



BEN BLAKE

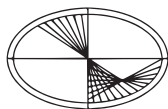
THE  
SCHOLAR'S  
WAR



# THE SCHOLAR'S WAR



**BEN BLAKE**



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# THE SCHOLAR'S WAR

*Ben Blake*

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*Dedication*

For my daughters, Bella and Evie Blake.

You're everything, and you can do anything.



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## CHAPTER ONE

*A truth of the world: In every place, given time, there will be war.*

§ § §

TELL ME AGAIN what colours look like to you,” Mani said. The young man ducked his head briefly below the water’s surface, wetting his skin and eyes. “I could tell you sixty times, and you wouldn’t understand. They’re different, that’s all.”

“Different how?”

Slits in the youth’s clavicles opened and closed with a *tss-tss* sound, like snakes in the reeds. “Just different. They’re one way in fresh water, another way in salt. Hues that are one shade with dawn light above are another shade at sunset. Why do you want to know about colours?”

“Just trying to understand you.”

Ripples ran down the young man’s scaled lower body, vibrating the water around him until it gave a hum, right at the edge of hearing. Mani had long-ago recognized it as the Sea-Goat’s equivalent of a laugh. “You couldn’t understand us if we talked until you grew old.”

“Well,” Mani said, trying to draw the lad into an indiscretion, “you always hide so much, don’t you?”

“That’s because you wouldn’t understand it,” the young man retorted. Muscles tightened and he was gone in a glimmer of scales and splashing water.

Mani supposed he should be grateful a Sea-Goat had talked to him at all. Frequently when a scholar rang the bell nobody would come. He’d sit in the sun for an hour before walking back to Aš-alam with dust in his eyes and curses piling up on his tongue.

“There are stories the lagoon fishermen know more about the Sea Goats than we do,” Shahan had said once. He was tossing chickpeas into the air and trying to catch them in his mouth. “People are sure of it.”

“Well,” Mani said, making a mark on his tablet, “people are sure of lots of things.”

“I thought we might go and talk to them,” the other scholar said. A chickpea ricocheted off his nose and scurried across Mani’s clay tablet. “The fishermen, I mean. We could make a few days’ trip out of it and travel to the villages.”

“I would rather roast my balls in embers,” Mani said, “but you go ahead.”

Shahan never went to talk to the fishermen, of course. It wasn't a thing scholars did. Their place was in the city, eating from proper plates and talking with other erudite men. It was not clumping down tracks to muddy villages perched on the edge of the marsh, eating half-cooked grain and being stared at by grubby children. Mani wanted answers, but he preferred to seek them in civilized company.

The claim had stayed with him, though. A year or so later he asked one of the Sea-Goats, an older man whose head was crusted like the shell of a turtle. The swimmer sank under the water, looking up at Mani through magnified eyes. Usually that meant they were about to vanish, but this time the Sea-Goat broke surface again and shook water from his head.

"Don't talk to fishers, much." The words sounded pulled from his tongue. "What have they got to say? All they do is paddle about. They don't think."

"And we scholars do?"

The man blinked opaque eyes. "Some think, mostly about the wrong things."

"What are the right things?"

A glimmer and a splash, and the old man was lost in the depths.

§ § §

Aš-alam. The city of the goddess Eala—virgin, mother, whore. Daughter of the Moon and reeds of the river, who brought kingship and ritual to the earth so long ago only the *zami* remember it. The altar in the House of Heaven stood where she had stood. Pilgrims from other lands walked in the gardens, past pools shaded from the sun.

Around that temple, the city thronged. Artisans and labourers, porters with laden donkeys or loads strapped to their own backs, pushing their way through the crowds. Workers and servants, chained slaves, students from the Temples or the schools, census takers and *zami*, the priests and priestesses with their shaved heads and pinched lips. Always *zami*, wherever you went.

Carts inched through the throng, heavy with grain and sacks of vegetables, or cages in which animals squawked and snorted and clucked. Others carried bolts of flax to the weavers, or limestone and cedar brought from the distant west, bound for the builders who exchanged shouts from rooftops. In winter, there were carts piled with baked bricks to be used repairing walls, and clay jars full of bitumen to coat them against the spring flood. Around it all were the signs of smiths and wheelwrights, coopers and carpenters and masons, the men who endlessly built the city and tore it down to rebuild it again, piece by piece.

There were other cities, scattered across the plain like seeds thrown from a farmer's hand. Each had its own god, its own great temple, but none was as

large or as grand as the House of Heaven. Priests in those far-off towns followed fashions set here and came to marvel at the temple on its great platform and the ceaseless, towering ambition of the city's other buildings. They sat at the feet of the *zami* of Aš-alam, listened to them speak, and took those words back to their homes. This was the first city, the oldest, the greatest. All others were imitations, lagging a pace behind no matter how they ran to catch up.

Eala had set her feet here, at the edge of the lagoons and waterways that separated the land and sea, the place where three worlds met: heaven, earth, and water. Mani often thought that the memory of her presence remained, like the glisten of rain on leaves after the storm has passed.

This was the only place in the world where Sea-Goats would talk to men, however perplexingly. Visitors to Aš-alam sometimes asked why that was important.

"How was Man created?" Mani asked in return.

"Imgar made us to be servants to the gods and set us free when we turned out to be trouble," another man said. He sounded oddly proud of that but then hesitated. "Didn't he?"

"Perhaps," Mani said. "If that's so, then when were the Sea Folk made, and by whom? For what reason?"

Brows furrowed, and then the first man said doubtfully, "Do you mean there are other gods?"

"If I knew all the answers," Mani said, "I wouldn't need to ask questions."

He might be spending too much time with the Sea-Goats. He was nearly as elliptical as they were these days.



## CHAPTER TWO

THE BELL WAS half-submerged in water at the end of a pier made of woven bunches of reeds. When the lever was pulled the tocsin rang, the sound muffled as though the clapper was smothered in pillows. Mani had once put his head underwater while a colleague sounded the bell and hadn't thought the sound especially loud. When he came back onto dry land, he found his ears were aching though, a dull pain that didn't go away for a week.

One day when he rang, a young Sea-Goat man arrived, gratifyingly quick for once. He was slim and lithe, as all his people were, and his head was still a smooth grey, unspoiled by long years in the sea. The paler ridges that began above his eyes and curled back over his ears were what had given the swimmers their name. They looked like the horns of a goat, sunk beneath the skin.

"I haven't seen you before," Mani said.

"Nor I you." The young man performed a lazy somersault under the water. "I've always wanted to meet a human."

"Why haven't you?"

"I've only just come to the lagoons," he answered.

That raised the question of where he'd been before. Records at the academy said that many scholars had asked about that before, and such queries always ended with the swimmer streaking away into the deeps. Mani managed to bite his tongue. "I'm Kassu-Mani."

The Sea-Goat flapped his tail, bobbing in the water. "I'm Hanno. Why do you have two names?"

"A lot of my people do," he said. "Some even have three. It's easier if you just call me Mani."

"But why?"

It was hard not to show surprise. Sea-Goats rarely asked questions, and Mani couldn't remember one insisting on an answer. "I suppose I don't know. It's just how we are. I could find out, if you like."

Hanno bobbed under and back up again, water streaming from his hairless head. "It's not important."

"Why did you come here?" Mani asked.

"You rang the bell."

"That isn't what I mean. Why did you come to the lagoon?"

"I was old enough," Hanno said. "I wanted to see humans, too. I've heard all the stories about you."

That was too clear an invitation to miss. "Stories?"

"That you try to make yourselves clever but don't know how," Hanno explained. "You hardly ever dance. You smell of desert winds blowing over the sea, or sometimes of a beach after rain." He shrugged, a curious ripple to his shoulders. "Things everyone knows."

"We don't dance by the lagoon," Mani said, smiling. "We do sometimes in the city, though."

"Not when you move," Hanno said.

Mani didn't really understand that, so he let it go. Smell was interesting though, since to a human nose the Sea-Goats stank of the sea floor and fish drying in the sun. Quite revolting if you stood too close. It made sense that humans smelled strange to the swimmers. As for cleverness, Mani thought it would be easier to learn new things if the Sea-Goats answered with more than riddles. Perhaps this new one might. He was still enigmatic, but less so than others of his kind on first impression.

What Mani wanted to ask was *did you hear these stories growing up*, but the Sea-Goats never answered questions about their home, wherever it was. That was one of the first things a student learned, even before he first spoke to the swimmers. It was the question most certain to send a swimmer plunging down into the green depths, and often it was days afterwards before one would respond to the ringing of the bell.

"Most humans aren't very interesting," Mani said instead. "We work growing food, and we pray. For much of the year there's not much time for anything else."

"You grow grass?"

"A sort of grass," he agreed. "The same way you grow reeds."

Hanno snorted through the slits in his collarbones. "We don't grow it. We just manage where it grows."

"Is there a difference?"

"Reed beds affect water flow," Hanno said. "We shape the marshes and lagoons by what we do. Your farmers don't change the land around them."

"You should go up the river sometime," Mani said. "Take a look at all the canals and reservoirs we've built. Most of that water goes to fields in the dry season. Our farmers affect the land all right."

"Truly?" Hanno asked, and there was a nearly human eagerness in his sibilant voice. Then he deflated. "But the older people say we're not to go into the river. They say it's dangerous."

"Dangerous how?"

"You," Hanno said. He shot Mani a dark look from under the ridges of his brow. "Your people. Men with nets or spears. War, and warriors stabbing and stabbing."

“Fishermen might cause a problem,” Mani admitted, “but there aren’t any wars in Engiru these days. There were some long ago, when the steppe people came, but we’ve had none for sixty years.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Mani said.

§ § §

North of Aš-alam lies the river Ranuna behind its great levees, one of two rivers to cross the plain. Beyond those slow brown waters lie the other cities of Engiru: Dar-aš and Tibad, Piqash and Shurraš, Eshkir and Kindar. Further north still is the second of the rivers, the Utuka. Whereas the Ranuna runs slow and brown, the Utuka is fast and clear, its channel bored into the earth as though by the knife cuts of giants.

It is said that in Engiru people take their characteristics from the waters. Men of the south are placid and calm, while those of the north are busy and quick to anger. Quick to violence, as well. Especially the men of Tibad and Labaš. A Sea-Goat who swam so far might find himself fighting for his life in some cleverly contrived arena against a warrior in waist-deep water.

Despite this, priests are the same everywhere. Some are men, others women. All shave their heads, pinch their lips in perpetual disapproval, and believe every aspect of every life is theirs to control. If a man be a king or bricklayer, warlord or farmer, the *zami* will worm their influence into his work and family, never saying it is enough.

Mani was in the scholars’ rooms next to the Platform of the New Moon when someone spoke beside him. “I was a year younger than you when I was married,” the person said.

Mani looked up. He thought at first that this was another of Shahan’s jokes, something that started with a random comment and led quickly to elliptical nonsense. But it wasn’t Shahan. The man by the pigeon boxes used to store tablets was older, his hair winged with grey. He had his back half turned, but Mani knew him.

“Darsal?”

“Keep your voice down.” The other man didn’t take his attention away from the shelves. There was no sound in the hall but his voice and the scritch of the scribes’ quills from their desks at the far wall. “You’re twenty-five, am I right?”

“Yes. What does—”

“I was married at twenty-three. The priesthood found me a wife.”

Mani frowned. “Why would they bother?”

"Think about it. We work in a building on the grounds of the city's third-largest temple. The royal treasurer pays for us, but it's the priests who watch us, and we store our records in the House of Tablets the *zami* built. They like to know what we're doing." Mani could hear the frown in his voice. "They like to know what everyone is doing."

"That's true," Mani said.

"It's about control. That Shusikil and her crones are all around the king and Elders, did you know that?"

The chief priestess's name made Mani shudder. "I knew it. You think they control us by giving us wives?"

"Who knows more about a man's day than his wife?" Darsal asked. A rhetorical question, not worth an answer and not getting one. "They give us women who failed the tests for the clergy. Zealous, but not the cleverest. Women who can't write, that sort of thing." He selected a tablet and pretended to study it. "Why did you want to be a scholar, Mani?"

He stared at the man through the shelving. "So I could talk to the swimmers."

"I know that. But why?"

