim to be chosen play the part of the leader of the coalition instead, of Gemre, for some reasons, should lose the priest’s support.

“Gibeon has never been part of Djahi, they’d do everything to keep us away” noticed Gemre.

“Together with Lab’ayu they are only waiting for an opportunity to stab us in the back” confirmed Hetammu. “Unfortunately, they’re strong enough as to need neither us or the support from Hazor. And their lands lie in the very middle of Canaan, like a firewall. They realize that. They shall try to embitter against us ...”

He couldn’t finish for he experienced a sudden blackout. He grabbed Serpeth’s mane, as she turned her head and looked at him in surprise. He knew what such sensations meant. His guardians darted around in unison and loosened the ranks around the two riders. Now they’d seen the Adversaries. They were frightened by the boldness and confidence of their arrival. It was impossible to even count them, as the silhouettes of *Angelos* were covered by a sphere of white light. The only thing they managed to see was the dark trail of the messenger. Mad with fright, like a black raven he was fleeing from the shining beings.

It all took no more than a flash and none of the mortals could possibly have seen anything, even if their senses ceased to be protected by the natural veil that protected them from the dwellers of the realm of the spiritual. *Angelos* rolled across the firmament like a lightning and disappeared on the northern side leaving the devils helpless in

their fright and fury. At last the messenger caught up with the commander and having bowed down to him, he gasped out the latest news.

“My Baal, rabišu is staying in Gaza” he hissed out, watching the stern face of the commander fearfully. “I feel the *Host* is responsible for that.”

“Damned mortals, ever so unreliable” shouted the chief officer and the echo rolled across the valley. “Why isn’t he coming?”

“An important caravan is coming from Damascus. An important load and letters for the pharaoh. They are headed for Tell Al Amarna. Kab-Seqnu must take them over from the detachments from Jaffa and escort to the border. It’s a priority, only then shall he be able to come back.”

“But the carriages from Kiriath-Sepher shall have reached the capital by then by then by then. Of course they shall bring the duty and a very polite letter with a precious gift!” shouted the commander in helpless fury. “Unless we stop them.”

“I feel somewhere high up some important decisions have been made” added another demon. “Again they are one step ahead.”

Suddenly everyone looked south, towards Beer-Sheba, from where another messenger was dashing, as frightened as the first one. Everything became very clear.

“Such timing may mean nothing but precisely coordinated sabotage” the commander’s voice, like his eyes, was stone cold. He stabbed the messenger with his gaze. “What news are you bringing?”

“You must be back in the camp” the messenger replied.

“They didn’t keep him from mischief, did they?”

The messenger didn’t reply.

\*

Gemre gave Hetammu with a piercing look. He was very delayed and wanted to stop the pointless conversation.

“I still don’t understand why you’re presenting that issue to me right now?” Gemre said with a suspicious tone. “I’m

alert and don't think anything could surprise me now, and how about you?"

Hetammu didn't react to that question as he was trying to understand the strange sensations reaching him from the other dimension.

"Hetammu, are you sick or what?" Gemre's voice brought him back to the reality. "Are you really controlling the situation?"

Hetammu was confused but he heard the last question clearly. He was taking a breath to give the king a suitably sharp retort but he controlled himself. In the months to come he had to win the khazanu's limitless trust at any cost, and Hetammu's criticism of his conduct wouldn't do any good.

"The Khetu are only seemingly staying in beer-Sheba, Gemre" he said, still feeling dizziness in his mind. "You know all too well that there's nothing we fail to know about and the undesired persons are under our constant invigilation."

"I'm very glad to hear that!" the king's impatience was reaching the top. "So what are you aiming at, Hetammu? Speak, as we're wasting time here!"

*It's high time I mentioned the new trail. It must start him thinking!* He thought with satisfaction. "If you insist, king..." he said aloud "I shall tell you that..."

A horse's tramp and shouts from the back of the column made him stop speaking again. Both men looked back and saw a lone rider dashing towards them.

"Stop, Hetammu!"

The Amalekite looked at the rider, stupefied, trying to guess his identity, but he recognized him only after he stopped in front of them and took the kerchief off his face.

