

ARETA

by

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PROLOGUE

Circa 300 BCE

Tens of thousands of humans from far-flung regions of Earth were brought aboard a celestial ark.

A century into their voyage, the route to the Bridge of Heaven lay in ruins, destroyed during an all-out war among the factions. The Age of Shoah was an era of plunder, rape, and nihilism.

From the ashes of chaos, a unified and peaceful society emerged. Its members were ignorant of the true nature of their world, their journey through space, and their ultimate destination.

CHAPTER 1

Over two thousand years later

Beneath the diffused daylight piped into the interior of the ziggurat, beside the towering wooden shelves filled with scrolls and codices, Angora stood captivated by the sight of the man in the spacious hall. She had not felt such a strong attraction to anyone before, and the thought of approaching him made her nervous.

The man, hired by one of her aides, was scrubbing the Welcome Pavilion, a ten-foot-tall sculpture of bronze, copper, and acacia wood. This elaborate structure had graced the entrance of the grand mouseion for centuries, but two decades had passed since its last restoration, leaving jade-green grime marring its surface.

Her eyes traced the man's controlled movements and the play of muscles in his bare calves. He worked with deft precision, never needing to glance down as he pulled out or inserted a bottle or scouring pad from the leather tool harness strapped over his coarse linen shirt.

As mouseion director, she could openly admire him under the guise of overseeing his work. Not that she, or any unmarried woman of childbearing years, needed justification to ogle an unclaimed man.

If he noticed her watching him, he gave no indication.

Angora envied men's role in matters of romance. Her introspective and scholarly nature made her uncomfortable with initiating and setting the stage, as was expected of a woman. She drew a deep breath and made her way to him, crossing several large woven mats and stopping behind him on the limestone floor. Up close, he was even taller than she had thought. Maybe even taller than she was. That wasn't saying much, though. At just one inch over six feet, she was a petite woman.

With a nervous flutter in her stomach, she called out, "It's quite remarkable how the stand is transformed once scrubbed."

The man turned around and held her gaze. She momentarily recoiled from—but then was immensely drawn to—the intensity in his granite-colored eyes. They were like the eyes portrayed in paintings of those mythological creatures, wolves.

He turned back to his work, the silence of the great hall broken only by the rustle of pages from a distant reading nook and the muted footsteps of someone unseen behind one of the tall bookcases.

"A donation stand? That's what the Welcome Pavilion is?" His voice was low pitched. She felt it went well with the hard planes of his face, his cropped hair, and his stubble of beard.

"Well, yes," she said with a smile in her voice. That was familiar ground for her; Angora felt her confidence return and her initial nervousness fade.

He turned again to her, frowning. "Is that a typical design for such a...stand?"

"Well, it's a unique creation."

"It's rather ornate for a mere collection jar," he remarked, motioning at the hippopotamos and the intricate figures resting on top of it.

She gave a half shrug, slightly impatient with his train of thought. It made sense that it

would be fanciful. The Welcome Pavilion was meant to be a work of art adorning a mouseion lobby.

“What does it say here?” He pointed at the burnished plaque by the side of the Pavilion.

““House of Muses.””

The man raised an eyebrow at that.

“That’s what the word mouseion means in the Old Tongues.”

She saw surprise in his face. “I was not aware of that, *Vyre Angora*,” he said.

So the man knew who she was. She wondered if it was because she was the mouseion director and a prominent scholar, or because she was the daughter of one of the seven revered custodians of their world: the Iskandar of Maradam. She wanted to believe that it was the former and not the latter.

The man was silent, clearly mulling over her words. As he looked around the hall, Angora read wonder bordering on reverence in his face. But when he turned back to her, a suggestion of a scowl replaced it. “So, this place began as a hub of creativity and innovation during the Revival,” he said, his tone harsh, “yet over the following millennia, it has dwindled into this...” He gestured to the few people seated at the reading tables. “An exalted public library.”

For a moment, she was too shocked to respond. The observation was so unexpected and impudent. This gave way to outrage, and she glared at him.

“Perhaps,” Angora said, her voice cool with sarcasm, “you should limit your comments to topics that you’re actually familiar with—like polishing bronze.” She looked pointedly at the Welcome Pavilion.

He eyed her, his gaze lingering. “Polishing has taught me to see past the tarnish, to the

essence of things.”

Angora flushed. She spun on her heel and strode away, her leather sandals tapping sharply against the floor as her maroon toga dress billowed and her dark shawl with gold trim streamed behind her.

How dare he! Angora fumed as she climbed the spiraling stairway. That inconsequential man. He was contracted because the commissioning agent had informed the Mouseion that he was thorough—and she wished to see the Pavilion burnished before the Burning of the Ship festivities. Yet such tasks, low in pay and skill, were usually reserved for the young. The fact that he appeared to be in his thirties and still doing such work spoke volumes about him.

But then again, what difference did it make what vocation the man pursued? His comment stood on its own merit; she’d always been the first to rebuke those who sought to argue from authority. And his comment stung.

Angora entered her private chambers and leaned against the thick, carved wooden door that effectively shut out sounds coming from outside. A slow breath escaped her lips. Why did his opinion matter to her? Was it the sheer audacity of his observation? Or was it because there was a grain of truth in what he said?

Beneath a limestone arch, she walked to her low work table and sat on the firm floor cushion, legs folded underneath her. As she looked at the open manuscripts with their hand-drawn sketches of recent studies, Angora felt her tranquility returning. This spacious room was her sanctuary, a home away from home. Restoration projects or digs sometimes took her to the far edges of the world—trips of up to twenty miles—but Maradam was her primary place of work, and the Mouseion of Maradam, which she oversaw, was her base of operations.

If a mouseion was merely an “exalted public library,” as that man had said, did that make

her a shelf custodian? That was quite the demotion, she thought to herself, inwardly smiling, amused and troubled at the same time.

Oh, to the pits with that! Angora didn't have time to dwell over his words any longer. She unfurled a large excavation site map and studied it intently. Picking up her trusted stylus, she made some annotations in the margins.

After a brief knock, the door swung open, and a staff member marched in, holding a sheaf of papers. She nodded, acknowledging her.

The day went by in a rush, crowding out thoughts of him and his troubling comment. The hours flew by. And before she knew it, the workday wound down. Mede'a and Assur stood at the door, dressed in their finery, grinning and joking and hurrying her on. She changed into something more suitable and headed out of the ziggurat with her two friends as daylight gave way to the violet veil of evening.

It was a gala night on the plaza by the shores of Naiad Lake, where lyre players serenaded the crowd with their tunes. Pole-mounted torches cast amber light, their flames reflected and dancing on the rippling lake. The guests mingled and chatted, and were later treated to a reading of poetry from a debut work while sipping a drink made of date molasses and rose water and eating sesame morsels.

Life on Areta was pleasant and peaceful, following the same rhythm for years. For decades. For centuries.

And Thalith Na'amat star seemed to underscore this, as each passing year it blazed ever brighter in the night sky.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, attendants nodded to each other in greeting as they entered the majestic ziggurat that housed the mouseion.

Angora was climbing the open wooden spiral staircase to her chambers when a cry of surprise rang out from the ground level, followed by sharp intakes of breath throughout the entrance hall. She stopped mid-step and stared at the Welcome Pavilion—just in time to see the wings of its bronze eagle stretch and the metallic feathers bristle.

A collective gasp rose as a golden ball emerged from the eagle's beak, dropped, and was swallowed by the gaping maw of the sea serpent figure beneath it. The serpent, which was supposed to be fused to the main frame, started to pivot on its shaft, with the heavy metal ball pushing it ever lower.

The ball of gold dropped from the serpent's mouth into the receptacle below and—
—made a deep, melodious gong sound that seemed to reverberate from the walls.

Stunned silence filled the entrance hall.

The sea serpent smoothly swung back to its original position.

For a heartbeat, Angora stood rooted in place, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps—and in the next, she was scrambling down the spiraling stairs, rushing toward the structure. She

grasped what the structure was, what it really was.

People were streaming in from various sections of the mouseion to take a closer look, until virtually all the mouseion keepers were congregated around the Pavilion.

Standing on the low platform on which it was perched, Angora inspected the sculpture. She turned and raised her hands, patiently waiting for silence, tamping down on the excitement and pride she felt.

“Over the centuries,” Angora’s voice rang out, “countless people have graced our mouseion and passed by the Welcome Pavilion, unaware of its function. Today, one of our own not only discovered the true nature of this structure but also managed to restore it to working order. What we have here is a water clock.” A ripple of excitement spread through the crowd. “It’s a functioning artifact from the Revival Era, which is rare enough in itself. It’s also arguably the most sophisticated water clock ever unearthed.” No wonder none of them suspected its purpose, Angora thought; its design was unlike any other.

“Come forward, whoever you are!” she announced, her smile radiant. “Society owes you a debt of gratitude.”

The gathered people applauded and cheered, looking around expectantly.

As no one came forward, the applause died down, replaced by confused whispers.

Angora’s eyebrows rose. This was unexpected.

Yet, almost immediately, her bewilderment gave way to a sense of growing unease, a hunch.

One of her assistants pushed his way forward. “We found this inside the Pavilion.” He held out a pair of curved nose pliers. “We don’t know to whom it belongs.”

She felt shock as recognition hit her. She’d seen these pliers before. Recently.

* * *

He was down Ganuzar alley, scraping patina off double-entry bronze doors with a hammer and chisel. Bougainvillea vines partially obscured the doors, their purple flowers cascading from a balcony above, vivid against the intense blue sky. Focused on his work, landing rapid, precise blows, the man didn't notice her.

Angora watched him. The rhythm of his hammering and the flex of his arm muscles with each exertion seemed to mirror the racing of her heart. She was both drawn to and repelled by the sheer force of his presence.

She hadn't wanted to come, yet her legs had carried her over all the same. She was certain that no other museum keeper realized to whom the pliers belonged, and she had been tempted to make them disappear. That wouldn't have been right, though. She had no choice but to swallow her earlier conceit. "I was mistaken in dismissing your intuition about the Welcome Pavilion," she called out.

Startled, the man stopped hammering and turned.

She lowered her head. "Arrogance got the better of me. Please accept my apology."

His gaze fell upon the pliers in her hand before finally settling on her face. "How did you know where to find me?" he asked, his voice modulated.

"Your commissioning agent told me you would be here."

"Did she now?" The man regarded Angora. He then walked toward her, wiping his hands on his vest. Amusement tinged his voice. "What else did she say?"

"She told me that your name is Sargon, and that you've been polishing artifacts

throughout Maradam for years.” She closed the space between them. Quietly, she said, “She also told me that you originally hail from Timnah. And that you never talk about that time of your life, before Maradam.”

With his gray eyes fixed on hers, he held out his arm.

Their fingers brushed as she handed over the pliers, a connection neither acknowledged nor pulled away from.

“You went through a great deal of trouble to return these to me,” he said as he flipped the pliers and in one smooth movement inserted them into a pocket in his leather harness.

Angora gave him a tight smile. “It was the least I could do. All things considered.”

“Must have left them there yesterday.”

Yesterday night, you mean, she thought to herself. Her gaze drifted to the pliers, now snug against his broad chest before returning to his face. “Someone has uncovered the true nature of the Welcome Pavilion and recovered some of its functionality: It’s an ancient water clock.” She paused. “We haven’t found out who did it, though.” As she said this, she looked him in the eyes.

“Surely in the house of muses, innovation, and creativity there’s bound to be someone who did it,” the man said, deadpan.

She felt her cheeks warm. He could not have made his point any more eloquently. In all these years, none of the experts or museum keepers had ever recognized the Welcome Pavilion as a clock, let alone figured out how to make its ancient mechanisms work again.

“It’s quite ingenious really,” she pressed on. “A cassette installed on top feeds metal balls, each starts the cycle anew. A tank filled with water inside the hippopotamos contains a perforated, open vessel. It’s obviously meant to complete its submersion in one hour. As it

finally plunges downward, it tags—”

“I thank you for bringing my pliers over,” he cut her off, then turned and strode over to the door he’d been working on, his tone making it clear the conversation was over.

“You were not always polishing aging metal artifacts, were you?” she called out.

The man started scouring the door again.

Then: “It was you, wasn’t it?”

The man did not react to that, either. She stood there gazing at his back, arms resting on her hips. When it became obvious that he wasn’t going to respond, she turned and left, surprised that she felt no disappointment. Somehow she’d expected him to neither confirm nor deny his involvement.

CHAPTER 3

Sargon scraped away at the bronze doors after the woman had left, though the last things she'd said stayed with him. They reminded him of what once was, what could have been—and could never be again. It grated on him to hear those thoughts voiced aloud. Notably, by that woman with a cream-and-peaches complexion unblemished by scars, with a youthful face untouched by marks of pain, with piercing eyes free from existential doubts.

Sargon had a reason for avoiding machinery. But then again, how could the agent have known it was anything other than a pavilion in need of a polish? Now, though, Sargon was happy it had happened.

It turned out the mouseion was originally a center of creativity and innovation. How he would have loved it, had it still been the case. Restoring the artifact was the least Sargon could do. But that wasn't the reason he made that spur-of-the-moment decision last night to restore the clock. At least it wasn't the main reason.

His thoughts kept returning to the mouseion director, with her proud bearing, tousled hair, and intelligent, defiant eyes. She made him feel seen in a way he hadn't before. A long-dormant part of his soul stirred under her gaze, drawing him to her. But that wasn't the reason he made that spur-of-the-moment decision last night to restore the clock. At least it wasn't the main

reason.

He toiled until the distant wail of a ram's horn from a signal tower across Maradam marked the end of the workday for many, its notes lingering in the air. Soon, the chatter of townsfolk melded with the whirring of pedaled di-wheelers.

Wagons laden with olive oil, their iconic lanterns casting a warm glow, rumbled down the meandering avenues paved with large limestone slabs. The thoroughfares, smoothed by years of use and kept clean, were lined with single-story houses of the same pale stone, their flat rooftops adorned with greenery and vines trailing over the edges.

The streets bustled as people headed home or to the outdoor market. Sargon, meeting up with Azai, Elam, and Tamuz as was their habit, made his way to the commissioning house. His three friends shared a dwelling, as was customary for unattached men on Areta. They did so to share household chores, but mostly for the camaraderie it offered and the elaborate tabletop games they played at night.

The interior of the commissioning house offered comforting familiarity as the four men entered, taking seats on elevated cushions around a low table. A papyrus reed partition provided welcomed privacy, allowing the quartet to talk without the distracting hum of neighboring discussions. Daylight, channeled through reflecting shafts and tinted glass, bathed the room in purple hues interwoven with soft shadows.

A prismatic skylight focused daylight onto a cast-iron plate, warming the kettle. Sargon added mint leaves and a piece of the sweet jaggery to his cup of hot water, then stirred with a spoon. His three friends followed suit.

“It seems that a water clock has been rediscovered at the Mouseion,” Azai said. His weathered hands, curled around the warm cup, betrayed a lifetime of metal work. The old man

looked at Sargon with a hint of pride, his eyes sparkling against his dark skin.

Elam laughed out loud, his bulky shoulders shaking. His rich laughter never failed to bring smiles to the faces of his friends.

Sargon sipped his tea and regarded meditatively the steam that rose from the cup.

Tamuz clapped Sargon's shoulder. "Truly, who else but our companion here could've unraveled this riddle and restored the clock?"

Sargon offered only a noncommittal grunt before taking another contemplative sip of his mint tea. From outside, a sudden gust of warm wind carried the fluttering sounds of the fronds from the neighboring date palm grove.

"I thought you vowed never to touch machines again," Elam said, "so as not to be tempted."

"I polished it, not realizing it was a contrivance of some kind," Sargon said. "Evidently, no one did." With a whimsical expression, he looked up at his friends. "But enough about me. Elam, Tamuz, are you still working on that broken shaft at the gristmill?"

Elam and Tamuz chuckled, and the conversation shifted to their day at work. The two were master millwrights, mostly hired by the factories on the shores of the Thyamis river, which utilized numerous waterwheels. The gristmill, the sawmill, the paper mill, the textile mill—through the years, Elam and Tamuz were commissioned by all of them. For his part, the elderly Azai was a master machinist whose services were in demand wherever intricate or exact metal components were needed—whether to replace a part on one of the weaving apparatuses or to reconstruct a gear assembly. The reputation of these three men had allowed them to work on the most sophisticated mechanical projects, often fetching them handsome fees.

They swapped anecdotes from work, teased Elam about not talking to women, and

listened to Azai threaten again that he would retire next year.

At some point, Sargon downed the rest of his tea. “Time for me to go home and spend time with the girls.”

His three friends simply nodded. They’d expected him to say that, but hearing it had never grown any less disconcerting through the years.

“If not before, I’ll see you for our Tishrei eve game,” Sargon said, getting to his feet.

“I’m looking forward to it, my friend,” Tamuz said and raised his cup in farewell.

“So, is he the one behind the clock restoration?” asked Azai quietly, regarding the retreating figure of Sargon.

“Oh, undoubtedly. No one else could’ve accomplished that. He just doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Tamuz. He sighed. “What a waste of a life that was meant for true distinction,” he added softly. “Sargon could’ve done so much good. Blazes, he *wanted* to do so much good. Instead, he clings to the fantasy that his adopted daughters are still alive, keeping a low profile and burnishing metal artifacts for a pittance, lest he’ll be declared an outcast and forbidden from interacting with them.”

“I tell you, it all started when he got slapped down for that contraption idea in his younger days—” started Azai.

But Tamuz shook his head. “It happened years later. Whatever he ran into truly unsettled him; it changed everything.” Sargon had never spoken of what he’d stumbled upon. All they learned was that he’d dug deep underground, an incredible thing in itself, and then he’d run into something.

The old man exhaled heavily. Who could tell, with Sargon being so private? For a long moment, the three friends sat in silence, their contemplation punctuated by distant calls of gray

hornbill birds.

“It’s unnerving how Sargon keeps talking about Lilit and Norea as if they were growing,” commented Elam, shifting his considerable bulk and adjusting his cushion. “Not a fixed point in his delusion.”

Azai nodded. “A few months ago, he mentioned that they’d become adults.”

“Sounds about right,” said Tamuz, “considering the year the two drowned. Around now they would have been of age.”

Tishrei eves were the most awkward in that respect. Sargon would remark that the twins were around or that they’d just left. And as far as his friends could see, there was no one there but Sargon. They’d tried once to broach the subject, and he hadn’t talked to them for *weeks* after that. They’d never challenged him on that point again.

CHAPTER 4

As Sargon walked on, the stone pathways in the heart of Maradam gave way to open, hard-packed dirt roads, widely dispersed dwellings, and trees.

Nearing his residence, he noted the tall palms swaying gently overhead, their thick date clusters gleaming in the final hour of daylight. It was twilight, a time when inky, lengthening shadows juxtaposed with amber light that bathed the reddish-brown earth in an ethereal radiance.

As his home came into view, he felt the deep, grounding pulse of the world beneath his feet. Dik-dik antelopes paused browsing the small myrrh trees, lifting their heads before resuming their activity. His path took him downhill, though the slope seemed to rise again in the distance, creating the illusion of an upward arc.

The view was familiar. Yet, the comforting joy it once held had been tinged with unease these past two months. The river current subtly waned; the night cycle shortened slightly; a faint tremor now accompanied the pulse of the world. And probably no one noted these changes. But with the ever-brightening star Talith Na'amat, a knot had been lodged in his stomach for many months, and he had been on the lookout for shifts in the environment. He felt that something was askew, something... foreboding.

Sargon believed that answers might lie in the ancient past, and if anyone could uncover

them, it would be Angora, Maradam's foremost scholar on antiquity. That was the main reason why he restored the water clock and left a calling card behind—to get her attention.

It was an impulsive decision, and now he regretted it. What had made him think she had the courage to unearth unsettling truths from the past and the integrity to keep his secrets? How could he trust the daughter of the Iskandar not to betray him and bring down the hammer of exile upon him?

He glanced up at the ever-present silhouette of Kadesh Barnea, an unreachable construct hovering a mile above. Always there, an enigma. From the distance, it appeared deceptively small, no larger than a coin held at arm's length.

A contoured clay wall surrounded Sargon's residence. He opened the outer door and entered the tiny anteroom, setting off gong sounds, each deeper than the previous one.

He reflected on the many feet that had crossed this threshold before his. The dwelling he called home—though repeatedly revamped, redecorated, retouched—was essentially the same one occupied by generations past. Someone from a prior century would find little unfamiliar in these surroundings.

As he shed the dust and weight of his workday sandals, the inner door opened. Two breathtakingly tall, identical twin girls in their late teens rushed out to greet him, long black hair streaming, amber eyes alight. "Father!" Lilit cried with affection, and Sargon stood up, smiling. She leaned low so their adoptive father could kiss her cheek, while Norea embraced him, her warm hips and flat stomach pressing against his chest.

As he stood there, basking in their affection, Sargon couldn't help but marvel at the young women they'd become, with the pronounced contours of their figures at an eye level—a bittersweet reminder of time's steady passage.

Kisses and hugs exchanged, the twin sisters made their way to the kitchen, within the walled enclave of their dwelling. Sargon headed down the curved stone path that led to three yurts, each ringed with a gravel barrier and fragrant plants to deter creeping insects, each modestly elevated off the ground on sturdy pilings.

He entered the center yurt, which served as their dining space. Fading daylight filtered through the canvas and the meshed screens, casting a warm glow onto the floor—a mosaic of interwoven natural mats. Sargon lowered himself and lounged on pillows, enjoying the rest after being on his feet most of the day.

It was only a few moments later that Norea and Lilit entered the yurt, wheeling in small carts that held several trays and set the table.

Sargon sighed with pleasure, eyeing the mouth-watering freshly baked stack of flatbreads, a steaming bowl of lentils, and a plate of hummus liberally garnished with olive oil, chopped parsley, and dusting of paprika. Lilit smiled at him, signaling that dinner was ready. He joined them. The three of them chatted about nothing in particular as they tore into the food.

“So, what did you work on today?” Lilit wanted to know. Her long, smooth black hair spilled onto the table as she poured hot spicy apple cider for her father, then her sister, and finally herself.

Sargon made a dismissive gesture. “Today was not that interesting.”

That must have meant scraping a door or windowsill. “And yesterday?”

Her father shrugged. “Polishing some dusty old thing at the Mouseion.”

She wrinkled her nose; books weren't her preferred spice. But then she recalled something she'd overheard in the marketplace. Last night, someone had entered the Mouseion, or rather its open lobby, and restored its large water clock. Many were commenting on it. And to

think that her father could have had a chance encounter with that enigmatic person had he stayed a few hours longer.

That reminded her what she'd been curious about earlier in the day. "Speaking of old things," she said, "is it true that in the olden days, fathers were also...you know...the sires?"

"Yes," he said and regarded her with mild surprise. Lilit ordinarily didn't express interest in things that extended much beyond last week's events or strayed too far from her passions: cooking and theatrical plays.

"When did the decoupling of siring from fatherhood happen?" she asked, pushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, then breaking off a piece of flatbread and scooping with it some of the hummus.

"You know that originally everyone on Areta belonged to one or another of the seven lineages."

It was impossible not to know. "Things were so fragmented in the ancient days, weren't they?"

"They were," her father agreed. "Imagine if everyone with your coppery skin and amber eyes ruled a district, while in the next were those with red-hair and fair skin. All those rivalries boiled over. They almost destroyed everything in that all-out intertribal war."

"The Age of Shoah," Lilit said.

"Indeed—a century of blood and fire," he said with a pensive expression. "Towns reduced to ash, fields choked with the unburied... When they eventually stopped, it was due to exhaustion." He took a long sip. "Nevertheless, clannishness lingered and animosity festered. The leaders knew—a generation, maybe two. It was to be just a matter of time until fights would break out again."

Sargon studied them as he said that. The twins were listening, truly listening—a sure sign they’ve come of age. It seemed like yesterday they’d swallowed the rite’s black brew, marking their transition into adolescence.

“They had to unite,” he told them. “Yet, members of the various lineages didn’t want to lose their distinct physical traits. If they had begun interbreeding, within a few generations the lineages would have faded away, and a more physically homogeneous population would have emerged.”

“Sires,” Norea said, her voice betraying a hint of surprise.

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. She understood, he thought. “The choice of sires was strictly guided by lineage,” he said. “Choosing an adoptive father later transcended those lines, focusing on personal connection rather than bearing more children. This arrangement eliminated the risk of future conflict and preserved the distinct characteristics of each lineage through the generations.”

For a few moments, the twins busied themselves with the food, but Sargon could tell that Lilit was still sorting through it.

“So why are there so few pure-breds right now?”

A soft chuckle escaped Sargon at the irony. “Over time, people started valuing individual traits over lineage purity when choosing sires. That’s how two of the seven lineages died out.”

“You’re of pure Sveal lineage,” Norea stated, a touch of pride in her voice. Her adoptive father might have been a simple man, a day laborer, yet he was true bred. Her hand reached out and stroked his arm, then the fingers curled back, settling obediently in her lap.

A wry smile tugged at the corners of Sargon’s mouth. “Well, the blond hair darkened over time, but yes, Sveal through and through. All my ancestors are.” He winked at her

playfully. “The real item.” Privately he thought that this was the least important thing about him. However, his adopted daughters knew nothing of his past or his passions. It was the only piece of pride they had about their supposed failure of a father, and he’d been indulging them on that count.

Lilit regarded her father. His seeds had been dulled by that edict long ago, and she felt pang of sympathy. She’d inquired about it through the years, and “youthful indiscretions” was all he’d ever offered in reply. Then again, while all men were more than willing, only one in three or in four ended up siring, she admitted to herself. When a woman could select for traits of her future offspring from any man of her choosing, why would she settle for anything less than her notion of a perfect complement?

Dinner came to an end. Lilit dabbed her lips with a napkin, the soft shadows playing across her face, her large eyes smoldering as they met Sargon’s. “Father,” she began, her voice eager, “we wish to go tonight to the amphitheatron. They’re performing the second part of *Ashur-Banael*.” Lilit would have happily attended every play at the open-air theater if money were of no concern.

She glanced at the water clock on the stand. If they were to catch the play, they’d better get going. Theatrical performances used to coincide with the moon’s journey across the night sky until it passed through the exit gate. This had changed as Thalith Na’amat waxed ever brighter, eventually outshining even the moon a few months ago. No one knew why, but it didn’t matter. The key point was that the star graced the night sky shortly after dinnertime, casting its silvery light for a couple of hours before setting. This made evening outings, especially outdoor performances, all the more appealing. It left just enough time to eat, chat a bit, and get ready.

Sargon’s heart constricted with the familiar twinge of conflicting emotions. *Going out*

again? This would make it the second time that week. “Girls, it’s not that I don’t want you to have a good time, but three copper coins here and three copper coins there—it adds up.”

Norea looked down. “We know,” she said quietly. He could sense their unspoken disappointment and felt guilt. “We promise we won’t go out at all next week.” Her eyes, amber and deep, now held him captive, a tender trap he’d fallen into time and again.

He knew he needed to be firm, to set boundaries as the head of the household, but the thought of denying their simple pleasures pained him. He’d done what he could to support their modest requests, yet at times he had to take a resolute stand. This was one of those times. “I’ll have to say no,” he said. “And it’s high time, well past time, you two start thinking of acquiring a vocation.” When children reached adolescence, they began apprenticing—from sanding boards in a carpentry shop to mob grazing water buffalos to processing rags into paper pulp. “Why, when I was your age—” He stopped, puzzled by the sudden anxiety that flashed across their faces.

Was he just saying something? What had he just said? He couldn’t remember. A bit strange and had occurred more than once when he had conversed with his daughters.

“Please, Father,” Norea murmured, her voice a gentle breeze that filled the yurt. She moved with fluid grace, and her tall form slid beside him, the side-slits of her dress parting. He could feel the warmth of her thigh press against his, followed by Lilit’s as she settled on his other side. The modest yurt suddenly felt cramped, the air carrying the faint scent of their bodies. Sargon shifted uneasily, seeking grounding in the firmness of the woven rush mat underneath him.

He looked up from one face to the other, determined. “I’m sorry—” he started firmly. But then they got a hold of him.

A shiver ran down his spine, a touch of warmth at the back of his neck he couldn't explain—and a new thought entered him. Wasn't this what fathers were supposed to do, provide for their daughters? And yet...another expense... He felt a wave of unsettling vertigo wash over him, fogging his thoughts. It was not a problem to let them go; their basic needs were met, he realized. Now it made perfect sense; the three coppers wouldn't change anything. "Very well, you two go and have a good time," he said when they finally released him.

Sargon pointedly cleared his throat, the inexplicable thud of his beating heart slowly receding. "Come on, girls. Give me some space here."

"Of course, Father," said Norea, getting to her feet and smoothing her ankle-length dress.

"You know that we always do as you wish," said Lilit, now also rising up.

"I do." He nodded to himself. They were the most obedient daughters any father could have asked for. Why, he didn't remember them arguing ever—not with each other, and never with his decisions. Obedient, respectful—their future spouses would be blessed.

Sargon had been earning the money, and Norea and Lilit made the family's purchases, mostly food. Well of course he directed them; he was the head of the household, after all. Well maybe not quite directed them, though he *could* have directed them. That was the point. And whenever they bought a new article of clothing for themselves, which was most infrequent, they'd always made it a point to ask him. Such obedient girls, he marveled, as he'd marveled countless times before.

Sargon stood up, went to the small wooden chest, and took out three copper coins. He would just skip lunch tomorrow, he reckoned. That ought to do it. They didn't need to know about that.

"We love you, Father," said Norea, her voice soft and warm as she approached. "More

than anything,” she added.

A corner of his mouth lifted. “I love you too.” He gestured toward the entrance flap. “Now, go on, enjoy the play.”

Today he made five coppers. That was a good day. If he would secure a job tomorrow, too, then a full breakfast was assured for Tishrei day. On some days he went out to work and didn’t take any food with him, making sure Norea and Lilit wouldn’t notice. Or ever go hungry. That was what mattered. That was all that mattered.

Sargon had adopted them when they were close to ten, shortly after the peculiar death of their mother. Poor girls. The moment he’d seen them, and Lilit coiled her slender arms around him with surprising strength, he fell in love. “Always and forever,” he had promised them, as they held onto him. And they cried a little in relief.

It was a year or two later when the two of them grew tall enough to loom over him.

CHAPTER 5

Repeatedly trying to exorcise the image of Sargon from her mind, Angora tossed and turned on the mat, finding sleep elusive.

If he were the one responsible, as she suspected, for identifying and rebuilding the water clock... She shook her head in disbelief and offense. What he'd accomplished could have been the highlight of his life. For some, it would be. That was something he could've proudly recounted, even years from now.

Yet, he seemed to dismiss the clock's restoration as if it were nothing more than a windowsill he'd scrubbed or a doorknob he'd polished. Well, no, that wasn't really it. Rather, what she thought of his work, perhaps what anyone thought of his work, seemed to mean precious little to him.

What an insufferable man!

So be it. She'd returned his pliers and was done thinking about him, Angora told herself firmly. She then willed herself to breathe deeply and slowly until sleep finally overtook her.

Over the next few days, Angora went through the motions of her work, her mind elsewhere. During lunch breaks, she would escape to a secluded grove. She sat on a weathered bench lined with exposed roots and gnarled branches hanging overhead. A group of gundis, squat

rodents, occupied a nearby rocky outcrop, their constant vigilance reflecting something of the growing unrest in her heart.

The initial excitement she'd felt over the historic discovery and restoration of the water clock steadily gave way to growing discontent.

The question had been haunting her increasingly: Was the mouseion a little more than a glorified public library, as Sargon had hurled at her? Was her professional life nothing but tending a well-preserved carcass?

Indeed it was, she eventually conceded. If before, this realization would have brought fulfillment, now it felt lacking. The thrill at discovery of ancient artifacts was there, strong as always, yet somehow that wasn't enough when it came to the house of muses she'd been put in charge of.

Her staff didn't share her concerns. They were buzzing with excitement over the comprehensive reconstruction of the water clock they were tasked with. Those Angora had assigned were lovingly tweaking its mechanism.

A few days later, the water clock was calibrated to precise one-hour cycles. Angora instructed her aide to affix broadsides on the tiding pillars throughout Areta, announcing a public unveiling in three weeks. She didn't specify what exactly would be unveiled, and it didn't occur to anyone that there were any questions around that.

She tried to talk about her misgivings with her three close friends. Shouldn't a mouseion be more than just a repository of the past? Mede'a laughed in response, amused by something only she could see; Assur merely blinked at her, seemingly mystified; Shammai grew impatient with the whole thing and changed the subject. Angora hadn't brought it up again.

She had no one to confide in. The only person who might grasp her inner discord wanted

nothing to do with her.

As she sat, meditating, the silence amplified the turmoil within her. Every shadow whispered doubts, anxieties, and heresies. As dawn approached, she resolved what to do. And it felt right.

With the first light, Angora sent a runner to the commissioning house with a letter addressed to Sargon.