"Because we don't understand them," Mani said. That didn't seem to be enough. "Look, they know things we don't, yes? How? Where did they learn them? There are answers out in the lagoon, Darsal. I want to know them. I want to learn the age of the world and to set my feet on the soil of their home island. The swimmers know things no human does. Sometimes they share, and once we've learned it, we won't forget. Knowledge is forever."

A chortle, as though that was the funniest joke of the year. "You really haven't lost your enthusiasm, have you?" He tucked the tablet under an arm. "If you want to choose your own bride, Mani, better do it soon."

Mani had mastered his letters when he was seven. That was early even among scholars, mind you. There were six hundred glyphs, and most people balked just at the thought of learning them all. In truth, most were combinations of simpler characters, so the marks for water and street were combined to give the one for canal. Once you knew the basic sixty you had the language mostly cracked. By nine Mani had been writing essays on the Goddess, on philosophy, and on the nature of divinity and how it pertained to kings. Shortly after that he'd been sent to the Elders' School, and since then he doubted he'd known anyone who couldn't write.

It was the Sea-Goats who'd begun to claim his interest though, to the point where they swallowed everything else. Now it seemed that was all threatened, because a wife found by the priests would be more than a wife—she'd be a snitch too, and everything Mani did would be known in the Temples five minutes after he did it. Darsal was right. The *zami* would try to control him.



Let the priests decide where he went and what questions he asked? Bind him with a wife who couldn't even write? All Mani had was his work. He was an ordinary-looking man, he knew that—no taller than most with his face too bland to be handsome. He had always been clever and always bent that intelligence to the Sea-Goats. He wouldn't let the Temples take it away. A malicious wife was worse than all diseases, the saying went. Mani sat and thought for some time. Then he went to the study he shared with Shahan, because the first thing a man ought to do was warn his friend.

"Force me to marry?" Shahan said. "I'd like to see them try."

"Darsal seemed very sure."

"He always does. He's been a scholar so long he probably thinks the Moon and stars will fall from the sky when he's not here to study them anymore."

"That's not the point," Mani said. "What are you reading, anyway?"

"One of old Lipit's tablets, from sixty years ago. I remember years back I came across a reference to the Sea-Goats' home island. I think it might have been in one of Lipit's."

"You think it *might* have been? He left more than ninety writings in the archive. It'll take you days."

"Does it matter? There's no rush."

"Also," Mani said, "you've got mustard on the tablet."

"See?" Shahan said triumphantly. "The priesthood won't be able to find a woman to put up with me. I'll be blithe and carefree all my life."



## CHAPTER THREE

THE PLAIN OF Engiru is completely flat. The annual flood means there are no trees or hedges of thick shrubs. The fields are marked out by irrigation ditches, hundreds of them running this way and that. They gather thickly around the reservoirs and spread more widely elsewhere, crossed by countless narrow bridges of limestone. Each ditch is lined by bricks painted black with bitumen to keep them from crumbling into dust.

It works, for a time. Every few years the bricks must be replaced, in the autumn and winter when the land is parched and the fields lie empty. Shaven-headed *zami* walk the trenches, making notes on clay tablets whenever they see a section that needs repair. Then, while the ditches are dry, men pull down decaying sections and build them back afresh, watched over by those same bald *zami* as they work.

Cities dot the plain, drawing ditches to them in thickening streams. Nestled among them, like a tick on a bull's back, is Labaš.

City of Balih, the god of War and the Wind. Its streets are much the same as those of any other city, its buildings similar, and its people afflicted by the same concerns. The *zami* wear the pinch-lipped expression common across all Engiru, and they shave their heads just as *zami* do in Kindar or Aš-alam. Today, however, they are smiling, taut expressions that look uncomfortable on those narrow faces, as soldiers carry body after body out of the Chamber of Elders behind the main ziggurat and toss them into carts at the foot of the steps.

"They make my flesh creep," Enmer muttered.

His words were hardly loud enough for his own ears to hear, yet one of the *zami* turned his bald head to stare at Enmer as he helped haul another corpse down to the street. Enmer ducked his head and walked a touch faster.

"You fool," Yarim said as they threw the body into a cart. "Do you *want* a curse on your name?"

"He didn't hear me," Enmer said unconvincingly. "Stop worrying."

"I wouldn't worry if I didn't work with a fish-brained *kamal*," Yarim answered. "Anyway, it's not the *zami* that concern me." He nodded his head towards the far side of the stairs, almost imperceptibly. "It's him."

A man stood alone at the top of the steps, watching the bodies as they were brought out. He carried a sickle sword in one hand, curved point resting on the bricks at his feet. Even in the blazing sun, he wore only a kilt, leaving his broad chest to tan and then burn. Black hair curled over his forehead and ears. His left arm was banged all the way to the elbow, glittering with silver and precious

stones. He didn't seem to be looking at anyone. Everyone looked at him, though, mostly when they thought he wasn't watching or when his face was turned to the sky.

Yarim had a bronze club in a sheath on his back, and he knew how to use it. He was inches taller than most men, and his shoulders were like a roof beam. He'd fought in the battle that brought the king to power in Labaš. Not much frightened him, but his eyes were drawn back to that sickle sword, and every time he felt a little shiver of fear.

He and Enmer went back into the Chamber.

Common folks were normally not allowed in here. Except slaves, of course, when they served the Elders their wheat cakes and beer during debates. They never spoke of what they saw and heard though, even years afterwards—the *zami* forbade that. Anyone who uttered a word knew he was doomed to ages in Gizal, the world beneath the world, while flesh rotted slowly from the bones that trapped his soul.

The Elders forbade anyone from entering here, too, but they'd be forbidding no one anything now.

Blood ran down the steps from one tier of seats to the next, to pool in the open space below. The chairs were solid cedar wood. Yarim couldn't resist touching them as he went by, just to see what the wood felt like. He was careful not to touch where blood had splattered, though his hands were red and wet from lifting bodies, so he supposed it didn't matter. There were only ever thirty Elders, one for each day of the month, but they hadn't been the only ones to die.

"There are bodies down by the lower door," Nepada said. The captain pointed to the bottom of the room, as though Yarim and Enmer might not know what *lower* meant. "Slaves, mainly. Get to it."

Enmer grimaced, but Yarim merely gave a nod and moved down the steps. He had to stand aside while two other soldiers brought up a corpse, then continued until his sandals splashed into the blood. He paused to look around. Most of the wax candles were knocked over during the killing, but light still came through the high windows, enough to show slumped forms to his left. He walked carefully over and saw most of the dead were slaves, as Nepada had said, all clad in plain kilts and lying in pooled blood.

One of the corpses was an Elder, or had been. Yarim had seen him a few times, walking in the street with two big men to guard him. A well-fed fellow with a white stripe down each side of his beard, too distinctive to forget, though Yarim couldn't recall his name.

"Get your idle arse over here," he said to Enmer. His friend had hesitated by the last curved row of chairs. "These deaders are soaked, and curse my bones if I'm going to carry them on my own."

They took the Elder first, because he was the biggest of the slain. Blood made their hands slip, so they had to pause halfway up the steps and take handfuls of his clothes for a better grip. That was worse, if anything; the fabric was drenched in blood that hadn't caked and was slimy under their hands. They stopped for a second time just outside the doors. The tall man with the sickle sword was gazing at the sky again.

Someone was climbing the steps behind him, and Enmer abandoned his efforts to find a hold on the dead man and shut his eyes. His lips moved in prayer. Yarim lowered his head but kept his gaze on the approaching woman. She wore a simple white robe and kohl that made her eyes huge, and she should have been beautiful. She should have earned stares and quickened blood as she walked, but instead men turned their eyes away or closed them and murmured words of propitiation until she was gone.

Her head was shaved bald. She still carried an exotic beauty, enough to make Yarim's blood run hot, but it was sweetness in the taste of poison. Yarim knew her, too, and this time he remembered her name.

"High priestess," the man on the steps said. He brought his gaze down from the sky and turned to face her, resting the sickle sword on his shoulder. "You were expected this morning. I began to think you had abandoned our agreement at the last moment."

"I was listening to the voice of the god," she answered. If there was controlled power in the man's voice, there was complete self-assurance in hers. "But I am here now, my king."

The sword point ground on the bricks again. "And what did the god say to you, Kammani?"

"That the time is ripe for a change, and the Council of Elders had outlived their usefulness," she said. "That it is the will of Balih that power pass to the hands of a strong king, unencumbered by the failed traditions of the past."

"How fortunate," he observed.

The woman named Kammani didn't seem to notice the irony. "I will tell the people that you should rule alone. With proper advice from the priesthood, of course, to ensure the continued good graces of Balih."

"In your person?"

"In my person, Sarru-kin. There would be...advantages. Kings and high priestesses must work closely together." She stepped nearer. A tall woman, she still had to tilt her head back to look at him. A fingertip traced a line on his bare chest. "Very closely."

"How fortunate," Sarru-kin said again. He swung the sickle sword back onto his shoulder. "It seems we are agreed. Now, you promised me one thing more."

"I know it," Kammani said. In her place, Yarim thought he would be

cringing by now, but the priestess was still serene. "My *zami* hear...a whisper. A rumour, inscribed on a tablet now crumbled from age. It seems there is an island which holds the secret you seek."

"Where is this island?"

"I do not know. But the tablet tells us who to ask." She still held his eyes. "The swimmers. The Sea-Goats of Aš-alam."

Sarru-kin let out a soft breath and turned his face back up to the sky. "Then that is where I will go. The army will march in two days." The sickle sword twirled. "There are cities between here and Aš-alam. If they oppose me, I will soak them in the blood of their own sons, and in Aš-alam I will become immortal."

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPILLED SALT was on the far side of the city, in the north. Mani hadn't been there in some time.

Heat struck him a blow the moment he stepped into the street. Workers had abandoned their scaffolds and now lay dozing in the shade. They were the wise ones today. Shops were shuttered and temple doors closed. The streets were nearly empty. Sweat ran into Mani's eyes, and he wiped it away. More soaked his tunic under the arms.

There was no telling when a priest might appear with a wife for him, though, which meant he had no time to waste. Mani moved into shade when he could, suffered when he had to, and kept going.

Even in the heat of the day, there were some people about, those with business as urgent as his, or who were under orders. In the latter group was a band of debt slaves, two pushing wheelbarrows and the rest laden with trowels and pickaxes. A *zami* walked behind with a bucket of bitumen in one hand, which named the gang as a ditch repair crew. It was late in the year for that, with the Flood due in three months. The work should have been finished by now, but there was always more to do, like a section that collapsed unexpectedly. Better it be fixed now than left until the waters rose.

A man walked down the middle of the street, buffeted at every step by a woman who called him a bastard, cheat, and rooster-cock. He absorbed her blows without comment, his mouth a hard line. That was marriage when it turned out badly. Wed for love, divorce when you've had time to think it over. Mani had heard that a hundred times, and he'd taken it as a warning not to rush into anything. There had been pretty girls here and there, though he was never brave enough to talk to them properly, losing his eloquence in a torrent of um and ah. Because of that, or because of the warning, he'd never rushed into anything.

Until now. He didn't think he had a choice anymore. No shaven-headed fanatic was going to tell *him* what questions he could ask and which answers he could write down.

He really wasn't good with girls, though, and doubts first slowed his steps and then brought him to a halt. Uncertainty made a hole in his stomach, and he only knew one way to fill that.

"Course it's fresh," the vendor told him. "Caught last night in the river. I swear on Eala's virtue."

"The Goddess is a whore as well as a maiden."

"Then I'll swear on her ecstasy too," the man said. "Are you going to buy a fish or not? It's hot as fury out here."

Mani bought a barbel steak, fried with onions and garlic, and sat on a shady wall to munch it. If he was Shahan, he would have wiped greasy fingers on his tunic, but Mani kept a scrap of cloth in his pocket for just such crises. He cleaned his fingers and stood up. The hole in his belly wasn't filled by eating, but he did feel a little braver.

He went on to the Spilled Salt. It stood on a side street not far from the main gates, a square building with steps leading up to a porch flanked by pillars with spirals of black and white cone mosaic. Only two pillars, true, and slender ones at that, but still. Someone who could afford cone mosaic was making a lot of money. It might incline him to be generous or mean of spirit. You really couldn't tell until you went inside and found out.

Across the street was a block of mismatched houses, now being torn down. Well, not right now; the workers were all stretched out in the shade of a remaining wall, arms over their eyes. Someone had told Mani a new Temple was going to be built there, when the clearance crews were done.