"What's happened, Gershi?" he asked, feeling something bad had happened.

"Chamat has sent me" he said, trying to quiet down the horse, which was still gasping heavily after a long journey. The steed's sides were foamed.

He mentioned the name of Hetammu's adjutant, who—according to the orders—had always watched Murtekh—the

younger brother of the commander of the Khetu, whenever Hetammu was absent in the camp. He was an experienced and intelligent soldier and his correct judgment had a few times prevented a crisis from happening. The fact that he'd sent a messenger to Hetammu meant only one thing: trouble.

"Come back urgently, chief! Your brother had mobilized and armed the people. Before the sunset they're bound to attack! He's still waiting for the scouts to return and should the gods allow, you can still stop him!"

"Who is he going to attack? He got clear orders!" Out of emotion his eyes were as big as bowls. The black mare pricked her ears as she felt the rider's disturbance. Around sounded the grating of the hooves tramping the grit, and loud breaths of the man and the steed. "Is Chamat controlling the situation?"

"I don't know, chief. They had a bitter row. Now it may be hell down there! Let me give the horse some rest. He must drink something or drop dead. I've been riding without a break!" Without consent he dismounted the horse, took the water skin out of the straps holding the light saddle and started watering the tired animal.

By then the column of soldiers had moved some distance away. Gemre had no time to lose.

"It's all about controlling the situation" he noticed sneeringly as he watched Hetammu grow furious. "Are you still sure it's me who needs your warnings?!"

Hetammu didn't answer, only gave the king an angry look.

"So good bye. Should you need to talk about that again—though I hope you won't—then I heartily invite you to the castle. But not today!" the king turned the horse and followed the detachment, which was still making its way down the track.

"Don't disregard what I've said, Gemre. Ullisukmi himself deems it important" he cried after the leaving man but inside his heart he knew he'd lost that encounter. He knew him well enough to know that either the king would do something at once or the opportunity would pass and



the whole force of argument go weak, like a sword's failed blow. To warn him against the treason he'd have to change his approach completely.

"You'd better worry whether the Khetu break the ban and attack some caravan again. Then you shall be in big trouble!" the king shouted back, which only confirmed Hetammu's apprehensions. He reminded him of one of the Khetu's biggest dishonor from a year before.

"The hell and its demons with it!" the Amalekite said a swearword and turned to Gershi. "When your horse rests, go to the city and mention my name in Ashtarte's temple at the north wall. You shall get accommodation and food. They shall take care of the horse as well. As soon as you rest, return to Beer-Sheba. I'm setting off now."

He rode off sharply, rising a cloud of dust. With fear he imagined himself arriving to see nothing but dead bodies on the sand and the Khetu soldiers finishing off the wounded and raping the women that had travelled in the attacked caravan. The last time he didn't manage to stop his brother. Shall he now?

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A detachment of moving shadows was impatiently waiting for the order to set off. The demons were anxious to the limits about what they'd see upon arrival. Some of them followed with their eyes the lone rider dashing through the valley. He left behind a trail of dust risen by Serpeth's hooves. They'd soon move after him. The commander was just giving the last orders to a few veterans selected to accomplish a task in the valley.

"We're returning to the camp of the Khetu and you have a job to do. There's not much left but it must be done with the effectiveness you are famous for." He looked into the eyes of each of them with such determination that they trembled. "The carriages to carry the duty won't leave today, is that clear?!"

The four subordinates hissed vengefully and dashed towards Nun-Hatti. In an instant they left the riders

behind and focused on a large group of buildings a mile away, among which people were hurrying about their business. At the verge of the village there a string of carriages waited, loaded with various goods. In turn they went up to the accountants, who counted everything carefully, quickly moving beads on the wooden abacuses, double-checked the results and then quoted them to the scribes. The man supervising the work would every now and then look towards Kiriath-Sepher. He expected the king to arrive soon. He cast nervous looks at the barns that were located east of where he was. The gates were open; all the time empty carriages went inside and reappeared on the other side loaded with grain. So far everything seemed to be going well.