* * *

The following night, Angora lay awake when the chimes of the doorway gong sounded.

Frowning, she peered at the night sky through her studio's ceiling window. The moon had already set beyond the horizon. Who could be calling at that hour?

But it was the Taberna quarter, she reflected, irritated and amused as she got up. It was not unheard of for some to try to drop by in the late hours of the night.

Nearly all of Maradam's intellectually-inclined residents and their families clustered here, in this labyrinth of limestone-block alleys. They traded the open sky and rustling leaves surrounding the well-loved yurt homes for the proximity of minds, where weathered stone walls reflected the lamplight seeping from houses set for learning, discussion, and contemplation.

As she padded barefoot and in her nightshirt to the doorway, it occurred to her she'd skipped that evening's get-together with her three friends. *Blasted!* It must have been one of them—or worse, all of them—deciding to drop by. They didn't do it often, but when they did, their discussions typically spilled into the early hours of the morning.

Angora stifled a yawn and opened the door. And then she stopped short, her heart

skipped a beat.

Sargon was standing in the shadowed alley, just beyond the threshold. Casting a dappled light on his body, a lantern was strung casually from the end of a balanced pole that rested on one shoulder. She could see his gaze roam, taking in the hem of her short nightgown, her bare thighs, her loose long tresses.

His brazen sweep over her body left her feeling unexpectedly giddy. “How did—” She cleared her throat. His eyes were back on her face, intense and inscrutable. “How did you find where I live?”

“The directory listing,” he said, and her face grew hot. Anyone could have found out anyone’s address. He must have thought her dull-witted.

More silence as they studied each other.

Her thoughts strayed and her attention lingered on his broad chest, the strong lines of his body visible beneath the open vest. He remained unfazed, a stoic statue in the dim light.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, relieved to find her voice steady and her demeanor collected.

“Your letter said you wanted to see me.”

She stared at him. He couldn’t possibly have thought that she’d meant for him to come to her residence. In the middle of the night, at that.

It mattered not. Angora took a deep breath. “The water clock is about to be unveiled. Before this happens, I want to propose something to you.”

“I’m listening,” he said. And Angora tried and failed to read his face.

“Not here,” she said, breaking their eye contact and gesturing beyond the lantern’s light, where darkness obscured the alley. “Let’s walk over to the Mouseion.”

He gave a curt nod, and she stepped into the night and the dry hot breeze. The well-worn slabs of stones felt warm under her bare feet as she joined Sargon, the two of them setting off together. In this late hour, both Thalith Na'amat and the moon yielded to an obsidian-black sky densely streaked with the Milky Way's glittering star dust.

Sargon shifted the counterweight for balance and extended the pole, the lantern now hanging farther out, its reflector casting a wide beam downward and tinting the aged stone alleys in pearl with a whisper of gold.

She glanced down at her shift, a slight smile hovering on her lips. Save for some flesh-flaunting unmarried girls, it was unthinkable for any woman to walk outside during daytime barefoot garbed in nothing but a sleepshirt, as she did now—any more than for a man to walk with a vest and no tunic underneath, as he did now. However, the night was a realm unto itself, where the intimate and the veiled and the bottled up were free to surface. A fond memory of a moonlit escapade flitted across her face. Night was a time when people swam in the nude. Night was a time when some young women, sirenas, were on the prowl. And as a rule, what happened under the cover of darkness remained unspoken in the light of day.

They walked on, side by side, not speaking. Yet, she was keenly aware of him walking right next to her, at times their shadows merged and danced on walls.

As they neared their destination, the faint starlight revealed the Mouseion's ziggurat at the end of an open, paved space. A flutter of nervous excitement coursed through her. In just a few moments, she would lay out her proposal. His reaction would be telling, one way or another.

Angora walked over to a nook in the massive stone wall near the mouseion's entrance. She turned a hand crank, and a shower of sparks rained down as the iron bar grated against the grindstone situated right below it, quickly igniting a char cloth in a small depression. She then

pulled a thin stick from a nearby stack and lit it with the flame.

They both entered the lobby through the massive double doors. Once inside, Angora walked briskly along the wall, lighting one oil lamp after another with the elongated kindling in her hand.

She approached the Welcome Pavilion and turned, facing Sargon who had come to stand in the center of the hall. “If you accept my proposal,” she declared and then touched her heart, lips, and forehead, “I shall pledge my honor to keep your involvement secret.” With those ritualistic gestures, Angora was in effect telling him that whatever may come, she’ll keep their transaction confidential.

One’s word was everything on Areta. Business deals depended on it, secrets relied on it, societal trust was based on it. A person who reneged was as good as ostracized and his honor as dust. No one would have dealings of any consequence with an oath breaker.

“What are you talking about?” Sargon demanded, bewilderment plain in his face.

“This.” Angora said, gesturing toward the refurbished water clock. “I’ve given a great deal of thought to what you said about the Mouseion—as it is now and in its heydays. *Vyr* Sargon, I want this water clock to be a tribute to creativity.” As she spoke, Angora watched his face closely: bewilderment shifted to incredulity, then a flicker of hope, quickly masked by impassivity. She said, “I yearn for the Mouseion to be something more than a hollow shell. Beyond restoring functionality to an ingenious clock from the past, I desire a touch of the present infused into it.”

“And what makes you think that I can do such a thing?”

“It is said that you’re the best millwright on Areta.”

He cocked an eyebrow at that.

“Yes, I made inquiries.” Crossing her arms, she met his steely gaze. “Years ago, you assembled a small team of master millwrights and ran a millforge renowned for crafting intricate devices from concept to completion. At some point, you shut the doors. No one knows why.”

After studying her under furrowed brows, he sauntered over and thoughtfully rapped on the large, fanciful water clock sculpture. In that instant, as he reached out, his vest lifted, revealing a small tattoo below his ribcage—and her breath caught. The man was rendered infertile.

Her mind spun with possibilities, trying to comprehend the implications of what she’d just glimpsed.

The majority of women who chose to bear children were typically done conceiving in their early twenties, at which point they were rendered barren—and could pursue carefree intercourse from then on. Or earlier, if they resolved to have no offspring. Either way, if not before, all women had their fertility quenched in their early thirties, as conceiving past that age was deemed to bode ill to the unborn. At twenty-eight and not planning on having children, Angora had seen no reason to delay. She drank the noxious, burning substance to still her womb, allowing her to move on with her life.

But she knew that with men it was different. They did not have their seeds dulled until they reached mid-forties, but Sargon didn’t look the part. Or unless they were married, but Sargon didn’t wear a marriage ring. Or unless, well, the other options were just as improbable. Habitual lawbreakers were rendered infertile, as the authorities did not care for these people to pass on their traits to the next generation. Those with severe physical abnormalities or those possessing impaired minds were rendered infertile. And those that had a rebellious streak.

The matter of stillness was one of the very few things the authorities intervened in

people's lives. And those were in *exceedingly* rare cases. What to make of that tattoo?

His voice cut through Angora's thoughts, interrupting her musings. "You understand that if I agree to it, it'll be on my terms," he said. His voice was flat, business like.

"Yes," she replied.

"I'll decide what to do and how to do it. There'll be no further adjustments to make it more...acceptable."

"That's the idea," she said in an even tone.

With one slender hand, she reached in and traced her fingertips along the exposed area just below his ribcage. A muscle flexed under her touch, yet he allowed the familiarity. "How did you get this?" Angora's fingers lingered on his skin, the pad of her thumb lightly brushing over the tattoo. She looked up at him through her lashes. "Was it a crime?"

"The worst kind," he said. "Are you ready to walk away?"

"No," she said, and let her hand drop by her side.

They stood looking at each other.

"Very well, then," Sargon said. "But I doubt you'll follow through. When it comes down to it, I think you're too"—for a fleeting moment, his eyes traveled down—"soft-bellied for that and too comfortable with what is, daughter of the Iskandar."

A flush crept up her neck, but she held his gaze unflinchingly. "If you're so convinced," she called as he started to make his way out and she found her voice, "why did you accept my proposal?"

He stopped without turning. "In possibility, I find opportunity," he said tonelessly, as if reciting. "Give me a week."

She acknowledged his statement with a nod, though he walked away without looking

back.

Angora remained standing, watching. Darkness enveloped his retreating form, and she could only hear the faint echo of his receding footsteps.

She snuffed out the lamps and shut the exit doors, brooding.

CHAPTER 6

A week later, under the cover of night, Sargon wheeled the modified water clock into the mouseion lobby and went about installing it.

He brushed off Angora's murmurs of praise with a slight shake of his head. "If you change your mind, let me know no later than two days before the unveiling, and I'll restore it to its original form," he announced unsmilingly and left.

The following morning, Angora stood at the center of the grand lobby. Soft daylight bathed her face, casting long shadows on the gathered crowd of staff members. She felt the weight of their collective attention. "During the Revival," she began, her voice carrying across the large chamber, "mouseions became the cradle of new ideas, the heart of a scientific and artistic era. Now, as stewards of a mouseion," she continued, pausing for effect, "it falls upon us to uphold its legacy."

She noted frowns and half-smiles; her staff was intrigued yet puzzled, hanging on her next words. "So, it is with a deep sense of responsibility, I've decided to fuse this mechanized relic from our past with an innovative measure from the present." With a dramatic flourish, she pulled away the draping cloth, revealing the transformed water clock. "Behold," she cried, unable to keep the quiver out of her voice, "the first clock in history to display individual

minutes!”

Gasps rippled through the crowd as they beheld the familiar hippopotamos figure, now sporting a small, wooden bird perched atop its back. With a gentle whirl, its head was bobbing rhythmically as its beak tapped the hippo’s back with a soft, clucking sound. At the culmination of a minute cycle, the bird darted forward, striking a metallic dragonfly atop the hippo’s head with a resounding tick—marking the passage of a minute before returning to its relentless pecking.

The exclamations and whispers of the gathered people swiftly morphed into protests over the modifications Sargon had introduced. Scandalized, they pleaded with her to recover the prized artifact to its “pristine state.” It was a matter of principle for many. The very idea of alteration meant a disruption of a venerated equilibrium.

The staff members brought up all the expected arguments. Angora countered, faltered, and rallied time and again. In fact, everyone’s reaction had been similar; it was just a matter of degree of bluntness. In the privacy of Angora’s home later that night, Mede’a grumbled and threatened to take a broom to her head to shake some sense into her. Much like the mouseion staff, her friend didn’t care if it was the “right thing to do.” There was something fundamentally upsetting and displeasing about a technological innovation.

And everyone clamored to know who fashioned the change, which she stayed mum on.

Angora dreaded the upcoming Tishrei dinner—the time of the week she’d always made it a point to get together with her father. The Iskandar of Maradam would have undoubtedly heard the news about the novelty introduced into the water clock. How would he react?

It didn’t take her long to find out.

As always, their meetings took place at his home: a small, tastefully furnished abode

overlooking one of the preserved wilderness areas, a mile away from Maradam proper. They greeted each other, and she took in the sight of her father dressed in his ornately-woven robes that draped about him in elegant folds. They sat by the table, and his stooping manservant entered, wheeling in some steaming dishes.

“I heard your announcement today caused quite a stir at the Mouseion,” her father said, pouring them both some water.

Angora added some cardamom and cinnamon to her hot glass of water and said nothing. She knew he wouldn't have commented on it publicly. It would have been gross impropriety for an iskandar to discuss—or worse, intervene—in a case involving an immediate family member or a close friend.

“Quite the story, isn't it?” her father remarked in a conversational tone, regarding her with bright intelligent eyes undimmed by age. “All those years, all those centuries, and no one suspected the true function of the Welcome Pavilion.”

But of course she knew that the discovery of the water clock wasn't foremost on his mind. And as if on cue, the Iskandar added, “I found it surprising to learn that what you've undertaken hasn't been purely a restoration job.” One of his bushy eyebrows rose in question.

“Yes, to embody the spirit of innovation requires more than to refurbish what was.” There, she said it.

Talmai was silent for a few heartbeats, his fingers thoughtfully combing through the length of his silvery beard. His rugged face, with its strong jawline and deep-set eyes, conveyed concern. “I can only comment on it as your father, not as a member of the Sanhedrin.”

“Is it truly a matter for the Sanhedrin?”

He ignored the sharpness of her tone. “Your decision bodes ill, Angora.”

“So everyone tells me,” she said, suddenly almost in tears.

“Then I wish to add my voice to theirs. You may lose everything you’ve worked for, daughter. Retract your decision before it becomes public and is deliberated by the Sanhedrin. Restore the water clock to its original condition, and the storm dies down.”

“Do you not think I realize that?” she cried out, miserable. She came over and knelt by her father’s side. “You’ve taught me to do what I think is right. Please don’t ask me to betray my conscience.”

He reached out, tenderly stroking her hair. “Daughter,” he began, his voice thick with emotion, “have you considered—” A heavy sigh escaped his lips. “Very well,” he said softly. “Very well.”

Through her tears, Angora gave a small laugh. “Whatever the Sanhedrin decides, it’s not going to be the end of the world.”

He gave her a strange, sharp look. “No,” he said heavily, a flicker of something warring in his eyes. “No, it is not,” he added in a low voice. “This is definitely not the end of the world.” The Iskandar reached out and grasped her hand, his eyes glistening with emotion. “My daughter, I want you to know how proud I’m of you and all that you’ve accomplished.” His voice held a wistful note. She felt a warm surge of affection, touched by his sentiment yet confused at the intensity of his words.

Talmai looked at her again and managed a smile. “Tell me about the rest of your week. I want to hear all about it.”

Later that night, Angora walked home, despondent. Her father’s initial urgings to reverse the decision heightened her inner turmoil. For the first time in her life, she felt a profound sense of loneliness. Even her father had not really grasped the position she’d taken.

Her steps faltered. Veering off the path, she found under the moonlight a secluded meadow and sat, cradling her face in her hands and listened to the thrum of remote cicadas.

Call it off, distant voices whispered in her head, and the storm would pass.

She felt she could not bring herself to do that, yet she also felt she could not rise to her feet and take another step.

Her insistence was so silly and pointless. After all, it was but a modified clock.

A modification that no one desired, at that.

What in the world was she doing? She looked up at Kadesh Barnea as if the hovering structure might offer some answers. Alas, it remained distant and inscrutable as always.

An eternity later, she tried again to will her legs to obey her, and again they refused. She remained sitting, immobilized by two opposing forces.

One hour bled into the next and then the next.

Dawn was breaking. She gazed at the brightening sky as it gradually morphed from inky blackness to hues of yellow, orange, and red, before finally settling into a light blue. She felt her shoulders relax and a small smile broke free. And this time her legs did obey her.

* * *

Angora made her decision public—the evolved water clock would remain. The public unveiling would take place in three days' time.

A few hours later, a messenger came to the Mouseion of Maradam delivering a writ from the Sanhedrin: The water clock would not be presented to the public until the Sanhedrin had a chance to deliberate and arrive at a decision in this matter.

Angora told herself that she shouldn't have been surprised by the writ. Pushing aside her frustration, she spent most of the day catching up on work neglected by her over the past few days. A lot piled up, and that night she was the last to leave the large ziggurat and shut the double doors.

Stepping into the plaza, she was greeted by the pale light of an aloof moon. That's when she noticed, and her heart quickened. Leaning nonchalantly against the tall obelisk at the far end was Sargon, one ankle crossed over the other, arms loosely folded.

He pushed himself off from the stone pillar, his strides confident as he made his way toward the solitary lamppost in the middle of the empty clearing. Their long shadows stretched as they walked toward one other.

They met under the lamppost's glow.

"Flight," he said. "I tried to fly when I was young."

"What?" She was bewildered.

"That's why my seeds got dulled."

She looked at him blankly. What did he mean? How could humans possibly take to the skies? Did she understand him correctly?

He must have noticed her puzzled look. "Inspired by birds, I constructed large mechanical wings that attached to the back," he said.

She understood now and gasped at the audacity of the idea. What a notion! To emulate the birds and soar in the sky. It was like... Yes, it was just like Daidalos in the myth.

Angora asked, "So what happened? I mean, did it work?"

He shook his head. "It turned out that human muscles are altogether too weak to sustain the body mass involved in flight."

She regarded him, caught in a whirlwind of conflicting feelings. Her suspicion about Sargon was proved right. Throughout history, there have been visionaries like him, individuals whose idiosyncratic ideas challenged the state of affairs. For all she knew, he might have been the only one in their generation. And here she was, entangled with him, entangled with a man she shouldn't have.

"I have two daughters," he then said. "I wanted you to know that."

Her heart stumbled as the implications sank in. Should the Sanhedrin discover his meddling, he might never see his daughters again, facing potential ostracization from society. "Had I known the stakes, I would have never asked you to transform the clock."

"I appreciate you saying this," he said, placing a hand over his chest. "But it was my decision to make and my burden to bear."

She inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"I misjudged you." He bowed with his head and then regarded her silently. "I underestimated the lengths you would go to see this through."

His expression turned quizzical. "How did the Mouseion's attendants react?"

"They were in an uproar," Angora said when he drew closer, and they came to stand in an intimate distance. "It wasn't just them. It was everyone." She grimaced.

He grinned at her amiably, and it struck her that this was the first time she'd seen him smile. The austerity was lifted, the planes of his face shifted, opened, and for a moment there he looked almost boyish.

Angora felt herself smiling back. "I'm heading to Tamzin Grove," she said. "It's a daily gathering with some friends. Care to join?" The question slipped out unexpectedly; she hadn't planned on asking. It just came out.

Again the same easy smile. “I would be happy to,” he said as he fell by her side, the two of them started walking. “Tell me more of what happened.” The amusement was clear in his voice.

“Well, not much to say. The Sanhedrin will deliberate the matter of the clock and reach a verdict,” Angora said.

“Does the fact that you’re the daughter of an iskandar will weigh for or against the matter?”

“Neither. And in case you wonder, my father will recuse himself from the case.” She gave him a sharp look, offended by his question. “I don’t think you understand the iskandars, nor appreciate the depth of their integrity.”

He seemed ready to argue but then raised his hands, palm up, in a gesture of concession.

Angora cocked her head with a hint of amusement. “You have a dim view of the authorities.”

He offered a lopsided smile. “Only when they presume to interfere in the affairs of the individual—though admittedly, that’s rare.” He must have noted her skeptical expression. “For instance, think of a woman who wants to have more than three children,” he said. “What could justify the higher levy or the increased civic share work hours to discourage this?”

She waited, hoping he’d just drop it. Yet he seemed bent on getting an answer.

“The rationale of eating every day,” she eventually said.

He looked at her quizzically.

“It’s not as if we can expand into pristine new regions—to accommodate the extra mouths if our population numbers were to increase.” She could tell he now understood, but no, he was not going to agree with her. “We can fit more in, no?” he said.

What a peculiar view, she mused. Why would anyone desire that?

“The world population is around fifty-thousand people,” she told him. “It has been this way, well, always. Add two thousand more, and we’d need to choose which of the twelve preserved wilderness areas is to be cut down to make space for more fields for food and textiles. If we reach fifty-seven thousand, there’s no wilderness left. We’d face rationing, deciding which days to go hungry.”

He stared at her, obviously taken aback. He likely hadn’t expected her to rattle off numbers like that.

They walked on, exchanging nods with a family clearly returning from a night swim. The woman, her hair still damp, wore a breezy sarong and walked alongside her husband, dressed in loose white shorts. Their chattering children, carrying oil flasks, followed a short distance behind.

Angora thought back to what her father had told her. It wasn’t just about growth; a shrinking workforce was also problematic. If numbers fell by more than five percent, the intricate infrastructures of their society would start to falter. Making sure that the population numbers fluctuated within a narrow band was an artful tool of nudging by the authorities.

They walked some more.

“I’m curious,” she said as they turned into the next alley, “what drove you to step forward and make the modification?”

“I wished to do something for the house of muses.”

She could see that about him. “Is that the only reason?”

A flicker of something unreadable crossed his face as he regarded her, yet he remained silent.

A gust of wind rustled through the tree canopy over their head, scattering a few leaves in their path.

“What about you?” he asked. “Why do you restore ancient artifacts?”

She thought about it some. “I suppose, like everyone else in my field, I’m driven by the hope of uncovering something extraordinary. Something that may illuminate a forgotten past or reshape our understanding of the world.”

He gave her a strange look but then glanced at a shadowed doorway. “Do you ever worry that some truths are better left buried?” he asked in a neutral tone.

“No,” she said immediately. “I mean, the past is what it is, and so is reality. Why would we wish to pretend otherwise?”

“Indeed,” he murmured and eyed her anew.

Laughter and conversation drifted from a small grassy clearing as they approached. Beneath a cluster of ancient olive trees, a woman and two men sat on wooden benches.

“Angora!” the woman called out, getting to her feet. Lithe with delicate features and startlingly dark skin, she hurried toward them. “I’ve just heard about the Sanhedrin’s writ, Oh, this is so sad. I told you—why did you have to get yourself into this sorry situation?” The women embraced.

The two men joined them, both slim, sharp-featured, and with intelligent eyes. “What does the writ say?” the shorter of the two asked.

“The water clock is to remain veiled until the Sanhedrin is to reach a decision about it—and about me,” Angora said.

Sargon looked sharply at Angora, apprehension and surprise on his face.

“Will you be summoned to the Hall?” asked the dark-skinned, lithe woman.

“Already was. The hearing will be held a few weeks from now.”

“What do you think will happen?” It was the taller of the two men.

“I trust the Sanhedrin’s wisdom,” was all Angora said, trying to keep her tone light. She turned to Sargon. “Please meet my friends: Shammai”—she pointed at the shorter of the two men—“Assur, and Mede’a.” She gestured. “Everyone, this is Sargon.”

Sargon introduced himself as a “metal scrubber.” From his end, Assur at first didn’t get the hint in a form of discreet kicks to his ankle from Angora and had inquired Sargon a few times about “his field of specialty” and “any recent writings he may have done.”

“He is a metal polisher,” Mede’a told him, leaning in. “That is what he does.” Comprehension dawned on Assur’s face; the gears in his head finally meshed, though they likely needed a good greasing, Mede’a mused to herself. She turned to Angora, her fingers dancing quickly in the female hand-talk, a glint in her eye. *And he can come and polish knobs and crannies at my house anytime he wants*, she signed.

Angora flushed and playfully swatted Mede’a’s arm. *Put a cork in it!* she signed back, but a hint of amusement crept into her own eyes.

He’s actually taller than you, Mede’a continued in hand-talk. You two look positively adorable walking side by side.

Angora shrugged. I happen to be attracted to men taller than me.

Mede’a chuckled. That’s the spirit, little one!

The group settled onto the benches beside the olive trees.

Through the hours that followed, Sargon gathered that all three of Angora’s friends were promising if not already accomplished scholars in their respective fields of interest. And like every other scholar in Areta, they also held paying jobs. Shammai was a junior magistrate;

Assur, an apothecarist; and Mede'a, a pedagogue. None of them had any romantic ties or intentions to raise a family. Instead, they had chosen to devote their free time to intellectual pursuits, and finding fulfillment in the company of like-minded individuals. After their working hours, the four of them would usually get together and talk, debate, joke, and philosophize.

Eventually, the evening wound down, and Sargon offered to walk Angora home. She readily accepted.

They walked side by side, a comfortable silence settling between them. At some point, their hands found each other—a hesitant brush, a lingering touch, and then an entwining of fingers. Neither was sure who initiated the connection, yet it felt natural.

All too soon, they reached her residence.

Next Angora knew, he was kneeling down in front of her in the dim alcove by her door. He reached out and bit by bit undid the straps of her sandals, unbuckling and loosening them. No permission had been asked, he just took charge. And she fought the urge to rest her hands on his powerful shoulders.

His head was close. She thought that all he had to do was reach out; it was but thin fabric that separated her from his hands. She sat abruptly on the small ledge, knees grown weak. For a breathless moment, she craved more, yet Sargon did not oblige. He merely removed one sandal, then the other.

Sargon paused, studying her. He seemed to wrestle with an internal decision, a trace of longing in his eyes. Then he rose to his feet and gave her the slightest suggestion of a bow. Before she knew it, he was walking away, the night gradually reclaiming him.

CHAPTER 7

Lilit entered the yurt. A lone oil lamp cast a muted glow over her flowing dress, accentuating the sinuous lines of its one-shouldered design as she moved toward Sargon.

Sargon's weathered hands paused over the mechanical puzzle before him, as he took in his daughter's fetching air. A frown creased his brow as he deduced the intentions behind her chosen attire.

Lilit crossed the yurt with a confident, leisurely gait. Already gauging the depth of his disapproval of her evening plans with practiced ease, she determined that cajoling wouldn't work. She reached out with a subtle tendril of her mind. Finding the memory thread, she delicately unwound it, erasing it as if it had never been. To Sargon, this encounter would leave nothing other than a fleeting sense of déjà vu.

She clucked in soft disapproval as she drew near. "You must be exhausted," she said, looming over him.

Sargon gave her a contented smile and yawned. "Now that you mention it, *I'm* sleepy." She was right; he was *really* tired. She'd always been right about such things.

"Let me help you," Lilit said. She crouched beside him, then eased her father to his side as he fell into a deep sleep. She bent over him and kissed his cheek tenderly.

Lilit slid one arm under his knees and the other behind his back. With some effort, she lifted him, positioning his head against her shoulder and carrying him to his sleeping mat. His heavy, steady breathing mingled with her own labored breathing.

As she laid him down, Lilit's eyes settled on the small, polished ironwood box tucked in the corner of the yurt. The box contained their meager savings, a pile of coins marked with a distinctive design. While copper, silver, and gold were commonplace, their unlawful smelting into coins was deterred by a unique design. Each coin bore a thick central depression holding a sapphire—a rare mineral—embedded with a state-secret resin. The sapphire's hue indicated the coin's denomination: orange for copper, green for silver, and blue for gold.

A pang of guilt touched her as she sifted through the coins, drawing out two copper pieces. She promised herself that next week she wouldn't ask for anything. She truly wouldn't, but tickets to the amphitheatron didn't come free. And she just *had* to know how the saga ended. Lilit drew the line at three persuasions a week, which meant she'd reached her limit.

Lilit understood the necessity of conserving money, yet she couldn't help but feel frustrated thinking about it. Money would have been so *easy* for her to procure. She'd found that out when she was eleven. It was the beginning of the stirring and the enticing whispers.

She still felt a twinge as she replayed the childhood memory. On that occasion, she'd come home clutching silver coins and wearing a grin. Earlier, she'd approached a random man, asking him for money with her eyes and with her voice. He fumbled for his coin purse, a slight blush creeping up his neck, and ended up offering her more than she'd asked for. She didn't even have to use her hidden talents except for a little nudge. It was exhilarating—the man's expression slackening, his pupils dilating, and the weight of the coins in her hand.

Lilit had been shocked by her father's reaction. She'd thought he would be happy.

Instead, he had lectured her on how hard the man worked to earn the money she'd charmed him out of. In fact, she had never seen her father so angry. He'd made her return the money and promise him she would never do such a thing again.

She had stuck to her promise. Within reason. Over time, she'd also come to see the wisdom and morality of his words.

But by Zeus' whiskers, the raw, pulsating need to use her allure was ever-present, a dark thrill lurking in her veins with a distinctly sexual undercurrent. As she matured, she'd muzzled the feral urge, a predator caged within her. She let it whet its appetite—though nothing more—in cases she felt the need for a new garment. Then she would go out and acquire some money. This could not be helped; her dear father simply did not make enough and would not let himself admit this.

Years ago, Lilit had told him that when she was old enough she would financially contribute by doing chores for people. Her father had said nothing and his face remained expressionless, yet she could read the hurt and chagrin in his vital lines. Lilit had dropped the matter, never to bring it up again.

Lilit took the coins and closed the small money box. She made to go; however, a nagging thought stopped her in her tracks. Lately, she had noticed a subtle change in her adoptive father. A certain lightness to his step, evenings spent away from home, and a twinkle in his eyes when he was lost in thought. These minute details clawed at the edge of her awareness, a persistent itch she couldn't ignore.

Lilit reached out with her senses to delicately probe the intricate web of his vital lines. Intertwined with the familiar threads of warmth and steadiness, she found new strands of anticipation and a tender yearning that seemed to dance just out of reach.

She delved deeper, her meta abilities extending with careful precision into his mind. It was not something she often did, respecting the sanctity of his private thoughts.

Lilit navigated the pathways of her father's memories until she encountered an unexpected imprint. Amid the familiar tapestry of his subconscious was an image of woman, startling for its clarity and depth. She recognized the face of *Vyre Angora*, the daughter of the Iskandar, whom she'd seen from a distance a few times over the years.

Lilit cautiously withdrew. She sat there for a long time, rocking back and forth, hugging herself.

The betrayal stung—the knowledge that her father had allowed someone else to glimpse the hidden depths of his heart, depths Lilit had thought were reserved for her alone. Could this woman insinuate herself into the fabric of their life? The thought of being pushed aside to make room for another, filled her with dread. And what would mother say when she came back that night and learned of it? Now that she thought of it, where was Mother? *Wait, wasn't she at the marketplace? She'd been gone already for hours and years!* Lilit thought. She blinked, feeling disoriented. Then it came back to her: the knowledge that her father had allowed someone else to glimpse the hidden depths of his heart, depths Lilit had thought were reserved for her alone. Could this woman insinuate herself into the fabric of their life? The thought of being pushed aside to make room for another, filled her with dread.

Lilit's chest tightened with indignation and resolve. Indignation at this woman, who threatened to disrupt the delicate balance of her life. Resolve that she would not allow it. In the recesses of her mind, a thought began to crystallize—a glimmer of possibility to reassert control in the face of the new uncertainty that threatened to upend her world.

She took a deep, steady breath. For now, the amphitheatron offered a diversion, a way

to forget—even for a few hours. She scrambled to her feet, pushing the unsettling thoughts into a corner of her mind.

Outside, Norea waited.

The two looked at each other expressionless. She was thankful when Norea and Lilit didn't have to put on the charade of pretending to converse with each other.

Norea fished in her small handbag and took out gold jewelry. Wordlessly, the twins put it on each other. Lilit now sported a ring connecting her ear to her pierced nose, and Norea had her ear connected to a lip ring. Next, they put on matching hooded cloaks.

In truth, there was little reason for both to attend, and one usually took to bed instead. It was as much vanity as anything when they both went out. Or was it the illusion of a company?

As one, they fastened the clasps on their respective cloaks, made half a turn and walked in lockstep, as that was what came naturally to her.

Later, at the amphitheatron, she sat amid thousands of fellow theatregoers. Along with the rest of the audience, she clicked her fingers for approval or swung around a cog rattle for disapproval.

In those moments, she was truly part of the community. Like other spectators she was crying and laughing, moaning and chortling. In those moments, she could forget that she was different from all of them. And that no one must ever know.

CHAPTER 8

“Sargon is late today,” remarked Shammai during a lull in the discussion. The short man was pacing amid the fallen leaves.

Angora glanced up at the mention of his name. Indeed, he was.

A tremor ran through the earth, abating as swiftly as it arose. Such tremors pulsed erratically, save for two each day—one at dawn, one at dusk—as cool breeze flowed across the land. People called these two the world’s breaths: a morning exhale sweeping south, an evening inhale flowing north as night fell.

Over the past week, Sargon had appeared at Tamzin Grove each night, settling at some distance from the small group. He never spoke or offered any comments. They couldn’t tell if he listened to their discussions, or what he might think if he did. Shammai, Assur, and Mede’a didn’t know what to make of Sargon and of the relationship between him and Angora. It was a connection that even Angora herself seemed unable to explain.

Sargon seemed content to wait for Angora, patiently ready to escort her home. Then they would walk hand in hand, say little, quietly enjoying the company of each other. During those times, she had the distinct feeling he was debating whether to share something with her. She chose not to press, trusting he would confide in her when the time was right.

The rustling of leaves underfoot brought her back to the present. She looked up.

“How are things going between you two moon-mates?” Mede’a asked, joining her on the wooden bench.

“Eat straw,” Angora said without heat. “He just walks me home. That’s all.”

“Do you contemplate a more serious relationship with him?” Mede’a meant it as a question, yet something of her disbelief must have seeped through.

Angora scowled at her friend, then had to admit to herself that only a few weeks ago, she would’ve reacted the same to the notion of going out with anyone not of their lineage.

There were five traditionally recognized lineages in Areta: The Svear, with blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin; the Punjabi, with sharp features, broader faces, and thick black hair; the Caledonii, with their green eyes, dusting of freckles, and hair the color of flame; the lithe D’mtian, with their dramatic dark skin and high cheekbones; the Han, with their distinct almond-shaped eyes, small noses, and straight, silky hair.

And then there was a lineage that had no name, came into being in recent centuries, and had nothing to do with outward appearances. For its members, intelligence was the paramount consideration in potential sires, outweighing all other traits. The four of them belonged to it.

“For Marduk’s sake, he’s nothing but a handyman,” Mede’a said, a hint of exasperation in her voice.