Temples everywhere, and *zami* pouring out of them like insects from cocoons. But that wasn't his business today. Mani went up the steps and into the relative cool of the Spilled Salt.

"Scholar!" There was Udar, black hair oiled, his beard trimmed close and curled, sleek as a seal. He threw his arms wide. "I half thought you'd died. Another week and I'd have come to make sure you were all right."

"I don't doubt it," Mani said.

"I swear!" Udar grinned. "I'd have hunted you down like a wolf on a gazelle. I don't like to lose a regular customer. Come, meet my friends."

The tavern wasn't like most of the city's bars. Usually, they were poky places squeezed into a row of houses, like an unwanted guest in the middle of a bench. There was usually no room to wriggle between tables when the chairs were full, so a wise man picked a spot near the door and once in it never moved. The Spilled Salt catered to a more discerning crowd, men with coins to spend and a palate that could tell when the beer mash hadn't fermented long enough. There was space to weave through the tables, which Udar did easily, coming to a bench at the back wall where two men sat.

"Isha, a drink for the scholar." Udar slapped Mani on the back. "These fellows are Ruen and Ramsi. Brothers, as you can see, they're as ugly as each other. Boys, this is Mani. He speaks to the swimmers."

The two men's expressions changed as they reached to clasp arms. Mani knew why. He looked like every other educated man, a little soft around the jaw, his hands unsullied by manual work. Enough for a worker to distrust him,



even hold him in a peculiar sort of contempt. But if he spoke to the Sea-Goats, and they let him, then he deserved respect.

"Pleased to meet you," the brothers said in unison. They sat down the same way, arses hitting the bench at the same moment, like marionettes puppeted by the same strings.

"You, too," Mani said. He was about to sit down when Isha came over with a clay mug and set it on the table. He found himself watching as she walked away. She had a fall of hair, black as a raven's dreams, and a nice wiggle to her hips. Not much of those hips, true, and her hair was straight as a knife cut when in true beauties it was curled. Mani shook his head.

"Could we have a word in private?" he asked.

Udar was instantly all solicitation, the perfect host. He led Mani to a corner table well away from the other patrons, who were few enough given the hour. Then he went back for his guest's mug, put it before him, and slid into a chair. He set folded arms on the table. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," Mani said, "you might wish you hadn't asked."

"Nonsense. A friend is a friend, and I owe you a little. People come to a bar where they know scholars drink. They like to listen to their tales, especially about what the swimmers say. Can't get enough of the swimmers. I guess you know that."

He nodded.

"And what have I done to repay you? Nothing. Can't do much, truth be told. What does a scholar need from an innkeep? Beer, that's all, and too much of that can rot any man's brain. I'll allow myself two a night and no more than that for my friends, the clever ones most of all. So ask. Ask."

Mani took a long slug of beer, emptying half the mug. It left froth in his beard, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. "I, um. That is, I want to uh. Could you...would you—"

"Mani." The landlord's sleek hand covered Mani's own. "Stop fretting yourself. We're friends here. Take a breath and ask."

He took a breath. "Is your daughter still looking for a husband?"

There was a moment in which Udar looked like a man hit over the head with a brick. Then a smile broke, water on cracked ground. "Cripple my father! You want to marry Isha? Truly?"

"Only if you approve," Mani said. "And if she's willing, naturally. I don't want to offend either of you."

"Offend me? By Eala's footfalls, I thought no one would ever ask for her again. Not after...well. To have her wed to a scholar would be a blessing beyond hope. And to a friend, besides." He slapped Mani on the back, and for all that he looked well fed and indolent, the blow hurt. "I will make gifts of thanks in the Immaru Temple at sunrise tomorrow. Great gifts!"

"If she agrees," Mani said. "*Only* if she agrees, Udar. I refuse a forced marriage for myself, and I won't impose it on her. Or any woman."

The innkeep paused. "The *zami*?"

"They want me to marry one of their cast-offs," Mani said. "Or at least I think so. I've had a warning from someone I trust. After that, I'll be able to ask only the questions the priestesses want and write only the answers they choose. A shave-head will be standing behind me every day of my life, even when I'm out at the marsh alone."

"A malicious wife is worse than all diseases," Udar said. His mouth drew down at the corners. "One of those priestesses was in here last week. She wanted to know if I'd agree to have her women in here, talking to the men as they drank. Offered me quarter the value of the business paid every year if I agreed. I turned her down, of course. Men come here at the end of the day for a well-earned drink, not to have priestesses peering over their shoulders."

"They peer over everyone's shoulders."

"It's worse for me," Udar said. "Imagine if the *zami* told you what beer you could serve, who you had to buy from, and at what price. If a man couldn't joke about work or his wife without a shave-head scowling at him. I'd be bankrupt inside a month." He eyed Mani for a moment. "Will they be angry with you?"

"For marrying another woman? I assume so. I'd rather contend with their anger than their interference, and they can't keep me from talking to the Sea-Goats. I'm Guild-approved. That's what matters."

"Don't take it for granted," Udar said darkly. "Their power reaches into every house and field, and they're never satisfied. If they can't tie this string to you, they will look for another."

"Then they will have to do that," Mani replied.

"All right, then. I think it's time you talked to Isha." Udar rose, gripping Mani's shoulder as he stood. "You say you need her agreement, and that's your choice. But know that you have mine." He wove away between the tables, calling Isha's name as he went.

Mani let out a long breath. He'd been more nervous about securing Udar's agreement than he was over Isha, in truth. She was twenty now, or close to it, well past the age when most girls married. Every year, every week made her chances of a good match less. And people knew what had happened. Rumour could be a vicious enemy.

Isha appeared from the doorway beside the bar counter. She stopped to stare across the room at him, and Mani felt nerves twist in his belly again. *More nervous about Udar than about her?* He'd been a fool. She started across the room towards him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

IS IT TRUE?" Isha asked as she sat. "You want to marry me? Why?" A simple question, with no easy answer. The truth would likely not do, except Mani didn't know what Udar had already told her. "The priestesses are going to insist I wed, and they'll put forward one of their own as my bride. I can't really refuse. Scholars are supposed to marry. It shows we're serious about life, as we should be serious about our work."

"So, you're drawn to me because I'm not a *zami*?"

"That's part of it."

"What's the rest?"

"I know you," he said. "I've known you since you were twelve, when you first started working in the bar. You're clever and brave. Look at how you're speaking to me now."

"If you can't handle a few questions, you'll never be able to deal with me in your home."

He shook his head. "That's not what I'm saying. I like sharp wits, Isha. A dull woman would bore me in a day."

He studied her. She wasn't really a beauty, with her too-straight hair, small nose, and a figure that didn't curve where a woman's should. Or not much, anyway. She was pretty, in a sideways sort of way. Then there were her eyes. Large and dark, and afire with the glint Mani knew as intelligence, which he saw so rarely even in his colleagues. Most men who talked with the swimmers had the enthusiasm worn out of them within a few years, ground down by elliptical answers that made no sense. They turned a little glaze-eyed, like cattle stupefied by the reek of blood.

Or perhaps it was their wives who did it to them. Their watchful, priestess-chosen wives. Mani shuddered.

"You know I'm bad luck," Isha said.

Mani shook his head again. "No, you're not. What happened to you was bad luck, and that's different."

"Once, perhaps. Not twice. It doesn't worry you?"

"Once was happenstance, twice is coincidence. That's all."

"It doesn't worry you?"

"You were betrothed, and your intended lost a hand in a hammer accident. The second time your husband-to-be died of consumption. It happens, Isha."

"If Eala has cursed me, it could happen to you."

"Well, let's see." He folded his hands on the table between them. "The accident was about a week after your betrothal, I think. The second time he died a fortnight later, is that right?" He waited for her nod. "Then I suggest we have a brief engagement."

Her lips twitched. "Are you quite sure I'm not cursed?"

"As certain as I am of anything," he said. "Although I talk to the Sea-Goats, so my concept of certainty might be a bit vague."

"Do they talk back?"

"Yes. Sometimes I even understand it."

"That must be frustrating. Will you come home and take out your anger on me with a stick?"

He smiled. "I hardly ever beat women."

"You've never been married before."

"True. But all this is just talk, Isha, words for the sake of speaking. Let me ask. Do *you* believe you're cursed?"

Her eyes flickered away from his for the first time. "Perhaps. I don't know the goddess's mind."

"I didn't ask you what Eala thinks."

"I...don't believe I am," Isha said. She still hadn't looked back at him. "You're right. I was just unlucky."

"And at that," he said, "not as unlucky as the poor man who lost a hand, or the one who died."

Another flicker of a smile. "That's true."

"Then what do you want, Isha? You can stay working here, if you like. Your father loves you a great deal. He'd let you stay until you grow grey and withered, like old bones. Or you can try to make a life of your own."

"That's true as well," she admitted. "The question is whether I should choose the life you offer."

He held his peace. There wasn't anything Mani could think of to say. His words had been more fluent with Isha than with any other woman he could remember, but there were limits, and he thought silence was his best friend just now. If Isha turned him down, he supposed he'd go to the nearest Scented House and hope to find a woman who could read and write, or at least think for herself, and be satisfied with that. He was *not* going to let a priestess command him in his own home or his work. Not ever that.

"If you had spoken of love," Isha said, "I'd have known it for a lie, and you a liar. I would have rejected you then. I'll be happy to be the wife of a *lamadu*. A scholar's house is better than I could have hoped to find. I might even be respected in society, innkeeper's daughter or not."

"A scholar's duty is to speak the truths he finds, however difficult or unpopular

they are,” Mani said. “We’re not usually respected much. Not in polite society, anyway. We upset too many people.”

He was smiling though, and blessings be to Eala, so was she. Isha reached across the table to put a hand over his two clasped ones, and across the room Udar let out a shout of delight.

§ § §

They were married the next day, in a little temple in the west of the city just as the sun rose to bathe it in light. Mani recited the words of a bridegroom and forgot them as they left his mouth. The priestess at the altar turned to Isha.

*Bridegroom, dear to my heart,  
Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet,  
Lion, dear to my heart,  
Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet.*

*You, because you love me,  
Pray give me your caresses,  
My lord, my protector,  
My husband, who gladdens Eala’s heart,  
Pray give me your caresses.*

They were marrying because circumstance had brought them to it, each for their own reasons. Even so, Isha’s voice made the words ring with love, or something that would pass for it. It was unsettling, in a way Mani didn’t understand. He had no time to think about it.

“Veil,” the priestess prompted.

The seats behind were filled—well, two rows of them were. Neither bride nor groom had many friends. Udar had come, and with him some of the regulars from the Spilled Salt, most of whom Mani recognised but couldn’t name. Ruen and Ramsi he could name, the brothers crammed into knee-length tunics in the yellow of marriage. In a cluster on the other side sat half a dozen scholars, including some of the seniors. Darsal was there, along with Hitti, who was so old he walked with two sticks but still managed to hobble to the swamp to ring the bell that called swimmers. Tash-Yal had come, dragging himself away from the charts and graphs that covered a dozen desks as he struggled to collate the Sea-Goats’ abstract comments into something that made sense. Shahan was also there, wearing a black tunic only bordered in yellow, looking like a crow in a cornfield and shaking his head at Mani’s foolishness.

The shaven-headed priestess poked him in the arm and said, "The veil?"

Mani gave a start. He reached behind him, and Udar put a veil in his hands, a light and flimsy thing that would fall apart the moment it was washed. That didn't matter—Isha only had to wear it for a week. He placed it on her head and let the gauze fall over her face. She smiled at him, and he found himself smiling back.

"You are married in the sight of Eala," the priestess said. She was a big woman with a big voice, less like a woman's and more like a bulky charcoal burner. "There is yet room for repentance. Remove the veil before seven days have passed and the marriage is dissolved. Wear it and the seal shall be set upon your union, and Eala will bless you in this world."

Mani looked at his wife. She didn't blink or look away. After a moment he felt her hand creep into his, cautious as a mouse crossing a newly cut field, and she said, "Shall we?"

They went out into the street, a party of a dozen and a half dressed in yellow that shone in the sun. It was still early, but people were about their business, hoping to finish before the sun rose too far and heat became a lion that mauled. Some paused to call congratulations and toss whatever they had into the air; petals or seeds for some, just a handful of dust for others. Mani and Isha walked through a constant shower, sage leaves and dust settling on their shoulders as they went.