The four demons were reaching the target and their scrutinizing gazes managed to find the weak point. Everything would start right there. Inside the barn the workers were finishing unloading one of the upper chambers. The servants were hurrying as much as they could to make it before the sun turned the interior of the barn into a fiery furnace. On the ground the temperature was bearable due to the gates opened on opposite sides, so they wanted to drop everything onto the carriages and get down into the nice cool. And then they heard a disturbing creak. The supervisor's vigilant ear separated that sound from thousand other noises. A moment later he rushed inside and began looking around and trying to control the panic rising inside his mind.

The demons quickened. Another creak, more prolonged.

They'd been emptying the chambers too quickly while the two other were two-thirds full and thus the balance of the frame of the barn was shaken. The old beams that supported the upper level were at the brink of their endurance. The servants understood their mistake.

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After breakfast Aberes decided to go to the city. Actually she didn't decide anything, just left the castle, where she

felt increasing claustrophobia. The images on the walls came alive in her imagination and started pressing on her unpleasantly, bringing to mind the threat she felt while visiting the dungeons the previous night. First of all she had to go outside and talk to someone she trusted to cast that burden off. The idea of visiting an old friend came naturally, so as soon as she sorted out all the matters concerning the chores of the castle servants, she just left. At the beginning she had to fight for the right to go on trips outside on her own with a woman called Kalacha, mother of the castle chamberlain, who had a strange name Bru, which meant nothing else than an old sandal, though in the land where his “age-old and noble family” came from the name meant something very precious, about which he reminded everyone on any occasion and to the torture of anyone who had to hear it again and again. It must have been his ill pride or very low self-esteem and it was easy to see that exactly the same plus some other features also distinguished Kalacha. She held the office of the chief stewardess, which she regarded as more important than the office of khazanu himself. It showed in her meticulous and uncompromising approach to the matters of order and security on the court. She insisted to the point of dying that the queen could leave the castle only under the guardsmen’s escort. That’s why, after frequent intense exchanges of arguments she would instinctively run to complain about the queen’s behavior and always in the middle of the corridor—realizing that the khazanu’s wife can be complained about only with the khazanu himself—she would quit the idea. Eventually she understood she couldn’t win with Aberes, the more so as the young queen was reasonable enough as not to provoke dangerous situations and thus give the old woman some arguments to use against her. But from time to time Kalacha had to be reminded, at least for the sake of prevention, who ruled in the castle and who just served there. This time, however, there were no major problems.

Outside the walls she immediately felt better. Almost every time she looked at the surrounding area she felt

weird bliss. The beauty of this place seemed to have come from paradise. A stranger visiting Nunkur, a spacious valley where the city was built, would see exactly the same as a thousand years before. It was surrounded by gentle hills, which—especially in the north—rose very high. From underneath the ever-green carpet of bushes and trees growing in the area, there resounded the hum of lavish wildlife. The area was densely populated by deer, gazelles and wild goats. Years before, many inhabitants had occupied themselves with hunting until the present khazanu—the city’s governor—introduced new laws that banned hunting on the municipal areas.

Predators were few—a lion hadn’t been seen for a few dozens of years, as they mostly hunted in the Jordan valley. And wolves, jackals, panthers or other dangerous carnivores, kept away from the valley, effectively deterred by regular patrols of the city warriors. They were mostly stationed in watchtowers built on mountain tops and passes, and carefully watched the actions of the neighbors, ready to defend the peace of the valley’s inhabitants. The only real danger to the herds grazing on the green slopes were eagles or falcons circling in the sky, but they only happened to hunt in this area very rarely. And nocturnal hunters with their noises could only scare people locked inside houses.

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Aberes first went one of the streets leading west. Soon she got to the street encircling the close center of the city and went towards the southern quarters. She walked sunken in thoughts; on the left she passed the buildings of the famous school of Kiriath-Sepher. More or less in the same location, but on the right, was the temple of goddess Anath, which towered above the other buildings. The gold ornaments glistened on the two upper levels of the ziggurat<sup>3</sup> and on the toppings of shapely steeples standing around

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<sup>3</sup> A tower-like temple rising up like a pyramid.

the yard. The priestesses followed their rituals without hurry, perfectly in tune with the peaceful mood of the morning. They were dressed in black, joined with their lady in sorrow after losing her brother-lover. The men walking past the temple cast lustful glances at the alluring temple maidens, who—like their goddess—were not allowed to enjoy any bodily delights before the draught ended. But on the faces of the passers-by the showed a joyous expectation and a keen observer could notice a secretive exchange of glances between the young priestesses and more handsome of the passers-by. Only two days later, when Anath killed Mot—the god of draught, Baal would return, rain would fall and the temple would become a garden of love for men and women from all over the city.