Angora couldn’t help it: She smiled in amusement at her friend’s unlikely depiction of Sargon.

Mede’a raised an eyebrow at that. “Has he written under a pseudonym any work I might be familiar with?”

“Mede’a believes that a person’s worth is measured by their published work,” Assur

clarified with a sardonic smile.

“That’s what Mede’a indeed believes,” agreed Mede’a. “And so do all of you.”

“Not every soul is inclined to produce written discourses,” Shammai chimed in, lying on a bench with his arms behind his head.

“Says the man who wrote dozens of treatises by the age of twenty-five,” said Mede’a dryly.

Shammai propped one ankle over a knee and closed his eyes.

If only they knew, Angora thought.

“Here he comes,” said Assur softly.

And indeed, Sargon walked toward them, offering a curt nod as he approached. As had been his habit, he sat down a short way off, leaning against the knotted trunk of a peepal tree.

“*Vyr* Sargon,” Mede’a called out, ignoring Angora’s sudden, rapid hand-talk. In the dim light, Sargon’s gaze shifted toward her. “Shammai thinks that Thalith Na’amat is growing brighter because it’s drawing closer. What are your thoughts?”

This was the first time any of them had tried to draw him into one of their conversations.

They all turned to him.

Sargon studied Mede’a in silence. “I have nothing but questions about it,” he finally said. “However, I would like to hear your thoughts, if you care to share.”

“I don’t find Assur’s comment terribly sensible,” said Mede’a immediately. “I think stars are exactly what they appear to be: dots of light. Now, how can a dot of light—or, I suppose, anything in the kosmos—move?” And indeed, she thought, Thalith Na’amat hadn’t shifted its position in the night sky.

“So, what do you think is causing it to grow brighter?” challenged her Assur.

“Whatever it is, I imagine the very same thing that caused a few other stars to grow brighter in the past,” Mede’a replied. “It seems that once every few centuries there is a sighting of stars brightening.”

“Assur doesn’t seem convinced,” Angora said, noticing his expression. She cocked her head, a playful lilt in her voice. “What troubles you?”

“The records speak of stars brightening over a period of months,” Assur said. “Thalith Na’amat has defied that for decades.” He ran his hand through his hair, a familiar unease rising within him. Thirty years since it had become the brightest star in the sky—and it only grown brighter since. A lot brighter. In earlier eras, many had considered the stars to be nothing but pinholes in a black, solid sky-firmament, letting in light from what some had called the Radiant Expanse beyond. That never made any sense—why would one pinhole emit more light than another pinhole of a matching size? “Well, if this continues, then...” He fell silent.

“Then what?” Angora urged him on. Sargon leaned in, attentive.

The frown lines erased from his face, Assur gave a lopsided smile and shook his head. He had no idea.

Shammai fell into a pensive silence. “Might it not be a rare case of a period of radiance, occurring once every few thousand years, for instance? Such an occurrence could explain why our annals make no mention of it.”

“Ha!” Mede’a exclaimed triumphantly. “Shammai, my noble advocate, has come to our aid.”

Shammai rose from his seat and executed an elaborate bow. “The pleasure is always mine, my fair *vyre*. That being said,” he continued, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, “without knowledge of the nature and origin of this radiance, we’re left in the dark, if you’ll pardon the

pun.”

Mede’a pouted at this.

“Consider how potent the source of light must be,” Angora mused.

“Why do you say so?” asked Assur.

Angora’s dark, tousled hair framed her face, which was lost in thought. “Regardless of one’s vantage point, the stars maintain their constant positions in the sky. This suggests they must be extremely distant from us. Why, they may be hundreds of miles away!—and yet, we can still see their celestial radiance. It’s astonishing, when you stop and think about it.”

“Indeed,” said Assur. “The more I contemplate the stars and their essence, the more perplexed I become.” He glanced up as Angora climbed up to her feet. “Departing so soon?”

“I leave for Maganot at dawn,” she replied.

They all rose to bid each other farewell.

“At least I drew more than a grunt from your man,” Mede’a murmured under her breath as she hugged Angora. “He’s scarce with words, which pairs well with that brooding allure of his. Quite the specimen, that one.”

A giggle escaped Angora’s lips, and she hugged her friend back.

Mede’a’s fingers danced quickly where Angora could see them. *Are you going to ride him?*

Heat rose in Angora’s cheeks. I’m not going to discuss this.

Mede’a’s eyes sparkled with mischief. It’s not that complicated. Grasp the serpent in your hand, feel it swell and pulse with life—and he’s yours from that point onward.

Angora felt a flush creep up her neck at the crude imagery. She glanced involuntarily at Sargon. *That’s not how it’s between us*, she signed back, but there was a hesitation in her

response, a renewed awareness of the quiet power smoldering at a female's fingertips.

"What silent sorcery do you two weave now?" Shammai demanded.

"Merely discussing the charm of evening breezes," Angora exclaimed brightly. And Mede'a smiled innocently at him.

It had all been banter and no bite, which the two women had shared since their adolescent years. Too vulgar for them to verbalize out loud, somehow it felt different when exchanged via the hand-talk. Leading lives of unintended abstinence, their sexual exploits had been mostly limited to make-believe and backchat. Mede'a had some experience. Angora, none to speak of.

But Mede'a had no idea about Sargon. Angora suspected that if Mede'a were to learn of his role in the water clock's modification and the reason behind his dulled seeds—his independent streak and dreams of human flight—she would change tune and actively try to prevent her from seeing him.

Mede'a was endlessly fascinated with intellectual ideas that were either abstract or esoteric. However, like all of her acquaintances, she was conservative at heart and would have recoiled in horror from anything that could've threatened to change the way of their world.

Sargon nodded in farewell, and together with Angora headed out, while Mede'a escorted home the two men, Shammai and Assur.

The narrow alleys lay nearly deserted at this weekday hour, bathed in the violet veil that marked the first four hours of night. Powellite, embedded in the limestone-pavements, glowed in yellow-white, and scheelite stone shimmered bluish-white on building corners, lending an otherworldly aura to the town. Meanwhile, street lamps of carved wood and frosted glass radiated warm yellow as the lime inside of them responded to the intense heat of hypo-red glow, focused by reflectors.

As Angora walked next to Sargon, her arm intertwined in his muscular arm, she realized that she'd felt embarrassed by his laconic answer earlier, that a part of her was hoping he would've contributed more to the conversation. She wanted to prove Mede'a wrong. Moreover, she wanted to draw him out for her own gratification and for the sake of the budding relationship between the two of them.

In fact, on multiple prior occasions, she'd tried to engage him in discussions around ideas, the only discussions that were of interest to her—and failed. He would only offered clipped responses, and she would then drop silent. Yet, their silence held an unspoken intimacy, a tender awareness of each other.

Angora and Sargon heard the low, guttural sighs and sharp gasps before they rounded the corner. There. Entangled amid the gnarled, exposed roots of an ancient banyan tree on the riverbank. There. A paper lantern swayed from a low branch, casting restless pools of light against the rushing water's gleam. There. Angora saw them, and her breath snagged in her throat at the spectacle: a colossal young woman was sprawled on her back and resting on her elbows, head thrown back. Her thick tresses, a tangled mass splayed behind her, were slick under the erratic beam of light.

She was nude. Her legs propped wide, and between her full thighs a compact, muscular man was moving with fervor. Her breasts, unbound, heaved upward, a steady, mesmerizing rhythm against his thrusting. The man was stripped bare and his skin shimmered with exertion. His gasps, choked and ragged, turn muffled as his faced was now pressed down into the swell of her breasts.

The young tall woman let out a loud moan at something the man did. Her thirst palpable, her cheeks were flushed from desire and the thrill of having one man deep in her grasp. With one

large hand, she smacked his reddening, sculpted buttocks, accompanying the act with sharp cries of encouragement—not that the man required any.

Angora couldn't look away. Disgust twisted in her gut, warring with a jarring heat sensation that flared at her core and was ignited by the raw display of unbridled desire. For a single heartbeat, she envied the sirena's uninhibited embrace of her ardor, a boldness she had never known.

The man's thrusts grew frantic. Closing her eyes, lips parted, the titaness wrapped her long, powerful legs around his back, engulfing and locking him inside. The man, once a whirlwind of motion, was now immobilized. Her inner muscles clenched and squeezed around him; it was an undulating, relentless pull from deep within her, accompanied by breathless moans rising into sharp cries. Her fingers dug into the man, drawing from him ragged gasps that rose in intensity. His glistening body turned taut, muscles corded—until a final tremor rippled through it, followed by a shuddering groan.

Sargon felt a touch of frenzied energy, a flush creeping up his neck. He glanced at Angora, her face a jumble of emotions. The sight of the sirena and her brazen power stirred him. He wrenched his eyes away, focusing on the pavement.

Hot envy, mixed with raw need and a territorial instinct shared by women in Areta, surged through Angora as she noted his wandering attention. She felt an urge to grip him down below, to wrap a fist around his core—to remind him with a single, searing squeeze whose touch, whose body he belonged to. With a barely audible growl, she dug her nails into her palm. The sting served as a harsh anchor, pulling her back. Did he really belong to her? She never did summon his gale. She never did envelop him in her glow. And he did not don a marking ring, signaling to other women not to make advances. Clarity returned to her. These things aside, what

she and Sargon shared was something more tender and meaningful than this raw, grasping need.

The young titaness drew in air and opened her eyes, trails of sweat snaked down her powerful thighs, glistening like slick mercury under the lantern light. Eyes still dark with lust—evidently unsated—she spotted Sargon. Her gaze raked over him and then turned into a smoldering beacon—causing his breath to falter and his throat go dry. The sirena regarded Angora, assessing, a silent challenge on her face. The younger woman now had one hand gesticulating, fingers moving nimbly.

Flushed, Angora stepped in front of Sargon. She wrapped one firm arm around his waist, drawing him in and marking him as her own. Her eyes locked with the sirena's, glinting, a storm brewing in their depths.

The young woman backed down. She redirected her attention to the man she had between her thighs. A series of slow, light swats landed on his backside. And a few heartbeats later, his body strained against the titaness, responding instinctively to the primal rhythm she set. Then he moaned—as, twisting her body, the sirena's long tongue found his mouth and slid in, reigniting a spark where embers still smoldered. His eyes, just moments ago glazed over, now set on her alight with renewed hunger.

A fresh wave of revulsion and envy mingled within her, and she looked away. “This thundercunt,” she muttered under her breath a dozen paces later, face still burning. Throughout one's life sex was about love and intimacy and bonding and play and vulnerability. However, in those heady months following one's declared adulthood, sex was in its distilled form. And that what the sirena intuitively was doing, she realized, extracting the man's essence and pulling it into her.

Sargon cleared his throat. ““Thundercunt’?” he said, now sporting a slight smirk tinged

with surprise. “I didn’t think you even *knew* this word.” Earlier, Angora had nudged him close, her arm a vise around his waist. The heat of her body, the urgency of her grip—what woman could he ever fully fathom? Be that as it may, Angora had wanted him near. And, he had to admit, it was gratifying to feel so irresistible.

“You’ll be surprised what words I know,” she murmured darkly. “Do not have such a flippant attitude about that encounter,” she said irritably as his grin turned to a quiet chuckle.

He shrugged. “It’s just a man takes on an attractive woman, the two sharing a moment.” He glanced back at the figures in the distance. After about two thousand years of exclusively mating with the most fetching male specimen, practically *all* people on Areta were fair-looking in some fashion or another.

When a man takes on an attractive woman? Is that what he thought had happened? Amused and somewhat irritated, Angora stopped herself from shaking her head. Without her company, he would have had as much control of the situation as an insect flying in the vicinity of a Venus Flytrap. And that sirena seemed to possess an insatiable hunger, one that could outlast a succession of willing men.

It seemed he was like any other man she’d ever heard talk about sex. They all proclaimed that it was the men who really took the initiative, or they could stop it at any time—they just didn’t want to. And they all professed to love performing oral favors or being choked out with the female clamp—or at least made light of it. What any of them genuinely thought they kept private. If there was something to admit, she doubted they would even admit to themselves.

“That was female hand-talk back there, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t respond; she just kept on walking.

“What did she say to you?”

Angora sighed. “Just stupid stuff young women are prone to come up with.” She glanced at him. “Oh, very well,” she said, resigned. “She told me she could snatch my man had she minded. It’s a classic insult, suggesting I wasn’t enough of a woman to hold onto my man.” In fact, beyond telling her she was past her sexual prime and “that her man had seen bigger fires”—that one stung—what the girl hand-signalized about Sargon was more specific and explicit than that. Most positions and configurations had a sign, and that one particularly irked her.

“And what was your response?”

“Oh, you mean the pointed middle finger? I was just commenting on that.”

Sargon laughed. “So those are the kind of things females hand-talk about.”

“This and making lewd comments when men are around and are not supposed to overhear.”

“And here I fancied that female hand-talk was reserved to lofty thoughts.”

“I wish!”

They grinned at each other. They were both aware of the reason for the emergence of hand-talk. However, it was impolite to mention it in a mixed company. It had started as a way for girls to gossip and comment to each other in real time on would-be sires. Not that this was ever applicable to Angora. Even in her late teens, she had been too timid and fearful of these visceral interactions. If anything, her timidity had grown as the years went by.

On a number of occasions, she had wanted to invite him to her residence, yet couldn’t muster the courage. As a woman, she’d been the one expected to initiate intimacy, nevertheless, she was afraid to unleash her inner beast and more so, unleash his.

As they crossed an arched wooden bridge spanning the warm river, a flicker of silver caught Angora’s attention. A school of flying fish burst from the water, their brief flight

shimmering in the moonlight.

That brief encounter with the titaness and her mate jolted the serenity of their nightly routine and seemed to have shifted something in their relationship. Loosened something. The night air thrummed with unseen insects, their chorus mirroring their restlessness.

Sargon gave her an appraising look, something Angora had noticed him doing more than once those past few nights. “There is something I’ve been contemplating sharing with you—” He stopped when he noticed her looking around frantically, and he raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

She looked back at him, confusion and apprehension in her eyes. “I’ve caught sight of a tall girl a stone’s throw away from us.”

“What?” He checked the bridge behind and their immediate surroundings. “There’s nobody here,” he finally said.

“What in the pits of damnation is going on?” she hissed, her alarm turning into anger as she scanned the alley again. He was right; there was no one around.

“You say it’s a tall girl. Did you get a good look at her?”

She nodded. “Amber, smoky eyes, coppery-brown skin, smooth black hair....” Her voice trailed off when she saw a flicker of incredulity crossing his face. “What is it?” she asked.

“Well, your description matches that of either of my twin daughters.”

“Your daughters?” Angora looked at him, dumfounded at the thought that one of his daughters might be stalking them.

He was still frowning. “I don’t know what to make of what you said. As for my daughters, why in blazes would one of them be tailing us? And how could she just disappear into thin air?”

Those were good questions. She didn’t know what to make of it any more than he did.

And it hit her that he'd never brought up his daughters in their conversations. Well then, he didn't talk much about anything, really.

“Have you seen her before?” Sargon asked. He appeared nettled, as if affronted by something.

“Well, last night, as a matter of fact—as we were walking together.”

“Why didn't you say anything yesterday?”

“It happened in a flash, and I, well, I thought I must've imagined it.”

They looked at each other, both unsure what to say next.

“Sorry, what did you start saying earlier?” she asked.

But Sargon just shook his head. “No, it's nothing,” he said weakly.

The moment was gone, she could feel it. Whatever it was. He was going to tell her something, but then the opportunity was lost.

And what to make of the tall apparition with amber eyes who had glared at her?

CHAPTER 9

“Why is your father named Yessod Olam?” Sargon asked a few nights later as he was escorting Angora home. “What kind of name is *that*?”

She burst into merry laughter. Merry because of the question. Merry because he finally initiated a question, notably after a few days in which he’d seemed to have retreated into himself during their time together.

“He’s known by the title of his defining work,” she told him, awarding him with a friendly grin.

Beneath the russet moonlight, his gaze was curious. “He’s known by the title of his book?”

“It’s common among distinguished scholars; their names often become synonymous with their seminal publication,” Angora explained. “And one doesn’t become an iskandar without first making a significant contribution, often through a renowned body of writing.” Eighteen years earlier, an Iskandar had retired, the Sanhedrin convened, and her father’s name came up on a shortlist. He’d told her about the grueling days-long interview, and her thoughts drifted to his uncharacteristic sentimentality in recent months, the way his eyes had moistened as he spoke of her accomplishments.

“What’s his real name then?” Sargon asked, breaking her reverie.

“Talmi.”

“This book of his, what is it about?”

“It explores the most fundamental building blocks of matter, the very essence of the physical world.”

They took a few more steps, passing dome-shaped terrariums nestled in nooks, their bioluminescent fungi casting a soft, magnified glow across the dark alley. “You’re talking about atomos,” he said, surprising her.

“I did not realize you’ve delved into natural philosophy,” she said softly.

“I haven’t; though I’m familiar with the notion that all objects in the physical universe are reducible to a common element.”

“Well, yes.” She glanced at him, unsure how far his interest extended into this esoteric topic. “An opposing school of thought argues that everything is simply a manifestation of energy. My father developed a novel hypothesis, atomic transiency—as it came to be called. It proposes that fleeting bursts of energy solidify into atomos.”

Sargon looked at her searchingly, as if trying to ascertain something for himself. “What about you?”

“How do you mean?”

“What is your field of interest?”

She smiled mischievously and pushed back a loose tendril of hair off her cheek. “You mean beyond my passion for restorations of ancient artifacts and the study of languages in historical sources?” He nodded. “Aetiologia,” she told him. “More narrowly, the study of chance and randomness.”

Again, the appraising, searching look from him.

He said, “I assume that at some point you’ve delved into the question of the world’s origin.”

Cosmogonia? Sargon was just full of surprises tonight. “No, not really.” She then hurriedly added, “I’m familiar, of course, with the notions of emanations and of the Eleatic School, arguing that—”

He made a cutting motion with his hand, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. “I didn’t mean anything as esoteric as that. Look,” he said, his voice low, “if I were to ask you to accompany me to a place far out of the way and disrobe, what would you think?”

She stared at him, but he seemed dead serious. “I’d think there was a good reason for that,” she said in a measured tone. To her mild surprise, Angora realized she felt no apprehension; she trusted him.

Sargon pursed his lips, and they continued walking.

“What is it?” Her heart skipped a beat. “You found some ancient writings, didn’t you?”

“No.” He turned to her, suddenly angry. “No ancient writings—gristmill for discussions, debates, and hypotheses.” He pulled her close. “You and your friends speculate about the nature of the world. Do you want a real glimpse?” he demanded harshly.

She flinched with a sharp intake of breath as if physically jolted. This existential question he threw at her felt shockingly real, unsettlingly so. Her instincts screamed for retreat to the sanctuary of the familiar. It was a threshold she wasn’t prepared to breach. It was time to bid him goodnight. It was going too far, taking her somewhere she dared not tread. She should forget this conversation. She—

She gave a small, hesitant nod, and a tremor ran through her.

“All right,” he said, a touch of surprise in his tone, “I ask for your pledge of secrecy about what you’re about to hear and see.”

“What did you uncover?” she asked, throat tight.

But he just looked at her. She remembered. Very well, then. She pressed a hand to her forehead, lips, and then her heart. With this gesture, she vowed silence, come what may; the pledge was absolute.

Sargon said, “You know about the circumstances in which I was deemed too inquisitive for my own good,” he said. “Well, what I’m about to share with you will surely get one banned and fated to live in isolation.”

“Oh,” she said in a small voice.

He halted and faced her. “Look, we can end the conversation right now. You won’t be any wiser, though you also won’t have to grapple with knowledge that may put your future at risk.”

Angora exhaled audibly. “The pursuit of knowledge and truth define me,” she heard herself say, and knew it to be true. A part of her cowered and wished to run away, yet a larger part felt compelled to move toward the unknown.

He studied her for a moment, a glint of approval in his gray eyes, then motioned for her to follow him.

The only sounds were the distant call of a night bird and the hushed murmur of the wind as it swept through the deserted streets. Gradually, the alleyways gave way to open spaces and date palms as they neared Sargon’s dwelling. They quickly retrieved two shovels from his home and, with an oil lamp swinging from a pole, set off on a trail leading into one of the wilderness preserves.

Angora turned wildly around, causing Sargon to stop. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she said faintly, “I thought I saw—” She swallowed. “I thought I saw that young woman again.”

He scanned the darkness. His brows creased, and he glanced around uncertainly. After a moment, they resumed walking, their footsteps hushed on the moonlit dirt road. A sea of grassland soon surrounded them.

“Some years ago,” Sargon said, “I drilled in search of water.”

She glanced at him, startled. Why in blazes would he dig in the dirt to find water? His way of thinking at times was so unusual, so *strange*.

He must have guessed what she was thinking. “You don’t believe there’s water beneath the surface, do you?”

Angora shrugged. Why would she, if all they’ve ever found was dirt?

His eyes twinkled. “You surely don’t deny that some of the rain during the monsoon season is soaked by the soil.”

That was obvious enough. She nodded curtly.

“Then what happens?” he prompted her.

“Well, you get wet soil.”

“Where does the water go—”

“Evaporation.”

Again that hint of a smile in his eyes. “All of it?”

She looked at him, unsure.

He persisted, “What if some of the water doesn’t evaporate and instead trickles deeper— year after year, century after century? Is it possible that some water is accumulating to form an

underground lake?”

She stole a glance at the ground beneath her feet, a shiver running down her spine. Debating distant cosmic mysteries was one thing; the very earth they tread upon? That was a thought too close for comfort.

Sargon grinned savagely. “Surely you don’t believe in the underground world of the dead.”

“No, of course not,” Angora immediately said, yet she felt uneasy. They all grew up on stories of the Tartarus. In a society that spurned the notion of the supernatural, Tartarus stood as an anomaly, a bedtime story that never seemed to lose its hold on people. It was passed on from one generation to the next. No one dug too deep into the ground, and that was that.

“So I started boring yard after yard—”

“Wait,” she interrupted him. “How did you bore ‘yard after yard’?” It was so...unsettling. No one dug deep.

“You know those auger poles. Attach a bar, turn, and press down.”

Indeed, she had seen such contraptions before. Still, how did he go past the first yard—when the pole was fully embedded in the soil?

He read the question in her eyes. “I kept adding five-foot extension poles.” A rueful grin crossed his face. It was backbreaking work. He’d bored a few feet, pull the rig up using a treadwheel crane, pry the dirt out of the auger head, and then lower the entire thing back down the shaft. Time and again.

“You dug that deep?” she asked in disbelief.

“Deeper, actually.”

In spite of herself, she shivered again. She wetted her lips. “What *did* you find?”

He smiled thinly. "Dirt. Yard after yard after yard."

"Oh," she said. So he'd found neither the underground world of the dead nor water. Relief and disappointment coursed through her. But then again... There had to be more to it, or else he wouldn't be telling her this or walking with her to some unspecified location in the middle of the night.

"I bored fifty feet into the earth. It took me two full days. Started doubting there'd be any water. I was ready to give up." He shook his head, as if still amazed at his own stubbornness. "Perhaps I just couldn't admit defeat; for one reason or another I just kept on going." He paused, seemingly listening to the distant calls of nightjars. "For two weeks, I labored from dawn to dusk, and I reached a depth of two hundred feet—I could tell, as I used forty poles by then. I dug out clay and sand and a bit of rocks. The colors of the soil changed, yet no water. This is when I had enough and quit. A week later, however, I was back at it."

She realized she was biting her lower lip. She let go of it.

Sargon said, "Another forty feet down, and I struck water." He looked at her closely as he said that and noted the astonishment in her eyes. "One moment I was boring through sand, and the next, what must have been close to a thousand pounds of connected series of brass poles just plunged into water—an underground pool, of sorts—then it hit something that sounded like metal."

So there was water deep down! Sargon had been proven right. Angora regarded him with a trace of awe. She dimly thought it puzzling that no one had thought of it before. But then again, whenever someone thought at all about great depths, it was Tartarus that came to mind.

She thought some more. Water down below: an underground lake.

"But what was your plan?" she asked in a subdued voice as they kept walking on. "I

mean, the water might as well be on another world. How were you going to get it up?”

“I had some ideas about that,” he said guardedly.

Up until that point, Angora was so caught up in the story, she didn’t stop to think about the implications of obtaining water from underground. Now it dawned on her. Outfits throughout Areta delivered water from the river, notably to those farther out and the elderly. What was to befall them had—

Something clicked into place, and she looked up. “Did you say you hit *metal*?”

“I did.”

“But what does—” she started, her face betraying confusion and apprehension. “Metal?”

He gave her a brief look of acknowledgment. “The pipes plunged through the layer of water—and then hit bottom. The sound was unmistakable: the clang sound of metal hitting metal.”

A pure metal deposit beneath an underground lake. What an astounding discovery!

“Before the authorities caught wind of it, I shut down the shaft. Water, metal... the whole blasted thing,” he said, a touch of bitterness in his voice. “Yet, metal at the bottom of this underground lake was so unexpected, so *disturbing*, well, I had to find out.”

“Find out what?” she demanded, pulse racing.

“Find out if it meant something.”

“And?”

He gestured. “I excavated another hole in an entirely different location.”

She blinked, trying to process this. “You dug a *second* shaft?”

“That’s where I’m taking you. It’s not far now.”

Angora stopped and stared at him. He merely looked back, expressionless. She hesitated,

then fell into step beside him.

Minutes later, Sargon halted. They were in a remote area with sparse wild grass dotted with acacia trees. "I hid it, and for more than one reason," he said, unbuckling the leather straps that held the shovels. He handed one to Angora and walked over to a nondescript spot that looked no different than any other. Sargon pointed, and the two of them unfolded the shovels and started scooping out dirt.

Within a few minutes, the shovels hit something hard. Sargon knelt and with his hands brushed away the dirt, gradually uncovering a trapdoor. He fiddled with its latch. There was a click, and a moment later, Sargon was pushing it open. He lowered the lantern he'd been carrying, peered inside, and sent Angora a satisfied look. "It looks just as I left it ten years ago," he said and climbed down, disappearing from view. She hesitated, then peeked in.

Under the dim lantern light, she could make out stairs carved into the earth. She followed and found herself in a small room with a circular shaft in the center. "Unlike the first one, this borehole is wide enough for a person to enter," Sargon said. Angora walked over and examined the opening. She couldn't tell how far it went; the oil lamp threw light only on the first ten feet or so.

"Couldn't you have dug it wider?" she muttered, still gazing down.

"Most inconsiderate of me to not have considered you when I excavated it," he said dryly.

In response, Angora made a gesture with her hand.

"I don't know hand-talk."

"I was counting on that," she said darkly.

He gave her a smile that set her teeth on edge, and he proceeded to remove his sandals

then his shirt.

“What,” Angora demanded, “are you doing?” But then she recalled what he’d told her. It was going to get hot and humid down there, and some diving was involved, too. She looked at him, and he looked back. “I’ll remove the dress later, if needed,” she finally said, and he merely nodded.

Sargon lowered himself onto a wooden platform suspended within the shaft by pulleys. He mounted a saddle seat, placing his feet on pedals connected to a geared mechanism. Angora handed him the lantern, which he secured in a holder overhead. He then helped her onto the platform. Their bodies were close together in the narrow shaft, leaving her to wonder if there would even be space to turn around if she wanted to.

As Sargon began pedaling, the pinions engaged the rack. The clicking of the gears punctuated their descent.

“Whatever you do, don’t let your body brush against the shaft,” he warned her, glancing warily at the rough, rounded walls. “As I bored ever deeper, I tightly packed the sides with earth to prevent a collapse. All the same, let’s not find out how sturdy the walls are.”

She shuddered as she thought this through.

They kept descending, the darkness lapping at the small pool of light that surrounded them. Humid air clung to her skin, growing heavier with each turn of the gears. With each click of the mechanism, her ears strained against the silence, desperate for a sign that the walls weren’t closing in.

About fifteen feet down, panic seized her. “I can’t breathe!” she gasped, clawing at her throat. “Take me back up!”

Sargon reversed gears and pedaled briskly, raising them a few yards up, and the sharp

tang of mindless terror receded. He wrapped his arms around her as she sobbed and gasped, until she pulled back and regarded him through reddened eyes.

“It affected me the same way,” he told her, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. “And frankly, until now, I wasn’t sure if it would affect others.”

Her face registered surprise. Next she looked daggers at him. “Thunder and fury! And you didn’t think to tell me this!?” Her voice rose with each word, ricocheting off the surrounding walls of the passage.

“You’re right, I’m truly sorry,” he said and lowered his head. “I thought that my presence next to you would have lessened it considerably.”

She stared at him, torn between indignation and understanding. “You should’ve given me a choice.” She struggled to keep her voice steady.

“You’re right,” he said.

For a moment neither of them said anything.

“I believe I know why this happens,” Sargon said, eyes back on her. “I’ll explain myself later.”

“There’s no ‘later,’” she said with heat, her voice rasping. “I am *not* going down that shaft again. I felt like I was dying.”

Angora took several shaky breaths, her large eyes seeking answers in his. “How did you endure it? You spent weeks digging... not just passing through.”

Sargon looked away, when he looked at her again, his face was composed. “It’s possible to get used to it after a fashion.” He folded her up in his arms, and she felt the warmth and firmness of his body. “After fifty feet, the phobia abates,” he murmured against her hair.

She held onto him, and he whispered to her of his own struggles with the terror and how

he'd overcome it.

She drew back, dread still evident in her eyes, yet a spark of resolve now shone through.

"Just close your eyes," he told her. As she nestled close to him again, she felt the rhythmic motion of his pedaling. And true to his words, the primal fear began to recede some time later, as they descended deeper.

Bit by bit, they journeyed down the dim shaft, the temperature rising from typical warmth to a stifling heat. Lower and lower they went, the rhythmic clicking of the gears filling the silence. She tried not to dwell on the tons of earth pressing in around them, focusing instead on the reassuring rise and fall of his chest beneath her cheek.

There was no warning. One moment she stood on dry wood, the next, water swirled around her ankles.

"We've reached bottom," said Sargon. He locked in the gearing mechanism.

The air hung thick and heavy. Angora could almost feel the weight of the earth above them, an oppressive reminder of the incredible depth to which they'd descended.

She removed her dress and folded it, but suddenly felt self-conscious. No one swam with clothes any more than anyone took a shower with them. Yet moonlight swims, which she'd done on multiple occasions, felt different.

Sargon was looking elsewhere, presumably giving her a measure of privacy. All the same, she decided to stay with her smallclothes on. She grabbed onto the little support frame and lowered herself into the water, careful not to rock the little platform. The water was decidedly warm, pleasantly so.

Standing, the water was at her shoulder level, offering a measure of privacy.

The surface underneath her feet felt slick, unnaturally so and oddly less warm than the

surrounding water. He joined her, also wearing his smallclothes. He pointed downward. “This is metal, Angora. This is what I ran across at the other site. Metal.” Under the dim light, she could see the surface underneath her feet with the unmistakable glint of a silvery metal.

The hush was profound. Aboveground, there were always sounds: tree branches sighing, distant conversations, or buffalos’ snorts and grunts. Down at the bottom of the world, however, only the soft ripple of water was heard whenever they stirred about.

“Do you feel it?”

“Feel what?” she asked.

“The vibration.”

She started to shake her head, but then she noticed it. The metallic surface they stood on emitted almost imperceptible vibrations.

Angora was bewildered. “What does any of these things mean?” Why was the metal surface under her feet so smooth? How was it possible?

“You’ll figure it out soon enough. First, dive in and feel around.”

She gave him a questioning look, nevertheless acquiesced, allowing him to string a rope around her chest and under her armpits. “Give the rope a yank when you can’t hold your breath much longer, and I’ll pull you back into the shaft.”

“How far does it go?” she wanted to know.

“Just go as far as you can,” was the only thing he said.

She dived in and then moved on her hands and knees, as Sargon instructed her to. A weight strapped around her waist kept her from floating up.

When she felt she couldn’t stay underwater much longer, she tugged and almost instantly felt him drawing her back. Angora came out gasping and taking deep, urgent breaths.

“Well?” Sargon asked.

“It just keeps on going.”

He snapped his fingers “Exactly,” he said. “Just let *that* sink in. If you dig deep enough, you hit a metal surface that just goes on and on.”

She wanted to talk about it, to process this. But he wasn't having any of it. “You were turning a bit around; I need you to go in a straight line.” Sargon glanced at a ring coming out of the wall. He obviously had installed it to orient himself. “This time I want you to go this way.” He pointed toward it.

“I could swim underwater much faster than crab-walk,” she protested.

In the dusk she could see him smile. “I need you to feel the bottom, though.”

She dived in, gave a few strong strokes, and then settled on walking once again on knees and hands.

Nothing different was happening, and she was ready to tug on the rope. Angora gave it a few more steps and then felt something: a smooth, rounded protrusion in the otherwise flat metal surface. She touched the area around it and felt another small bump, and then another. She signaled and was hauled back.