It was some distance to the Spilled Salt, where Udar had laid out a wedding breakfast. They followed the street towards the middle of the city, past grain warehouses and homes shoehorned into the spaces between them, past temples with pillared porticoes, past smithies and cobblers and rug makers. A tailor came out of his shop to give them a few yards of cloth he said was no use to him, so he'd make a wedding gift of it. At the corner an apothecary gave them a glass bottle an inch high, filled with powder that he said would ensure a child within one year. The apothecary winked.

They turned onto a wider street, heading now into the shade of a massive platform of bricks. A smaller storey stood upon that, then a third, and finally the Immaru Temple, the place of light, raised so high above the city that the sun's rays fell on it every moment from dawn until dusk. The place where Eala had set her feet when she descended from Heaven, and the centre of the world. A scaffold covered half of one side, with workers like dots hanging from the poles and rigging. They cheered as the little procession went by.

"I hope they don't throw their hammers in the air," Isha whispered.

Mani chuckled. "That would be bad. Let's settle for the cheers."

A moment after he said it the whooping quieted ahead of them. Mani peered and saw people backing to the sides of the avenue, bowing as they went.

He couldn't see why. Then the crowd parted, and he did, just as Isha pulled him to a halt and began to go down into a bow of her own.

"No," the man emerging from the throng said. "Not today, young woman. A bride should bow to no one on her wedding day." He took her hand, kissed the palm, and then he turned to Mani with his hand extended. Mani gripped the forearm and felt strong fingers clutch back.

"Congratulations," said the king of Aš-alam.

"Er," Mani managed.

The king wasn't alone. Three portly fellows in expensive tunics walked close to him, Elders of the Council ready to give advice to the man they'd elected king two years ago. They were matched by an equal number of shaven-headed priestesses, all of them old and skinny as starving dogs. They might have been cut from the same cloth on the same day. Six muscular men with maces walked in a loose circle around them all, bare-chested and grim-faced. They weren't needed to protect the king from the people, but other cities had sent assassins before, in more warlike times. There had been peace for decades, but habits die hard.

"I have no flowers to throw for you," Ra'im said. Something had been sewn into the curls of his beard, tiny glimmers amid all the black. "Will you accept a gift from me, to spare me shame?"

"You're very kind," Mani said. He started to bow, and Isha caught him before he got very far.

"Quite right!" The king was laughing. "A groom shouldn't bow on his wedding day either. Here." He pulled a ring from his baby finger. "Take this. Any jeweller should give you a good price for it."

"Thank you," Mani said.

One of the priestesses took a pace forward. "You're Kassu-Mani. The scholar." Her voice was harsh, like gravel scraping against stone. "Aren't you?"

Mani did bow then, just a small dip of his head. "I'm honoured that you know of me, *zami*."

"And you're married." The crone cast a flat look at Isha. "How...provident. We were going to—"

Another of the women pulled at her arm, and the hag broke off. The action drew Mani's eyes to the second priestess, and he knew her.

There were stories about Shusikil. Tales of what she had done to rise to the top of the *zami*, and her place one step to the side of the king. Not a step behind. The chief priestess walked alongside the king by right, and when a king died hers was one of the votes cast to decide who would next wear the crown. Some of the older scholars claimed that Shusikil had not chosen Ra'im.

She was tall, thin as a stick, her cheeks hollow and black eyes burning. "No wedding was listed for you."

The king's gaze sharpened at that, as he caught the same implication Mani saw. The *zami* really had been watching him, planning to find him a bride of their own. Perhaps they'd already done so. If he hadn't forestalled them, he would have been wed to a failed acolyte by the time the Flood came. He didn't have to look around to know that Shahan was shaking his head.

"No," Isha said, before Mani could reply. "We met again yesterday, after weeks apart, and decided we couldn't wait. Our fervour overtook us."

Shahan spluttered. Shusikil's narrow face tightened, but she was given no chance to speak either.

"Was this a sudden wedding?" Ra'im asked. "That really is provident. We might take it for granted that the *zami* will be pleased to see a man and woman so quick to take their oaths before the goddess. Isn't that right, Shusikil?"

There was a glint of amusement in his eyes, a flicker of a smile on his lips, as he turned to her. Mani was certain the king knew exactly why the wedding had been so quick. Put on the spot, the crone could only grind her teeth and mutter something that might have been agreement but was a long way short of gracious. It didn't matter. She could make a cage, but Mani was a fox the priestesses couldn't catch.

"Congratulations again," the king said. With that, he moved past them towards the great double doors in the side of the ziggurat of Immaru. The swarm of advisors and guards walked with him, already chattering as they went.

"The rumour comes from two sources," someone said.

"They are both reliable?"

"One is especially so. He is in Labaš itself, and says he watched Sarru-kin's army leave."

"His target?" Ra'im asked.

"My lord, we can't be sure. Perhaps Kindar, perhaps Ashkir. Both lie along the same road from Labaš."

"We can't form an army in time to help. Very well, send an emissary to our royal brother of Ashkir. He probably knows already but warn him anyway. Then send another messenger to..."

The group passed from hearing. Mani realised his wife was looking at him through her veil.

"It's not our business," he said. "We study the Sea-Goats, not war, and Labaš is a long way from here."

A long way indeed, across the wide Ranuna and past most of the cities of Engiru. Still, it was a shock to hear of an army on the march after so many years of peace. War in one place might lead to war in another. It had happened before, a local skirmish drawing in one city after another until the land was in ruins from river to river and the irrigation ditches went unrepaired.



Well, there was no sense borrowing trouble. Now it was Mani making a cage for a fox he hadn't caught yet. He smiled at Isha. *My wife, and isn't that strange?* "Shall we go on?"

They did, passing out of the shadow of the ziggurat of Immaru and back into morning sunlight. Even so, all during the wedding breakfast Mani couldn't shake off the feeling that clouds had thrown their shadows over the day, and he found it harder and harder to smile.



## CHAPTER SIX

**M**OST INITIATES LOSE their enthusiasm quite soon,” the scholar said. He was short, with a tubby tummy and graying hair that stuck up around his head like a deformed helmet. Isha couldn’t remember his name. “Mani didn’t. Shahan, either. It’s good to see.”

“Shahan could use a little more earnestness,” Hitti said. He said it with a cut of his eyes towards the man in question, who raised his cup in a mocking salute and then stuck his tongue out. “Last month he tried to persuade a Sea-Goat to eat grain bars.”

There were grins and a couple of polite chuckles. The *lamadu* didn’t seem to indulge in open emotion, or even to relax, as far as Isha could see.

She sat on a bar stool, the counter at her back and her new husband at her side. Isha could see him from the side of her eye, leaning with one elbow on the bar and a cup not far from his hand. He hadn’t touched the wine. She didn’t need a better look to know that he was tight as a sealed barrel, stiff with tension and nerves.

Behind her Udar was busy serving drinks. Ramsi and Ruen were there too, hurrying to fill cups and cut bread or fruit. The three of them hardly fit behind the counter. Isha didn’t think the Spilled Salt had ever been this busy in the morning. On the far side of the bar room the usual early customers chewed, sipped, and threw perplexed glances at the wedding party, crammed into a corner at the back.

“You lot have tried the same tricks for years,” Shahan said. He burped, bringing a hand to his mouth too late. “Sorry. Anyway, I thought I’d try something different.”

“We all do the same things because they work,” Hitti snapped.

“Oh, surely,” Shahan grinned. “That’s why you’ve learned so much, of course. All you need is a sailor and a ship, and you’ll be off to the Sea-Goats’ home island, won’t you?”

Hitti and the mad-haired man glared at him. Some of the others allowed themselves more of those discreet chuckles, and one lifted a cup to Shahan. That must be a custom among these men. On any normal day, a drinker who kept lifting his wine would find it knocked out of his hand by an accidental shoulder before the second sip.

“Does anyone know where the swimmers live?” Isha asked.

She had to turn to Mani to ask, lowering her voice so only he could hear.

When she saw him fully, she could tell he was terrified, a man who has taken a leap and didn't know where he would land. His skin had a pallor that she associated with too much wine or not enough food.

"We never figured that out." His eyes darted to her and away, like frightened fish. "We've known for a long time that their home is an island, but it's only four years ago that we found it's in fresh water."

Isha looked at the scholars. "Which one of them discovered that?"

"I did," he said.

She looked at him and then away, no words on her tongue to form a reply.

"Any sailor would leap at the chance to take scholars to the Sea-Goats' island," another man said. Younger than some of the others, but older than Mani and Shahan. Isha thought he was about forty, though he looked tired around the eyes. "But we don't know enough yet. Learning is a slow thing, Shahan, when it comes to the Sea-Goats. Risks are dangerous. You ought to know that by now."

"Risks usually are dangerous," the young man said. His smile flashed. "You ought to know that by now."

"Listen, pup, you haven't—"

"Look," Hitti said.

He was staring past the others, towards the door. Isha turned her head and saw two *zami*, one tall and the other fat as a goose, both twisting to look at the wedding party as they came in. She looked the other way and there was her father, stock still and glaring. There was nothing he could do. Priestesses could go where they wished. These two went to the counter and sat on high stools, hard faces set.

"Dust eat the pair of them," Shahan said too loudly. "Look, Tash-Yal said that Mani and I haven't lost our enthusiasm. He's right, you know. I want to learn things. The Sea-Goats can mumble and frustrate better than anyone, but I'm not going to give up."

"Meaning that I have?" the tired man retorted, firing up at once.

"What about you?" Isha murmured, for her husband only. "What keeps you fascinated with the swimmers, Mani?"

"Knowledge," he answered, without a moment's pause. "They could tell us so much, about everything, and they *won't*. They must be teased and tricked. They're like sphinxes, protecting what they know, and we can't force them to tell so we must outwit them, outthink them. I want to learn everything they know so I understand how important it is." He drew a breath. "That's why."

It was the most animated Isha had seen him. A glimpse into the soul of the man. It both drew her and made her uneasy. "That's close to obsession, husband."

He twitched a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I know it is."

All right. He was bewitched by the Sea-Goats, as helpless as a shepherd

possessed by a demon. There were worse things a husband could be. “There’s another question.”

“What question?”

Isha wondered if he’d be angry that she had an opinion, after no study of the Sea-Goats at all. Maybe he would, but he was her husband now, and he’d said he wanted a clever wife. “Why are they here at all?”

“Who, the swimmers? Because they like fresh water. The lagoon is the only coastal place for a thousand miles where—”

“No,” Isha said. “That’s not the point. Why would they be anywhere on the coast? Why leave their island at all? You said their home is in fresh water, Mani, so why aren’t they there?”

He looked at her. No anger in him, but his brows drew slowly down, and after a moment he bit his lower lip.

“You hadn’t thought of that,” she said. “I’m sorry. I know it’s your work, and you know so much more than I do.”

“I know enough to recognise insight when I hear it,” he said. “But speak softly. Some of the older men would spit dust and gravel if they heard you say something like that.”

“It’s not a stupid question?”

“I once heard,” Mani said, “that there are no stupid questions, only people too stupid to ask. I don’t know the answer, though.”

“Well,” she said, “the stories say they were here when Eala founded Aš-alam, I think. So, whatever they came for, it was before the city began. That’s a long time for one reason to hold.”

“Yes.” His face had become an agile thing, alive with interest. “They might have come even before the fishermen did, when there was no one here at all. I wonder...” He broke off and then chuckled the little scholar’s chuckle. “Listen to me. It’s my wedding day—our wedding day—and I stand here yammering about the Sea-Goats.”

He changed when something engrossed him. When his curiosity was caught, and he forgot he was an awkward man with a new wife at his side. Isha gave him a gentle push. “Go talk to your friends, husband. You have a new idea to offer them.”

“I can’t take credit for that!”

“Will they accept the idea of a woman, untrained?” Another push. “Go on. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

“Scholars’ talks are never done,” he grumbled. He went to the tables and squeezed into a chair by the wall, his cup of wine untouched on the bar counter.

Isha looked at him, through the gauze veil. *My husband*. Not an especially tall man, not deep in the chest or muscled in the arms. His beard was neatly

trimmed, his features interesting more than handsome. She'd seen him before, sharing a jug of ale with one or another of his colleagues, and yet she'd never really seen him.