She didn't pay too much attention to the temple and its surroundings and went towards the city walls. Soon she passed the last group of rich houses with their own yard around which there were numerous rooms built. The owners could afford to build sumptuous shrines and lavishly gilded statues of Baal, the sun goddess Šapszu, whose radiant crown sent around beaming rays of lights, and many other gods. The servants of the court chamberlain, who lived in the main alley, were busy cleaning the statue of the goddess of birds' filth. Šapszu's blissful smile showed the relief she felt as she was getting rid of the unwanted embellishments. The servants were having great fun doing that chore, and with false zeal they cleaned the "private parts" of the statue and rocked their hips lustfully.

Next to the houses of farmers there were also the statues of Sheger—the god whose name meant "progeny of the cattle". He looked after abundance of horned cattle, while the ram-headed Ithm cared for herds. Among all that variety of gods she even noticed a statue of Yam, the god of seas and rivers. He sat on a grotesque image of a Leviathan. She wondered why so deep inland there was the patron of sea farers. Then she remembered that the house belonged to Daala, wife of a sailor, who spent most of the year out of home.

She got struck with a thought that beyond that abundant cult and colorful festivals, in case of real threat the gods were helpless. She felt a gust of fear against committing a blasphemy but she was had an impression that the gods were like rattles for children to make them merry until they grow, or like crow scares nobody was afraid of. She doubted if people who really needed help could get it from the gods.

At last she passed the last rich mansion and having crossed the High Gate she entered the suburbs. None of the guardsmen recognized her. At this time of the day the traffic was heavy and people rushed both directions so she easily mingled in with the stream of people returning from the city market to their households.

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“And what, did they pay you?” the old man’s screechy voice was the last thing that Glisha wanted to hear. “Got the money at last, eeh? Why aren’t you saying anything, Glisha?”

“Father, please, stop asking ask me that” he said angrily. The old man was holding his arm like he always did when they went somewhere together. He was aged and weak, so naturally he needed the son’s support. But in moments like this, Glisha would gladly left him and run. He cursed the whole world in his thoughts. He felt like roaring his regrets out loud publicly and release the frustration that had been building up for too long. But only his lips were moving slightly in the rhythm of the raging thoughts.

“I told you it’d be no good, no good. I told you that all the time” the father whined and started flailing around with his free arm. “You were naïve like a child to think they’d make you rich. Naïve like a child! A grown-up man, and again they pulled your leg.”

“Please, stop talking” he shouted. “And what was I supposed to do? You know them. When the Amalekite visits us, at once you run to hide in the garden and when he leaves, you preach to me and grumble like an old woman.

“Glisha, you degenerate son! Don’t you dare talk to me like that!”

He didn’t reply and started to ignore the old man’s protests. He walked with his gaze fixed in the ground, but when he raised his head his eyes shone with bolts and lightnings. For making an accurate copy of the king’s seal he’d been promised not only generous pay but also protection from any trouble he might get into because of the job, yet now he started to feel anxious. And what if everything had been revealed? He’d also hoped to be paid for the previous jobs he’d been waiting for more than a month but to no avail. He hadn’t see the priest, Hetammu had just passed by before Glisha could do anything and that moment he’d realized that on that very day he’d be paid nothing.

And he was worth being paid. He rose to the heights of his profession, devoted long hours to the job, while still recollecting the countless imagined harms he’d suffered from his former employer. It made him stronger and was the best motivation to create his “masterpieces”. He wasn’t too modest when it came to assessing his own products.

“And what are we to do? Budre is coming today to collect the debt and what shall I tell him?”