“I came across a row of knobs,” she gasped, breathing hard when her head broke above the surface.

“Rivets.”

“What?” She pushed wet hair away from her face.

“Those are rivets,” he repeated.

An image flashed in her mind, and the pieces tumbled into place. “No,” she said hoarsely as cold dread filled her. Everything she had ever known, the very foundation of her

understanding of the world, was crumbling. “No, I cannot accept this.” She looked up, frantic. “Air,” she choked out. “I need fresh air!”

She felt his firm arms around her. “Easy,” he said gently “Easy now. It’s going to be all right in a moment.”

She held onto him shivering and breathing noisily.

She stood there for a long time as he embraced her. “Our world...” she whispered. Then, “Our world...”

“Yes,” he said.

“No. Don’t say that! Don’t you say that!” He felt something wet and hot and salty trickling down her cheeks. She was crying. “Our world...” It came out as more of a soft, mournful wail than anything.

“Yes,” he said again.

For a while neither of them said anything. She clutched him, needing his strength—as her understanding of herself, of everything, unraveled. “It’s a construct,” she said, her voice hollow, as his arm tightened slightly around her. “It’s an artificial environment.”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 10

Sargon began to pedal, and the small platform slowly carried them up.

Angora's mind reeled. She'd touched the very rivets that someone hammered in before recorded history, before the Age of Genesis. Someone who had constructed their world. The memory of an obscure fable about the architektons surfaced. Could that tale have a basis in truth?

Their world was a construct—a creation of unknown beings with unknowable purposes. She'd always assumed that the entirety of existence was their world, Areta. Yet someone had constructed it, someone not of it—but outside it. The implications boggled her mind.

With each click, the platform rose, and the water and the metallic surface faded from view as the inky darkness reclaimed them. They were once again a tiny island of light in the oppressive black night of the deep shaft.

“Who is aware of it? Of any of it?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No one, as far as I know.” His eyes found hers. “The very existence of the phobia felt peculiar. I think that's what drove me to keep boring. The way the dread flared then vanished within such a specific depth band... I became convinced it's something ingrained in our bones to stop us from digging too deep into the earth.”

He paused, a grim smile twisting his lips. “Nonetheless, I wasn’t sure; could’ve been just my own quirk. Now, I’m certain. The bedtime stories of Tartarus, they were meant to scare us, to keep us from exploring the depths. And the phobia, that was the final defense.”

“People weren’t meant to learn of the metal underside of our world, were they?” Angora said. Then she chortled, a hollow sound, strange even to her ears. “The architektons”—the corners of his mouth quirked up, so he’d been familiar with this tale, too—“or whoever was behind it, did not count on someone as stubborn and inquisitive as you.”

“For all we know,” he said, his voice low and gruff, “there have been others, and when they died, their discovery died with them.”

“So, all those years you held onto this knowledge, sharing it with no one,” she said, her eyes filled with tenderness and understanding.

The silence stretched, punctuated only by the steady grind of chains and the rhythmic click of gears as he pedaled. “You asked me why I’d decided to accept your offer to introduce an innovation to the clock. I told you the truth, but not the whole truth. I wanted to find out what you’re made of—with the hope that I could share this finding, and that your insights...” He faltered.

“I am glad you did,” Angora said softly, her fingers brushing against his cheek.

Sargon leaned in, their lips meeting. Next, they were hugging each other in the dark and tenderly kissing.

Later, they lay outside side by side, listening to the rustle of leaves and the flutter of grass. The Milky Way stretched above them, a glittering tapestry in the night sky.

What rested at the bottom of the shaft opened up an avalanche of questions and new thoughts for Angora. Aloud she said, “Lions, leviathans, camels, elephants—are these mere

mythological creatures, or could they be based on actual beasts from a long-forgotten world of origin, their stories carried across millennia?"

She saw him pondering it, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

"Or think of the expression 'beast of burden,'" she said.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you see it?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"What do you reckon is the meaning of this expression?" she asked him.

"Well, it's deriding someone who carries heavy loads."

"But why refer to that person as a beast? Animals never carry burdens. Could that expression have originated in a world different from ours in which animals were employed to carry or drag things?"

He shook his head. "I think you're reaching. No animal would willingly consent, and with pulleys and treadwheels there isn't a need to, anyway. The expression likely stems from the mindlessness of the task."

She admitted to herself that Sargon was probably right. "There are other intriguing clues," she hurriedly said. "Why is the crescent shape a symbol for the moon? Our moon doesn't look like a crescent."

She could tell by the expression on his face that she scored a point with this one.

Sargon studied her, assessing. "So you think that the symbol comes from a time in prerecorded history under a sky of a different world?"

She inclined her head.

For a while, they were content to just look up at the stars.

“Or the expressions ‘annoying as a gnat,’ ‘small as a fly,’ and ‘mosquito’s bite,’” she said, nudging him lightly. “We’ve no *gnats* or *flies* or *mosquitoes*, whatever those things may be. How did these expressions originate? Or should I say, ‘where?’”

Sargon looked thoughtful, clearly considering her points.

Angora wasn’t done, though. “We’ve identified at least four, possibly five distinct languages within the Old Tongues. That kind of diversity is unlikely to emerge in a society like ours, where people have interacted and communicated across the breadth of the land. It makes more sense if those languages originated on a different world, one with multiple isolated populations.” This, she reasoned, could also explain the diverse lineages of their people.

Her reasoning was sound. He had years to reflect on the implications of Areta being a construct, yet he’d never considered the linguistic aspects of it. What Angora said lent much credibility to the notion they were originally from elsewhere. “I’m impressed,” he said.

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. “Don’t be; I didn’t come up with these hypotheses. Until today, they were little more than fanciful speculations among scholars, a few among many, at that. What about you?” she then asked. “Any insights?”

“In truth, not many,” Sargon said. “However, once you accept that this is an engineered, artificial environment, all kinds of things start to make a new sort of sense. The journey of the moon across the night sky, the prolonged wind gusts every seventh day, the perfectly timed seasons—I no longer think those are mere forces of nature—but artificial cycles designed with intent.”

Angora was gaping at Sargon. Yes. Yes, of course, she thought. It was a constructed environment, was it not? Then it occurred to her. “Do you think the apparent rotation of our world on its axis serves a purpose?”

“Without a doubt,” he said instantly. “Though I don’t know what that might be.”

“It’s interesting to speculate whether prior to the chaotic days of the Age of Shoah, the people of our world knew of these things,” she said.

He regarded her. “What do the writings from that period say?”

“Few texts survived from the late Age of Shoah and none from the preceding Age of Genesis. Our earliest substantial writings date a century after the Shoah, once a new world order emerged. No known manuscript references Areta as a construct.”

Her gaze grew distant, lost in thought, then sharpened with determination. “I’m going to comb the ancient writings for any clue, any at all, to shed light on it. I may be able to find something—now that I know what to look for.”

He seemed pleased at that.

Angora took his hand, her eyes searching his. “Sargon, this discovery is monumental. The Iskandars need to be made aware. Do release me from my secrecy vow.”

He stared back at her. “We can’t reveal this to the Sanhedrin.”

“Why not?”

He looked at her in disbelief.

“What do you think will happen if you tell?” he demanded.

“Nothing like what you insinuate. Sargon, you don’t know the iskandars as well as I do.”

“Or maybe I know them better than you,” he said, his eyes hardening.

“How can you be so certain they won’t listen to reason?” she said heatedly.

His voice grew quiet. “Do I need to be sure of it? Is it not enough that there is a real chance we’ll both be banished over this?”

She looked away and remained silent.

CHAPTER 11

A few days later, Sargon made an unexpected visit to the Mouseion during the midday lull, when the vast building was nearly deserted. He came to share with Angora what had troubled him in recent months.

They kissed, and then Sargon pulled back, his eyes taking in the scattered codices and scrolls before settling on Angora. Her pale skin was stark against the rich folds of her maroon gown, and her long hair cascaded in untamed waves. “You’ve barely slept, have you?” he asked, concern evident in his voice.

“No, not nearly enough,” she admitted with a sheepish smile.

“Any leads?” he asked softly.

“I found one reference,” she said, stifling a yawn. “However, it leads nowhere, I’m afraid.”

A glimmer of intrigue crossed his face. “Show me.”

Angora yawned again. She didn’t seem able to stop it. Her relentless search had begun to take its toll; the long hours and intense focus wearing on her. She’d taken some vacation days to dedicate her time to search for ancient references. “All right, since you came all the way.” She led him to a sprawling table.

A scroll, nearly two feet tall, lay unfurled on the table, its manuscript wound around two wooden rollers. Sargon recognized the setup: Each end of the scroll was attached to a roller, allowing independent turning and easy access to any section. The manuscript's panels, stitched together, formed a continuous sheet that, judging by the roll's thickness, likely stretched for dozens of feet.

Angora grasped the polished handles on each roller and deftly navigated them, opening to a large illustration. "The Burning of the Ship festival," she said, moving aside to allow Sargon a better view.

"What about it?" Sargon peered down. "What does this have to do with the world being a construct?"

She offered a halfhearted shrug. "As it turned out, in ancient days they referred to the ship model in the festival as the Ship of the World. Until a few days ago, I thought it described the ship as majestic, the fairest of the fair. But it could be..." She looked up. It sounded silly to even say it.

"You think that the iconic ship in the festival might be a physical depiction of our world," Sargon finished for her.

"Not really," she said, regretting sharing this theory of hers with him. "We don't sail anything. We don't move, in fact." She sighed. Yet this is the only reference I've found so far that may refer to Areta as a construct." She let out a self-deprecating laugh. "It doesn't even look like our world, does it?"

He shook his head. No, it didn't.

Sargon couldn't think of anything to say. "Why this particular drawing?" he asked.

"It's a reproduction of the oldest illustration we have of the event."

He studied it for a while. “The festival seems to have changed since this picture was made,” he observed.

“Through the centuries, the festival evolved, as all things do.” Why again had she shown him this irrelevant illustration?

They peered again at the drawing.

“Can we view the original?”

Angora glanced at him. He was trying to be nice about the whole thing, she concluded. She motioned for him to follow her.

Even at the innermost section of the ziggurat, pleasant light bathed the space, as reflective shafts piped in filtered daylight. The hall they entered housed the works that were least consulted. They walked through the quiet space, their footsteps the only sound.

The hall was currently empty except for Yanai. The frail old man, stooped with age, was a fixture in the Mouseion, his presence likely predating anyone’s memory of the place. As they approached, he was wiping dust from the mosaic of the Festival of the Ship, the very mosaic Angora intended to show Sargon.

“A grand artwork, isn’t it?” Yanai called from his little scaffold, his voice a thin rasp.

Angora chuckled. “Indeed!” She made introductions. “This mosaic must date all the way back to the time of Revival,” she said.

“Can’t tell the tiles that were replaced fifty years ago from the original pieces, can you?”

Yanai cackled, gingerly making his way down a rickety ladder.

“That’s right.” Angora turned to Sargon. “Acid spilled and the paint was stripped away. They had to swap out some of the mosaic tiles.”

Yanai shuffled away, leaving them to their study of the mural.

Eventually Sargon sighed. “I am sorry, I don’t see anything relevant here. You just keep doing what you’ve been doing, something is bound to come up!” He smiled encouragingly, and they both made their way toward the exit.

Angora stopped by the doorway, a quizzical expression crossing her face. “Yanai,” she called out.

From across the hall, the old man turned back, looking at her questioningly.

“You did say it was repaired fifty years ago.”

“Yes, fifty years,” he called back.

“But... the acid spill occurred two hundred years ago.”

“Well, yes. The mosaic was in disrepair for over a century before being restored.”

She pursed her lips. “How did they know what mosaic tiles had what color?” It came back to her now—she’d read about it somewhere, the restoration of the mosaic was delayed due to the loss of the ancient techniques and materials required to accurately recreate the intricate artwork. Alas, in the interim, a freak flood destroyed the related notes.

Yanai cocked his head, as if puzzled by what she said. Then, with a shrug, he resumed his shuffling toward the exit at the far end. His whistle receded in the distance.

Angora’s heart hammered in her chest. With a century gap, there had to be guesswork involved, especially with no contemporaneous designs to reference. She exchanged glances with Sargon. The ship mosaic on the wall looked nothing like their world, yet what if the original had been different? Was the barge-like shape a result of the restorer’s interpretation, or an accurate depiction of the ancient vessel?

“Can we uncover the original?” Sargon asked, his eyes glinting as they returned to the mosaic.

“If not that then at least we should be able to learn what was added later,” Angora replied, swiftly moving to scrutinize the tiles.

She pursed her lips. “I can’t tell the difference.”

She approached a desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a reading stone. “We’ll need to shine some bright light on it.” She looked around, located what she was seeking, and then gestured toward a shelf. Sargon understood. He went over, rummaged around, and returned a few minutes later with a lit oil lamp attached to a burnished funnel-like reflector. He trained the spotlight on the mosaic.

“Yes,” Angora said after holding up the hemispherical lens and examining a few of the colored tiles. “With the reading stone, you can see faint crack lines with patterns that vary enough between the newer pieces and those that are over a thousand years old. Wait here,” she told Sargon. He nodded.

She returned shortly with several large, gridded sheets of paper and a variety of colored pencils.

They began the meticulous process of transcribing the mosaic onto the grid paper, marking and coloring the location and hue of each original tile. The quiet scratching of pencils against the rough paper was occasionally interrupted by their hushed voices as they coordinated their efforts.

“I think this is a replacement,” Angora said, squinting at a cluster of blue tiles. “The crack lines are not that deep.” She paused, her gaze shifting to the surrounding tiles. “Actually, now that I look closer...they have that spiderweb pattern typical of Riverstone pigment. Those fade significantly over centuries, so maybe the blue is original after all.” She examined it again.

This painstaking effort went on for a long while, with them recreating thousands of tiles

on the large sheet of paper. The faint smell of hot oil began to permeate the air as the lamp burned. At one point, Sargon left to fetch some food for them.

Hours later, they were done. With the added tiles excluded, the original form became apparent. It was not complete; nonetheless, there was enough to indicate the original shape. Now they could also see why the restorers had made their additions; the vessel they'd reconstructed on the grid paper looked like nothing anyone today associated with the Ship of the World.

Angora and Sargon stood side-by-side, studying their handiwork. It didn't depict a barge or any recognizable form of a ship. Instead, it showed a thick cylinder suspended horizontally, tilted as if seen from an angle.

Angora felt disappointment surge through her. Those might have been the original tiles, yet they depicted something so unlikely that crucial mosaic pieces must have been absent. The original could have been a barge, as the restoration showed. Blazes, it could have been anything—anything but that massive cylindrical hunk that bore no resemblance to a ship or to their world.

"This may be it," Sargon said, grabbing a ruler from the adjoining table.

"That may be, *what?*" she snapped, disappointment turning to impatience.

"A representation of our world, an outside view," he said, drawing lines on a blank sheet, as if calculating dimensions.

"*This?*" she cried. To her, the gridded image resembled Areta as much as a pomegranate resembled a platter.

His eyes shifted from the illustration to meet hers. "Think about our world. You must've noted there is a gentle curve on the horizon when we look out at the land, yes?"

She leveled a flat, expressionless stare at him; obviously she did. Along with everyone else. "What about it?"

“What if it’s not an optical illusion?” he said in low voice, “What if that curve is the true shape of our world?”

How could it not be an illusion? she wondered, waiting for him to go on.

“Someone once calculated that given the apparent curvature of the land, if it were part of a complete cylinder, the slice of land area, the section we inhabit, would make up about a quarter of the circumference, while the diameter would be 7 miles.”

“So?”

“With our world being 25 miles long, it produces a ratio of 3.57 between length and diameter.”

“Fascinating.”

He ignored her sarcasm. “Angora, this precisely matches the ratio of the diameter to length of the object in the mosaic.”

Now he got her attention.

Sargon continued, “There’s more. The mountain ridge is five miles from the northern edge and twenty miles from the southern.”

She felt her pulse quicken. Her eyes darted to the drawing—to the indentation encircling the cylinder...

“One fifth of the distance to one edge,” he said quietly.

“You’re saying this is a model our world, an exterior perspective?” she murmured, unsure. She studied anew the gnarled cylindrical object in the illustration.

He nodded.

Angora cocked her head as she considered Sargon’s words. The notion of their world curving, the center lower than the edges, defied logic. If the edges were truly higher, water would

pool at the curved surface's lowest point. "If I dropped a ball at the world's edge, it wouldn't roll toward the center. It has been tried. The curvature is an illusion, Sargon; our world *is* flat."

He stroked his chin, mulling it. "Not necessarily," he said after a while. "That assumes there is something below and outside our world, which makes the notion of 'lowest point' meaningful. But if we rest on nothing, perhaps every point along the circumference could be considered the lowest."

Sargon was right, Angora realized, feeling dazed. If she examined a cylinder, could she single out any one point of its interior hull as lower than another? It could've been the same with their world. Why had she never considered this before?

She then said, "Even if our terrain is concave in truth, how is it possible we're inside some sort of cylinder? Above us is open sky."

The question clearly stumped him, then a thoughtful expression crossed his face as he turned to her. "Could it not be similar to those two-way mirrors: clear when viewed from one side, opaque from the other?"

She conceded with a nod. Yes, that was possible.

Areta was a cylindrical world. Such a prospect staggered the imagination.

She turned to him. "So when we reached underneath the layer of soil..."

"I reasoned we're touching the bottom of a flat world," he said, "However, if we reside inside a gargantuan barrel tilted on its side, we must've reached its inner hull."

Yet, as the moments ticked on, a more profound realization dawned. "If the festival ship represents our world," she said, her voice hushed, "then...we're inside some sort of a ship." Her gaze sought his.

Sargon, too, had missed the deeper connection, and the possible true nature of their world

left him speechless. They stared at each other, grappling with the staggering implications.

The silence stretched on until she found her voice again. “If our world is indeed a colossal ship, what are we sailing on?”

Sargon blinked, his mind awirl with this astonishing possibility. He said, “If this is a ship of some sort, then we aren’t sailing on anything, but through. It’s more akin to...” He searched for an analogy. “A fish swimming through a vast body of water.”

Her eyes went round with wonder. “Our world is sailing through the kosmos.”

“A space ship, if you will,” he said. She could hear in his voice the newfound realization with lingering traces of disbelief.

She looked away, trying to process it. Could they be traversing the black void that was the kosmos? This notion rocked her to her core.

But then again... “If we were in motion, wouldn’t we have sensed it somehow?”

Sargon shook his head. “I don’t know if we move or not; however, that’s not much of an argument,” he said. “Halfway down the shaft, you remarked that if we snuffed out the light, you wouldn’t be able to tell if we’re moving. Angora, we don’t sense movement; we sense changes in movement: bumps, jolts, subtle shifts in direction or speed. Constant motion would be undetectable.”

He snapped his fingers as a sudden thought struck him. “The occasional inexplicable minute tremors and shudders we experience daily... Isn’t that what you’d expect in a moving vessel?” He turned to her. “These could be course corrections, turbulence within the kosmic void, or even just routine mechanisms.”

Yes, of course! Angora thought. Excited, she paced about. The clues were tantalizing; just the same, she sought more evidence.

“Angora,” Sargon began, “I wanted to share with you something.”

“I need a moment,” she told him. She closed her eyes, and her mind flashed back to the festival of the ship, a curious celebration whose origins had been lost to time. Its centerpiece was a massive ship suspended in midair by ropes and transported on a wheeled platform.

With the original meaning lost, the festival was likely to have been corrupted through the centuries. She dismissed the revelers and looked for ritualistic aspects, which likely formed its core elements. Small, elevated platforms placed in front of the procession. Did they signify anything?

A delightful feature of the festival was the multitude of nude girls with bodies painted in shimmering metallic hues. Those who chose to stand on the elevated platforms were required to wear peculiar, cumbersome headdresses, each bearing a unique, intricate geometric design. These ungainly adornments seemed less about fashion and more about fulfilling a fundamental role in the festival.

She conjured a headdress in her mind’s eye. Then another, with a different shape. Then another. Then...the next one looked like... Her heart quickened. If she was right, that last design was that of the original headdress. The rest were variants that had emerged later.

Angora opened her eyes and walked up to the giant mural. It had some figures in it. That mosaic was a travel back in time, back to the time of Revival. Likely after the meaning of the festival was lost. Yet, this rendition ought to have been a lot closer to the original, Angora fervently thought, as she looked at the people depicted in the mural.

There! She spotted in the mosaic a rounded elevated platform. A naked female in silver stood atop it, wearing the headdress design she’d hoped for. Yes! Another platform...the same design. And then another.

Angora turned to Sargon. “All the original headdresses are of a six-pointed shape,” she told him. “Stars, those are meant to represent stars.”

“By Tartarus,” he breathed. “You’re right.”

“Clear out the crowds,” she said. “Consider just the bones and sinews of the festival and what are you left with? Star-shaped headdresses atop platforms positioned far apart.”

He exhaled slowly. “The ship’s ritualistic fifty-yard journey is a tiny fraction of the distance between it and the stars. It explains why stars in the sky don’t grow larger no matter how many centuries pass.”

They both studied the mosaic.

Sargon ran his hand through his hair. “Are we to understand that at some point in the future, our world will meet its fiery end?”

“What? Why?” she asked, startled.

“The ship in the festival,” Sargon said, voice low. “It’s engulfed by fire at the end of its journey.”

“Oh.” She’d totally overlooked that. “I assumed the burning was symbolic... a reset, where the cycle of life starts anew. But yes, that is possible.”

Her voice softened in contemplation. “Every journey ends. It could be thousands of years before the ship meets its demise. Or tens of thousands. Why, this could be just the beginning of the journey!”

He hesitated, doubt etched on his face. “Maybe. Look, in recent months, things have been changing. Small changes, subtle changes.” His voice lowered. “That’s why I came today—to share this with you.”

She looked at him, eyes large in her face.

“What kind of changes?” she asked.

“The river flows slightly slower. The nights are a fraction shorter. The tremors feel a bit more pronounced. Vines are growing out more than usual. Bird flight patterns have altered. Not anything that would alert anyone—unless they were looking hard, which I did, ever since Talith Na’amat grew so bright.”

She swallowed. “What does that all mean?”

He scratched his stubble. “I don’t rightly know. It could also be nothing more passing through a turbulent region.” And if not for the brightening star, he would have believed that.

Angora turned to study the giant mural of the Burning of the Ship Festival. It didn’t feel all that festive anymore.

CHAPTER 12

The enigmatic Kadesh Barnea construct hovered one mile high. Directly below, the domed Sanhedrin Hall stood proud, its red granite exterior a bold centerpiece in the vast plaza designed to accommodate the entire population of Areta.

As the daughter of one of the world's seven iskandars, Angora had frequented the august hall over the years. Today, however, was different; she'd been summoned for questioning by the Sanhedrin council. Though each iskandar independently governed their respective district, they occasionally convened as a council to rule on matters of worldwide policy.

Her case wasn't up yet. Restless, she took a seat in the recessed viewing gallery. The balcony-like structure offered an unobstructed view of the proceedings below and the stained glass dome above.

A tall female guardian entered the well-lit circular hall, escorting a short man across the patterned stone floor. The two stepped onto the muted-color rug at the chamber's heart as the massive doors, inlaid with gold and framed in deep blue, swung shut behind them.

The man bowed to the iskandars, who were arrayed in a semi-circle. Awe touched his face as he gazed up at the seven revered figures, each perched with legs folded on tiered daises of polished wood. A carpet, adorned with bronze rivets and the emblems of the seven districts,

flowed down the tiers to the floor.

As was customary, the escorting guardian took a stand off to the side, behind the man. And it was quite a sight. Her hips were a bit below his eye level, each of her tawny, muscular thighs almost as wide as his waist. He could not have been much taller than a lykaia, a rare female strain that bred small and proud.

“Greetings, Your Wisdoms. I’m Balzek, and I recently came of age,” the young man began, pausing briefly before adding with a bashful smile, “I’ve since found myself unexpectedly sought-after by women of towering stature.”

He turned and looked up at the titaness beside him. “How do young women refer to shorter men?”

She looked uncomfortable. “Short men, I suppose.”

“Yes, but there is a distinct term for it among sirenas.”

“‘Hip Hugger,’” she said, coloring slightly.

“Indeed.” Balzek faced the council again. “As you can see,” he said, “for a tall sirena, anyone beyond seven feet, I’d be a ‘hip hugger.’ And with my particular height, the notion hits uncomfortably close to home.”

The woman next to him glanced down then laughed, vastly amused by the sudden realization.

“Your point is taken,” said Iskandar Nishmat, her lips twitching as she fought back a smile.

She’d heard these disparaging terms before and looked the other way. Like other members of society, Nishmat had extended a measure of leniency—indulgence, really—to young women. It had a practical side to it. Their society had been emboldening girls to be brazen and

unreserved as they were to be the initiators of sex with the sires: men whose biological traits they wished to incorporate into their offspring.

And some of the girls had been taking it too far, she readily admitted. All the same, it was but a short spurt in a woman's life. A flash in a pan. Those licentious conventions were shed as in subsequent years women entered committed relationships and assumed positions of responsibility in society.

"We understand your concerns," Iskandar Nishmat addressed the young man. "All of us do. Yet, I've noticed you keep glancing toward the Iskandar of Maradam." The elderly woman leaned over her document stand. "Could it be because Yessod Olam shares your gender?"

Balzek looked down, somewhat abashed.

Iskandar Nishmat continued in a mild tone, "I don't know what is more objectionable—your belief that he'll be prejudiced in your favor because he's a man, or your thought that the rest of us on the council are biased against you because we're not."

"Yes, Your Wisdom."

"Know that we strive for what is good for the broader public, regardless of one's sex."

Balzek lowered his head, chastened. "I understand, Your Wisdom."

She gestured, indicating for him to proceed.

"Your Wisdoms, for countless centuries, young women dictated the makeup of generations to come—by sheer virtue of their mating choices and control over their offspring's sex," Balzek said, his rehearsed words delivered with conviction. "Going forward, I ask the council to consider binding guidelines. Otherwise, it's only a matter of time before the 'hip hugger' way of thinking bleeds into our daylight hours." He paused, letting the implication sink in. "It is claimed that in ancient times, men and women were about the same height. I ask the

Sanhedrin to encourage a reversal of the existing trend, to nudge us back toward that historical baseline. Or, at the very least, consider setting differential height limits—a cap—between the sexes.” With a final bow, Balzek concluded his plea.

There was a moment when no one said anything. Up in the viewing gallery, along with a handful of other onlookers, Angora listened with rapt attention, keen to see if the council would take up the petition or summarily dismiss it.

Iskandar Mivneh broke the silence. “As a matter of fact,” she said, her voice conversational, “it’s speculated that until the Age of Shoah, men generally were taller than women.”

Balzek blinked, somewhat taken aback.

“Back then, men’s physical dominance over women became a tool for mass violation,” the Iskandar said. “In the aftermath, we vowed, ‘Never again.’”

That was common knowledge. “Could it not be that our nature has changed in the two thousand years since then?” Balzek offered.

“Unlikely,” replied Nishmat dryly. “Rape has not occurred in countless centuries not due some fundamental change in human nature, but because of taboos, severe consequences, and the fact that, as a rule, a woman can overpower a man.” The greater height of women often conferred a significant advantage in weight and reach, which, coupled with their combat training— forbidden to boys—more than compensated for their typically less aggressive dispositions and men’s greater average strength.

Nishmat gestured. “The last attempted rape, if it can even be called that, ended not in our courts, but in a pyre—and that was centuries ago.” The world was not big enough to hide from the wrath of thousands of women who had spread out in numerous search teams. “The memory

of it is burned into our laws, our flesh, and our daughters' training. All the same," she said, "I find merit in your petition; the council will deliberate it."

Balzek pressed his hand to his heart, bowed, turned, and along with the few spectators filed out. Soon the doors were closed, and no one was in the viewing gallery or at the main hall below except the seven iskandars.

"“Hip huggers,”” the Iskandar of Maganot repeated the words of Balzek. Were the breeding choices made by young women stood to debase men-women relationships?

Yessod Olam pinched the bridge of his nose, a troubled expression flitting across his face. The council had made some half-hearted recommendations for women to conceive at an older, more discerning age. Though it amounted to naught; women kept choosing to conceive shortly after turning adults. Seed scouting appeared to be too exciting a thing to defer for later years. He said, "I fear the cumulative effect of the breeding choices of young women over the centuries has generated disparities between the sexes to the point where degenerate considerations among the sirenas are more likely to come up."

An uneasy stirring passed among the iskandars. Much as their predecessors in recent generations, they'd all noted that.

"You surely remember the Lykaia affair," Yessod Olam said. Indeed, they all did. Some of those audacious females, barely taller than children—fierce, quick-tempered and even quicker-footed, products of the Shoah's legacy—sought to breed a strain of men as little more than 'well-endowed packages,' devoid of all but rudimentary intelligence. That same dangerous arrogance simmered in some girls, fueled by youthful indulgence.

He pressed his fingers together in a steeple, his expression contemplative. "Like all of you, I've hesitated to intervene in young women's mating choices. Yet, I find myself

reconsidering our stance on establishing guiding principles.”

Iskandar Nishmat cast Yessod Olam a sidelong glance. “Given your conviction of impending doom, Iskandar of Maradam, your concern for these long-term prospects is curious.” She never grew tired of highlighting his belief in imminent cataclysm, a threat he improbably insisted originated from outside Areta. As far as anyone knew, there was nothing beyond their world—how could there be?

“I allow the possibility that the ancient prediction is mistaken,” Yessod Olam said dryly. Only the council was aware of that ominous forecast; generations of iskandars had made sure of that. He brought the conversation back on track. “Imposing limits on height disparity among the genders is just a return to a balance that held fast for centuries.”

Some nodded at that, some frowned, others were content to sit in silence and contemplate. Rarely did the Sanhedrin deliberate a measure without considering its impact across generations. And such deliberations were not done in haste.

They would mull over the matter in their respective districts, corresponding with each other via the confidential Letters of Exchange. Typically, these exchanges would continue for months, until a given discussion reached its natural conclusion. At which point, they would come together and render a ruling.

Over time, these deliberations would be added to the hallowed Inscriptions found in every Aretan home, initially as addenda, then integrated into the main text, joining thousands of past Sanhedrin rulings, discussions, and commentaries..

Angora was next. As she was escorted in, her father, Yessod Olam, made his way out, which prompted the other iskandars to rise to their feet in respect. His recusal followed protocol and good judgment.

As the daughter of an iskandar, she had met all of them on numerous occasions. Yet, there was always a gulf between the iskandars and the populace. In fact, she'd come to realize that there was a deliberate distance among the iskandars themselves. Her father had confirmed her impression. It was to avoid "herdthink," he'd told her.

"Angora," said Iskandar Ohr Tova after they resumed their seats, "you understand why you've been summoned."

She met their gazes with a tight smile.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" continued the Iskandar of Tarqash.

"My actions speak for themselves," she replied coolly.

"Who was the person behind the change?" the Iskandar asked.

"I vowed not to reveal their identity."

Ohr Tova sighed. "I see."

Iskandar Nishmat rested her chin on her hands as she thoughtfully regarded Angora. "Do you intent to introduce more inventions at the Mouseion of Maradam?"

"Your Wisdoms, the mouseions were founded during ancient times when bold experimentation was embraced. I want to bring some of that spirit back."

The Iskandar of Admon arched an eyebrow. "During those 'ancient times' the world laid in ruins and there was a great need to rebuild and create. Now, we live in a different era."

"In the Era of Perfection," Angora said, deadpan.

Iskandar Nishmat ignored the sarcasm of the younger woman. "An era where the potential cost of change is likely to outweigh the benefits."

Angora remained silent. She had heard this argument many times before. In fact, until mere weeks ago, she herself had shared that way of thinking.

“We’re treading a fine line,” added the Iskandar of Martzot.

“Is that what it is?” she asked. Before she’d turned adult, it would not occur to her to challenge an iskandar. Yet, her father had since pushed her to apply firsthand thinking to the Sanhedrin’s rulings, too. “I submit that fear of change has kept us in a stasis of mediocrity and stagnation for generations.”

Iskandar Nishmat leaned forward, her eyes glittering. “You mistake caution for fear. What you call stagnation and mediocrity is stability and harmony.”

The Iskandar continued, “Consider your minute-displaying clock. People would be able to coordinate down to the minute. An unalloyed benefit, yes? But then again... new conventions may spring, in which coming one minute past an appointed time will be deemed late. Things may become more...efficient. The very rhythm of life may acquire a different flavor, a mechanical flavor.” She tilted her head at Angora.

Silence. Angora could see the Iskandar’s point, and it was a good point—even if she could also perceive the obvious benefits for craftsmen from precise time-keeping in their meticulous work.

“Where is the room for innovation?” she posed to them. “What if a bit of creative chaos is the fire that ignites?”

“Chaos exists and is beyond our control—sickness, natural disasters.” Nishmat replied. “Must we cultivate more within the sanctuary of society?”