A man you could pass in the street and never notice. Yet he was here, and he was hers, odd as that seemed, and perhaps the Goddess hadn't cursed Isha after all.

"I heard some of that," Udar said behind her.

"Eavesdropper," she said. "You have no respect."

"What, a father shouldn't worry for his daughter? I passed you to another man to care for today, Isha. That doesn't mean I'll stop making sure you're safe from harm." He put Mani's wine cup under the counter, ready for the next customer. "I heard some of what you said. About the swimmers coming for a reason we've long forgotten."

"I'm not sure that's quite what I said."

"Close enough. A mystery to stand with the Goddess herself, isn't it?"

He spoke with an eye on the two crones further along the bar. Neither paid him any attention. They were staring at the scholars, not blinking. Shahan said something and the scholars laughed in a little ripple, as though the amusement was too shy to come into plain sight.

"He's a good man," Udar said quietly. "I would have kicked him down the steps for asking, otherwise."

Mani was leaning forward now, speaking with light in his eyes as his colleagues listened. Telling them her thought, as though it was his own, and Isha said, "I hope you're right, Papa. My life-thread is twined with his now, and there's no taking it back."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

THOUGHT YOU'D BE sleeping in," Shahan said the next morning. It was two hours after dawn. Yesterday's wedding breakfast had gone on well into the afternoon, and the stream of well-wishers kept bringing gifts. Small things, for the most part, salt cellars and cutlery, or knick-knacks Mani accepted with a smile and an inward vow to throw away as soon as possible.

He now owned seven carved cats in ghastly colours. Perhaps he could give them away in his turn. He did not intend to fill his house with hideous cats.

No need to say his home felt odd now, heavy with the presence of a stranger. "I just thought I'd come in, and I can't afford to miss days. We're not paid a daemon's wage."

Shahan made a face. "Don't I know it."

As a married man, Mani would be paid more. Quite a lot more, in fact, though he hadn't checked the numbers. Marriage had always been something he thought he could leave while he focused on his work for another year...and another, and another. Time had passed without him really noticing. He didn't have much to show for it. A small home not too far from a river garden, enough clothes that he could always wear clean in the morning, and a pile of baffling Sea-Goat comments big enough to cover every desk in the library.

Now he had a wife as well. He supposed that would change his life. Maybe for the better in the end, but he and Isha had spent their wedding night lying sleeplessly beside each other, afraid to reach out and touch.

"Is there anything new?" he asked.

"Nothing. All the scholars spent yesterday at your wedding, and the evening sleeping off too much beer. Tash-Yal's not in yet, and I can't remember him being late before."

"Neither can I," Mani said. He slid onto the bench beside his desk. "In that case, I'm going to review the notes I made last time I was out at the marsh, when I spoke to Hanno. The new one."

"You're such a bore," Shahan said. "You just got married, by Eala's blessed feet. Go home and spend time with your wife. If the *zami* ask I'll tell them you're out at the bell."

There was no way for Mani to say he didn't really want to spend time with his wife. He didn't want to think about it either, so he said, "If you did and they checked, we'd both be in serious trouble. I've upset the priestesses already, if you remember. I can do without making more enemies among them."

Shahan sighed theatrically. "Well, if you're staying, I did hear some interesting gossip this morning."

"Did you?" Mani asked, not much interested. He pulled a tablet over and picked up a reed stylus.

"About the king of Labaš," Shahan said, and Mani looked up at him. "I heard he had all the Elders killed. He says Balih has chosen him to rule alone."

"Without a Council?"

"That's what I hear."

"It's just rumour," Mani said after a moment. He wasn't so sure. There had been that snippet of conversation in the street as the king and his advisors moved away. The army of Labaš was on the march, heading to nobody knew where.

Labaš was a long way away. He'd said as much to Isha. Almost all the cities of the plain lay between the two rivers, slow Ranuna and quick-flowing Utuka, among them Labaš. It was further north than most, and as far from Aš-alam as you could get. Aš-alam lay south of the Ranuna. Most of Engiru was between them. The warlord king would have to conquer his way across the entire land before he could threaten Aš-alam.

"Would the priestesses stand for that?" he asked, after thinking it through. "A god-touched king would weaken them, and the *zami* don't like to surrender their power."

"Ahem," Shahan said.

Mani sighed. "Yes, I know you don't believe it, but I do. The priestesses were going to force me to marry and use my wife to control my work. Anyway, this news of Labaš is different. They wouldn't give away their influence over a whole city without a fight."

"Ahem," Shahan said.

Mani started to glower, then realised his friend wasn't looking at him, but past him. He turned on his seat.

There were two priestesses in the doorway. One of them was young, with a cascade of ebony hair and large dark eyes. She might have been pretty if not for a nose that would have done for chopping through reed beds. Young or not, she had the pinch-lipped look that all priestesses seemed to wear out of habit.

The woman beside her had worn the look for decades, and Mani had seen her before, at the side of the king.

"Good morning, *ama-su*," he said. He thought his cheeks might be flushed. "What can we do for you?"

"You can stop spouting nonsense for a start," Shusikil said. The chief of the *zami* spoke in a hiss, like a snake spitting venom. "The Temples serve Eala. Her, and no other. We don't care about your work. Our interest is Heaven, not power in the mortal world."



"Of course," he said. "Of course."

"Now leave us, Kassu-Mani. Tauth and I wish to speak with your colleague."

Mani glanced at Shahan at the bench behind his own desk. His friend's expression was frozen. *There sits a man faced with a truth he didn't believe in.* It might be that Mani's precipitate action in finding himself a wife had stirred the *zami* to move quickly to snare Shahan. If that was so, it was too late to help. Mani rose.

"I think I'll go to the lagoon after all," he said.

The crone nodded. "Very wise."

Mani found a blank tablet and left, tucking the stylus into a pocket of his tunic. He went ten feet down the corridor and paused, knowing it was risky and the two priestesses would insist on penance from him if he were caught. Still, he had to know. He stood silently and listened.

"—young women," Shusikil was saying. "You visit the Scented Houses once a week at least. It's time you put such careless behaviour aside."

"The Temples have no cause to chastise me," Shahan replied. "I pay my tithes on time."

"Proper worship of Eala comes through the children we raise. No tribute of coins compares to that."

"But I—"

"Tauth has failed her tests for the priesthood." The hag spoke over Shahan without effort. "Not through lack of zealotry. She just struggles with her letters, and every *zami* must keep good records. But she can serve Eala well outside the Temples, as the wife of a good citizen."

Mani had heard enough. He turned and went down the corridor and out into the rising heat of morning. Sweat popped on his brow that had nothing to do with the sun.

The *zami* had been ready to act. Mani thought Tauth had been meant for him, and today was the day she would have been offered. He had no evidence for that. No scholar should reach a conclusion without data, and yet Mani was certain.

He'd been one sunrise from marriage to an illiterate failed priestess. How bad that would have been he didn't know, but surely it wouldn't have been easy, especially when he thought about Tauth's axe of a nose and the bold eyes above it.

He had to give thanks for this. To Eala, ironically. A donation of coins at a temple, probably a chicken for sacrifice too. More importantly, he needed to thank Darsal for the warning, and that was a gift which needed thought.

"I'm sorry, Shahan." His friend would hate being made to marry. Of all men, the laughing, irresponsible Shahan would hate it the most. "I'm sorry."

He had been warned. Mani shook his head and set off down the street.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

A PAIR OF vultures flanked the gate, each one set on a tower of mudbricks. Someone entering Kindar had to pass between them, under the glare of stone eyes above cruel beaks. They had been set there by the goddess Sabit to mark the city's victory over its neighbour Iraš, when the dead lay in a carpet half a mile wide. So the legend said.

Iraš was long lost, its bricks worn to nothing by the Flood. Now the vultures that stood in its memory were broken, one of them chipped and its eyes smashed, the other toppled to the ground. It lay in two pieces, face buried in the dirt. Soldiers were sprawled around it, except for a path cleared in the middle. One of the bodies was very large.

The battle had not been without its losses. That giant had laid six men in the dust before Yarim came up to him. Maybe the giant was tired by then, but Yarim was a big man too, and the giant was slow bringing his mace up and around. Yarim ducked inside the blow and struck the huge man on his hip, smashing bone. The giant fell with a shout, and when Yarim fell back to gather his breath he saw Sarru-kin there, watching, the sickle sword spinning its point in the earth.

The king was still there, black hair curled and sewn with threads of silver so it glimmered in the sun. His army stood around, Yarim in the front rank with the scarlet token of a captain hung on his belt. So many of the top captains had been killed in Sarru-kin's seizure of power that one kill at the right time could gain a man rank. It put Yarim closer to the Mad King than he'd like. He just hoped it didn't show.

After a time, there was a commotion at the gate, and a score of soldiers came through. They were Labaš men. The fighting was done here, all resistance broken. They came down the slope from the gate to the plain, led by a woman with a shaven head almost as tall as Sarru-kin. The sun was high, but Kammani wore no hat to shield her. She strode up to the king and gestured, and the soldiers threw a man into the dust.

He stood at once. His tunic was bloody and torn, but it was silk. One sandal was missing. A few silver threads shone in his unkempt hair. Yarim knew who he was.

Sarru-kin tilted his head back, looking over the other man's head, or else at the sky. "You are beaten. How should I treat you?"

"Like a king," said Luduzi, lord of Kindar. "How else?"

"A king who leads his city to disaster is no worthy king."

"I led nothing to disaster," Luduzi said. "You came here with war and an

army we could not match. Well done, you've conquered. Do you think you can hold what you've won?"

"I have been promised so," Sarru-kin answered. "The great god Balih intends to impose his authority on the lesser deities of Engiru. I am his chosen means of achieving that."

Luduzi smiled a leopard's smile. "Did he tell you so?"

"He did. Yes," Sarru-kin said. He stroked the blade of his sickle sword. "I know you spoke the words, brave one. But they were Balih's first."

Yarim didn't understand that. He looked at the two men, standing in the dirt with their eyes locked together. It was impossible to miss who was the victor and who the vanquished, but they stood the same way, straight and proud. Kings, both of them.

Sarru-kin tipped his head again, as though listening to voices from the sky. "Swear fealty to me and Balih. This is his city now."

"This is the city of Sabit," the other man said. "Your god holds no sway here. The goddess will remember it."

"On your knees," Sarru-kin said. His voice was still calm, a man detached. "Beg for your life before me."

"I will not," Luduzi said.

They took Luduzi, cut out his eyes, and burned them on an altar to Balih they built under the gate of Kindar. After that, they locked the blind king in a cage and hung him from the wall to die. It took two days. He never cried out, never made a sound as far as Yarim knew.

Soldiers of Kindar were invited to join the conquering army and take Balih as their new god. Balih as worshipped through his chosen envoy on earth, Sarru-kin of Labaš. Kammani smiled her sweet poison smile as she accepted the oaths. The recruits were ordered to smash the Temple of Sabit and replace it with a new shrine, built of bricks taken from the top of the wall. Yarim and Enmer had the duty of watching over them as they worked.

"I don't like this," Enmer said.

"Shut up."

"It's wrong. The goddess will be furious."

"Shut up or I'll never speak with you again," Yarim said. "Talk like that is dangerous, do you understand? We're Sarru-kin's men now. Not Balih's, not men of Labaš. Just the kings."

Sarru-kin appeared when the work was done to stand by Kammani while she consecrated the new temple. There the soldiers of Kindar swore loyalty to Sarru-kin, almost all of them. The few who did not were dragged to the side and beaten to death. Yarim dispatched one himself, teeth gritted.

Three days later the army marched towards Tibad.

## CHAPTER NINE

YOU KNOW SOME of the stars are not stars.”

“Yes,” Mani said. “Planets.”

“Name one.”

“Nergal,” he said. “The harbinger of drought and summer heat, and the wilderness of war.”

“That’s all you know,” the Sea-Goat asked.

Mani was sitting on a bench, near the end of a jetty that poked out of the reeds. He’d forgotten his hat, and the sun beat on his head. After every two answers the Sea-Goat sank into the water and swam under the pier, to emerge on the other side.

“Do you know more?” Mani asked.

“Nergal is red because she was flayed.”

Mani didn’t really know what to say to that, so he made no answer. The Sea-Goat submerged and rose again, this time on the same side of the jetty. Opaque eyes blinked. Mani waited, but Sea-Goats could out-wait anyone, and finally Mani spoke.