“I warned you not to borrow from him” Glisha retorted. “Usurer is a usurer! What did you need the money for?”

“I had to borrow it. None of your business.”

“Really? Then it’s not my problem! You shall have to talk to him yourself. Or you’d better win the money from that pal of yours at a game of dice... Wait a minute! You borrowed from Budre to pay off—what’s his name? Ashdul?” The old man’s nervous pace was the best answer.

“No, I can’t tolerate that!” Glisha stopped abruptly and grabbed the father by the arms. He was avoiding the son’s eyes as much as he could. “I thought that when I bought you here, when you were far from my stupid brother, you’d get wiser a little...”

The old man’s eyes almost went out of rage.

“You can’t talk to me like that!”

As he shouted out his complaints he spluttered with saliva and flailed his bony hands around. Glisha was fed

up with him as he could be. They were near the city wall and the crowd got bigger. Some passers-by looked at them with annoyance. They must have looked comically. A tall and skinny youth was bending down to get his face closer to the father's face. And the father—shorter by more than a cubit and a half—did what he could to overcome the stiffness in his neck and return the look. But due to his age he found it very difficult so he leant backwards and had to bend his knees. It seemed he would lose balance in a moment and fall straight under someone's feet.

"I don't care if you like it or not" Glisha snarled. "You get us into trouble, very serious trouble! If it hadn't been for me, you'd both be begging by the roadside now. I hoped vainly that with me you'd act your age, but no! You shall always find right company!"

„So you'd better lock the old father in a garden shack!"

"Easy now, let's go. We're putting up a show." Again they moved towards the gate. Right behind the wall there started a street they lived in. It was high time they'd eaten something, then Glisha could get down to work. And have some real rest. "At home we shall finish that talk. And don't flail your arms like this or you shall hit someone and get us into more trouble."

As if to confirm those words, the old man tripped and ran into a woman. She lost balance. With his free hand Glisha somehow stopped her from falling.

"I beg your forgiveness, lady, it's so clumsy of us" he apologized, red as a beet. Of course the father pretended not to have anything to do with that incident.

Fortunately, the woman just threw a word or two, she said it was no problem and disappeared in the crowd. Immediately he felt relieved, for she could have been some important person and rightful to accuse them of a public offence, and then they'd get into hot water for sure. Not once had he messed with some noble people due to his contacts with the Amalekite and the priest.

"Once again we apologize. May the gods bless you, lady" he shouted after her and then it dawned on him. He hadn't seen her face exactly but understood who she was. And that



scent—jasmine and oil. Only she could smell like this. He stood rooted to the ground and felt increasing excitement. Part of his nature was curiosity, or rather ill intrusiveness, thanks to which he'd often got some valuable information. He didn't stand a chance to gain her trust at all. She hated him, like most people in the castle did, so the more he knew about her, the better. Now he had a chance to pay her back for that despise. Love and hatred were separated by a very thin line, especially when the first feeling had brought frustration and pain.

"Where is she hurrying so much?" he wondered. "She can't have wanted to be recognized, can she?"

"Why are you standing like that? Are we going home or not?"

"Listen! Take those five *gerah*... No, take a *beka* as it can take a while. Go to that inn at the wall and wait for me."

The father was turning the coins in his hand. His face said he had no objections. Glisha dived into the crowd and the father went right, from where there came voices of drunken man and smells of food. "He may change his mind!" he thought, but his elder son disappeared for good.

"He's not a bad lad, that Glisha of mine" he said smiling at himself. "Not such a good companion as Shaga, but he happens to be generous!"

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Behind the walls she saw loosely scattered buildings, which had thick, inelegant walls and not more than two rooms. They had no superfluous decorations. The borders of the households were marked with low stone walls. In case of an enemy attack they could escape inside the city, if they could make it before the gates were closed, or run to the mountains. Obviously, in this area the least wealthy citizens of Kiriath-Sepher lived. They couldn't afford to have servants or big herds, vineyards or orchards, and the gods guarding their welfare and property belonged to a lesser category. That weakness of the patrons was reflected in the poor existence of the inhabitants. They made their

living either on grain trade at the city market, they scraped small pennies day to day, or pastured herds on the green slopes of the nearby hills. Sometimes there were quarrels between them and the shepherds of rich herd owners, who deemed the best land to be theirs. Well, strong gods don't like semi-gods getting in their way.