It was at that moment that the gulf between herself and the council became apparent. “Creativity is an end in itself,” she said. “We can’t just consider the outcome; it’s the journey, the act of creation itself, that is just as important. We must have a measure of it in our lives, or we risk losing a fundamental part of our humanity.”

“And so we do,” said Iskandar Yetzir Bree’ah without missing a beat, “in the field of songwriting, literature, and fashion accessories. Yet, creativity and even quality cannot be divorced from morality and the greater good.”

Angora took a deep breath. “These outlets are too tame. Chaos and unpredictability are integral to the human experience. Without them, we stagnate. I submit we ought to embrace the unknown and make space for consequential mistakes and setbacks—however messy.” She pressed on, “It’s in the crucible of chaos that life truly thrives. If we stifle that, what are we left with?”

Silence.

The Iskandar of Maganot folded her arms in her lap. “The council comprehends your position. We’ll deliberate and inform you of our decision in a few days.” With that, she struck the gong with her mallet, signaling the meeting’s end.

CHAPTER 13

Earlier, Angora had arrived at the Hall of the Sanhedrin by a public di-wheeler. Now, she and her father strolled back to Maradam on foot, relishing the sporadic warm breezes. The broad roadway wound through fields of wild grasses dotted with ancient, towering baobab trees, their smooth trunks bare save for the branches at their crowns.

Talmai walked with his arm intertwined in Angora's. Even without his official breastplate and staff, he was recognized by most passersby. They offered respectful bows as he passed. However, sensing his desire for privacy, avoided approaching him for advice or to air concerns. Clearly, the Iskandar was walking in a private capacity.

“And how fares my favorite daughter today?” Talmai inquired.

As always, the little joke—she was his only child—brought a smile to both their faces.

Angora longed to share the proceedings with her father, yet knew he'd frown at the impropriety. Discussing a Sanhedrin case where she was the subject wasn't something they ought to do.

“Father, Balzek's words set me thinking,” she said, as in her mind's eye flashed the outdoor mating scene she'd witnessed a few days earlier. “In the ancient days, mothers desired daughters who could protect themselves better by being physically more imposing. But how long

are we going to dwell under the shadow of the Age of Shoah?” She paused. “Or is there a chapter in our history I’m missing, Father?”

They continued walking. “Perhaps there is,” her father said, “When the concept of sires began, the focus was on lineage. At the same time, with the newfound ability to choose an offspring’s sex...” He paused, one brow arched in that familiar way she knew meant a challenge was coming. “What do you think happened next?”

She considered, then looked up at him. “They chose boys, overwhelmingly.”

A pleased smile crossed his face. “Precisely, my daughter. In those days, men were likely to be in a position to offer physical protection, and they were not potential subjects of rape, which was at the time fresh on the minds of women.”

“But that wasn’t the end of the story.”

“How could it?” The Iskandar glanced at her. “The looming population collapse, a world without enough females... it forced a drastic change. To encourage mothers to conceive girls, they were offered monetary rewards and exemptions from levies. This dire need was the catalyst. And within the broader shift toward female power, including hand-combat training, girls were selected for height in subsequent generations. At the same time, men of a great, bruising hulk were avoided as potential sires for male offspring.”

Angora mulled over what he’d just said. In the past, she’d simply not given this topic any thought.

“Given the combat training and women averaging a few inches taller than men, wasn’t that enough?” she asked, Balzek’s words fresh in her mind.

“It was more than enough. That was the problem.”

She looked at him with a sudden flash of understanding.

Her father went on, “Generally taller and often capable of physically overpowering men, many women found men less alluring. Yet, the intrinsic desire of most women to mate and bond with those more physically dominant remained. Reverting to the old status quo was socially abhorrent, so some prospective mothers went the other way: selecting female offspring to be even more physically imposing and sexually dominant. Sensing this shift, the authorities of that era began promoting increased births of females with pronounced bisexual inclinations.”

Her bisexuality was a testament to this societal shift, Angora thought wryly. It’d led to a world where a small albeit sizable portion of women possessed a striking blend of feminine and masculine traits: soft features and curves alongside impressive musculature and commanding height. This had shaped the society she knew, where women were the majority and formed pair-bonds with both men and women alike.

“The Sanhedrin ought to introduce some binding guidelines, Father.”

He glanced her way questioningly.

She hesitated, then recounted the scene by the river—the sirena’s brazen display of raw dominance, her seemingly insatiable appetite. The memory had seared itself into her mind. “The female was all-consuming, Father. Her desires were an irresistible force that left no room for the man’s will.” Her voice held a note of unease. “How long before submission becomes an unspoken expectation—not just in siring, but in all sexual encounters?”

Talmai’s expression turned pensive. “In those months after coming of age, some females are alight with a fierce intensity, which can overwhelm.” He sighed audibly. “Yet, your concern is just one thread, Angora, in the intricate tapestry that is our social dynamics. To pull on that thread with binding guidelines... it could risk unraveling the whole cloth. I do not dismiss your concerns,” he said, raising a hand as she was about to protest. “I’ll formally propose guidelines

to the council, but I suspect I may find myself standing alone.”

“I’m starting to wonder if it’s truly a matter of principles—or sheer inertia.” Angora’s frustration was palpable. “We cannot allow the fear of change blind us to the erosion of our values.”

Talmi gave her a pointed look, and she met his gaze steadily. Eventually, he chuckled and shook his head, acknowledging in her the same fierce spirit that had always propelled him.

They walked on, each immersed in their own thoughts.

“Father, why have you never encouraged me to have children?” she asked him suddenly. “You always go on about how intelligent I am.”

“And indeed you are,” Talmi said with a crooked smile.

“Well, isn’t that more worthy than passing on a pretty nose, an ample bust, or pure-breed traits?” It was the first time she brought this up.

He squeezed her arm gently, a hint of sorrow in his eyes. “Of course it is.”

“Well then?”

He hesitated then looked away. “Call me selfish, but I wanted you to dedicate your time to your work and not to attend to children’s needs. Your gift is too great to squander in such a manner.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “For all it’s worth, Father, you’re a terrible liar.”

He surprised her by hugging her fiercely.

“I want you to enjoy life, enjoy your work. Life is good, is it not?” he said, his voice somewhat muffled as his head was pressed into her shoulder. “Let’s enjoy the years that are left to us in this world.”

She laughed and they disengaged. “Since when did you become so sentimental?”

He gave her a fond look and said nothing.

They kept on walking.

“I’ve met someone,” Angora said.

For the first time that day, his face lit up in a smile, a true smile. “Does that person make you happy?”

“He does, Father.”

She knew he wouldn’t press her for details, and would respect her wish to share more when ready. Yet, she might never speak of Sargon. If she did, she would have to withhold certain things—details that he would find unsettling, if not outright alarming. She knew her father would prioritize the wellbeing of the community and the world over any personal sentiments.

A disquiet settled over her, an unease that had been growing for months. Her father’s cryptic remarks, his uncharacteristic sentimentality, and his strange insistence that she remain childless... each peculiarity seemed to fit into a pattern, a pattern she couldn’t quite articulate but one that nonetheless left her with a creeping chill.

The last Tishrei dinner had only reinforced her suspicions. Her father was holding out on something, something ominous. And there was only one reason why he would: It pertained to something he’d learned in his capacity as iskandar.

CHAPTER 14

At the stroke of the hour, a long embroidered banner unfurled down the slim, terracotta signal tower, marking the end of the workweek. The signaler, dressed in ceremonial turban, cobalt-blue robe, and ephod shirt, blew a series of notes on a ram's horn. Amplified by a giant bell-shaped attachment, the mournful wail was heard throughout Maradam, heralding the start of Tishrei. The next day and a half offered a welcome change of pace: a chance to sleep in, reconnect with friends, and find time for reflection and study.

As was their tradition, Azai, Elam, and Tamuz paid Sargon a visit that evening. The rich, inviting aroma of cooked meat greeted them—a rare indulgence for Sargon, making the evening all the more special.

Once inside, a familiar ritual unfolded. Tamuz laid down a small pouch, its satisfying clink hinting at the excess coins within—intentionally more than the cost of the meal, meat included. Next, Sargon would invariably protest, saying that no such help was required; he had enough money for a “stupid meal.” They would all nod in agreement. Of course he did. They weren't suggesting otherwise, were they now? But this was their way of contributing. They asked him to accept the token money for their sake, for the pride it gave them all.

When they put things that way, he would relent. After all, how could he let his friends

lose face? Secretly grateful, he would later open the pouch and add its coins to those resting inside the small wooden box.

“Seems that the clock at our local mouseion has undergone a change.” Tamuz chortled as Sargon ushered his friends to the dining yurt. “An improvement, I hear.”

“I’ve heard that, too,” said Sargon dryly and that garnered a new round of chuckles. He raised his hand to forestall any other comments on the topic, then motioned for his friends to sit down.

Tamuz, with a mischievous smile crinkling the corners of his hazel eyes, pulled out a recently purchased deck containing newly crafted cards. He passed them around the table, and his friends examined them avidly—Azai’s weathered fingers tracing the card edges, Elam’s brow wrinkled in thought beneath his unruly mop of curly hair as he commented, speculated, and argued on how the functionality of one card or another would change the game’s dynamics.

Two tall girls, strikingly alike with midnight-black hair, entered the circular tent, wheeling trays. Conversation died. Azai’s hand clenched on a card, Elam blinked rapidly, and Tamuz’s mouth fell open.

“You surely remember Norea and Lilit from last Tishrei eve,” Sargon said with some humor in his voice, somewhat taken aback by the intensity of their reactions.

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Tamuz was the first to find his tongue. The twins were alive...but *how*? “It’s just that...they’re so striking,” he finished weakly.

Norea winked at him. Lilit snickered at that.

“We are so sorry,” Norea said in a soft, languid voice, her eyes wide and innocent. “We did not mean to... startle you.” She held their gaze, and a comforting warmth washed over Azai, Elam, and Tamuz. The tension that had gripped them began to fade, the shock receding. Yet,

questions continued to swirl in their minds, a silent exchange of confusion and wonder passing among them. As Norea brushed against Sargon, the weight of the moment seemed to lift from him, memories of his friends' initial reaction turning fuzzy.

Lilit set two glazed clay pots on the table, and as she removed their conical lids, a tantalizing blend of saffron, cinnamon, ginger, and pepper wafted through the air, teasing their nostrils.

Still in a bit of a daze though recovering, the guests murmured in appreciation at the steaming dish resting on the pitted, dark-brown plate: a colorful medley of golden potatoes, chunks of lamb, carrot pieces, apricot cuts, and tomato slices.

"To complement the warmth of the stew," Lilit said next, lifting a bronze dome with a flourish.

A soft, appreciative whistle escaped Elam at the riot of colors on the large wooden platter.

"At the bottom is a cucumber-yogurt sauce seasoned with garlic and lemon," Norea explained. "We put roasted eggplant, cherry tomatoes, arugula, and sprouts on top."

"It's a shame to eat these two artworks," said Elam, staring at the dishes. "Alas, the smell is just irresistible," he added, almost apologetically. The men chuckled and began heaping their plates.

"You have the touch, girls," said Tamuz, grinning from ear to ear as he munched on the food and smacked his lips in appreciation. He'd resolved to uncover the true identity of these girls but reckoned that such mysteries are best tackled after a good meal. And didn't a full belly make for a sharper mind?

"I think it's just about the best food I've ever had," chimed in Azai while chewing,

agreeing heartily. He recalled that Sargon had always claimed his daughters were alive and well. Yet, they'd not seen them before, not since the day they'd drowned, years ago. What to make of it? That question would have to simmer on the back burner of his mind for now.

The girls smiled in appreciation and left, returning moments later, wheeling in more items.

With Norea's help, Lilit hoisted a glass-ceramic cauldron onto the cooker, water rippling within. Above, they mounted the parabolic reflector, and daylight now blazed around the pot. In Areta, the burning of wood was sacrilege; cooking relied on concentrated daylight or, in the later hours of the night, on the hypo-red glow.

Lilit eased a sealed-bottom cylinder into the gaping hole in the table—a giant mortar, polished like a river stone. From darkened glass jars, she scooped a fragrant medley: black peppercorns, cardamom pods, clove buds, tossing them into the mortar. Lilit then inserted the stone pestle, a heavy and thick rod. She leaned into it, pressing and turning, muscles rippling beneath smooth skin. Tamuz, Elam, and Azai watched, spellbound. Sargon's smile held a hint of pride.

The ground spices were added to the now-boiling cauldron, followed by cinnamon, ginger shavings, and a few fragments of jaggery. Next came a fistful of crushed dark tea leaves, their scent rising in a fragrant cloud. Norea poured fresh buffalo milk. She let it boil and thicken and acquire ever-richer mocha hue. Occasionally she would lean in and blow air on the roiling thickening mass, calming it down some, her jet-black hair gleaming intermittently in the concentrated daylight as her head moved about.

At last, the twins strained the concoction, leaving behind a foam-topped drink. Lilit churned it, a long glove protecting her hand, then poured some of it with a flourish into the first

tankard. Black ironwood, banded in gold, clinked against the table, a satisfying counterpoint to the appreciative sips of the men.

Minutes later, Norea arrived with a platter of filo pastry with spiced nut mixture accented with orange blossom water: the signature dessert of Tishrei eves.

As always, the onset of the seventh evening of the week was heralded by the Howling Winds, which were to blow for an hour or two. This was the true beginning of Tishrei eve. The men sat haphazardly around, all within arm's reach of the steaming tankards, occasionally sipping. The wind moaned. The wood creaked. The canvas snapped. It was the time of lamentation.

The twins quietly exited the room.

Tamuz followed them outside, greeted with darkening sky and buffeted by the tropical-warm winds.

The two young women stopped in their tracks, sensing his presence.

“Who are you, really?” demanded Tamuz, raising his voice over the wind.

One of them turned to face him. She seemed amused. “We seem to be having a variation of this conversation every few Tishrei eves, Tamuz.”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded and ignored the warm raindrops that now splattered and trickled down his face.

She ignored his question. “It’s me, Lilit,” she told him.

“Lilit drowned years ago,” he said, biting off the words.

“It was a close call,” she said, walking up to him. “Incidentally, it was you who taught me how to swim. Freestyle. Father never did care much for swimming.”

Tamuz stiffened.

“It was just you, Norea, and myself when you instructed me to reach with my arm forward for a stroke and I smacked myself—smacked Norea in the face.”

He remembered it now and stared. “How could you know that?”

“For the same reason that I know that Lilit slipped on some pebbles minutes later, even though she was too embarrassed at the time to tell you that’s why she stumbled: It’s me.”

She dropped to her knees and looked up at him.

“Lilit?” he murmured in disbelief.

She nodded and pushed her now-wet hair back.

“That’s truly you?”

She nodded again, and he fiercely drew her in his arms. “We thought you were dead,” he said and kissed the top of her head.

She hugged him back tightly for a long moment. When she finally pulled back, her eyes shone with unshed tears. “You’d better go back in now.”

Tamuz gave her a lopsided grin.

As he reentered the yurt, Sargon was starting on a wistful song in a low voice. Soon, the other three men joined in, humming and gazing reflectively at the steam curling from their mugs. Lost in thought, each drifted into his own world, brooding, reminiscing, and remembering what was, what could have been.

Azai, the oldest, dozed off, lulled by the humming and the weight of his thoughts.

When the wind died outside, Tamuz roused him with a gentle prod. It was time. After the Howling, the group would start on a complex strategy card and dice game that would take them into the wee hours of the night. Tomorrow morning they would all be sleeping in.

A single oil lamp was suspended above, casting warm light on the wooden table, now

strewn with a few sets of polyhedral darkened-bronze dice etched with glyphs. They all pulled the chairs around, and richly-illustrated cards were being brought out from small metal cases.

“Sargon, have you been setting aside coins for *Inscriptions*?” Azai asked. Libraries and scholars owned the unabridged set of seventy-eight volumes. Yet even the prevailing digest version among the public spun nine hefty volumes and did not come cheap.

“I’ve been saving for a year now,” confirmed Sargon. Indeed, bit by bit, he’d been putting away some of his earnings, unbeknown to his daughters. He was comforted by the fact that it was typical to keep the same edition for one’s entire life, even if a new edition did come out every decade or so.

His face turned wistful. During Tishrei dinners, families throughout the land sat around, read, and debated various passages from *Inscriptions*. This monumental work encapsulated the wisdom and perspectives of numerous iskandars and sages from generations past, covering all facets of community life and culture. He remembered the nights when Lilit and Norea, as children, would eagerly sit by his side, hanging on to every word. But that was then. Since they turned adolescents, their interest waned, spurning his attempts to study the treatise together.

It was his turn to play, and he pulled himself back into the game. He scooped up some cards from the array in front of him, discarding some, selecting others, and stacking a few for a counter-offensive. The battle intensified.

“Elam, and his Water defenses, always,” grumbled Tamuz as he tapped a card depicting the Forge-Hammer of Perseus. “This hammer has seen the fall of titans. Do you really think your puny shield can hold against it?”

The younger man smirked, flicking a card with an intricate blue rune into the discard pile. “Water can erode even the mightiest stone, my friend. And my inscriptions are unmatched.”

There were chuckles around the table, then all quieted when Sargon began his turn. A seasoned player, he was known to pull unexpected tactics. Sargon surveyed the grim landscape, his slate-gray eyes sharp with calculation. He'd been patiently nursing these cards in his hand, biding his time. First, a Whispering Forest, roots coiling beneath his enemy's forces. Next, a Blazing Light to nurture its growth. Tamuz swore under his breath as his Forge-Hammer faltered. From the heart of the forest arose the Solar Phoenix. Finally, Tamuz comprehended what Sargon was setting up. "The Phoenix Build," he said exasperated, a hint of respect in his voice.

The game went on, ebbing and flowing. Alliances formed and broke. Strategies were masterminded and countered.

It was a few hours later, when the tall young women were back, collecting the empty dishes and placing them in the small cart.

"Why, Lilit and Norea," crowed Tamuz, looking up from his deck. "I doubt there're any better cooks in Maradam," he exclaimed. The other men voiced their agreement and approval.

Lilit inclined her head. "I thank you for the compliments, dear *vyr's*." She placed the rest of the dirty dishes on the wagon and turned to face them. "Well, I bid you all good night, I'm sure you'll forget me the moment I leave"—a chorus of laughter ensued—"Yet, we'll meet again next Tishrei eve." She bent down and cupped Elam's face. The young man blinked, as if shaking off a momentary daze after Lilit's lips left his forehead, and Tamuz's chuckle wavered as Norea's lips touched his cheek. Azai closed his eyes when Lilit touched him, and then opened them, disoriented.

Lilit softly closed the door behind her, following her sister.

"What are you beaming about, Sargon?" Elam demanded. "You look like you swallowed

a lit lamp.”

“A father has right to be proud of his daughters, no?” retorted Sargon. He chuckled with a touch of wistfulness. “They’ve always had a spark, my girls, but now it’s a full-blown fire. They’d make anyone proud.”

An awkward silence followed. What could have possibly triggered a memory of his dead daughters now?

“To Lilit and Norea!” Elam bravely toasted.

“To Lilit and Norea,” everyone repeated, raising their mugs.

Sargon downed his tankard. “You’ll excuse me for a moment,” he said, rising to his feet. “I need to have a quick word with them before they retire for the night.”

“I swear it’s getting worse each year,” grumbled Tamuz after Sargon exited the yurt. He then noted Azai, who was looking confused. “Now, what’s the matter with *you*?”

“I don’t understand,” mumbled the old man, his gaze shifted uncertainly between Tamuz and Elam, his fingers absently tapping on the table. “Who were those two tall girls earlier?”

Tamuz and Elam’s eyes met briefly. “What tall girls?” Tamuz asked. “What are you talking about?”

“The ones who served the...” The words died in his throat as a look of incomprehension greeted him.

“My, my, my.” Chuckling, Tamuz patted Azai’s arm. “That must be the trouble with aging. My dear, dear Azai, you do realize that you fell asleep at some point, yes?” There was a first time for everything.

“Why, yes... But they were here before I fell asleep.”

Tamuz leaned closer, his voice softening. “I assure you, at no point had there been

anyone in the tent except us and Sargon.”

“So explain to me who prepared the masala tea.”

“Sargon ahead of time, I suppose. Why?”

Azai stared at Tamuz then at Elam. Had he merely dreamed of the two tall apparitions with amber eyes and long, flowing dark hair? With all the talks about Sargon’s daughters, had they finally entered his dreams as he was sitting there, at the home of their friend?

“Were they at least pretty?” inquired Elam.

“Ravishing,” Azai promised.

Elam and Tamuz grinned.

“That’s what I always say. If you dream, dream big,” said Tamuz. Friendly laughter greeted those words. This time, Azai laughed with them, shaking his head. A dream. The most vivid dream he’d ever had.

Sargon returned a bit later, and their game resumed.

Thirty minutes passed and they wrapped the game up, calling it a night.

As the three friends were about to leave, Azai noticed a long black rubber glove in the corner. He froze, recognizing it from the vivid dream he’d had. Well, it *was* possible that his gaze had fallen upon it earlier and he’d worked it into the dream, was it not?

But then again...

Under some pretext, Azai stayed behind after his two colleagues left. It dawned on him that there might be a way to sort out whether it was a bizarre dream or an even a more bizarre reality.

It was now just him and Sargon.

“The masala tea was just...divine,” Azai said.

Sargon's lips twitched in a near smile. "I'll make sure to tell Lilit. She spent a lot of time planning it, you know. It was as much a performance as food preparation."

"So it was Lilit," Azai said, forcing a casual tone. "The two look so alike; easy to get them confused."

"Lilit wore the rosette and orange-red—"

Backless dress

"—backless dress and had her hair in a bun. Norea was the one who—"

Sat with her eyes closed, loose hair, and cream-colored dress, Azai thought.

—had her hair down and wore a pearly dress." Sargon shrugged. "She wasn't doing much. Mostly mediating, from the looks of it."

Azai gestured at the far end of the room. "So that's the glove Lilit used?"

"She couldn't very well have stuck her bare hand into the hot masala tea, could she now?" Sargon chuckled. His daughter had a flare for drama. "You liked how she prepared the tea?"

"I most definitely did," said Azai, his old heart was threatening to break out of his ribcage. His knees felt weak as he made his way to the yurt's entrance. At the threshold, he turned and forced a smile. "If it's all the same to you, don't mention anything to the twins. I would like to compliment them myself next time I see them."

Sargon waved a dismissive hand. He had no problems with that.

Minutes later, Azai was walking down the quiet dirt road under the glittering Milky Way, a lantern slung over one shoulder, and a few fennec foxes watched him. His thoughts were swirling.

One thing had not occurred to him. Had not occurred to anyone. It was not Sargon who

was befuddled. Everyone else was. Those two tall women were not a figment of Sargon's imagination. They were real.

How was such a thing possible? And who were those two young women, in truth?

Azai did not know. Yet he did have a growing sense of what he ought to do.

CHAPTER 15

The Iskandar's house stood eerily silent, its usual occupants—her father and his manservant, Ashur—absent due to an overnight Sanhedrin meeting. Seizing this opportunity, Angora slipped into the house, making her way to the study. This was her chance to learn the secret her father carried like a heavy burden.

The Iskandar insisted on triplicate records: one in the Sanhedrin Hall, another in his Maradam offices, and the last in this private study. Approaching the wooden shelves, she anxiously scanned the inscriptions, sweat forming on her forehead. Finally, her eyes fell upon the gold and emerald sigil. With a quick movement, she pulled out the stack of confidential papers, the so-called Notes of Exchange—communications passed among the iskandars.

The seriousness of her intrusion weighed on her with each passing minute as she sifted through the pages. Minutes turned into an hour, yielding nothing but ordinary discussions. She tossed aside another irrelevant document, a growl escaping her lips. The volume of correspondences seemed to mock her efforts.

Just as doubt began to creep in, some passages caught her eye, taking her breath away. They referenced “the fiery end,” “this cycle,” and most chillingly, “Areta will be consumed by the flames of the sun.” Her hands trembled. It couldn't be...could it? She reread the lines,

desperately seeking an alternative explanation, a cold knot forming in her stomach.

Frantically, she flipped through several more pages, as if another passage might somehow negate what she'd read. Instead, the cryptic references mounted, solidifying into a terrible certainty.

She collapsed onto the cushioned floor mat, the papers scattering across the limestone floor. The study's familiar scent of papyrus and ink suddenly turned sickly. Driven by the turning of a small rooftop windmill, the gentle trickling of water over smooth river stones within the bronze sculpture, usually a soothing sound, now gurgled like a death knell, reflecting the dread pooling in her heart.

How long she sat there, paralyzed by shock, she couldn't say.

As the light of dawn crept through the windowpanes, casting long shadows across the study, her numb despair gave way to a firm resolve. With feverish energy, she gathered the scattered sheets. The Sanhedrin had to be informed of their world's true nature; it had to be informed that Areta was, in fact, a colossal space ship. Armed with this knowledge, perhaps the council could devise a plan, do something to save them all—before flames consume their world at some point in the next few years.

She would share with them what she'd learned, while carefully omitting any mention of Sargon's involvement. Indeed, she would ensure it could never be traced back to him. The personal cost to herself was a small price to pay to give their society a fighting chance.

With her decision made, Angora strode to the town hall and formally requested an audience with an iskandar. Though anyone could make such a request, it was unheard of to summon a Sanhedrin member for anything less than a matter of utmost importance. And most never did. The clerk, taken aback, hurried to comply.

An hour later, a running messenger appeared at her doorstep. Her request had been granted, and she was expected at the Sanhedrin Hall later in the day. Angora thanked the runner, then closed the door and leaned against it, suddenly overwhelmed. She now faced an agonizing wait, mentally rehearsing what she would say, how she would convince the Sanhedrin of the true nature of Areta. She could only hope they would listen and act upon this dire knowledge. She managed a few hours of a fitful sleep before she had to get ready.

Finally it was time. With the back of her sleeve, she wiped away the tears that freely ran down her face. For the first time since she was declared an adult, she unlocked a small wooden cabinet. Inside, a single item lay: a violet-blue cord of interwoven linen and wool—a forbidden yarn combination in Areta, reserved solely for this cord and the ceremonial garments of the iskandars. In Areta, each adult possessed such a cord, symbolizing the inviolable bond of one's word.

Angora placed the cord in her satchel, knowing that in mere hours, she would sever it in the Sanhedrin Hall before an iskandar. She would proceed to share what she'd learned of the true nature of their world—breaking her vow to Sargon—and then submit to self-exile, the customary route for oath breakers. The consequences would be severe: the loss of her social status, her family ties, her very identity within the community. She would become a pariah, facing a long path to regain even a shred of trust—if such a thing were even possible.

Typically, Angora rode a di-wheeler to the Sanhedrin Hall, but today the six-mile journey felt more appropriate on foot. As she trudged along, she kept her eyes fixed on the horizon, avoiding the curious glances of passersby who might question her solitary journey.

Two hours later, the imposing structure of the Sanhedrin Hall came into view. She nearly stumbled as the enormity of her decision hit her, fervently hoping Sargon would one day forgive

her. When she thought of her father, her heart almost broke, imagining the sorrow the old man would feel. But she had to. She had to do it. She lifted her head and spotted Kadesh Barnea, but the hovering structure seemed unmoving and unruffled, as always.

Nishmat was the one who answered her summons. A guardian in ceremonial garb led her into the Iskandar's private chambers within the Hall, where the elder woman awaited her.

At the doorway, Angora bowed deeply. Nishmat inclined her head in acknowledgement, and once the younger woman was seated across from her, she said, "Your timing is impeccable."

Oh? thought Angora.

The Iskandar went on, "The council has reached a verdict."

The modified water clock! In the whirlwind of recent events and discoveries, she'd forgotten about the council's pending ruling concerning her.

Iskandar Nishmat folded her hands in her lap. "Angora, hear our judgment. The council has decided that the unique clock you introduced is to be construed as a one-of-a-kind monument, befitting the Mouseion of Maradam. It was within your purview to have made this call, and the Sanhedrin honors the choice you've made."

Angora nodded, but the iskandar wasn't finished.

"Please convey to the anonymous contributor that they should be more thoughtful and less inventive in the future. If one is born with a fire in their belly and a thirst to innovate, one must doubly exercise self-restraint."

Angora nodded mutely again.

Iskandar Nishmat went on, "Due to your intent to continue introducing innovations, you are the director of the Mouseion no more. You're also removed from your position as the head of

restoration of Areta.” Angora’s face went ashen. “Your termination will take place soon and be made public. Very public.” Nishmat’s expression softened, noting the dismay and shock of the younger woman. In a quiet, conversational tone, she added, “You’ve always known that all who are close to us are held to higher standards of scrutiny.”

Yes, Angora knew. They went to great lengths to avoid any appearance of favoritism.

The Iskandar offered a sad smile. “Now, what is it that you wished to bring to the attention of the Sanhedrin?”

“What?” She was jolted from her daze.

“You summoned us,” Nishmat reminded her gently.

“I shouldn’t have bothered you, Wisdom,” Angora heard herself say as she struggled to her feet. “It was a foolish overreaction to a small problem. I’ll handle it myself.”

As she spoke, a cold clarity seized her. Sharing the true nature of their world with the iskandars was likely to result in nothing more than a rigorous investigation to unmask her accomplice and prevent the population from learning the truth. And along with that, she was likely to lose more than her position.

Thundering Typhon! Sargon had been right. The Sanhedrin, the pillars of guidance she’d revered from childhood, were little more than stewards of social stability. They would not usher in radical departures of any kind.

She staggered out of the room, leaving behind a bewildered iskandar. Shock and bitterness gave way to a glum mood. Her anger now felt hollow, and by the time she arrived home, her mind was clear. She would not add to her father’s grief or waste her breath on the council’s deaf ears. With a heavy heart, she would face the inevitable with the man she cared for—and together they would savor their remaining time.

Angora waited for Sargon amid the ancient banyan trees. The gnarled trunks, witnesses to countless intimate moments over the ages, offered a modicum of privacy for the painful news she wished to share.

Sargon arrived, his brow creased with concern as he took in her somber expression. He settled beside her on the rustic stone bench.

Angora took a shaky breath, her fingers twisting in her lap. “Sargon, I... I almost betrayed your trust. I nearly told the Sanhedrin everything.”

A shadow of hurt and confusion passed over his features before his usual stoic mask reasserted itself. “Why?” he asked, his voice low.

“Because of something I’ve learned.” She clasped her hands together, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “You were right. Areta will meet a fiery end.” She bit her lip. “But it’s a lot sooner—a few years, at most,” she said, her voice breaking.

The color drained from Sargon’s face. He looked away, staring off into the distance. A heavy silence fell between them, broken only by the faint rustling of leaves.

His gaze returned to her. “How certain are you about this?”

“As certain as I can be,” Angora said. She proceeded to recount everything—her growing unease about her father’s demeanor, the clandestine visit to his study, the damning Letters of Exchange, the aborted attempt to inform the Sanhedrin, and her dismissal from the Mouseion.

“The more I reflected,” she finished, her voice thick with emotion, “the more convinced I became that the Sanhedrin couldn’t do anything, even if they knew the truth.” The Letters of Exchange left no doubt about the council’s ignorance of the true nature of their world. A bitter laugh escaped her lips. “No point sacrificing everything for nothing.”

She reached for his hand. “Let’s just... let’s make the most of the time we have left.”

Sargon sat there unmoving, expressionless. She leaned in and kissed him, then after a beat, offered another tender kiss, hoping to stir some reaction. But his aloof demeanor remained unchanged, and with a sigh, she drew back, disquieted.

Finally, he spoke, his voice flat and distant: “The kids jump off.”

She nodded. “I’m so sorry for having thought of revealing to the Sanh—what did you say?” She looked at him with lack of comprehension mixed with pain. “What?”

“During the Festival,” he said, “the children jump off the ship onto the grass before the countdown is complete and the ship reaches the bonfire.”

Angora frowned. “That’s merely a practical constraint of the enactment. Surely you don’t expect the children to jump into the flames.”

“If not to enact what’s to come, why have children climb aboard at all?” he asked, turning to look at her. “The kids are a proxy for the population. What if we’re meant to jump off, and not go down with the ship?” She stared at him. “Angora, do we have any historical references for departing Areta? Has anyone written about stepping off this... vessel?”

“What do you—What does it even mean?” she stammered. “Are we supposed to sprout wings like Pegasus and fly into the kosmos?”

“No,” he said. “We are to depart as our ancestors boarded: We disembark.”

Her hand flew to her mouth at that last, eyes wide. “Elysian Fields,” she gasped, suddenly recalling something. “The kids disembark at the Elysian Fields.”

It was his turn to look at her quizzically.

Angora scrambled to her feet, Sargon intuitively following suit. “Come with me,” she said, her voice filled with a newfound resolve.

Less than an hour later, they stood in the bowels of the Mouseion, surrounded by towering shelves of ancient texts and artifacts. Angora flipped through a thick stack of aging placards, muttering under her breath. She was certain she had seen it here before. She was sure of it.