“Flayed?”

“By the star bird.”

“How?”

“That’s the wrong question,” the Sea-Goat said.

“What’s the right one?”

“Why,” the Sea-Goat said. His tail swished, and he was gone in a swirl of bubbles.

Mani sighed and made notes on his tablet. It hadn’t been a bad exchange, despite the abrupt end. He hadn’t heard of star birds before, or a planet being skinned like a turkey for the table. There might be something in the records, a mention of these things made fifty or a hundred years ago, but he’d never come across it before.

Talk of war seemed to be everywhere. First the king, then Shahan, and now Nergal intruded into Mani’s life. He made another mark, frowned, and blotted it out with his thumb. Writing *stair* instead of *star*. He must be more tired than he thought.

No sleep on his wedding night. He’d imagined a hot-limbed woman and a time of sensual discovery, not hours of lying stiff on his back while the air grew thick and the mattress harder.

He started back. The path went by a hut with its single sentry and then popped out of a wall of reeds with a clutch of shacks in the distance. Mani turned the other way, towards the road and the mound beyond where Aš-alam stood. Even from this distance he could see the glisten of fresh bitumen on the brick walls. Nothing was left to do to prepare for the Flood, but the Temple teams still found tasks for the debt slaves, digging out channels and building up banks. Some years the Flood was bigger than others. You could never be too prepared.

Once on the main road he began to cross over ditches, deep cuts lined with mudbricks. Only dust lay at the bottom. He met people too, most of them heading out with empty water pails or home with full ones. Another day in Aš-alam, the same as any other. Except he was married, and that changed everything.

Married to a wife he didn't dare touch in the calm of the night. He had no idea how to deal with that. At least Isha wasn't a *zami*, and she didn't have a ploughshare for a nose. That had to be good.

He got back to find the office empty and Shahan gone.

"He went out," Tash-Yal said when Mani found him. The older scholar was bent over a trestle table filled with clay tablets, some alone, others standing in little stacks. He'd hammered tacks into the wood and coloured cords ran between them, connecting this pile to that. "Earlier."

"Of course it was earlier. He couldn't have gone out later, could he?"

"Quite right," Tash-Yal said. His nose was two inches from a tablet, and his bald head gleamed. "Quite right."

"Did he leave with anyone?"

Tash-Yal's eyes flickered. "Two women. I didn't see who they were. Didn't look too closely."

"Of course you didn't," Mani said. With *zami* it was prudent not to look closely, or if you did, to pretend you hadn't. Well, then. Shahan left with a hag and the woman with a ploughshare nose, Tauth. When he came back Tauth was likely to be his wife. No more talk of trips to speak with fishermen, no more tossing chickpeas into the air and catching them in his mouth.

Mani left the tablet on his desk and went to find his wife.

§ § §

The Spilled Salt was empty, except for an old man dozing in a chair by the door. Two flies crawled on the lip of the half-empty cup on his table. Mani wondered how long it had stood there.

"Scholar!" Udar cried. He rose from a chair at the far end of the bar, arms flung wide. "Second-son!"

"Don't call me—"

“And why shouldn’t I? My son-in-law talks to the swimmers. A man can be proud of that.”

Best to change the subject. “I thought you had servants to run the bar when it’s quiet.”

“Well, I do, but I must pay them. It’s cheaper if I do it. There’s no work for a man anyway. Old Teod there is the only customer I’ve had, and he’s made one cup of beer last half the morning.”

“Can’t you tell him to leave?”

“What, and have an empty bar? That’s bad luck for an innkeep.”

“You bar owners are really superstitious.”

“Maybe,” Udar said, “but on the other hand, we don’t waffle instead of getting to the point.”

His gaze was sharp, and Mani started to smile despite himself. Then something came home to him, and the smile died unformed. “Isha is here, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is. Where else would a new bride go for advice, except to her father?”

“All of a sudden,” Mani said, “I have the feeling I might be in trouble here.”

Udar clapped him on the shoulder. “No trouble, scholar. I called you second-son when you walked in, didn’t I? But you chose trouble when you married my girl, and if you didn’t know that you’re not half as clever as I thought you were.”

This time he did smile. “No, I knew that. But trouble from her, not from you.”

“Never. Come, sit with me.”

They sat at the end of the counter, across the room from Teod and his congealing beer. The worst heat had passed, and hammers rang through the open back door, the construction crew back at work smashing old bricks into dust to make way for a new Temple. From the front came the sounds of creaking wheels, barking dogs, and voices raised in greeting or complaint. The noises of everyday life, faint and far away.

“You’re not experienced with women,” Udar said.

Mani shook his head. “No. Only in the Scented Houses, really.”

“Well, that’s good experience, but it only teaches a man about a woman’s body. They’re all the same, really, just as men are. All the same bits in the same places, am I right?”

“I’m not sure about the *zami*,” Mani said.

“I won’t argue with that! You’d have to be a fool to want a peek under those grey robes anyway. But my point is that bodies are one thing, and souls are very different. Do you know what Isha wanted last night?”

“To be alone.”

“No, scholar. She wanted you to tell her she was beautiful, and your body yearned for hers. She wouldn’t have believed you, but she would have wanted

to, and for that night she would have thought it might be true. She wanted you to touch her."

"But she lay down straight as a rod."

"She couldn't touch *you*, scholar! You had to act first. She was lying there waiting for you to move, and you didn't."

He thought about that, chin on his hand the way he did when he was poring over tablets. "I need to go to her."

"Yes, you do. But you ought to know two things first. One is that a marriage is void if the bride removes her veil in the first seven days, or if the marriage isn't consummated by then."

He nodded.

"Isha won't take off the veil. You can rest easy on that." Udar leaned forward. "But the second thing is that the priestesses will look for any reason they can find to take you away from her. Won't they?"

"Yes," he said. "I understand, Udar."

The innkeep nodded towards a door in the side wall. "Through there is the parlour. From it go left to the yard. You'll find your wife sorting her belongings."

He found her in the shade of a lemon tree, flowers and fruit peering out from under the leaves. Isha smiled behind her veil when she saw him. The smile was weak at the edges, like an unfinished thought.

"I'm sorry," Mani said.

Her hands twisted the grey bag between her feet. "For what?"

"For leaving you alone last night."

She looked down and didn't speak for a moment. The neck of the bag was a knot in her fingers. "I wasn't alone."

"I was in the bed," he said, "but you were still alone."

"Is that how our life will be? Have I married a man who will treat me like a servant, and give me nothing?"

Mani didn't say anything.

"I've got some clothes in here." Isha hefted the bag, "A few knick knacks. Nothing else. It isn't much to show for twenty years life."

"I doubt I have much more."

She looked back at him, with that faint smile still on her lips. "We could build more together, if you want to."

"Yes," he said. "I want to."

"Can we go home now?"

He held out a hand, and she took it.



Quarter of an hour later Mani held open the door of his house—their house—for her to enter. He shut the bolt and turned to find Isha standing by the divan, her back to him.

“I’ll prepare supper,” he said.

“No need,” Isha said. “I can do it later. Are the tablets from the Sea Folk?”

There wasn’t much decoration in the room. A mural painted on one wall showed Eala descending to earth, her arms raised high and one foot stretched to touch the ground. That wasn’t Mani’s. It had been there when he moved in, and he’d left it in case the priestesses came knocking. The other decorations were his own, and most were clay tablets inscribed with a few words, hanging from pegs in the plaster.

“Yes,” he said. “They all are.”

She went to the nearest and tilted her head, a shore bird trying to see beneath the surface of still water. “‘The seed is good, whether you eat or not.’ Is that something the swimmers say?”

“Something one of them said,” Mani told her. “I’d asked about learning among the Sea-Goats. I wanted to know how they’re taught, if they even are. It ended up with me explaining how I was educated here in Aš-alam, and the swimmer said that to me.”

“What did he mean?”

“That learning is valuable no matter what you do with it,” Mani said. “I think. It’s hard to be sure.”

“And this one? ‘Pleasure is in the fish.’ What does that mean?”

“I don’t have the least idea.”

She turned. He could see her face through the veil and thought she was flushed. “It’s hard for you to admit you don’t understand, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “I want to know everything, Isha. How the world began, right to how it will end. The Sea-Goats know something of that. But all their secrets are on their island, and we can’t get to it.”

“You think so?”

“Eala came here,” he said. “To where Aš-alam stands now, where she placed her feet on the world for the first time. Why here? What do you find here and nowhere else in the world?”

“The swimmers.”

“The swimmers. What are they to make a goddess come to them?”

“I can’t explain those things,” she said. “But there are other things I might teach you.”

He didn’t speak. Isha reached up, unhitched her veil, and let it fall. She took a step towards him. She really was flushed, he saw. He was the only person allowed to see her face for another six days.

"Isha..."

"You can teach me, too," she said. "No more nights afraid to touch or speak. Agreed?"

He swallowed. "Agreed."

"I will cook supper," she said. "You tell me of the Sea-Goats, husband. Talk to me of what you've learned, what you think and believe. Let me know you."

"Isha, tonight we—"

"Let tonight wait," she broke in. "Tell me, Mani."

He caught her hand as she turned towards the kitchen. "I will. And Isha, I won't let the *zami* make us part."

## CHAPTER TEN

THEY TRIED THE next morning, when Isha was buying vegetables at the market while the day was still cool.

“Those don’t look fresh,” she said.

The trader shrugged. “The Flood was a year ago. We irrigate, but the results are never as good.” Shrug. “This is as fresh as anyone can grow.”

“I will test that,” she told him.

Another shrug. It only made her smile.

She felt...different, after last night. She kept smiling, for one thing, though that was hard to see behind her veil. At first, she’d wanted to go see her father, but maybe that wasn’t suitable behaviour for a new wife. Especially one who’d experienced the marriage bed for the first time.

Well, the marriage divan, she supposed. Then the bed, after midnight when she woke from a doze to find Mani shifting beside her. He still found it hard to relax with her. That would change in time for both of them. It was already changing for her. Strange that what was once so frightening now seemed such a silly thing to fear.

Stranger yet, she found the shrugging stallholder was right. After an hour she’d found no better vegetables than his in the market, fresh or not. The reservoirs were nearly empty now, and the sun a pitiless force that burned plants down to the ground if they weren’t shaded. Still, she was sure things hadn’t been this bad last summer, or the one before.

“Are there pests?” she asked one trader. “Insects, or...flies, or whatever eats crops?”

He rolled his eyes a bit at her ignorance. “There are always pests. Debt slaves are supposed to keep them off, but they’re worse than useless. The Temples would do better to hire proper workers.”

“There is presumption in telling the Temples what they ought to do,” someone said behind Isha.

She knew who it was before she saw. Priestesses, one tall and made of bones, the other tiny and twitching. It was amazing how many *zami* had tics they couldn’t control. “Good morning, clerics. I was about to—”

“One moment,” the little priestess said. She might look nervous, but her voice was firm as baked clay. “Trader, we will tolerate a great deal, but you come close to open disdain. Perhaps Eala might be assuaged by a gift at the Temple at tomorrow’s dawn, do you think?”

He ducked his head. "As you say, lady."

"We will be watching you," the woman warned. "Now, mistress Isha, if you would walk with us?"

It was phrased as a request, but that didn't fool Isha. She went with the two priestesses across the market, to a side street cut between two narrow houses. The roadway was worn, untended for a long time. Isha wasn't about to follow two *zami* into that. She'd grown up in a tavern, never far from tales of unlit alleys and a person alone. She came to a halt and the women looked at her.

"I have a fear of quiet places," she said. "A city woman's foolish nerves, no doubt. I hope you will forgive me."

She saw in their eyes that they knew what she was doing. Isha was as cautious as anyone about going into back streets, though she wasn't really afraid of them. Not in daytime, anyway. She didn't want to enter one now, with priestesses who had come to find her—and she thought she knew why. She put up a hand to check her veil was still secure.

"You can take that off," someone said from deeper in the alley. "There will be no blame."

Isha had to move a little before she could see the other woman clearly. Then she bowed her head, as one did to the great. "*Ama-su*. I'm honoured, of course."

"You should be." Shusikil stepped forward, a scarecrow shaved bald, with eyes like drips of bitumen. "I can lift your curse, woman."

"My—"

"Your betrothed died or were maimed," the head priestess cut in. "A clear sign that Eala has withdrawn her blessing from you. In the land of gods, you are less than human, hardly more than an animal. Do you wish for an eternity like that?"