When she got to Belea's house, once again she noticed that it differed from the others by one important element. The yard and the building itself were free of any statues. The neighbors had often expressed their disapproval and wondered how it was possible to disregard the gods so much and not be afraid of the consequences of the lack of their protection.

From a distance, Aberes saw Belea bustling around the farmyard. Her tiny silhouette was barely visible against the sun-burnt grass. The old woman was kneeling next to a cloth of figs spread on the ground. She was sorting the fruit. The fig trees seemed to rule the farmyard and the area. The trees grew in the garden, on the path in front of the entrance and they ran along the low stone wall encircling the whole area like a natural pergola. The crops were abundant this year and wooden baskets filled with the fruit occupied a large part of the yard. The woman was working quickly, like she was forty years younger. Autumn figs were the best, enormous and sweet as honey. The woman was so absorbed in work that she failed to notice Aberes coming. Only the crunching of her feet on the gravel attracted her attention to the arrival of the guest.

"Good day, Belea. How's my best friend's health?" she smiled widely, forgetting about her worries.

"For great *El*, it's her majesty, the queen! My dear Pearl has at last visited me!" Belea got up from her knees and took the girl's hands in her worn-out hands and shook them heartily. "Sit down, please. Under the tree there's a bench, we shall use some shade. Lape, bring us some juice from the cellar, and some treat, please. We have a dignified guest."

A generously proportioned middle-aged man leaned out from inside the building and was clearly glad to see Aberes.

“Be greeted, queen! What brings you to the humble door of your servants?”

“I missed you, is that reason alright?”

Lape was a very interesting man. Despite the impression like he'd spent all his life working hard on a farm, the truth was completely different. He's spent the best years of his life in the army of Egypt. First he'd fought in regular infantry, then, due to his bravery, unmatched skills and strong shall to fight, he'd been selected to join the famous *kenyt-nesu*—the host of desperados, feared by all enemies greatly. Wherever *kenyt-nesu* appeared, the allies' hearts grew stronger, even if their fate seemed foredoomed. And almost always it turned out that it wasn't that hopeless. They were a weapon in itself: one could face a hundred, a hundred had a power of a regiment, a thousand could win a battle with no other help.

For Lape the army and the mother were the essence of life. Thanks to a high pay and abundant spoils, which they got after almost every victorious battle, he'd been able to save up a lot. When the others had frittered their money away with whores, he's thought of the future, like he had sensed that he'd be strong and victorious for not too long. The end of the career came in Nubia, where the previous pharaoh had been trying to maintain the status quo. That campaign was doomed to fail from the very beginning as the pharaoh didn't listen to his spies and despite the warnings he sent the troops straight to a lion's mouth. Hetites were ready and they attacked while the army was still marching, when the people and horses were exhausted from the heat and stuffy air. Even in the first hour the army stopped counting as a military unit and turned into chaotic bands fighting for their lives. The foes seemed to be indestructible. Eventually the worst came and the Egyptians got beset. And that was the task for which Lape's force was trained—make a breach in the enemy ranks and get the army out of the trap.

They attacked, as usual heedless of their own lives. A perfect combination of disregard for their own lives and the irresistible desire to kill one more enemy had always determined their success. They had made a breach despite

the fury of the Hetite soldiers, who felt the prey was breaking free from the snare. And it was then that the arrow came flying, like a hellish projectile—or was it shot from an angel's bow?—till the rest of his life he'd be wondering what the truth was. The arrow got deep inside the ankle, crushing the ligaments and chipping the bone. But he still fought resting on a companion's arm. And when the other man got wounded too and it seemed nothing could save them, then—like from the underground—or straight from the heavens, he'd never been sure of that either—came the last of the surviving chariots and carried both veterans back to safety. But Lape was crippled for life. No doctor in entire Egypt was skillful enough to repair such damage. Though the joint healed, Lape had never regained his previous efficiency.