“What are those?” Sargon asked, gesturing toward the weathered sheets.

“They’re like our *Events of the Week* gazette,” she replied, her words punctuated by the rustling of papers as she continued to flip through poster sheets. “You can still see the marks where they were glued to the stone pillars.”

“Are these old?” Sargon inquired, peering over her shoulder.

“About a thousand years,” she confirmed. A triumphant cry escaping her lips as she held up a brittle broadsheet. “Found it! Now, listen to this. ‘Before the ship heads off into the consuming inferno, the kids disembark from the Bridge of Heaven...to safety, to the green pastures of the Elysian Fields. And that concludes another uneventful festival...’” She paused, tilting her head. “That’s it, that’s all it says about the festival. When you mentioned disembarkation, it came back to me.”

Sargon started pacing about.

“It doesn’t say ‘a bridge,’” he said.

“No, it says ‘Bridge of Heaven.’ I noticed that, too.”

“So there *is* a designated place or gateway for disembarkation,” Sargon mused aloud. That changed everything. He leaned in and peered intently at the aging sheet of paper. “That’s it, isn’t it?” He pointed at a few words. “This spells Bridge of Heaven in the old script.”

She nodded.

He glanced over at her. “There’s a gap between this phrase and the next, a hole in the

paper.”

She grimaced. “They had to peel the broadsheet off the pillars. Probably a glue spot.”

Sargon frowned in displeasure.

“Have you come across any other references to the Bridge of Heaven?” he asked her.

“No. No, I did not,” she said. She looked at him. “I’ll give anything to locate it.” She looked at him and met an equally determined gaze. She had to delve deeper. The responsibility to seek answers fell on her now. The struggle to secure Areta’s fate was her burden to bear.

CHAPTER 16

Sargon doubted Angora had thought it through. She'd speculated the stars could be hundreds of miles away, an incredible distance, to be sure, but he suspected she was completely wrong.

If their world moved at a brisk thirty miles-per-hour through the kosmos, they would have covered roughly five hundred million miles in their two-thousand-year voyage. This was an entirely different scale of distance. The stars, however, remained unchanged in size, hinting at far greater distances yet. He shook his head; such expanses utterly defied comprehension.

Bridge of Heaven—a term neither he nor Angora had encountered before. What could it mean? Identifying and locating it could be their key to survival. Angora promised to search for answers.

He pondered it. The name implied a celestial location—on the other side of the hull, in the sky section.

That was the only logical explanation. It might not have occurred to anyone before to try to reach the sky region. But then again, he'd not met anyone who thought the sky was a solid, translucent firmament, windows into the kosmos, rather than an open expanse.

Reaching the skyward region, however, was unfeasible. The final stretch of the land section, the miasmatic zone, was impassable. Razor-sharp crevices and a lack of vegetation made

navigation treacherous, while the air itself induced dizziness, confusion, breathlessness, and ultimately unconsciousness. None dared to venture beyond a few dozen yards into it.

No one knew why the miasmatic zone existed. Some thought that the noxious miasma had seeped out during the Age of Shoah and permanently fouled the air in that area. Others argued that it was a natural decay, possibly due to a gradual depletion of a key nutrient in the soil or a slow change in the composition of the land that supports plant life. He suspected that the miasma was intentional... engineered.

Be that as it may, if there was a Bridge of Heaven, it was somewhere in the sky area, and he had to think of another way to reach and search the sky.

That night, Sargon walked along the riverbank.

He felt the old yearning to take flight, to soar—a desire long suppressed. Then the memory of searing pain flooded back, the day he was forced to imbibe the noxious black liquid that stole his fertility.

No! He shouldn't even be entertaining the idea of contriving a way to fly to the sky region of Areta. Any future flight experimentations would result in far more than infertility; he would face a complete severing of ties with his daughters and friends, Angora and the entire community. Was that the only way to save their people? He squeezed his eyes shut. Was the world truly destined to be annihilated in the next few years? Those were just conjectures based on other conjectures.

And the idea of constructing a flying contraption to locate the so-called Bridge of heaven was such an absurd idea. Good thing he wasn't contemplating it.

The next morning, Sargon found himself at Diomedes Park, the place where twenty years ago he had first envisioned humans soaring into the sky. Memories of his failed flight flooded

back as he surveyed the landscape. He recalled strapping on large wooden wings, covered in latex, and secured with metal straps to a specially designed vest. He had leaped from a cliff, vividly remembering the exhilarating rush of wind, the hopeful anticipation, and then the jarring reality of drifting down. The power he had generated as he flapped was insignificant compared to the weight of his body. His contraption hadn't transformed him into a bird; it had merely slowed his descent.

The park was alive with activity. Small children ran about, their kites flying high in the blue sky, tiny bells chiming. Old men lounged on the grass, engrossed in games of senet or chaturanga on wooden boards.

Watching the kites dance in the breeze brought a pang of longing. These simple creations effortlessly harnessed the wind's power. Every gust was a tantalizing glimpse of what could be. Wind was the key; when strong enough, it could lift much. Yet, despite countless hours spent in his youth contemplating how to harness it, his efforts had come to naught.

A sudden shriek jolted him from his reflections. Nearby, a little girl lay sprawled on the rocky ground, her dress torn, her face contorted in pain. Her mother hurried over, scooping the child into her arms and brushing off leaves and dirt. She caught Sargon's eye, her expression a fleeting mix of exasperation and amusement, before turning her full attention back to soothing the girl.

Sargon responded with a knowing nod and climbed onto his di-wheeler. As he rode away from the park and picked up speed, he felt the wind on his face. Wind. It was all about the wind.

He brought the di-wheeler to a halt, and as expected, the sensation of wind ceased immediately. He understood the phenomenon: There was no actual wind, only the airflow he created by moving through the still air. The faster he went, the more resistance he generated.

True, he thought, it was he moving and not the air, yet ultimately, it amounted to the same thing. Was the answer to attach wings to the di-wheeler?

But almost immediately, Sargon dismissed the idea. Even at top speeds, he doubted he could achieve lift-off. His earlier attempt had proven that despite outstretched wings and significant wind resistance, he still went down. And if he did manage to get airborne, without traction on the ground, how would he maintain forward thrust with the di-wheeler?

Struck by a new thought, he stopped dead in his tracks.

In any situation, airborne or grounded, he could always control one movement: the rotary motion generated by his legs pedaling—the same motion that used to power a table saw or a blender.

His mind raced. He could thus get something to spin rapidly, but what exactly?

The answer came with a snap: a blade-like appendage spinning around its axis, similar to...a twirling sycamore seed midair.

He did not find any sycamore seeds; however, he did come upon and pick up some maple seeds, which behaved similarly, twirling in the air as they slowly descended. And he spent some time studying their shape.

Sargon now had a concrete idea he could pursue. Did he really want to?

He exhaled noisily. Angora would delve deeper, trying to locate other references to the Bridge of Heaven, he resolved. He would bide his time. And then, if circumstances demanded it, he would do what needed to be done.

CHAPTER 17

A middle-aged man opened one of the twin arched doors. The manservant, Azai assumed. Only the iskandars had personal attendants—doing the maintenance, cleaning, shopping, and cooking, thus freeing the iskandars from mundane tasks.

“Is the Iskandar at home?” he asked.

“It’s after hours,” the man stated, displeasure clear in his voice. “Can’t this wait until tomorrow, at the Iskandar’s administrative offices?”

“It’s a sensitive issue that I believe is best discussed in the privacy of his residence,” Azai said, his eyes bright and unblinking.

Some of his pent-up excitement must have come through, as the steward looked at him sharply, reassessing Azai. The whole matter was highly irregular. Yet the Iskandar had given a standing order to admit anyone who came at odd hours and seemed earnest in their need.

“Follow me,” the manservant eventually said.

He led Azai down a flagstone path and into a glen shaded by acacia trees. Beyond, a cliff’s edge revealed a breathtaking vista: a meadow where dozens of white oryx grazed. The sight of the majestic antelopes filled him with awe as he regarded their straight horns and pure-white coats. They were the emblems of Areta, their presence considered a blessing.

“Well,” came a jovial voice, and Azai spun around. It was the Iskandar walking down the winding path bearing a friendly smile. His toga, a blend of cobalt-blue and white, billowed around him in the gentle breeze. “I reckon there is a good reason for this. Welcome, then. Welcome to my abode.”

Azai bowed. “Thank you for seeing me, Iskandar.”

Yessod Olam gestured for him to sit, then settled onto the raised cushion across from him, shooing away foraging partridges that wandered nearby.

After taking a moment to collect himself, Azai recounted what he had witnessed the other night, attempting to stick to the facts.

The Iskandar interrupted a few times, seeking clarification, and otherwise listened quietly.

When the old man finished, Yessod Olam sat back, clearly astonished by what he’d just heard. The power to wipe out memories at will? It sounded so improbable. Yet, despite the outlandish nature of Azai’s tale, the Iskandar couldn’t discount the old man’s reputation for honesty and integrity within the community.

“Have you seen the two girls since you dozed off?”

“That’s the thing, Wisdom. I can only presume that I did. But if I’m right, they erased that memory.”

“...Which they can do unless one sleeps afterward,” the Iskandar finished his thought.

Azai nodded in agreement. “I don’t think they can expunge memories that are followed by sleep. Furthermore, I believe they are unaware that I dozed off while they were out and retained the memory of everything that went on before.”

“Who are these two young women? Would I recognize them?”

“I don’t think so,” said Azai. “If you did happen to encounter them, you probably wouldn’t retain any memory of it. They live in the shadows—making sure it remains that way.”

The Iskandar sighed. Yes, there was that. “All the same, what do they look like?”

“They are tall, of tiger build, and bear striking curves. Predominantly Punjabi lineage with traces of D’mtian,” Azai said, taking obvious pride in his discernment abilities. “They have haunting amber eyes, framed by long, smooth black hair. Broad faces and prominent cheekbones.”

The description dislodged a memory. “Didn’t two Punjabi twins drown six or seven years ago?”

“That was them.” *The real daughters of Sargon, at any rate*, Azai thought. True, no bodies were recovered, but along with everyone else, Azai had always assumed that the strong undercurrent at the bottom of the lakes dragged the bodies down, and the marine scavengers, such as eels and the giant catfish, had done the rest. That was to be expected. On Areta, one way or another, all organic matter was reclaimed—sinew, flesh, and bones.

Yessod Olam then recalled something else, grimacing at the memory. “Isn’t *Vyr* Sargon their father?”

“Yes, he is. I didn’t realize you were familiar with him, Wisdom.”

The Iskandar shook his head. “I heard about the case years ago, and later that he’d moved from Timnah to Maradam,” Yessod Olam pondered. “How old are they now?”

“They’ve been declared adults a few months ago.”

Yessod Olam rose and thanked Azai for bringing it to his attention. He promised he would look into it personally. He felt it was just that important.

Most Aretans preferred to travel by foot, unless they had to haul cargo or groceries—at which point they used di-wheelers.

When Talmai assumed office, many urged him to use a di-wheeler, deeming his time too valuable for the two-mile walk from his residence to the governance chambers in Maradam. Yet Talmai favored the walks. They allowed him to connect with the populace and offered a chance for anyone to approach their iskandar. In fact, since, as an iskandar, he didn't need to worry about purchasing his own groceries or carrying anything, it had been years since he'd used a di-wheeler. And so, when Talmai walked through Maradam's streets the next day, no passerby found it unusual.

Azai believed that the twins were born in Maradam; however, the old man didn't know their mother's name. A clerk's search revealed fifty-nine girls born that year in the district, including one pair of identical twins: Norea and Lilit.

Their mother, Ishtar, lived her life as a single parent in the mothers' cove until her premature death from unknown causes. Talmai was now headed to that very cove.

At any given time, the hamlet housed hundreds of young mothers who supported each other in child-rearing. The village was largely subsidized by the broader community, so the mothers didn't have to seek paid work. Most women typically moved out once their children reached four or five, often marrying and pursuing their chosen vocation.

Residents found it advantageous to live in proximity to each other, and the layout reflected it. The lodgings were designed as a series of whimsical, small earthen units, staggered, stacked, and overlaid. They sported ladders, spiraling staircases, and even chutes connecting them to each other and to the communal halls, making it easy for the mothers to visit each other and share resources. Fruits and vegetables were grown on the premises.

Talmai wove through carob trees and earthen dwellings embossed with geometric patterns, knocking on doors and seeking information. He learned that Ishtar and her daughters had lived there before any of the current residents, the oldest of whom was twenty-five.

However, the Iskandar did find someone who distinctly remembered an older former friend who spoke of Ishtar and her daughters. Talmai thanked her and, armed with the address of the friend, set off.

The woman who answered at the house was in her thirties. “The Iskandar!” she exclaimed, bowing deeply. “My husband is not home.”

Talmai returned the greeting. “I’m actually here to see you.”

She smiled, surprised. “Of course, please come in.” She ushered him into her modest dwelling, where the warm scent of flatbread and olive oil mingled with jasmine, drifting in through the open window. As she poured them each a cup of steaming tea, Talmai settled onto a cushion across from her.

“Ishtar,” she said in response to his inquiry, her face clouding. “Of course I remember her; a dear friend. How tragic. First the mother, then years later, I heard her daughters drowned.”

Talmai set the cup back down on the coarse, handwoven cloth adorning the small table. “What do you remember of the children?”

“Ishtar’s girls? What about them?”

“How were they?”

“Always together,” she said, with a wistful smile. “If anyone tried to separate them, their cries could wake the dead! Unbearable. It must have been even harder on Ishtar.” She paused, her voice catching in her throat. “Then, one day, she died.”

His eyes searched the woman’s face. “How did it happen?”

“Neighbors heard such acute keening that none could draw near. When some eventually did, they found the mother on the floor, the twins beside her, wailing. No one knows why Ishtar died. Some believe her heart simply gave out.”

Talmai’s fingers tightened around the hot cup, an unsettling sensation stirred within him, a suspicion beginning to uncoil. Steering the conversation back to the twins, he asked over the rising steam, “What else can you tell me about the daughters?” He sensed she longed to ask why the Iskandar cared about girls long dead. Yet, she was too deferential for that. Good, he hated lying.

“I would describe the two as perceptive,” she said. “Uncannily so. They were quite sweet, but...”

“Yes?” he urged her on.

“Often tense, on edge.” She pondered further. “Haunted, really.”

Talmai maintained an impassive exterior, weighing her words. “Any other... peculiarities?”

She thought, then shook her head.

“Did Ishtar ever mention the circumstances of their conception?”

Again, the woman shook her head.

“A shame the two died, you know,” she said, a hint of sorrow in her voice as she led him to the door. “Their bond was something special. Why, I never heard a harsh word between them, let alone a fight. Strange for children so young.” She bowed farewell, and he returned it.

Talmai wished to talk to one more person that day. And as he made his way, he mulled things. Azai believed the young women weren’t the drowned twins—but imposters. Talmai was no longer convinced of that. Maybe Ishtar’s daughters were not quite as dead as everyone had

thought. And maybe there was more to their mother's death than met the eye.

Before he knew it, Talmai was standing before a small domed house in hues of pastel yellow with purple trims. He tugged on a cord, and small bells chimed inside. It was not long until the door opened, and he found himself face to face with a tall middle-aged woman. At the sight of the Iskandar, her eyes widened, and she bowed, lowering her head until it was in line with his.

Talmai returned the bow and stepped discreetly backward so she won't tower over him. "Greetings. I apologize for the unexpected visit." He paused. "May we speak? It concerns Ishtar."

The woman looked thunderstruck, then gave Talmai a hard look. "My daughter is dead. She died *years* ago."

"I'm aware of it," he said, lowering his head in condolence.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't understand then," she said stiffly, the flash of pain in her eyes was replaced by a guarded expression.

This one was not going to invite him in for tea. He would have to get straight to the point. "It's just this," Talmai said. "When Ishtar turned twelve, did you perform the rite of passage from childhood to adolescence?"

She froze, then frowned. "Why in blazes would you ask such a thing—years after. What could be—"

She's hiding something, Talmai thought. "Did you administer the rite's black brew during the rite?" he asked in a crisp voice.

The muscles in her jaw tensed. "I don't understand—"

"You don't need to understand," he snapped. Then more softly, he said, "Please, just

answer the question.”

“No, I did not!” She glowered at him.

His breath hitched. The unthinkable had taken place.

“I did what I thought was right for my daughter,” she told him, a deep, long-held resentment in her voice. “You iskandars may brush away the excruciating pain, the burning sensation that lasts for days, and proclaim the brew benign. It burns off something inside the body...scars...mutilates. Any person with half a brain who experienced it would know that something bad happens when ingesting it.” She looked sharply at him. “I wasn’t going to administer it to my daughter, come what may.”

The tall, older woman squared her shoulders. “Now, if I need to pay the price, I’m ready.”

The Iskandar was silent. “No,” he said at last and shook his head. “There won’t be any need for that; no one will bother you again over this.” He bowed. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said and left before she would have a chance to wonder and ask questions.

He’d told himself earlier he’d address the question of the brew if it arose, and now that it had, he was forced to confront this uncomfortable topic as he began the long trek back to his offices, pondering.

The origin of the rite’s drink remained shrouded in mystery. Throughout history, people had imbibed it upon reaching adolescence, nothing more, nothing less. Incredibly, Ishtar hadn’t. Was this significant?

The rite’s black brew was a diluted form of the barrenness potion, itself derived from a concoction used to influence a fetus’s sex. Unmarried women used an even weaker variation for temporary, weeks-long infertility. At the heart of all these concoctions lay the mamba root,

distinguished by its black pulp and repugnant smell.

Was the actual intent of the rite's brew to prevent the possibility of people with meta powers? Was that it? Then again, there must have been others throughout history who defied the rite. Yet there has not been any account of any being with meta powers. What to make of it?

CHAPTER 18

Being a guardian was not a profession on Areta. Violence was simply too rare, and conflicts were typically diffused by neighbors, passersby, or by the feuding parties themselves.

However, throughout the land, a few hundred well-trained individuals stood ready to neutralize threats at a moment's notice. Their most visible role was during Sanhedrin meetings, where a handful of guardians always served as a symbol of authority. Afterward, these guardians would shed their emblems of duty and return to their regular occupations. These were Areta's overt sentinels.

Then there were the handful of covert vigils, called upon sparingly for scouting or detective work. Among them were the semi-legendary temptweavers, renowned for their persuasive abilities, particularly with men. The iskandars communicated only with Pandora, the head of this shadowy network. This capable, unsentimental woman would then commission the most suitable agent for the task at hand.

This is how it came to be that the Iskandar of Maradam summoned Pandora. He briefly explained his needs, and the next day, the woman delivered the requested information: Sargon was always alone at home on the first day of the week, as this was the one day the twins consistently went out. Pandora assured Yessod Olam he would have a reliable window of at least

two hours.

Not only were Pandora's vigils vastly more adept at extracting information from targets than Talmai, but he himself was notably lacking in such skills. All the same, he believed this was an iskandar's job.

Thus, two days later, the Iskandar of Maradam made his way to Sargon's residence. Not for the first time, he mused that it was likely the man harbored resentment toward the iskandars given the Sanhedrin's writ to render him barren years prior. This probably wouldn't be an easy meeting.

The Iskandar arrived and pulled the cord. Moments later, Sargon opened the door. It was the first time Talmai had seen the man, and he read surprise in his intense gray eyes. Then, a faint smile. "I suppose it was just a matter of time."

"Indeed," Talmai replied, unsure why Sargon had said that.

"You're a father, after all," said Sargon and led the Iskandar to the main yurt in the back, inviting him to take a seat.

The Iskandar had a feeling Sargon was assuming or knew something he didn't. All the same, he was grateful for the unexpected opportunity. "So you've children of your own?"

"Norea and Lilit, twins," said Sargon. "They've recently come of age."

"It is a blessing to have kids."

"Blessing indeed," agreed Sargon. He then regarded the Iskandar. "Are you here on behalf of Angora?"

"As a matter of fact, meeting you was my idea," said Talmai. *Angora? What in the world?* Why would Sargon think that Angora had sent him?

Sargon nodded as if that made sense.

This is when it hit the Iskandar—the man was seeing Angora! Of course. The water clock at the mouseion... Sargon must have been the one to introduce changes to it. He fought his inner turmoil and pushed these thoughts aside. A far more important reason brought him here. Sargon took this for a social visit. This was an unexpected boon.

Talmai observed Sargon over his drink. Pandora's report highlighted that the man was a doting father, eager to share stories of his daughters, yet quick to bristle at any perceived slight against them.

As their conversation flowed, Sargon confirmed what Pandora's agent had learned: Norea and Lilit spent much time away, supposedly with friends, Tabetha and Asnet. They had that checked, and it turned out no such girls existed in Maradam. The twins went out at night; however, it was not to see friends. Apparently, they had none.

"I hear the amphitheatron is quite popular with the younger people," noted Talmai at some point, pouring him and Sargon more tea. "Do your daughters go there often with friends?"

Sargon nodded appreciatively and accepted the refilled cup. "Indeed, a whole group of them meet somewhere and head out together."

With lightning flashing in the distance and the air growing damp, Sargon excused himself and climbed to his feet. He quickly made his way to a treadwheel outside, where a few minutes of brisk walking allowed him to unfurl a series of ropes, raising the latex-lined canvas canopy into a protective dome over the yurts.

"Remember the terrible rainstorm we had two years ago?" asked Sargon as he reentered.

Talmai grimaced, and a deafening thunder seemed to have underscore the memory. Everything had been flooded, requiring extensive repairs throughout. Like clockwork, every thirteen years, they had a big storm like that. Talmai liked to joke that those megastorms were

intentional, as they culled all the weak tree branches and flushed waste and weeds into the fast-moving Thyamis River.

Sargon's face softened with a wistful smile. "We were at home when that storm struck, and a few minutes into it, both Lilit and Norea sprang up and rushed out into the rain and gales of wind." His voice swelled with fatherly pride. "They came back later covered in mud, one of them carrying in her arms a crying small boy—apparently, he got trapped under a fallen tree."

That was most telling. Talmai leaned back and tapped his fingers lightly on the table, feigning nonchalance. "They could hear his cries over the raging storm?"

"Amazing, yes? I could hear nothing, but evidently they could—from half a mile away. They thought nothing of themselves; just charged into the storm."

The Iskandar stroke his silvery beard and studied the other man closely, searching for any hint of deception. However, Sargon's face was an open book, his love and admiration for his daughters plain and uncomplicated. If the man suspected anything unusual about their abilities, he gave no sign. Either this or he was a consummate actor. Talmai wasn't sure.

Rain began outside, a muffled cacophony on the protective canopy. It quickly intensified, turning into a torrent. The two raised their voices to be overheard over the downpour.

"They never argue with each other," affirmed Sargon in an answer to a question. "Why, I can't remember them even talking over each other."

"Isn't that something," marveled Talmai. "Never?"

"No, not that I can recall." Sargon looked faintly proud.

"My, those are delightful daughters you have," said the Iskandar. Could it be that the two could communicate their thoughts without verbalizing? Was that it? That was an important detail. "Wonderful, giving, generous," summed up Sargon.

Sargon's expression turned pensive. "I want them to find their place in the world." He sighed. "But they seem so content here, with me. I fear I've made things too comfortable."

As Sargon continued to speak of his dreams for his daughters' future, Talmai felt his lingering suspicions dissipate. The man before him was no protective guardian of a dark secret; he was simply a father, deeply devoted to his children, yet unaware of their deeper nature.

The Iskandar felt anxiety. Time was slipping away; if he had any other questions, now was the time to ask. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, a blinding flash ripped across the sky followed by a bone-rattling crack of thunder.

"That felt close by," said Sargon, his brows creased with worry. "I hope the girls aren't out in this."

Before Talmai could form a reply, the yurt flap was lifted and a tall girl burst in, bringing swirls of droplets, a rush of warm wind, and an infectious laughter.

"I didn't realize you've a guest," she said breathing hard, smiling, and brushing away drenched strands of hair from her face. "Norea went to change," she went on. But then surprised recognition dawned in her eyes. She bowed deeply to the Iskandar of Maradam, and he acknowledged the gesture.

The storm! thought Talmai. The tempest must have cut short the play, prompting attendees to hasten home. Why hadn't he anticipated this? Too late now.

It was her—unmistakably. The sight of her was a jolt, her intense presence unsettling. Yet, this awe almost immediately transformed into trepidation, deepened by the thought that she might be deciphering his emotions at that very moment. And from there, it was only a short step for her to deduce *why* he was afraid of her. Soon, she would understand she had been exposed.

And then what would she do?

Before she could arrive at this conclusion and act, Talmai rose. “It’s been a pleasure, although it just occurred to me how late the hour is,” he told a somewhat bemused Sargon. “I’ll be on my way.” The Iskandar held his hand to his chest in farewell to Sargon and Lilit, each responding with a bow. As he was leaving, he glimpsed the intense stare of the titaness.

Haunting eyes indeed, he thought, his heart beating faster.

Talmai escaped into the night, torrential warm rain and tropical winds buffeting him.

He held his arm up, futilely trying to shield his face. He stumbled forward, reaching an open field. The grass thrashed and whipped in the wind.

Talmai knew not how long he had walked when the stormy night turned into an inky void—which was impossible, yet it happened anyway. The twins must have manipulated his perception.

Lightning erratically pierced the darkness, revealing one of them a dozen paces away—a nude, stark monochromatic silhouette.

Each flash momentarily ripped away the night’s shroud, bringing her encroaching presence closer and closer. With a gasp, he found her standing a mere step away, her form illuminated in the intermittent silvery-white light. Her naked, sculpted form was slick with rain, serpentine rivulets tracing a path down her torso and thighs. Her flat stomach was just beneath his face. Trepidation filled him as he raised his head, noting the rounded, prominent swell of her breasts above. His eyes fixated on the glistening beads of water on her peaked nipples, her face partly, impossibly, hidden somewhere above. Higher yet roiled the storm clouds.

He spun and bolted toward a grove of banyan and peepal trees swaying in the gale force winds. Leaves thrashed and glistened in the downpour. Stumbling and staggering, Talmai ventured into the grove. As he plunged deeper, the drumming of the rain gradually faded, the

wind losing its fury. When silence fell, faint tendrils of steam curled from the rain-soaked earth, the air turning hot and humid.

This is when he saw her nude figure again—or was it her twin sister?—lounging in the hollow of a broad tree. One leg dangled carelessly, while the other was drawn up, her chin resting on her knee.

Primal fires of lust ignited within him, his legs moving of their own accord, ensnared by an irresistible compulsion. A part of him recognized her power over him, but he was as helpless as a moth drawn to a flame. His mind grew hazy, his thoughts incoherent, the pounding of his heart drowning out all other sounds. Darkness rimmed his vision.

Step by step, Talmai was forced nearer until he stood before her. His head was at level, and she grabbed it, pulling it to the juncture of her thighs. In an instant, her upper thighs contracted, closing in around his head, her long legs crossing at the ankles. She reclined, face turned toward the night sky, her mouth upturned in rapture, eyes closed.

With a shuddering breath, she parted her legs, releasing. And his limp body dropped to the ground.

CHAPTER 19

Bright daylight dawned as Lilit and Norea entered the kitchen, barefoot and in high spirits. They loaded laundry into a large drum. After stripping down to their thongs and putting on cropped tops, the two straddled narrow, contoured saddle seats upholstered in leather. Bracing themselves, they began to pedal.

The mounting angle not only made the copper drum spin but also caused it to sway and buck. They had their father create this contraption that was to cleanse the clothing while also delivering a punishing workout.

The water inside sloshed and surged against the garments. As their muscles glistened with sweat, Norea and Lilit powered through, every stroke of their legs met with the drum's resistance. A tingle between her thighs brought back sensations of his body thrashing last night, pinned by her legs. Using her arms, Norea engaged the internal agitator. She forced it to move counter to the drum's spin.

With their breathing labored and the clothes inside the drum thoroughly thrashed, Lilit pulled a lever. The soapy water drained away, replaced shortly by a fresh rinse cascading over the garments. They resumed their vigorous churning.

Lilit pulled another lever. As the drum drained, the twins pedaled with ferocity, wringing

excess moisture from the clothes in a final, exhaustive push. In turn, the drum spun wildly, straining against its mountings.

Sargon entered the kitchen as the spinning drum came to a slow, rattling halt. He stopped at the sight of the two girls in minimal wear. His gaze drifted to their legs. When did they get so long? He blinked. *Strong* was the word he'd been looking for, of course. He raised his eyes to their glistening faces.

"Breakfast?" Lilit called out, her breath ragged. Norea chimed in, "We'll iron later."

Sargon cleared his throat. "Sounds good," he managed, then tried for a casual tone. "Put on a bit more breakfast-friendly attire first, though."

"Naturally, Father," said Lilit, a hint of amusement touching her lips. The two young women dismounted, their movements a mirror image, bronzed thighs sheened with sweat. Their ample breasts, bold against the sweaty fabric, were still heaving from the exertion.

Rising to her full height, Norea pulled up on the straps of her thong, while Lilit braced herself with a hand on the ceiling, giving her lustrous hair a shake and letting it tumble down her back. Norea turned away from her father, peeled the damp top over her head and let it drop to the floor. She put on an airy, short slip dress, its ruffled hem dancing mid-thigh. Lilit followed suit. Sargon's gaze, averted all the while, remained fixed on the pan.

They both walked over and leaned down, planting quick kisses on their father's cheek.

"This dress doesn't want to let go," Norea mused with a hint of a pout as she surveyed the fabric clinging to her damp contours. "Seems like it wants to stick around for breakfast, too," Lilit added.

Sargon grunted. "Well, don't let it get any ideas," he finally said.

Norea, stifling a laugh, patted his arm. "Don't worry, Father. We've got things under

control.”

Sargon drew himself up. “See that you do,” he said gruffly.

Norea and Lilit exchanged another look, their eyes sparkling with mirth. “Of course, Father,” Lilit said. She turned and walked toward the counter. “Sit down and watch us as we make breakfast,” Norea told him and guided him with a gentle yet insistent hand to a floor cushion.

Weeks without coin meant flatbread slicked with herbs. Better days added white salty cheese. Today...today they had enough for a full breakfast.

Flour, water, salt—the basics—were combined followed by butter, which was worked into the dough with deft strokes, folded, layered, and brushed again. The oven, heated via reflecting mirrors and rooftop prismatic lenses, hissed as the bread slid in.

The two were onto the next thing: Lilit pedaled away on the stationary mill, grinding almonds with dates and cinnamon, while Norea added a dash of salt to bring out the flavor. She strained the mixture through a cheesecloth, and it was done.

Now, to the heart of the meal. Norea and Lilit briskly chopped onions and sautéed them. Bell peppers joined, then crushed tomatoes, their scent thick and smoky with paprika. Cumin and black pepper were sprinkled in.

“What?” Norea asked, looking back at her father.

“You’re like a whirlwind when you cook,” he said in awe.

“Like the vendors?” A flash of a grin.

“Faster. Never seen anything like that.”

The sisters laughed amiably. “You always come to the kitchen when breakfast is ready and miss the preparation.”

Their precise and efficient movements stirred a distant memory. For an instant, Sargon saw in his mind's eye not his daughters, but a whirling maple seed, its delicate form perfectly balanced for flight. The image shifted, morphed—a spinning contraption, gears and wings and the promise of the skies... He gritted his teeth. Foolishness. Dangerous thoughts—the kind that could unravel everything.

The sharp crack of an eggshell against the pan snapped Sargon back to the moment. He watched as Lilit carved shallow wells in the dish, cracked the eggs with a practiced snap, and dropped them in. Norea covered the pan with a lid, and fifteen minutes later, she moved it to the table and garnished the dish with parsley leaves. Sargon inhaled deeply, savoring the aroma. The meal was a burst of colors: the pastel white and yellow of the yolks surrounded by glistening orange and fire-red hues.

With a flourish, Norea pulled out the warm, flaky flatbread from the oven, the scent of butter a promise beneath the crisp brown crust.

The twins joined their father at the low table, and he reached over and tore a large piece of the chunky flatbread. They began their breakfast amid the earthen curved walls.

His daughters were genuinely good cooks, Sargon realized. He'd never thought it through before, perhaps too preoccupied to notice. He told them so, and they laughed in response.

Breakfast was over. Norea positioned herself behind Sargon, her long legs straddling either side of him. Her large hands began kneading the tension from his shoulders. He relaxed and murmured his thanks.

Meanwhile, Lilit unlatched the laundry drum and took out the damp clothing. She hummed as she sorted the clothes, the tune sweet and childlike. "Ironing time," she announced, looking up, a whimsical expression on her face.

“You like to iron everything,” Sargon said fondly.

Lilit grinned at him. She did.

Under the powerful prismatic lens, the copper block reached the desired heat in a short time. With tongs, she hoisted the now searing block, slotting it into a receptacle at the base of the box iron. The soft hiss of steam escaping from the damp fabric signaled the start of ironing.