Isha swallowed. "No."

"Then I will intervene on your behalf," Shusikil said, "and all you must do is remove your veil."

Isha had thought it might be this, even before she saw the leader of the *zami* had come to speak to her. There was no other reason for priestesses to stop her in the market. "Why would I do that?"

"To save your soul."

"The Temples teach that our souls are weighed according to the good and evil we do," she answered. "I'm sure I remember that from the catechism. Priestesses can't change Fate with a few prayers."

The black eyes flashed. "You don't know what we can do. Let us be honest. Yours is not a marriage of love."

"Yet the *zami* teach that love can grow in barren ground," Isha said. "That's in the catechism too. I always believed that one."

A slip, and Shusikil was on it in an eyeblink. “There are others you do not believe?”

Isha didn’t reply, and after a moment the crone sighed. “You are clever, Isha. See? I am honest with you. I swear by Eala’s footfalls you have nothing to fear from us. We are not your enemy.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“But you are. Of your husband? Of a life spent with a man you never learn to love? A woman deserves better.”

“I am happy,” she said. The words brought back memory of last night, and she felt herself blush.

“You could be happier. We could find you a new husband. A better man, with servants and a fine house.”

“You offer me a bribe,” she said.

The bony crone’s expression turned dark. It was one of the others who spoke though, the little one with the facial tic. “Watch your tongue! I met your husband two days ago and found him arrogant. You should take care not to run the same risks he faces.”

Shusikil held up a hand. The fury in her face was still there, hidden now under a smile. “Peace, Lamsi. She really is clever. Not wise, but we must accept she has wits.”

Not wise? Isha almost said it out loud, affronted, but managed to bite the words back. She wasn’t going to play this game. Not the way the priestesses wanted it played.

“Take off your veil,” Shusikil said. “I promise you a husband you like, a life you can enjoy.”

“I have those things,” she said, wondering if she did.

“For today,” Shusikil said. Her cheek shivered. “Who can say about tomorrow? Has he consummated the marriage yet?”

Now Isha really did flush. “Yes.”

“It can be checked.”

“Then check,” she snapped.

“Perhaps we will,” Shusikil said. “And perhaps we will offer Mani another wife. He uses the Scented Houses—did you know that? The women there are skilled. Some can make the nights dance with delight and turn men’s brains to suet. There are girls with pouting lips, hips that sway, and breasts as full and high as hills. What do you think Mani will say when we take them to him?”

Her mouth was dry. “He will say he’s married. Cripple my father, he will! I trust my husband, *zami*.”

“After two days of marriage?”

“Trust too can grow on barren ground,” she said.

Shusikil's smile could cut meat. "Perhaps we really will cripple your father."  
"What?"

"Think about your choices," the head *zami* said. "They become fewer, and less tempting, very fast."

They left Isha shaking, relief and fear washing through her heart. That last had been a threat, spoken in a lower voice but still unmistakable. She didn't doubt it was genuine. The *zami* weren't renowned for wasting words or speaking those they didn't mean.

They might tempt Mani with a sultry beauty from the Scented Houses, all sway and pouting lips. Men with clubs might set upon Udar in a back street as he was buying casks for the tavern and leave him with twisted legs that would never heal straight. Isha's hands trembled.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered. People walked wide of her, faces by chance turned away so they didn't see.

§ § §

She went home, of course.

That was what Isha had always done when she found trouble. Go home, find her father, find comfort, and usually find answers too. Udar had always been her haven, her dry place above the Flood. Where other children remembered a mother's face, a tender touch, Isha had only her father, and he had always been enough.

The Spilled Salt was closed. Not a surprise, this early in the day. Isha went around the side, to the little door tucked behind a corner of the wall. Across the street workers had begun their hammering in the middle of a cloud of brick dust, smashing away the last courses of buildings no one needed anymore.

Isha let herself in. She locked the door behind herself, went through a little parlour, and came out at the back of the bar room. Someone was ferreting around under the bar, and she began to smile. Then he stood up and it was only Ruen.

"He's out," the young man said. He dusted his hands on each other, got a grip on a barrel, and lifted it into place, shoulder muscles bulging. "Went out to buy brandy."

"When will he be back?"

That earned a shrug. "When he's bought it, I suppose."

Isha was unsettled and afraid, and it was disconcerting to see Ruen without his brother. He and Ramsi were hardly ever apart, brothers alike as two fleas. Maybe that was why she rested her elbows on the counter and said, "I need some advice, Ruen."

He blinked. "All right."

She spoke, and as the words piled up a frown appeared on Ruen's brow. It came in stages, like the Flood rising in a slow year, so each morning it seemed to have barely moved from the day before. He was big but not stupid, and she thought the scowl was for the priestesses, dislike rather than confusion. When she finished, he took a rag and absently wiped the bar with it, exactly as her father would have done.

"Not sure what you want to hear," he said.

*Trust can grow on barren ground*, she'd said. Spoke it to the face of Shusikil, the bony chief of the *zami* herself. "I suppose I want to know if I can trust him."

"Who, your father?"

"Of course not," she said with some asperity. "I meant Mani."

Could she really trust him? He seemed a decent man, uncertain of himself around women and much too fascinated by the swimmers, but still presentable enough. He didn't seem strong though. A strong man would not have lain beside her all through their wedding night, trying to find the courage to touch her skin. Isha wasn't sure she wanted to complain about that. Still, was he strong? Would he defy the *zami* for her, or would he smile and give in, tempted by the promise of a scented woman and all the delights she could give?

*I am cursed*, something murmured in the back of her mind, and she tossed her head to shake the voice loose.

"I can't help with that," Ruen said. The cloth wiped, back and forth.

"I know," She pinched the bridge of her nose through the veil. "Only I can answer it."

He shrugged. "Maybe not. There are people who offer answers, if you know who to ask."

For a moment Isha didn't understand what he meant. When she did, she flicked glances left and right and leaned forward to whisper. "A seer? Are you insane?"

He grinned at her. "Seers survive, you know. Some *nabu* even come into the city, now and then. Might be I can find one."

"That's dangerous, Ruen."

"For the Seer," he said and chuckled.

She wasn't sure Ruen was afraid of anything, or Ramsi either. They'd worked at the bar since they were striplings, and even then they'd been big enough to throw any drunk through the door. Isha had never suspected they might know the dark side of the city outside the Spilled Salt. They seemed too clean for that. They did what Udar asked and kept the bar safe, and that was all she'd ever thought of them.

"For you, too," she said. "No, listen for a moment, please. Don't put yourself at risk for me. There's a curse on me, Ruen. I've lost two husbands-to-be

to accidents, and now I may lose a husband as well. That sort of bad luck can rub off."

"Oh, Isha." He stopped wiping with the cloth and put his hand over hers instead. "The only person who carries that curse is you."

That was not entirely comforting.

§ § §

A troubled mind makes you sick, the saying went, and Isha's mind was plagued.

Mani was clever, as all the scholars had to be. They were drawn from the best students, those who mastered their letters and still wanted more, who asked questions and were never satisfied with the answers. Most of all they needed to be patient. Sea-Goats never gave straight answers, they evaded and confused, and more than one scholar gave up asking and became a bricklayer, or a scribe.

So, clever and patient.

He was kind, too. Last night he had been gentle, almost too much so, holding her like a rare glass chalice in his hands. There had still been pain. There always was the first time, for every woman. Mani had kissed her when she cried out, and she'd dug her fingers into his back and pulled him deeper, as though to say *this is what we chose, what we wanted, now let it be done*.

Clever and patient, kind and gentle. He would stand by her—she was sure of it. Nearly sure, anyway. She had thought, when he came to ask her to marry him and they talked over a table at the tavern, that she could trust him. She'd never thought the *zami* would try to bribe them to part. What would he do when they offered him a hot-limbed beauty from the Scented Houses and freedom from all this worry? Would he reach out and pull away Isha's veil in the street?

She thought on that as she walked. When she came under the shade of the city walls, she was no closer to an answer, and her head was aching. Whether that was from thinking, or worry, or just the blasting heat of the sun, she didn't know.

Once through the gate the first person she saw was the priestess from earlier, the tiny twitching one. The woman was speaking with a merchant, but his eyes flicked to Isha, just for an instant. It was enough. Too much coincidence for that particular *zami* to be here now.

They were watching her.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**Y**ES,” SARRU-KIN said. “Yarim killed their general.”

Yarim made sure not to look at the king. Around him other guards stared straight ahead, eyes blank, every one a captain in the growing army. Yarim stood so close to a pillar that he felt the cones of the mosaic against his back.

The hall was beautiful, which gave him plenty to look at. A lion made of brown and red tiles, prowling out of a corner. The doors were inlaid with silver. One whole wall was taken up with lines of white that swirled and curled until at last they coalesced into a woman. She wasn't much more than an outline, the suggestion of a form emerging from the ether. One of the soldiers claimed it was meant to be what a woman was if you took the flesh away and left only what a woman actually was.

That sounded like nonsense to Yarim. He didn't understand art. Boys from the back streets usually didn't, because they never saw it, and it didn't matter anyway. The important things were food, respect, and avoiding the muddy water in drying puddles after the Flood. Sometimes the poor boys made it into the army, two good meals a day and enough respect for anyone, but they still didn't learn anything about art.

Yarim looked anyway, because to do otherwise was to risk watching the king.

“I assume he felt proud,” Sarru-kin said. He was seated in a gilded chair, sickle sword in hand and someone else sitting on a step at his feet. Another woman, this one with her flesh still on. For the moment. “What true man would not? To end a life, to watch the blood spurt and see the eyes fade...there is a power in that. It is almost godlike.”

Silence for a moment. “No, Azaq, not like that. Yarim is skilled, a good soldier, but still a mortal. He has tasted from the cup of godhood, but he is not like me. I have made that cup my own.”

The woman on the wall was Ikuga, goddess of the air and marriage. Patron of Tibad. Her virtues had not helped the city to stand against Sarru-kin's army. Blood had splashed her feet, or the lines that swirled where her feet would be. The fighting had reached even here, in the heart of Tibad's streets and temples. By the inlaid doors a stone cat, unimaginably precious, had been cracked by the blows of maces.

At Kindar Sarru-kin had blinded the king and left him to die in the sun. Word of that had run ahead. In Tibad nobles and lords fought like rats in a drain rather than be taken alive.

"True," the king said. He spun the sickle sword on its point. "True. I am not yet immortal. But that is in hand, Azaq, and when I am, even the gods will tremble before me."

The doors opened. Yarim turned, spear coming down, but he stopped almost at once. It was only Kammani, and if Sarru-kin trusted anyone, he trusted her. The king stopped talking as she strode towards him, robe swishing on the tiles. Moisture gleaned on her bald head. Her eyes darted to Yarim, and he felt the contact like a shock.

*What a woman was*, he thought, not very coherently. *Like the lines on the wall. The essence of a female.*

It was female like a she-eagle, like a mountain lioness. One who scorns the thought of children and stalks the peaks, hunting for a victim. Poison in a cup.

"My king," Kammani said. She sank to her knees at the foot of the steps, head bowed.

"High priestess," Sarru-kin said. "Stand. Azaq and I have been talking."

Her back was to Yarim as she rose, but in the pause he read her expression. "Your sword?"

"The being who lives in my sword," the king corrected. "He is a *sukkal*, a messenger of the gods. Of course you know that."

"Of course," she said.

"We spoke of war, and how it makes a man proud. I do not know what makes a woman proud. Do you, Kammani?"

"Bearing sons," she answered. "Doing glory to the gods. Myself, I feel pride in serving you, my lord."

He nodded. "So do all who serve me. Look at Yarim there, by the pillar. He chased down the commander of their army yesterday and slew him under the gates of his own city. Such courage, in a low-born man. Do you not think so?"

The tall priestess half turned, and Yarim felt her eyes again, a weight on his flesh. He refused to acknowledge the glance, though. "I do. Ordinary men become heroes in your service."

"And what have you done in it, Kammani?"

The vague tone was gone, replaced by a question thrown like a dart, a spinning knife. That was the reality of what Sarru-kin was. His pale eyes were suddenly sharp. Yarim thought the king might be crazed, but mad or sane, the blades were always there, never more than a beat away.