He could only return and live a normal life on the farm. He only owed it to his luck and endurance that he stood on his feet again. Though Lape always limped and at the weather change he suffered torment, he didn't regret that at all. He could still work on the farm and make a living for himself and the mother, and he had some money saved up from those times.

He fulfilled his duty, and what's the most important, he escaped the fate of other *kenyt-nesu*, who couldn't say "stop" and fought until they got killed or in their and blood nothing remained but war and killing. He knew at least two such men who ended up like that. After returning from Egypt they settled down in the area of Kiriath-Arba, without a family, life's castaways. He managed to keep that best part of himself, so he decided not to complain about anything. And he didn't talk about those times, so only very few people knew his story. Aberes was one of the few.

Now every time she saw the modest widow and her son, she couldn't stop smiling serenely. Belea was the first person who had welcomed her kindly when she'd first come to the city as Gemre's fiancée. Others saw a threat in her, or an intruder at best. Only for Belea she was a sensitive person, a little confused among the unclear connections in the castle and the city.

When they sat down, the old woman scrutinized Aberes' face for a long while, which didn't make the girl shy whatsoever. After a while, with a strange tone she said:

"This is one of those visits, when even a big palace seems too small to contain our worries, isn't it? Don't deny, I see it in your eyes, Aberes."

"You know me better than anyone, dear Belea." She took a fig from the bowl and turned it in her fingers with no clear purpose.

"I see dark colors over the horizon. What's bothering you?"

Aberes was still fiddling with the fruit, not knowing how to start. Belea knew her story all too well, for over eight years she'd been her friend and trustee, a guide in the complexities of the court life and an advisor at difficult decisions. She was the one who had also been looking after the old queen for many years, and when the wife of Bher-Ašihu died, shortly after her the devastated king passed away. Then new orders were beginning to prevail at the court and stifled and shoved away whatever there was noble there. And at last, two years before, due to some events, her service had come to an end and the woman had left the castle never to return. Many missed her as they saw her leaving as the sign of the good old times of Kiriath-Sepher ending. But the advisors of the young king breathed a breath of relief, as the presence of the Praying One was the bone of contention for them. Belea was happy to start a new life and though she was worried about her young friend and the fate of the country, she found her modest place in life and with her son she looked after the household and the orchard, somehow making both ends meet.

Two years before—that had been a memorable time. The time of fateful events and decisions, alas, the wrong ones. The time of settlements after which Aberes—Pearl—was not the same innocent girl, full of ideals and righteousness. A flaw remained. There was disgust and regret, and the longing for the ones who'd left. She should have acted differently but back then she'd found it impossible to rightfully assess benefits and losses brought by her choices.

And despite the fact that Belea had known all too well what should have been done and she'd foreseen the present status quo with appalling accuracy, never had she reproached her for the mistakes made. Ever so kind and always available she was. Whenever Aberes came, the old woman was bustling around her business but as she saw the queen, her face went radiant and she always offered good words. That's why Aberes had needed her so much over the previous two years. Who could better understand her present situation than good Belea?

"So far everything's been going the way you predicted" she looked in her eyes. The old woman was listening intently. "I don't know what to do. Kiriath-Septher seems more and more alien and hostile. Last night I experienced something dreadful and even now I can't put it all together. Only a few days ago I was sure everything would be better. Between Gemre and me things started to go well, he's tender like before and I started to believe again. But... Last night changed everything. I learned unexpectedly that those two villains are scheming something evil and I can't stop that. What's worse, they find an ally in him. I'm helpless." She abridged last night's events to her friend but without all the details.

"I could stay indifferent to that. Two years ago my indifference to those things seemed the best option" she added at the end.

"And now you're ripening to make the decision, I can see that" The woman took her hands. "You still love him, that's good, you're responsible and want to save the former Gemre, but not everything depends on your efforts. If he doesn't want to change, you shall have to make a choice anyway. The old matters are still waiting for your decision, they haven't solved themselves, Pearlette." She'd always addressed her like that: "Pearlette" That diminutive of her name sounded in her lips like her mother used to call her. Now the mother was far away not only by the long distance. She felt better instantly.