“Lilit, Norea,” Sargon began, his tone gentle but firm, “you’re both grown women now. Have you considered what the future holds? If not children, perhaps apprenticeships?”

Norea’s hands paused their massage. “Father, why change what’s working? Our lives are rich, fulfilling—”

“—and bring us joy,” Lilit completed the sentence. She set aside the iron and approached him.

Norea said from behind, “The idea of leaving it behind, conforming to societal roles that don’t suit us...”

Sargon felt a twinge of irritation. “It’s not about expectations, Norea. It’s about ensuring you have the skills and resources to stand on your feet.”

Lilit edged closer, her voice soft yet resolute. “But we *are* standing on our feet.”

He frowned, perplexed. What was she saying? No one simply lived for housework and cooking. “You’re young women. Surely you long for companionship, for deeper connections.”

Lilit’s voice tightened, a hint of agitation rising, “Can’t you see? Our happiness, our harmony is right here—by your side.”

Sargon sighed, feeling the weight of his paternal responsibility as his daughters grew increasingly flustered. “I won’t be here forever, and you need to be prepared for when that day comes.”

The sweetness was now gone from Lilit's face. The sharp tang of rain on her skin, Talmai's muffled groan against her inner thigh...the memory of last night elicited a flash of heat that made her hand tighten on the edge of the table.

Oblivious, Sargon remained unmoved, his resolve firm. "It's for your own good, even if you can't see it now."

Lilit shrieked in frustration laced with anguish. "Sleep, Father," she commanded. Sargon's eyes rolled in his head, and he slumped on the table.

She rose to her full height, breathing heavily, nostrils flaring. It was no use. She couldn't sway him, couldn't convince him to let her stay. Lilit had held this discussion repeatedly in recent weeks with the same outcome, even if her dear father retained none of the memories. She tasted fear in her mouth, a bitter metallic tang, and had to push hard on the rising panic.

She paced in the small walled confines of the kitchen, her thoughts churning. A dark idea began to take shape in her mind. Angora, she might be the key. If Lilit could bend her subtly to her will, Angora may in turn sway Sargon.

The thought was rousing and distressing. To weave a bond that could influence Sargon's decisions was perverse. Yet the thought of leaving, of losing this life with her father, was unbearable.

And amid the turmoil, the thrill at the prospect of getting a hold of Angora in such a primal, dominating way uncoiled within her. Ever since last night's unplanned encounter with the Iskandar in the rainstorm, she'd struggled to keep in check the animalistic cravings she'd let out. Some part of her recognized that unleashing these had been a mistake: Her self control was weaker now. What was torn open could not be caged in with ease anymore. Even now, as she was contemplating, she could sense the insistent thrum taking dominance.

She breathed slowly and evenly for a minute or two until it receded, her head clearing.

Lilit's resolve hardened. She would do it. She would reach out to the other female, not with words, but with an unspoken connection that would tether her. Lilit's decision was followed by a silent vow, a promise to herself to protect the sanctity of the life she'd built with Sargon. *If my shadows can't chase you away, Angora. It seems I must tether you to them, make you a part.*

CHAPTER 20

Talmai regained consciousness to the distant laughter and squeals of girls, a sound that brought him a profound sense of relief: He was alive.

He quickly took stock of himself and his surroundings. Deep in the shadows, he was propped against one of the gnarled aerial roots of a massive banyan tree. Above Talmai, a hornbill hopped from one branch to another. A handful of little girls splashed, swam, and mock-wrestled in a pond not far away, their shrieks of laughter and animated chatter drifting across the clearing. He glanced down at himself, then hastily rearranged his clothes and scrambled away. He would have a hard time explaining that it was not what it looked like.

Talmai understood. The twins had put him there, in this compromising position, ensuring he was hidden from view as a way to show him what may befall him if he were to probe any further or reveal their identity. It was a silent threat—stop investigating, or else.

Talmai struggled to his feet, rustling leaves and sending the hornbill squawking into the air. He was unsettled by how he'd found himself, then unsettled even more as memories of his surreal encounter with the sisters came flooding back. In some unfathomable way, the two manipulated his perceptions and tinkered with his deeper, primitive instincts. He had no recollection of what happened after he felt the compulsion to approach one of them at the grove,

though.

The twins could have killed him just as easily, he somehow knew. It could have been clean and undetectable—a cardiac arrest, and no one the wiser. That they'd chosen to risk exposure by letting him live spoke volumes.

During the long walk to the governance chambers, Talmai gradually regained his composure. How little the twins understood him, he mused. Let his reputation be damned if it came to that. A bitter chuckle escaped his lips. If not for the gravity of the situation, he might've been amused by their reasoning.

There was no more doubt: The two young women wielded terrifying powers. The risk they posed to the community was too great to ignore. He was going to have them apprehended, Talmai resolved as he approached the town hall with purposeful strides. He entered his spacious, tasteful chambers and called in his personal assistant.

“Gather a dozen guardians,” he told her when the woman entered.

“Iskandar?”

“Just do it. Summon them here.”

“As you wish, Wisdom.”

After she'd left, Talmai sat down on a floor cushion, legs folded under him.

Could he look the other way if the sisters remained peaceful and respected social and personal boundaries? No, the idea was preposterous. How would he keep a check on their conduct? How would anyone know until it may be too late?

The Iskandar meditated some more, eyes closed.

Norea and Lilit represented havoc—this thought came to him again and again. They opened up perilous pathways, ones likely to shake their world to the core. As he pondered this,

he heard approaching footsteps. The double doors opened, and his assistant ushered in people, all donning the guardian emblems.

He rose to his feet, and they bowed to him.

“Thank you,” he said. “I need you—” He stopped, conflicted. In the long run, the twins were a true danger to the stability of their world, he reminded himself.

“I need you to—”

Danger in the long run? The looming catastrophe—whatever its exact nature may be—will consume their world in the *next few years*. Let Sargon and his daughters enjoy the remainder of their time. Much as Angora had been the light of his life, it was clear to Talmai that Sargon felt the same about his daughters.

The guardians exchanged uncertain glances. “Iskandar?” one inquired tentatively.

The two were a force of nature, Talmai reflected. But a force could be good or bad. They *had* chosen to spare him, even at the risk of being unmasked. He felt it now: the conviction they would do the right thing when it mattered. Talmai finally looked up.

“Iskandar?”

He regarded the faces of the group that assembled on the oval rug across the room. “I thank you for coming,” he said, offering an apologetic smile. “There’s been a change of plans. I bid you a good day and apologize for the unnecessary summons.”

The people glanced at each other, bowed, and departed.

The Iskandar was left alone. He sighed and sat heavily back down. He could think of only one way to force Lilit and Norea out of hiding—while showing to the world and themselves their true moral characters, that is, when faced with momentous consequences. And he *hated* this idea.

Zeus’ whiskers! He felt nauseous just thinking of what he was about to do.

Well, if it was going to be his time, so be it.

CHAPTER 21

Angora stepped out of the washroom, her skin slick and glistening with droplets of water.

Drying herself, she regarded her trim figure in the full-length mirror. She pulled a silk slip top from the freestanding clothes rack and slid it over her bare skin. As she adjusted the straps, an inky darkness caught her eye. She gasped, spinning around to stare at the inexplicable black void boiling in the center of her room.

Out of the murk, a tall female emerged, wearing a long, flowing dress with a high side slit tracing the length of her leg. A spike of fear shot through her, and she stared in shock. In a few soundless strides, the woman was upon her.

Angora staggered back, until abruptly her body was stopped by the cold surface of the wall mirror behind her. The suddenness and intensity of the encounter left her mind reeling, unable to form coherent thoughts or articulate any protest.

The figure loomed over her. Under the russet moonlight, the amber eyes, high cheekbones, and heart-shaped face framed by long, dark hair were unmistakable. It was that young woman who'd haunted her. It must have been Sargon's daughter: Lilit. What did she want with her? An inexplicable attraction, intertwined with trepidation, drew her in.

The woman was so tall and close that the prominent swell of her bodice was unnervingly

near Angora's face. Discomfort made her turn her head aside. But then a large hand closed in, planting itself against Angora's throat. Cool fingers extended over the contours of her cheeks, while the thumb, pushed under the side of her jaw, inhibited any words she might have tried to muster.

Angora braced against the hold, her limbs thrashing in futile resistance as she was pressed against the wall mirror. Strangled moans tore at her throat, only to be swallowed by the hand that now covered her mouth, hushing it. The air thickened, pressing silence upon them. Angora's face was inexorably turned forward and then coaxed upward to meet those feline-looking eyes. Next, a bare thigh wedged between her own, pinning her—triggering a sharp intake of breath, while her body went rigid at the deeper intrusion into her space.

The woman gripping Angora's face became still, unblinking. Time seemed to stretch and distort as the only sound in the large room was Angora's ragged breathing. Unable to break the intense eye contact, Angora felt a heightened awareness of her body as Lilit's thigh pressed intimately against her own. The warmth of skin against skin magnified every sensation, making her acutely conscious of her pulse racing in tandem with the overwhelming emotions that Lilit's presence invoked.

“Every stir of yours...every breath...I claim them all.” Lilit's voice was a mere wisp of sound, yet it carried, and Angora breathing grew erratic. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears, a faint drumbeat in the charged hush. “Yes, that's it,” the taller woman murmured. And Angora's breath came in quick, shallow gasps, her chest rising and falling rapidly under the thin silk cover.

Her eyes were held by Lilit's. Dimly, she felt probing fingers at the nape of her neck, deftly finding and pulling out the pin. Her hair cascaded freely down her back and shoulders, a sudden release into unguarded simplicity.

Lilit made a soft, drawn-out shushing sound as her fingers unhurriedly threaded through Angora's hair: a gesture of possession, each strand woven into Lilit's claim.

While maintaining the connection with her thigh, a column of insistent pressure, the titaness shifted sideways. A large hand reached in and lazily trailed down the front of Angora's blouse, arousing a curious blend of anxiety and certain undefinable sensations, as her skin tingled in unanticipated places. Heat flushed her skin, leaving a damp sheen of sweat. This was followed by a distant wave of humiliation as her resistance began to crumble and her body was betraying her: tremors and small moans escaping her lips.

The roving hand came to a halt. "Feel this—your heart, beating in the palm of my hand, thrumming."

Lilit's whisper was hauntingly intimate. An unbidden response leaped within Angora, a complex weave of fear and arousal pulsing beneath the hand that rested over the swell of her chest. Heat flared from between her legs—and from there, to the bare thigh that pressed.

With a shuddering sigh, Angora was past struggle. She shut her eyes briefly, giving in to the moment and to her own desires, the tension in her body gradually dissipating away.

The pressure of the hand against her chest intensified for a fleeting moment. In the charged stillness, Lilit drew closer, her breath a warm mist against her ear, "You'll feel me in the shiver of your breath, a secret only your body will know after the memories of this encounter are gone."

The moment lingered, suspended in time, as if the world had narrowed down to the space between their bodies, the frantic heartbeat under Lilit's touch, and the unspoken promise woven into her words.

"You are unable to hold yourself," the taller woman stated, leaned over, and tenderly

kissed Angora on the forehead.

And so it was. As Lilit withdrew, Angora's knees buckled under the weight of the words. She slid down, her back against the mirror, legs drawn together and tilted to one side.

Receding footfalls, and the front door was closed, taking away the darkness and incrementally leaching away the memories of what was.

Angora rose to her feet, her body trembling, an acrid metallic taste on her tongue. Her reflection in the mirror stared back at her, eyes wide with shock and disbelief. She had been manhandled, intimidated. The encounter left her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

A shiver ran through her as she touched the spots where the hands of that lunatic thundercunt had been, experiencing an interplay of raw fear and something else. Her skin tingled with the ghostly memory of their contact, the sensation unsettling.

She was touched, yet untouched. The dread that had gripped her started to recede, overtaken by surging heat. A part of her felt repulsed by the invasion of her personal space by some woman—she suddenly could not recall who exactly. At the same time, the encounter had kindled a craving within her, a craving to be touched, to be taken, to be claimed—by Sargon. The unexpected surge was overwhelming.

In the mirror, she saw herself—hair disheveled like a tempest, eyes fervent with abandon and alight with lust. Breathless, she shed off the silk top, and boldly stood in the center of the room, looking at her nude body, hands resting on her hips. How she wanted Sargon to open the door and take her right where she was, right as she was.

She stood breathing through flaring nostrils, staring at the door, as if trying to will it to burst open.

Finally, she lowered her head then sank to her knees, drained of the feverish sensations.

She was unsure what brought this flare. Did something happen earlier to trigger it? What overcame her? Strange.

She managed to drag herself to her bed before darkness overtook her.

CHAPTER 22

Someone was shaking her awake, and Angora cracked her eyes open. Her friend looked back at her with traces of reproach and worry on her dark face. “What are you doing here, Mede’a?” she asked groggily. “What time is it?”

“It’s midday,” her friend informed her, a hint of amusement in her voice.

“Midday!” Angora pushed some hair out of her face. A wave of confusion washed over her as she realized she was naked, and she brought the blanket up. She had no memory of getting undressed. Maybe a shower, then crashing without a thought to clothes? Strange.

Mede’a’s grin widened. “Must have been a wild night for you to be so tired—and naked.”

“Oh no, don’t you start...” Angora cut her off. “Your mind’s in the gutter.”

“At least tell me it was good.”

“Oh, do be quiet.” Angora yawned. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Getting you out of the house, that’s what.” Mede’a rose to her feet and put her hands on her hips. “Enough with the moping, already. It’ll do you good to get out.”

Angora made it a point to yawn again and then put the blanket over her head. “I’m going back to sleep,” she muttered. And she wasn’t moping! She was searching for any bloody reference to the Bridge of Heaven. For all the good that this did. She could not find anything.

Anything.

“Tartarus’ hairy ass you go back to sleep!” her friend said, leaning over, and in one yank pulled the blanket away, causing Angora to yelp in surprise and instinctively reach up. “Up you lazy cog! We’re going to put some food into you, and then you’re coming with me to a gallery. Enough with this navel gazing.”

Angora tried to glare at her friend but just succeeded in giving her a dirty look.

“Don’t make me drag you to your feet,” Mede’a warned her petite friend.

Despite her grumbling and grouching, she got dressed, ate, and soon found herself following Mede’a to an art gallery a few blocks away.

Mede’a had been right, Angora realized after they spent a few minutes in the gallery. She was enjoying herself, and it was good for her to be out and about. It felt like another lifetime since she’d learned of the impending fate of their world, a fate that weighed heavily on her mind, day and night.

As it turned out, Angora loved the artist’s work. She found herself captivated by the imaginative paintings, all done in a surreal style that deeply resonated with her. One painting depicted people swimming in the air toward houses dozens of yards off the ground. Another portrayed a giant building seemingly stretching for miles, filled with countless little holes where faces poked through tiny windows. Yet, it was another painting that stopped her dead in her tracks, leaving her staring in disbelief.

The painting showed a giant cylindrical artifact emerging from the rooftop of a house, the upper part of the massive tube was set against the black kosmos and the stars. The cylinder had the unmistakable gnarled texture, the unmistakable indent at the four-fifths mark around its circumference. There was no doubt: The artist painted their world, Areta, from the outside.

Angora approached the artist and waited until he finished conversing with a few other patrons.

Finally, it was her turn. She introduced herself, but he'd already known who she was. Angora told him she would purchase the painting, holding her rush of feelings in check. The artist and Angora shook hands on it, agreeing that she would deliver him the money the next day. She genuinely loved the painting and wanted it on her wall. All of this was secondary, though.

“Did you ever see a structure like this before?” Angora asked, pointing at the cylinder. Her fingers twitched with the urge to grab his lapels and shake him, almost overwhelming her. Every second spent on pleasantries before getting to the truth felt like torture.

The artist nodded. “It’s from the *Book of Fantastic Things*.” He winked. “The rest of the composition, though, that’s all me.”

Angora complimented him again and found Mede’a. With a hurried hug and a rushed excuse about being late for something, she bolted from the gallery before her friend could start asking questions.

It was only a few minutes’ brisk walk through the bustling streets to the Mouseion.

Her heart thudded in her chest as she entered the familiar stacks. Card index, a few frantic moments, and the hefty codex was in her hands. She carried it to a nearby reading table, unceremoniously plopped it down, and rapidly leafed through the pages. *Book of fantastic things* indeed; the author seemed to delight in contriving outlandish contraptions designed to both amaze and amuse.

Under other circumstances, Angora might have been interested to look through each of its pages, but now, the only thing of interest was—there! She found the illustration. The giant cylinder was the same as in the painting. However, here it had small figures of people peering

through a peephole at the bottom of the giant tube. The caption read “teleskopio,” whatever that made-up word meant. Source, what was the source? She frantically went through the index.

Found it! The artist stated he’d copied the enigmatic structure from the Tygliat Pesser scroll.

She leaned back in her chair and slowly exhaled. Tygliat Pesser. It was the fraud that had rocked the small scholarly community around fifty or sixty years earlier. The scroll was alleged to have been written during the earliest era of their history, the Age of Genesis. It all came back to her. Following an investigation, it’d been determined to have been a clever forgery. Fingers were pointed at the person who’d claimed to have discovered the scroll. Feeling disgraced, Apshafel committed suicide soon thereafter.

It was by far the most infamous forgery of the current age. The scroll had disappeared since.

And here was a reproduction of an illustration taken from it, an illustration that showed Areta from outside. Long before the alleged forgery of Tygliat Pesser was committed, the mosaic was altered, the shape botched. If Apshafel indeed had forged the scroll, what source had he drawn upon?

What was she to make of all this? Angora did not know. She reckoned that at the very least it was worthwhile probing further into this infamous scroll.

* * *

Angora found the woman. She was tending a small herb garden in front of a modest cottage. Stooped with age, she moved slowly, her weathered hands deftly plucking sprigs of parsley. The air hummed with the whir of dragonfly wings, their iridescent bodies darting among the plants.

Fifty-nine years earlier, this same woman had been a young scholar caught up in the controversy of a contentious scroll. Now, she was the last surviving person to have inspected it. The other four were long dead.

Angora cleared her throat. "Excuse me," she called out. The woman startled, then straightened, revealing a freckled face lined with years.

Angora introduced herself, and the woman's eyes lit up with recognition. Evidently, she was familiar with some of Angora's work. Moments later, they were inside. She did not have many guests, her host confided, as she bustled over hot cider she was fixing for them both. The scent of spices and something tangy hung in the air as they settled into a room that spoke of quiet afternoons and long-forgotten books.

"I came to ask you about Tygliat Pesser," Angora said, taking a measured sip of the hot brew and helped herself to some of the pastries on the table in front of her.

"About what?" the old woman asked, looking perplexed.

"The forgery. Sixty years ago."

"Oh, yes! I remember now. It was quite the story. Quite the story. My," the old woman said and chuckled. "I've not thought about it in ages."

Angora feigned nonchalance. "The scroll came up in a recent conversation, and my curiosity was piqued. I understand you had a chance to look at it." *Perhaps the last living person who did*, she thought.

"A number of us examined it, but yes, I was one of them," the old woman said a bit guardedly. Disdain crossed her face. "The scroll's owner, Apshafel, was a crook and a thief," she said, her voice acquiring a forceful, insistent tone. "Everyone knew it, even if he was never caught red-handed. He lied as easily as he breathed. The decision was unanimous: It was a

forgery.”

“An alleged scroll from the Age of Genesis. It must have caused quite the stir.”

The old woman put down her cup. “He didn’t claim that exactly.”

“No?” Angora must have looked as surprised as she felt.

“The Age of Shoah, late period.”

“But—”

The elder raised her hand. “I know. It’s a bit complicated.” A wistful smile traced her lips as she stared into the swirling depths of her cup. “My, I haven’t thought about it... Well, it’s coming back to me.” Her gaze sharpened as she looked up. “The scroll was ostensibly composed of an introduction written by someone from the Age of Shoah. While the rest of the scroll was alleged to contain text that dated back to the Age of Genesis—a series of reproductions made by the person who drafted the introduction.”

Angora listened intently, remaining silent.

“It was quite an outlandish account,” the old woman said quickly. “I don’t know how Apshafel expected anyone to believe it.” She reminisced, “When we asked Apshafel where he’d found that ancient scroll, he got uncomfortable. He mumbled and stuttered and finally came up with something unconvincing. He obviously didn’t anticipate this question. Honestly, his case fell on skeptical ears after that.”

Intriguing, Angora thought as she rearranged her dress. “And how did that alleged composer of the scroll chance upon text from the Age of Genesis?”

The old woman settled back. “Apshafel told us that the composer had stumbled upon the ruins of a mouseion dating back to the Age of Genesis. The building was gutted through and through, with anything not looted smashed to bits. Nothing remained except the walls, which

presumably held numerous metal inscriptions set in relief. The man decided to make copies of these writings to preserve them for posterity, as they were presumably the last surviving texts from a bygone era.” She looked at Angora with a wry smile. “Needless to say, there is no trace of the ruins. But this did make for an interesting story, to be sure.”

That did not prove anything one way or another. “To be fair,” Angora said, “we have no ruins at all predating the Age of Shoah.”

The old woman made a dismissive gesture.

Suddenly something occurred to Angora. “What did the inscription from the Age of Genesis look like?”

The other shook her head. “We never got to examine that part of the scroll.”

“I thought...” Angora began, her voice trailing off in confusion.

“Apshafel only gave us a carbon copy of the introduction, along with a single, fanciful illustration,” she chuckled ruefully. “Can you believe he haggled and demanded money for the rest? He wouldn’t show us the rest of the panels without payment.”

“What convinced you it was a forgery?”

The old woman looked taken aback, seemingly surprised that anyone would even ask that. “For one, the reason I’ve told you.” A glimmer of amusement sparkled in her eyes. “It also happened to be a bad time for Apshafel. Shortly before he approached us, the first clear writings from the Age of Shoah had been uncovered—”

“You speak of the Timnah Codex.”

The elderly woman acknowledged it with a wave of her hand. She smiled knowingly. “But you see, at the time that codex wasn’t made public yet; it was still undergoing the last stage of verification. So Apshafel had no access to it. As he forged the scroll, all he had to work with

was the ostrakon”—She was talking about the Two Peaks Ostrakon, realized Angora—“which the letter forms were not too clear; he could not have known the exact letter form of that period. I don’t remember the particulars; however, it did not match with the letter forms of the Timnah Codex. It did not match,” she repeated, stressing the words.

“I understand,” Angora said politely and rose to her feet. “I thank you for your time. The information was quite helpful.” She smiled cordially before turning to leave.

As she made her way back home, Angora felt unsettled. The analysis done on Tygliat Pesser left her dissatisfied. It fell short of the definitive evidence of its forgery she had expected.

Assuming Apshafel forged the scroll, it was odd he didn’t have a readymade, satisfying answer to where he’d found it. She started to suspect that perhaps he really did stumble upon an ancient scroll, but perhaps while stealing something, a detail he’d rather not share with the committee.

* * *

Later that day, Angora was at the archive section of the Mouseion. It had taken some time to locate the report that claimed to have debunked Tygliat Pesser, but at long last, she held it in her hands. The report was fairly brief, and its disdain for Apshafel evident. The authors seemed to have gone into it with the intent to prove it a forgery.

The scholars’ arguments boiled down to two key points.

First, they doubted that a two-thousand-year-old scroll could physically survive to the present day. However, since the report was written, a collection of just such scrolls has been found, authenticated, and thus put that question to rest.

The committee included a brief analysis by the renowned paleographer Adon Martze, who raised another objection: The letter forms differed from those found in the Timnah Codex. This argument, the same one the old woman had made during their meeting, may have held merit sixty years ago. However, everything changed in the years that followed when a trove of miscellaneous documents from the Age of Shoah was discovered fifteen years later. These documents revealed that different manuscripts from this tumultuous period were written in a variety of writing styles. While the Timnah Codex adhered to certain writing conventions, other conventions existed during that era.

In light of these things, it was possible that had Apshafel introduced the scroll to the authorities some years later, the result may have been different. Then again, maybe not. It was a lot of maybes.

The next morning, she made some inquiries then made her way to a small unassuming house on the outskirts of Maganot.

“Hello, my name is Angora,” she began as an elderly woman with a silver bun opened the door. “I’m the director—” She stopped abruptly, reddening as memory returned. She was no longer a director of anything; the Sanhedrin had stripped her of the position. “Are you the daughter of the late *Vyr* Apshafel?” she asked.

At the mention of the name, the woman’s smile faltered, and her gaze sharpened. From somewhere inside the house, children were yelling. They must have been great-grandchildren she’d been watching over. The woman turned her head and yelled a reminder about not quarrelling. Turning her attention back to Angora, she asked, “May I ask what it’s about?”

“I’m searching for the Tygliat Pesser—” She stopped at the sudden hardening of the other woman’s eyes.

“I’ve managed to not hear about that accursed *thing*”—the woman fairly spat that last —“for over fifty years. I don’t care to have anything to do with it.” She started to close the door.

“Wait,” Angora said. “It may be important.”

For the briefest moment, the woman hesitated, anguish flashing across her face—before firmly shutting the door.

“The scroll may have been authentic, after all,” hollered Angora. Remote as that possibility was.

She waited, and when it became clear the woman wasn’t going to open the door, she retrieved with a sigh a piece of paper from her satchel. A moment later, she slipped a note under the door. “That’s my home address if you change your mind,” she said loudly enough to be heard, then turned and walked away.

Why had she stumbled upon that blasted painting? It had led to nothing but dead ends. Despite her efforts, she was no closer to understanding the reference to the Bridge of Heaven than when she’d started. Frustrated, she kicked a small rock in her path. It was time to inform Sargon that it was unlikely any references to it existed.

A coarse, woven tapestry in butter-yellow and rust-red hung on the curved wall of the tiny anteroom. Angora hesitated—then pulled on the cord. The three gong sounds faded into an expectant silence. As footsteps approached, she traced a finger along the carvings of the inner door, its coolness a stark contrast to the prickling heat on her skin.

The door swung open, revealing a striking young woman with long, disheveled hair. A surge of recognition shot through Angora, accompanied by an intense, primal sensation she couldn’t explain. The recognition was instant, visceral—this was the woman who’d trailed her

and Sargon on a few occasions. As they regarded each other across the small space, her hands absently twisted the fabric of her dress. “You must be Sargon’s daughter,” she managed as she struggled to decipher the whirlwind of emotions stirred by the woman’s presence.

The woman nodded then tilted her head slightly. “My name is Lilit,” she said, her voice low. “You must be Angora; Father mentioned you.”

“In a good way, I hope,” Angora replied, injecting a lightness into her tone. So Lilit was aware of her relationship with Sargon.

They shared a smile.

“Lilit, is your father at home?”

The other woman shook her head, the waning daylight streaming through the open outer door and reflecting off the jet-black hair. Angora found herself gazing up at the taller woman, oddly fixated on Lilit’s jawline. With some effort, she resisted the urge to step closer.

On the spur of the moment, she said, “Lilit, I want you to know that my feelings for your father are rooted in deep respect and affection. I have no intention of disrupting the special bond you share with him.”

Lilit’s expression softened, a shadow of vulnerability crossing her features. “I understand,” she said, biting her lip. “It’s hard sharing him. But I see the joy it brings Father.”

Angora pressed on, “Sargon has a big heart. There’s space for both of us in his life without diminishing the love he holds for you.”

Lilit’s eyes gleamed. “Hearing this from you means a lot.” As she spoke, she touched Angora’s shoulder, a gesture that should have been comforting but instead reignited the mysterious stir within her.

Lilit stepped closer, her warm breath ghosting across Angora’s face. Then, she embraced

her. Angora was engulfed by the supple fullness of Lilit's chest as a wave of arousal washed over her. The subtle scent of sandalwood clinging to Lilit intensified the growing desire.

Angora jolted as Lilit's fist clenched the smooth fabric of her dress, pulling it taut against her hip. A thrilling mix of fear and anticipation coursed through her. In the span of a heartbeat, Lilit's eyes darkened with a raw hunger that sent a shiver down Angora's spine. Then, just as swiftly, the intensity faded, replaced by an almost apologetic softness. Lilit's hand loosened its grip and withdrew.

Pulling back, Lilit looked warmly at Angora. "Your words mean more than you know," she said, placing a large hand over Angora's chest. Beneath Lilit's palm, her heart hammered—a raw, insistent beat carrying an inexplicable apprehension and arousal.

As Angora left, the evening air offered little relief from the heat that lingered from Lilit's touch. The encounter was marked by genuine connection and disturbing undercurrents, drawing her to Lilit in a way she couldn't explain. In the solitude of her walk, Angora scrutinized their interaction, seeking the source of the insistent whispers in her mind and the fleeting flashes of arousal. Yet, the more she thought, the more confused she became, unable to understand the inexplicable pull toward Lilit.

What was happening to her? The idea that her emotions could be so easily stirred by a near stranger was unsettling. Perhaps it was simply the stress of her relationship with Sargon playing tricks on her.

Well, it mattered not in the end, Angora thought to herself, a sense of resolve settling over her. She'd made an initial connection with Lilit—a promising start. And as for telling Sargon about her fruitless search... well, that could wait a day or two, until their next meeting.

CHAPTER 23

Under the vast expanse of the night sky, the amphitheatron glowed a cool silver beneath the light of Thalith Na'amat. Hundreds of spectators sat on the worn stone benches, the drama on stage holding them spellbound.

Thirty minutes into the play, Lilit sensed a sharp flare of panic and alarm coming from somewhere outside the arena. She leaped to her feet and wildly stared into the darkness beyond the amphitheatron's rim, drawing some curious glances from nearby spectators. The mental signature lay somewhere in the lake nearby... by the pier. Someone was drowning.

Her hands flew to her hoods about to push them back when the enormity—the impossibility—of the situation struck her. If she were to rush to the rescue of an unseen and unheard victim, her true nature would be exposed. But if she did nothing, someone would die. For a heartbeat, she stood frozen, breathing hard, face flushed. The world narrowed, the sounds of the stage fading to a distant hum.

Cloaks flung aside, dresses ripped open at the slits, then discarded as sandals were kicked off. Amber eyes blazing, she cleared a path ahead of her with a mental shriek that sent the seated audience scrambling to the sides, dumbfounded and spooked from the unexpected, terrifying mental assault.

Starlight rippled across the water's surface as Lilit pounded down the short wooden pier, weathered boards creaking beneath her frantic steps, each footfall shattering the night's stillness.

She sent a desperate plea to the universe as she dove. The sudden coldness of the water sharp against her body as she worked her way down. Moments earlier, the signal had been cut off; the person must have gone unconscious.

The lake lay in murk, but it mattered not. Even in the impenetrable blackness of the lake's depth, his fading life signature pulsed clearly. She could sense it near the lake bed, about fifteen feet down.

As she swiftly dove deeper, she had her Lilit body coming from one side of him and her Norea body from the other. At the bottom, four arms grabbed the motionless form, two on each side, and immediately Norea and Lilit pushed off and made their way to the surface.

It didn't take long. They burst forth from the watery depths, gasping for air, and hoisted the limp body onto the wooden pier.

She had Lilit kneeling over the still figure of the Iskandar of Maradam. Norea remained standing, facing the amassing, buzzing throng of people, deterring anyone from approaching.

"Is he dead?" voices called out, demanding to know.

"No," Norea said loudly, facing them. "Stand fast, so I can save him." Her eyes went vacant as her attention was fully diverted to the Lilit's body.

Lilit felt for a pulse, finding none. A focused jolt reignited his heart. His eyes flew open, and he retched. She quickly turned his head aside as he coughed and gasped for air. A hushed whisper rose from the crowd, then another, and another, growing into a chorus of relief. Applause erupted from the hundreds gathered as his eyes slowly focused.

"What happened, Iskandar?" Lilit asked, reeling. The feeling of relief of having saved

him eclipsed by the growing realization—the horror—of her unmasking in front of hundreds.

He coughed. “Vertigo,” he said in a hoarse voice. “Just as I was strolling on the edge of the pier. Next I knew, I was underwater. This heavy breastplate didn’t help.” He rapped on the metal plate.

The Iskandar then regarded her. “What is your name, child?” he asked loudly for the benefit of the onlookers.

Her eyes grew round, then narrowed. He knew who she was. What was that about?

“Lilit,” she said. There, she said it aloud, to all to hear. What was to become of her, after everyone had a chance to think it through?

“Lilit,” the Iskandar repeated. “I’ve you to thank for saving my life,” he said in a voice that carried.

The crowd cheered again. Faces blurred—some awestruck, others narrowed in trepidation, and others yet with veneration. She felt a tremor of unease. At that moment, she was sure about only one thing: The time of subterfuge was over.

CHAPTER 24

The door to Talmai's study flew open and Angora rushed in. "Oh, thank Zeus you're alive and well!" she cried, throwing herself into his arms.

"Very much so," he said, chortling and fondly stroking her hair.

"I've been frantically searching for you for hours," she said with relief and lingering traces of worry, her words muffled as she pressed her face against his shoulder.