"There's very little to be found in the House of Tablets here," Kammani said. Her poise never wavered, however Sarru-kin's tone might change. "Tibad has less on the Sea-Goats than we do in Labaš. What my priestesses did find is as you might expect. Vague phrases, elliptical nonsense. Except for one tablet, found near the end."

"Which says what?"

"The same as the one at home," she answered. "That the swimmers keep the secret of immortality on their home island, far out in the ocean. The tablet here speaks of an isle surrounded by fresh water, in the middle of a salt sea."

"Life-giving water," Sarru-kin said, "amid a sea which would kill you to drink from it. Yes, Azaq, it is interesting."

Yarim stared at the woman on the wall.

"What do you think, Kammani?" The king twirled his sickle sword. "Should I make myself immortal?"

"You are the king."

"Yes, but kings have died before. One might point out that all have died before."

She shrugged. "The priestesses of Labaš follow you in all things, my lord. You have made Balih god over the patrons of Kindar and Tibad. The goddess Ikuga bends knee to him now."

"So, you support me in the name of the god, then. Not for myself."

There was a trap here, but Kammani was equal to it. "Both. We support the god, as we are sworn to. We also swore allegiance to you. We will follow you to this island, my king."

"Good," he said. The sword's point grounded on the tiles. "Good. You may leave me. Be ready to march in three days."

"March to where?"

"Piqash," he said, "and then Aš-alam and immortality. However, we must be quick. The Flood is near. If the rains come early, we might be caught on this side of the Ranuna, and my victories and all my soldiers will count for nothing."

"We will be ready," Kammani said. "I must take the oaths of those soldiers who will swear loyalty to you, my king. May I take your man Yarim with me? A captain's presence would assist me."

Sarru-kin waved a hand to signal assent. Kammani beckoned to Yarim, and he followed her down the hall, by which time the king had begun speaking again. "Yes, my heart. Yes. The Flood comes, but not too soon, I think."

He was talking to the sword again. Yarim tried not to shiver.

He put it out of his mind, because Kammani was hardly less dangerous than the Mad King. *Poison in a cup*, he thought, not for the first time. He had to be alert. Hopefully all she wanted from him was to stand nearby while she accepted oaths from the beaten men of Tibad. There shouldn't be a great deal of danger in that.

She turned left at the entrance to the Temple, away from the parade ground where the prisoners were held. "Where are we—"

"Patience," Kammani said. Sweat had begun to glisten on her bald head

again, out in the sun. She strode on regardless, not seeming to care. He couldn't help watching her hips move under her gown. She was peril, she was venom, but she was still a woman.

They went up the steps of the main Temple. Ikuga's place, replete with murals of swirling lines that coalesced into figures of people or animals, all of them moving. It was said in Tibad that the goddess could make any living thing from the air, and that creature kept all the motion and freedom of the wind. The walls depicted rams running, fish flapping in nets, and oxen labouring in fields. All shown with grace, as smooth as a cool northern wind.

On the first level of the platform, they went right, along the wall of the second tier. Priestesses passed them with downcast eyes. It was impossible to tell which worshipped Ikuga and which followed Balih. Probably it didn't matter; they were all worshippers of Sarru-kin now, whatever name was on their lips when they prayed. Kammani made sure of that. She went into a doorway, having to duck under the lintel to pass through, then down a passage to a room at the far end. At her motion Yarim shut the door.

He looked around at a table laid with brushes and paints, and a divan with a mirror—a mirror—behind it. "This isn't the barracks."

"No," she said. "Did you really kill Sipad-Ana?"

He frowned, forgetting for a moment who that was. "The general. Yes, I did."

"And did you feel full of power and life, as Sarru-kin said?"

"You heard that?"

"Is it true?"

"I felt alive," he conceded. "But not because I killed him. More because he didn't kill me."

"Ah. Then it isn't killing which fills you with joy. It's living." She poured a cup of wine and turned to face him. "You're a clever man."

"I'm a soldier, priestess. Only that."

"Not anymore. You've put yourself high in Sarru-kin's eyes. Captains can be a threat to a king."

He swallowed. "Not this captain."

She handed him the wine and poured another for herself. "Does that matter? A clever man must see not. A king might choose to see danger where none exists. Especially this king."

This was growing dangerous. Yarim put down his cup untasted, glad to see his hand didn't tremble. "I should go."

"Did you know there is a new faction among the *zami* here in Tibad?" She drank off half her wine. "They say the goddess made the first people from the air. It makes Ikuga the creator of humankind."

"The creator?"

"It's a new thing, and heretical. Orthodoxy says the first people were created by the god Ekur, after he raised the land from the oceans. All the cities agree on that, whichever god is their patron. For Tibad to break with tradition would be dangerous, at another time."

He wasn't keeping up with this. "Another time?"

"If it were not for Sarru-kin. Nobody will be worrying about an infraction of orthodoxy now."

She drank the last of the wine and dropped the cup. It bounced on the floor, unheeded. Then her hands went to the shoulders of her dress, and she wriggled. The fabric slithered into a puddle at her feet.

"Sarru-kin is mad," she said.

Yarim stared at her. Naked, she looked like a cat, gracile and sleek. His tongue didn't want to work.

"The king's not mad," he managed.

"He slaughtered the Elders and wants to live forever." She went to a bowl, picked out a cloth, and began to wash. Water glistened on her skin. "What would you call it?"

"I am loyal to him," Yarim said. It was still hard to find words. Kammani walked across the room, washing with the towel. He was reminded of a cat again, cleaning itself with its paws.

"Of course you are. But is he loyal to you?" She reached to wash her shoulders and her breasts rose. "And for how long? He is insane, Yarim." She turned towards him, cloth moving across the flat of her belly. "Madness can be steered, but not forever."

He couldn't speak.

"You like what you see," Kammani said. She swayed towards him, a smile on her lips. "So do I."

"What...you see?"

"You're a fine-looking man. Brave too, as Sipad-Ana will tell the shades of the dead in the Land of No Return."

Yarim licked his lips.

"People think priestesses are cold," Kammani said. "They say there's nothing in the *zami* but rules and lust for power. I'm not cold, Yarim. I am hot, and my lusts are of a different kind. Do you want me?"

It was hard to breathe. She was very close to him, so close he could see the tiny hairs on her skin. Her eyes were vast and fixed on his.

"You...lie with Sarru-kin," he managed.

She smiled a slow smile. "Sarru-kin has never touched me. His preference is for the cowed, the beaten. Did you recognise the woman on the steps at his feet? She is Puabi. This morning, she was queen of Tibad."

He swallowed. That was what could happen, when Fate crossed your path with that of the Mad King. Sarru-kin was mad, Kammani was right about that. He was insane, and he would eat up cities and lives before he was done. Anyone who stood in his way, anyone who he saw as a threat or who tried to thwart him, would be cut down. Even his allies, his generals, were not safe. There was more danger for them. One misstep could kill.

Kammani was hot-limbed beautiful. She reached out and ran a fingernail down his throat.

Yarim's hands were on her hips before he realised he had moved. She took a step and was pressed against him, her tongue on his teeth and then the roof of his mouth. They bumped into a table, and Yarim realised he'd pushed her against it. Kammani leaned backwards, drawing him down as her legs went around his waist.

"He will kill us if he finds out," Yarim said later.

She was lying under him, on the divan. "He won't find out. He only sees what helps him."

Yarim looked down at her. Sweat trickled into his eyes. Kammani wiped it away with one finger and a shudder ran through him. She smiled, tongue flicking over her lips. "He will go to find immortality and leave a kingdom behind to be ruled."

She reached up to catch handfuls of his hair. For a moment Yarim just looked at her, and then she pushed her hips into his, and he didn't think anymore.

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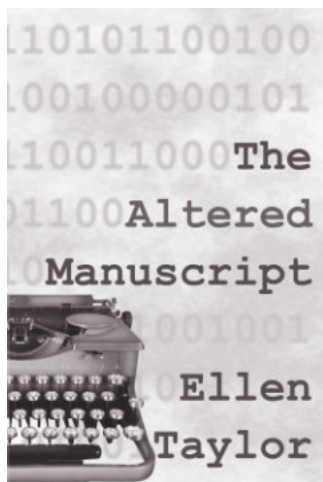
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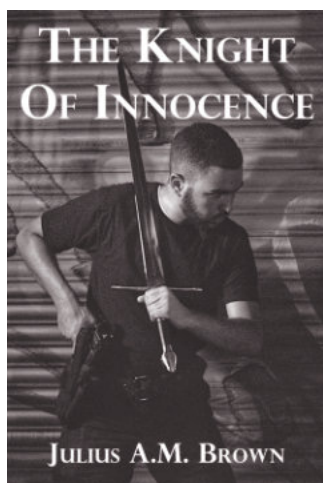
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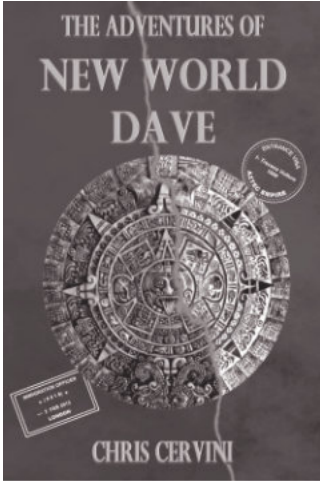
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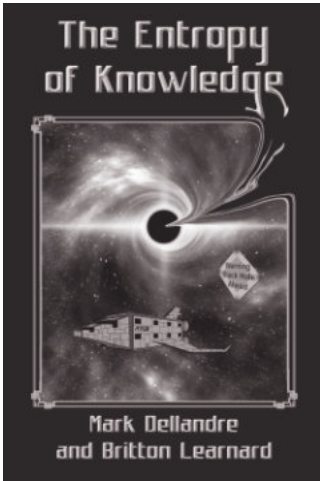
He was to have been an immortal undead, to have power and strength like he'd never known in mortal life. The Vampyrs lied. When he awoke he was some-thing else, a creature so foul they abandoned him to die alone in a crypt. When the local ruling Vampyr clan realizes what is living in their midst, they come in force to destroy Kaleb and wipe every last trace of his existence from the face of the earth.



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In the spring of 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived at the shores of Mexico to conquer the Aztec Empire and claim its gold for the glory of Spain. That's what the history books tell us. But sometimes, right in the middle of the history we know, somebody goes and does something to change one important detail, and the world is never the same...



## **The Entropy of Knowledge**

*Mark Dellandre and Britton Learnard*

We've all had moments when we felt like we were surrounded by idiots...

Babylon Briggs feels that pain every day because his town, his planet, even his galaxy, is jam-packed with the most thick-headed simpletons imaginable. So when his home world is invaded by a group of equally clueless conquerors, it's up to Babylon to save the day. The only question:

Is he smart enough?

*There was a nearly human eagerness in the Sea-Goat's sibilant voice. Then he deflated. "But the older people say we're not to go into the river. They say it's dangerous. Your people. Men with nets or spears. War, and warriors stabbing and stabbing."*

*"Fishermen might cause a problem," Mani admitted, "but there aren't any wars in Engiru these days. There were some long ago, when the steppe people came, but we've had none for sixty years."*

*"You're sure?"*

*"I'm sure," Mani said.*

For a thousand years, the scholars of Aš-alam, the city of the goddess Eala, have gone to the marsh to speak with the Sea-Goats. The Sea-Goats know secrets about the world, and it's the job of scholars like Mani to tease these secrets from the Sea-Goats.

For the same thousand years, the priestesses of Aš-alam have known one of the Sea-Goats most closely guarded secrets, a secret about the founding of Aš-alam. When Mani chooses Isha as his wife over a failed acolyte meant to monitor his work, the priestesses show just how much they are willing to do to guard those secrets, including murder. To protect his new wife, Mani brings her to the marsh, and on that day his relationship with the Sea-Goats changes forever.

The Mad King Sarru-kin knows another of the Sea-Goats most closely guarded secrets—that the swimmers possess the means to immortality—and the Mad King wishes to be a god. He is willing to wage war and conquer his way across the plains of Engiru in order to reach Aš-alam and force Mani and the Sea-Goats to take him to the swimmer's island. Mani is a clever man, but will cleverness be enough to prevent the Mad King from becoming a god...



*About the Author:* Ben Blake lives in North Devon, England, with his family. He likes to walk on the beaches, and works in the local hospital. This is his first traditionally published novel.



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