"You're right. 'The old matters' are still waiting to be settled, but for me they're the old demons and snakes,

raising their ugly heads to bite. They were smaller back then and if still I wasn't able to face them, how can I find strength now?"

"You shall find that strength only when you decide what you hold the most important—are you still intending to be the first lady of the kingdom, with all the consequences, good and bad, or you deem other values to be more important, which can save your soul—be it torn and shattered by the shares of life." She was saying that with such conviction that if Aberes had heard those same words two years before, her heart would have broken with despair. Now they seemed right and logical.

"I wish you'd never have to decide on your destiny on your own" she said quietly.

"I don't understand!"

"Once my mother said those words and only now do I begin to understand them."

"Your mother is a wise woman, Pearlette. But remember one thing—make a decision when you are sure." She shook her hands more tightly. "I know you and your story and it's not the first time you've come for advice and comfort. I know well that you're trying to save your happiness but you're a king's wife and it's not just you that influence his decisions and feelings. Remember that the fate of cities and kingdoms is shaped by forces much mightier than the most powerful armies led by the best generals, and in Canaan those are not the forces of good. This country has betrayed her God and *El* is not that possessive as Baal. *He* respects our decisions—*He* respected yours too, though it was wrong. Now *He's* standing in the shadow but is still waiting. Believe me."

"Thank you for your good words, Belea. I must go to face my own demons but you may expect me soon. Only with you I can talk freely, not afraid that it shall turn against me. Take care, I'd gladly invite you to the castle but you wouldn't come, would you?"

"Unfortunately not, my dear. For some I'm still an unwanted person there. May good *El* lead you, Pearlette. I pray for you every day and lately that need has become

even stronger, as if I felt you need that so much. I don't know whether to tell you..."

"What, Belea?"

"Maybe it's nothing. I may have imagined things. But yesterday evening I stood in front of the house and looked towards the castle. And then I got the impression that something evil had hung above the city. I saw nothing, I more felt that, but it was so distinct, like living darkness was falling from the sky upon us. I feared to look up not to see demons. It was so much real."

"You frighten me."

"Come more often Aberes" Belea had tears in her eyes. "Something evil is going on and you're feeling that too. *El* is still waiting and I believe that he cares about you."

"The *Voice* I heard yesterday carried a strange comfort but what I heard devastated me. Did *He* want that to happen?"

"Maybe. If *He* opened your eyes to evil, all you could see was evil, nothing else. But matters would have gone much worse if *His* messengers hadn't been near."

"Somewhere our ways parted and what am I to do now? Find that place we went separate ways?" A lot of time has passed and so many things have gone wrong. I'm afraid that except you there's no one I can count on but myself, and that scares me."

"One day the darkness shall disappear and then you shall see clearly where you are and where you're headed. Then you shall find your way."

Aberes got up, kissed Belea, said goodbye to Lape, and with a heavy heart she went to the street. The old woman was right. She wouldn't be able to save herself and Gemre, if first she didn't put things in order in her own mind and heart. Only then could she help him.

But would she be able to? The dreams of ruling the Canaan had become his obsession and in consequence his love to her had cooled down in a very disturbing way. That chill exceeded the usual indifference that every couple experiences after being together for several years, when all burning desires got satisfied, first emotions and excitement



fell down. She was ready for that as she couldn't think that a king and man like Gemre would only care for heightening their love and leave all the other matters aside, queuing for his attention. She knew their relation had to enter a new, more mature stage, but what had started to become of his ambitions and priorities she hadn't expected at all.

*„Damned Ullisukmi”* She thought with fear. The same words spoken aloud could be heard even by butterflies or birds in the sky and passed to the magus. *„I must talk to Gemre, I may succeed in opening his eyes to the danger. If only that jackal Hetammu isn't there...”*

She tried to find a way to get back the coat she'd left in the dungeons but the longer she thought about it, the more confident she became that it could only make things worse. Eventually she gave it up.

*„I may have to leave it all to the old God and stop tossing around like mad”* she thought. *„Belea has so much peace within, though she's been through so much. Why don't I have that peace of mind?”*

Again she was in the market. Soon she'd enter the castle and see, if her fears would come true.