Talmai drew back, a questioning look in his eyes. "You were looking for me for *hours*?"

"Ashur found me, terrified. He feared the worst and sought my help for what he thought was a suicide mission. He's at my home now, too ashamed to face you. Please, Father, forgive him," she pleaded. "He said you left sealed instructions for the Sanhedrin, in case... in case something happened to you."

The Iskandar shook his head. "I should've known," he grumbled, yet a smile flitted across his creased face as he thought of his aging manservant. He sat back down and invited his daughter to join him.

"All is well now?" she asked as they took seats. "Can I stop worrying?"

"Yes," Talmai replied, his smile widening.

Angora visibly relaxed.

But then, her eyes narrowed. “This entire thing was a setup, wasn’t it? By Zeus’ whiskers, you planned your own drowning! Why?”

Talmai considered her for a moment, before letting out a heavy breath. “Someone approached me with a disturbing tale,” he said. “I investigated, confirmed its veracity, and decided to draw her out and unmask her.” The Iskandar then pressed a thumb to his forehead before drawing it down to his lips. Angora nodded solemnly; she would keep it in confidence.

Her stomach clenched as she recalled Lilit’s inexplicable appearances and vanishings. It hadn’t been her imagination. “What *is* she, Father?”

“I do not know.” Talmai’s expression was grave. “It’s unlike anything we’ve known, isn’t it?” He looked at Angora inquiringly. Angora shook her head; she’d never encountered any reference to such a being.

The Iskandar shared with her the rest of what had transpired: from the moment Azai came to his front door, to his own investigation, and finally, the surreal encounter with Lilit in the storm.

“And after all of that, you decided to draw her out—and risk your life in the process,” she said, incredulous.

“I had to find out what choices she would make in moments of truth.”

“Yet, why risk your life for that?” Angora persisted.

“It wasn’t as reckless as it seems,” he tried to soothe her, seeking to downplay the risk. “She wouldn’t let an innocent die, Ango.”

Angora folded her arms across her chest, silent reproach on her face.

Talmai sighed. “I wanted more than to draw her out, I wanted people to accept her. Heroically saving the Iskandar... It was a gamble, a necessary one.” He met her gaze. “Everyone

who has taken the mantle of an Iskandar understands the risks involved.”

His answer bore the veneer of plausibility, but she felt there was more he wasn't saying. Something passed between the two of them. Her father sensed her suspicion, and wanted her to drop the matter.

“Be that as it may,” he went on aloud. “Special powers or no, at the end of the day, she’s a person— much like you, me, or anyone else.”

“What will happen now?” Angora asked.

“The Sanhedrin will soon convene and deliberate.”

“I’d better be going then,” said Angora and got to her feet.

Talmi nodded in understanding. “Sargon may need emotional support.”

“Yes, he may—wait.” She froze. “I never told you about him. About us.” She was suddenly wary.

“The water clock. It all fit,” her father said.

She looked away, then back at him, the question plain in her eyes.

He reached out and stroked her hair. “I’ll not ask you to betray any pledge you’ve made.”

Angora managed a faint smile of gratitude. “Thank you, Father.” She turned to leave, but then a chilling thought seized her. “Could Sargon lose his daughters?”

“No father should lose his children,” Talmi whispered. He looked up and gave her a smile that held a touch of sadness. “I’m afraid this transcends familial considerations, though; the stakes are too high. Only time will tell.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “You should go now,” he said softly.

With a final, lingering look at her father, Angora slipped away. Minutes later, her loose hair was blowing in the warm wind, she sat between the parallel wheels and pedaled, her hands

gripping the polished wooden steering bar. The di-wheeler's giant, skinny rims hummed on the stone road, punctuated by occasional clacks as they rolled over bumps.

Angora entered the main yurt, her eyes immediately finding Sargon. He got to his feet, and the two hugged fiercely.

As they parted, she took in the two other men in the dwelling. Sargon introduced them as Tamuz and Elam, lifelong friends of the family. It was obvious they'd come for the same reason she did: to stand with Sargon and Lilit.

She sensed their unspoken questions. They knew *of* her, as did most people of Maradam; however, her connection to Sargon clearly surprised them. So he hadn't shared this part of his life with them. A private man, indeed.

Evidently, Sargon had spoken earlier with Lilit. He was tight-lipped about the details, though she gleaned it had been a raw, honest conversation, and Lilit had sought his forgiveness. Now, she was in the kitchen, seeking solitude.

Some time later, Elam and Tamuz took their leave, warmly shaking hands. Sargon and Angora were alone at last.

"How do you feel?" she asked, settling beside him on the cushions.

"Bittersweet," he said. "Bewildered," he added after a moment, his gaze distant.

She placed a hand on his arm, her eyes warm and sympathetic.

"I thought I had two daughters." He stared vacantly at his drink. "Now I find out... Norea never existed." He ran his hand through his hair, his voice thick with emotion, "I don't even know *how* to feel."

"Understandable," Angora said. "Nobody has ever been in such a situation before."

He grunted in response.

“You’ve always had one daughter,” she said, her grip on his hands tightening slightly. “And the daughter you have is more extraordinary than any father could have possibly dreamed of.”

Sargon glanced at her and laughed ruefully, shaking his head. “I’ve always marveled why the two never argue with each other.” They shared a smile. “So it really was her stalking and glaring at you,” he said, recalling, his brows knitting together.

“You know how those things can be,” she said diplomatically. “It’s not unusual for girls to get insecure when their father—their only parent, at that—is becoming involved with another woman.”

His posture relaxed some.

“She may have sought to drive me away,” Angora said. “Wanted to have you all for herself.” Yet even as the words left her mouth, an unease twisted in her gut. The lengths to which Lilit went were far beyond those of typical jealousy. There was nothing normal about it. “Maybe she believed you two would always be together,” Angora offered.

He didn’t turn his head, but she could tell he was listening.

“Sometimes... sometimes I don’t understand Lilit,” Sargon said. “The way she dresses around the house. Is it me or is it her?”

“I think you notice in girls what they want you to notice,” Angora said tactfully, stroking the back of his neck. He tensed momentarily before relaxing into her touch. “Society puts boundaries in place to protect us from our own human nature,” she added, her voice barely a whisper.

He looked up, his expression troubled. Angora wrapped her arm around him and pulled

his head onto her shoulder, offering him a comforting embrace.

Angora's own words sent her thoughts spiraling. The memory of Lilit's touch clung to her like a phantom, refusing to fade. She'd struggled to explain the strange pull she felt toward Lilit, her unnerving attraction. Now, doubt plagued her. Could it be that something deep and potent had transpired between them, only to be erased by Lilit's powers? A sense of violation swept over her. Had Lilit manipulated the most intimate aspects of her being, her very desires? The idea was deeply unsettling. She felt vulnerable in a way she'd never imagined. She thought about it some more. It wasn't just her who was vulnerable; everyone was. Lilit wielded truly frightening powers.

"How are things going on at the...other front?" Sargon asked.

Angora looked at him perplexed, then realized what he was saying. She shook her head; she hadn't found anything else about the Bridge of Heaven.

"That bad, huh?" he said softly, his features clouding.

She began to nod, then caught herself. "I'll keep looking," she said.

He reached out and clasped her hand, a silent affirmation of his trust in her.

Angora leaned in to kiss him, her lips brushing his, but the sound of urgent footsteps interrupted. Lilit entered, eyes large in her face. "Someone is approaching," she said, her voice breathless with urgency.

"Who—" Sargon began, only to be cut off by the gong sound.

"Wait here," he told the two women.

Sargon went out and returned moments later with a man dressed in the slate-gray livery of the Sanhedrin's official staff.

"*Vyre Lilit?*" the man said.

“That’s me,” she replied. She regarded him with apprehension.

“*Vyre* Lilit, you are summoned to Sanhedrin Hall tomorrow, two hours past dawn,” he said in a formal voice.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. “I’ll be there,” she said.

The man gave a respectful bow and retreated. A heavy silence descended upon the yurt as the flap fell back into place and the footsteps receded.

Lilit turned to her father. “Tata,” her voice quavered. She took a faltering step toward him. “Tata, I’m so scared,” she sobbed, collapsing at his feet clutching at his arms, drawing herself close to him. Sargon held her tightly, his eyes filled with worry, his jaw clenched. Lilit started sobbing uncontrollably as she clung to him, her face buried in his chest. He looked up, addressing Angora, his expression pleading, “What do you think is going to happen to her?”

“There is no precedent,” Angora said, her hands gesturing vaguely. “I doubt even the iskandars can say for sure. This hearing is as much about learning as it is about judging.”

By now her sobs had subsided to sniffles, and Lilit wiped the tears with the back of her arm and took a seat on one of the raised cushions.

Angora hesitated, then decided to tell them. “The drowning was real enough, but it was no accident.”

“Are you saying...your father sought to drown himself?” Sargon appeared shocked.

Angora was looking at Lilit. “You don’t appear overly surprised by this.”

“I suspected it might be something like that,” Lilit said, her voice small, her gaze lowered.

Angora leaned over and looked deep into the younger woman’s eyes. “The Iskandar didn’t have to do it. He could’ve just had you arrested. Instead, he put it in your hands.”

“Why?” Lilit’s voice trembled. A wave of conflicting emotions flitted across her face—wonder at the Iskandar’s faith and a pang of guilt that he had risked his life for her sake.

“I think he trusted you to do the right thing when it came down to it—and wanted the world to know that about you.” Angora saw the turmoil in the younger woman’s countenance. “Lilit, I believe the iskandars will look past traditions and consider the situation with open minds.”

Lilit bit her lip, a silent tear rolling down her cheek, the dread giving way to hope and gratitude.

Sargon, still looking disturbed, pressed further, “In the worst-case scenario, what would they do?”

“Shut her out of society, of course,” Angora said. She’d hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“Could it be...worse?”

Angora was taken aback as she took his meaning. “You mean”—At least since the Age of Shoah no person had ever—“oh, no.” She shook her head vehemently. “No,” she said, her voice leaving no room for doubt.

Some of the tension had left Sargon. He turned to Lilit and wrapped one arm around her. Lilit looked at her father, tears dried now. “Maybe it’ll get worse, maybe not. Regardless, the time of lying and skulking is over.” Relief and wonder filled her. A shared smile passed among the three of them.

They stayed together through the hours of the night, Lilit finding solace and strength in the presence of Sargon and Angora.

As the first rays of dawn crept through the yurt’s woven walls, Angora quietly rose and made her way to the kitchen. With gentle insistence, she prepared a simple breakfast for them all,

a small gesture of love and nourishment before the trials of the new day.

As they ate, the kitchen door creaked open and Azai walked in. His eyes fell on Lilit and he made a deep bow. "I ought to stand by you in this hearing," he said with heat. The old man approached and sank to his knees. "Forgive me," he said. "I did not know it was you."

"What are you talking about?" Lilit was bewildered.

"It is I who went to the Iskandar and told him," Azai cried. He proceeded to recount how he'd fallen asleep and retained memories of Lilit, and how he had verified that it wasn't a dream. "I surmised that Lilit and Norea died years ago and some entities had taken over, impersonating them," he concluded.

Lilit leaned forward and placed a reassuring hand on his forearm. She then looked from face to face. "It is I who need to ask forgiveness from you, from all of you." A brief, thoughtful pause followed. Sargon's eyes softened, filled with sorrow and understanding. Angora's expression was one of compassion, with a small nod of acceptance. Azai, still kneeling, bowed his head in acknowledgement.

A bit later, Lilit had withdrawn to her quarters. Her fears and doubts began to morph into a newfound understanding. No more hiding, no more pretending. Lilit stood tall, embracing her identity, her dual nature, and she was ready to confront the world outside. As she looked at herself in the burnished bronze mirror, the vulnerability had been replaced by a fierce determination. She was no longer the young girl afraid of judgment. She was Lilit, and the world was about to meet her in her entirety. It was time.

CHAPTER 25

Word of the dual-bodied woman with astonishing meta-faculties and her valiant rescue of Yessod Olam rippled through Areta. Each signal tower, a skeletal structure of weathered timber and interlocking struts, swiftly relayed the news to the next tower, their hinged arms shifting rapidly into one angular pattern after another. On the heels of that, more news followed: The Sanhedrin council had decided to convene immediately to determine that person's fate.

What remarkable times!

A wave of anticipation swept Areta, from the bustling streets of Shikhon to the tranquil olive groves of Admon. Vendors and patrons paused in marketplaces to trade the latest gossip, while children, their eyes wide with wonder, badgered elders for tales of the Sanhedrin and the iskandars. Tea houses buzzed with fervent debates over future prospects, while spontaneous gatherings formed in public squares, where people shared hopes and fears. Some spoke of change, a new era dawning, while others clung to the familiar. Yet all were united in awe of the dual-bodied woman and the powers she possessed.

Impromptu public processions formed as people rushed out to see, cheer on, and walk some distance with their iskandars, who made their way from their respective districts to the Sanhedrin Hall. For some iskandars, the journey took two hours on foot; for those farthest away,

it was half a day's march.

They strode forth, the ceremonial walking staffs in hand with their unmistakable large turquoise orbs at their tips. Cloaks billowed and breastplates of leather and metal gleamed with the engraved, ancient symbol of their respective district. Hundreds of people lined the roadways, waving and bowing. On this occasion, the iskandars refrained from stopping for lengthy discussions with the people they encountered. Those who wished to converse with them had to do so while walking alongside them.

As the afternoon was enveloped in a soft, diffused haze from a mild dust storm, the seven iskandars arrayed themselves before the domed, red-granite structure of the Sanhedrin Hall. They stood somewhat apart from each other, seven lone figures in the broad plaza, which had earlier been cleared of all occupants.

A hush settled over the open space, punctuated only by the occasional sigh of wind across the stones. Cloaks shifted in the breeze as the iskandars stood in tense silence, watching the far reaches of the plaza.

“Before the incident at the lake, did you imagine it to be one entity with two bodies?” asked the Iskandar of Maganot.

“This did not occur to me,” replied Yessod Olam. “But then again, how could have I fathomed such an... alien thing?”

“Indeed,” said the Iskandar of Timnah, squinting against the dust as she peered intently into the distance.

At the far end of the large clearing, barely visible through the sand-laden haze, two tall figures emerged, side by side, wrapped in gray sandstorm-shrouds.

Nishmat, the Iskandar of Timnah, narrowed her eyes. “That's her?”

“It is,” said Yessod Olam.

“Can she hurt us?” the Iskandar of Admon asked.

“Yes,” said Yessod Olam, threading his fingers through a string of beads, each deliberate movement slipping a bead forward.

Tense, the iskandars watched the approaching figures. Their twin forms moved in measured strides, faces and bodies concealed beneath shrouds that stirred in the dry wind, sending dust swirling across the vast clearing.

“*Will* she hurt us?” asked the iskandar of Timnah.

“Highly unlikely,” said Yessod Olam. “Remember, she risked exposure and a possible banishment to save my life.”

There were grunts of acknowledgment.

“From what I gather, she’s a decent person at heart,” said the Iskandar of Maganot. “That being said, few who commit harm do so out of malevolent intentions.”

“Those who harm others are often amoral,” Yessod Olam observed. “Yet under pressure, both during my ordeal and the storm a few years ago, Lilit proved her courage and integrity.” They had all read his detailed report and were familiar with the facts.

Another iskandar spoke up, “Your point is well made, Yessod Olam. However, until now, she lived in the shadows, driven by the imperative to keep a low profile. This is over and done with—for better or worse, you brought her out to the open.”

“She reached adulthood a few months ago,” responded Yessod Olam. “The situation was not tenable for much longer—she would have been forced to interact with the broader world and exert her influence. It’s better now, in this way.”

After this, there was nothing left to say. They waited, the seven of them, watching as the

twin figures drew closer, leaving faint tracks in the dust that quickly blurred by the wind.

She came to a halt about a dozen paces away. Warm wind teased the edges of the dust-coated, slate-gray shrouds. Fine sand eddied about, creating a subtle shimmer in the air and occasionally irritating the eyes and throats of those assembled.

As one, both figures pushed back the hoods and removed the veils, revealing identical faces. Two pairs of intense amber eyes regarded them silently. For a long moment, no one spoke or moved. Eyes locked across the distance, the rustle of clothing in the light wind the only sound.

Nishmat broke the silence. "Greetings," she said, her voice steady.

Both figures bowed, a mirror image of grace. Some of the iskandars inclined their heads in return.

"How do you wish us to address you collectively?" asked Nishmat.

"My name is Lilit," she said, the voice coming in unison from both figures. "Norea, as a separate entity has never existed." She gestured, four arms raised. "This is me. All of it. I am one."

This had been discussed repeatedly among the iskandars. Yet, the reality, the experience, was something else again. And utterly alien.

"I ask you to speak using only one voice," said one of the iskandars.

"So I'll appear more...human?" This time only one voice responded, the other figure's lips curling into a tight smile.

Some visibly blanched at that.

"Quite so," said the Iskandar of Tarqash. "Perhaps in time, we might grow accustomed to it. For now, however, it's somewhat terrifying."

"Shall we?" asked Yessod Olam, extending an arm in a gesture of invitation. The

message they'd intended to send Lilit and the populace was to be unambiguous: The twins were not criminals summoned to face judgment. All the same, the outcome of the hearing might end up being just as severe. The danger to society was real; the stakes were high.

The titaness paused, her gaze sweeping across the Iskandars, then nodded assent. And they all made their way to the Hall, with guardians now joining them and trailing behind.

The carved doors of solid gold and blue inlays closed behind them with a heavy thud, the sudden hush a stark contrast to the whirring sand outside.

The seven elders took their seats on the raised wooden daises, arrayed in a semi-circle. Lilit chose to remain standing in the center, facing them. Though her face remained impassive, a touch of apprehension was evident in her expression. She proceeded to remove the dust shrouds, revealing long dresses of intricate patterns of aged red and orange hues.

"This hearing is unprecedented," opened Yessod Olam, his voice low but carrying within the vaulted chamber. "Let us speak, learn more about you, and things will take us where they may."

Lilit bowed.

The Iskandar of Maganot began, "Lilit, is there an anatomical difference between your two bodies?"

"Outwardly, they're identical."

From what they could see, that indeed appeared to be the case.

"How have you deceived your father on that count?" The others seemed content to let Iskandar Derekh Koakh lead.

"With cosmetics and distinct hair styles, I fashioned Norea and Lilit as twins—similar, yet not literally identical." She seemed to be almost relieved sharing this information.

“You stated you’re *outwardly* identical.”

“Indeed.” A flash of a wry smile. “You see, one of my forms possesses the means to bear life.”

“And the other is barren?”

“No uterus. It seems that with the other I can have sex merely for the joy of it.”

The iskandars glanced at each other.

“Do your pairs of eyes operate independently?” asked Nishmat. “What I mean is, can you see in different directions at the same time?”

Lilit gave a curt nod. “Yes, and the same goes for the other senses. Each of my forms maintains a certain measure of autonomy, processing information independently before integrating it.”

The iskandars were somewhat taken aback by the manner of her answers. They’d expected something volatile and muddled, not this dispassionate and articulate account.

“We understand you have special powers,” said the Iskandar of Admon.

“I perceive the...” Lilit paused, searching for words. “I think of it as ‘energy pattern.’ Each person has a distinct one.” She continued, “I can’t read minds, but I do perceive sensations and a person’s state of mind with the same immediacy and clarity that one perceives things with one’s eyes.”

“This and more,” one of them prompted when she fell silent.

“This and more,” she agreed. “I can inject images, and I can erase fresh memories. I can manipulate one’s perception, and I can sever connections within the mind and the body.” She took a deep breath. “It’s hard for me to explain all of this. I never had to.”

Yessod Olam smiled encouragingly, “You’re doing well.”

Lilit flashed him a grateful smile.

“We understand you wield significant power. Can you share a time when you chose to show restraint?” asked Iskandar Yetzir.

“Today and every day, and often without conscious thought.” She pondered it some more. “It’s not that different from the social self-control everyone learns to exercise in the presence of others.”

For the first time, the iskandar of Timnah spoke: “You’ve manipulated people to varying degrees. You have done it for years.”

Two heads bowed in unison.

“Surely there is a certain intoxication in power.” Nishmat persisted, “Does the thrill lessen over time, or does the appetite for control only grow?”

Lilit lowered her eyes to hide the dangerous gleam as an involuntary shiver ran through her as she relived her encounter in the storm. She pressed one nail into the palm of her hand until the intense sensation subsided, and she could safely raise her heads. She said, “I take pleasure in *sexual* domination. The rest was always fueled by apprehension.” That much was true.

It was quiet in the hall. Yessod Olam’s gaze met Lilit’s, a silent understanding passing between them. The feeling of helplessness and the seductive pull of her power vivid in his mind. Yet, he also recognized the courage it took for her to confront these desires openly, to lay bare her struggles before the council.

Composed once more, he gave an almost imperceptible nod to his colleagues to carry on.

“Are you attracted to men or women?” asked Nishmat.

“Like most other girls, I’m attracted to both men and women.”

Silence. None of the iskandars could think of anything else to delay the inevitable.

Yessod Olam gestured with a sweep of his arm. “I would like to ask you to demonstrate your powers.” Originally, he had considered asking for a restrained display. But he changed his mind; he wanted to see what she would choose to do. Her choice would be telling.

She hesitated and studied the assembled people as if to gauge their reactions. “You mean, here and now?”

“If you would, please.”

Lilit inclined her head in a brief bow, smoothing her dress as she straightened up, a fleeting gesture betraying a hint of nerves. Her two identical forms then turned and walked in opposite directions, coming to a stop a dozen steps apart.

Without warning, the attendees were thrown into a bottomless night. Gasps and quiet cries came from those present. Just as suddenly, light and sounds returned.

Iskandars and guardians looked at Lilit, some gaping. She spread her hands in a small, helpless gesture.

Yessod Olam motioned to one of the guardians. The titaness left the chamber and returned shortly, carrying a clucking chicken in a small cage.

“Lilit, this fowl is due to be slaughtered today for consumption,” the Iskandar said. “I thought that instead of the butcher, you would oblige.”

Uneasy murmurs broke out.

Lilit visibly flushed, absently brushing her hair back from her face. “What do you mean? You’re asking me to kill it?”

“With your mind’s powers, yes.”

She stared at him, face inscrutable.

Finally she bit her lip, let her eyes close, and both figures took a deep breath. For a few

seconds nothing outwardly happened. Then some of the guardians recoiled, and one of them softly cried out. The chicken collapsed, and some of the iskandars gasped.

“Is it dead?” asked one of the iskandars.

“No, it’s stunned,” admitted Lilit. “If one were to kill the chicken now, it won’t feel any pain. I’d rather not proceed with the rest of it.”

Some of the iskandars exchanged glances.

At Yessod Olam’s signal, Lilit bowed and filed out with the guardians, who closed the heavy doors behind them, leaving the iskandars in the hushed chamber to deliberate.

* * *

The Iskandar of Tarqash began, “I found little solace in her statement that she gets a rush only in sexual domination. One can link a sexual sense of dominance to anything and everything.”

“Isn’t it a matter of degree, not of kind?” countered another iskandar. “Aren’t most girls her age that way?”

“There was something disturbing about her when Iskandar Nishmat inquired about sexual intoxication,” the Iskandar of Tarqash persisted. “For a moment, something about her felt... different.”

“In what way?” asked the Iskandar of Admon.

“Did you sense it?”

“I believe so; nonetheless, I wish to hear you articulate it.”

The Iskandar of Tarqash hesitated. “As if she struggled to tamp down on something.”

Several iskandars nodded thoughtfully at that.

Nishmat said, “She can disrupt the vital force, which evidently courses throughout our bodies. Who among us can fathom what she might do in a moment of mindless rage?”

“Was it a reluctance or inability to kill the chicken?” asked one.

“Reluctance,” stated Yessod Olam.

All heads turned toward him.

“I withheld this information to ensure your first impressions remained unbiased. My investigation into her background leads me to believe she likely killed someone when she was small—with her mind’s powers.”

Uneasy mutters rose among them.

“Is she aware of it?”

Yessod Olam replied, “I believe she has repressed and buried it all. And I beg you not to probe her about this.”

“Her powers...” one of them shuddered. “We all experience anger; the difference is, our rage doesn’t kill. Her capabilities pose a significant threat to society.”

“I beg to differ,” said Yessod Olam. “Her rage is no deadlier than anyone else’s. She must act upon it deliberately—much as someone wielding a large rock, a kitchen knife, or a heavy skillet—and just as unlikely. *Everyone* has the power to kill swiftly and unexpectedly.”

He continued, “Moreover, given her profound reluctance to kill the chicken, I think she has built a wall around it and is terrified of ever breaching it.”

“So, you believe her reluctance was genuine,” said the Iskandar of Maganot.

“I’d stake my life on it. In fact, I did.”

Some nodded, conceding the point while several Iskandars wore slight frowns.

“Iskandar Ma’ayan?” inquired one of them, for the first time noticing how distraught the

woman was. The discussion halted, all attention turning toward Ma'ayan. None of them had seen her this unsettled.

The older woman held both hands to her head, shaking it.

The others shared worried looks.

Ma'ayan raised her head, her voice trembled, "Nothing is as we thought it is." The elderly Iskandar took a deep breath, visibly composing herself. "When the girl proceeded to stun the chicken, we were all taken aback. But it was not exactly at the same time. Or for the same reason. While you were all undoubtedly looking at the chicken or at the girl, I was studying the guardians. They were watching Lilit and were startled a moment before the chicken collapsed—before anything happened that anyone could *see*."

"They are...like her," Nishmat said, realization dawning. Ma'ayan nodded as Nishmat went on, "After a fashion, in some limited way, they perceive what we cannot—even if they're unable to perform any of her feats. This sensitivity, however muted, must be a shared trait with Lilit."

There was a moment when everyone else was too overwhelmed to speak.

"The guardians. How are they different from us? What is the meaning of it?" one of them asked.

"Derekh Koakh is a titan stock much as most of the guardians, and she sensed nothing. Yessod Olam is a male much as two of the guardians, and he sensed nothing," reflected Ma'ayan aloud. "There is only one fundamental difference that I can see."

"Generational," said one of them heavily.

"Indeed," said Ma'ayan. "They belong to a new...variety."

"If they're like her, why can't they—" Yessod Olam stopped as it hit him. "Tartarus

below,” he whispered. The black brew, given during the rite of passage from childhood to adolescence, must have been intended to impair the female’s reproductive organs. Even if offspring inherited meta traits like Lilit’s, these wouldn’t become functional. He’d previously dismissed this notion. After all, surely some in every generation had defied that ancient taboo, yet nothing untoward followed. Now he grasped the truth: There had been no repercussions because, until now, offspring hadn’t carried the meta traits in the first place.

Nishmat barked a bitter laugh. “Her cohort, all members of the new generations are innately like her. It wouldn’t have mattered whose mother abstained from consuming the brew, the offspring would have been metans. It happened to be Lilit’s mother. In the last few decades, it could have been anyone.”

Yessod Olam stroked his beard. “The puberty rite has stood for countless centuries; it’s not us who established this norm,” he heard himself say. “That said, the responsibility for what happens next, that falls on us.”

Numbness took hold.

In a single stroke, they were thrust from facing an isolated anomaly to the horrifying prospect of a wholesale transition—even though the population had yet to grasp this.

“It’s only a matter of time before people recognize the stark divide,” Iskandar Ma’ayan said in a low voice. “However, they won’t be able to understand why they’re not manifesting meta-faculties—only perceiving a sliver of it. We hold the missing shard of the mosaic to this question. Lilit is also unaware that the others are just like her—though stunted before birth and thus deprived of functional meta-faculties and a second body,” she said. “And that the brew had been responsible for that.”

With this one realization, everything indeed changed. With this one realization they were

plunged into the biggest decision they had ever faced: abolishing or maintaining the rite's brew.

For a long time, no one talked.

"Is she—Are they even human?" asked one.

Silence.

Then: "I find posing such a question ill-advised," said Ma'ayan. "Any attempts to classify them otherwise will offer us no added understanding. Yet, it may serve to rend our society asunder." And they all saw what she meant.

They contemplated the abyss that yawned before them. The minutes stretched into an hour; the silence broken only by the soft rustle of robes and the occasional distant sigh of the wind against the stone walls outside.

"What right do we have to stunt the next generation?" Iskandar Ma'ayan asked. "Even now, we—the old stock—may already be in the minority. Regardless, in a few decades our kind will pass away. And in time, we'll be naught but a bedtime tale, a chapter of ancient history."

"I concur," said Nishmat. "Resisting this change will only divide us. And we must also remember," her voice grew more resolute, "this isn't a takeover; they're our offspring, our flesh and blood." She looked around, meeting the eyes of her fellow Iskandars. "We could view it with trepidation, or we could look at it as a source of pride."

Some tapped their fingers on the wooden daises, signaling agreement.

"How is it possible?" one of them whispered. "How can such a shift in our nature emerge?"

"It's wrought by design, not mere happenstance," said the Iskandar of Tarqash. "I don't know who, how, or even why; however, these things don't just occur on their own."

One of the iskandars said, "I had the same thought earlier when the girl explained how

one body can bear children, and the other is for...pleasure. It feels as if it's—”

“Purpose-built,” another interjected.

“If it's really by design, then having two bodies has functional significance,” said the Iskandar of Shikhon.

“I wonder what advantage it might confer,” said Nishmat.

“Why don't we ask her about it?” suggested the Iskandar of Admon.

They all turned and looked at her.

The Iskandar shrugged. “She's in a unique position to offer us insight. But foremost, we need confirmation of what we suspect: that all of the new generation is like her.”

One by one, they gave their assent, and the Iskandar of Admon signaled to one of the guardians to summon Lilit back to the main hall.

CHAPTER 26

“Lilit,” the Iskandar of Admon said by way of greeting when she stood before them again. The Iskandar had decided to start with an innocuous question. “Having a dual body clearly has its benefits—some related to pleasure, others to practicality. I imagine singing is more rewarding and so must be acts of self gratification or grooming. Not to mention the capacity to speak while eating. Are there times in which it’s disadvantageous?”

Lilit thought for a moment. “Well, not really. I suppose when I go to see a play, there’s a little reason to walk both bodies. I may retire one, putting it into a light sleep.”

Ma’ayan found it fascinating, though she knew now wasn’t the time for such a line of inquiry. “Putting aside these everyday concerns,” she said, “does a dual body serve your meta-faculties in any way?”

Lilit had had many years to ponder it. “The strength of my powers seems linked to the distance between my bodies. When close, my reach is limited. When apart, my abilities are amplified.”

That was incredible. Her dual body was truly about magnifying her meta-faculties.

Lilit thought some more. “I didn’t state that accurately. My ability to perceive vital lines is independent of the distance between my bodies. The amplification applies solely to the

projection of sensory illusions.”

Nishmat asked, “How far apart can you stand?”

Lilit held the Iskandar’s gaze before she replied, “A few miles. Beyond that, I become disoriented, and farther still, risk unconsciousness—or worse. Naturally, I’ve never put these boundaries to the ultimate test.”

Silence.

“So that’s the Akilleus’ heel,” one of them said.

“Yes, that’s my vulnerability,” she agreed.

A thought struck Yessod Olam. “Is that why you nearly drowned?”

Lilit nodded. “As it turns out, my range is much more limited underwater, perhaps because of the denser medium.” She didn’t know. “If I’m diving and going off in two different directions,” she said, “it doesn’t take more than twenty or thirty paces.”

She continued, “I awoke to cries mourning my death. It sparked an idea. I altered the memories of those who witnessed it. For everyone except my father, Lilit and Norea died on that day.”

A wave of compassion filled Talmai. Growing up couldn’t have been easy for her: being an aberration, so wildly different from others, with no one to turn to. Lilit sent a grateful smile his way, and he realized that she sensed and understood the nature of his thoughts.

Iskandar Yetzir leaned in. “Solely using your meta-perception, can you distinguish between men and women?”

“As easily as you can with your eyes open.”

“What about the distinction between you and the rest of society?”

“This is where the difference is even more apparent,” said Lilit.

“Have you ever sensed anyone else who is...like you?”

Lilit shook her head.

“Is there a fundamental difference”—the iskandars hesitated—“between most old and young people?”

“Yes. And if to judge by your mindset and the anxiety surrounding it, I gather that all those questions led to this one.”

“Please,” Yessod Olam said, raising his hand placatingly, “be patient with us. Everything will be made clear in due course. I promise you this.”

And they collectively held their breaths as she answered: “Nearly everyone under twenty-five exhibits a form of augmented energy pattern, and the likelihood of seeing it in older individuals diminishes rapidly with age.”

“Do any of us, Iskandars—”

“No.”

So there it was; the confirmation the iskandars sought. It was not just the guardians and the iskandars; it was a generational divide across Areta.

Lilit was not done yet.

“Beyond that, I found that among the younger women, there are two distinct variants. One resembling my own—in a faint kind of a way—while the other bears an entirely different pattern.”

The iskandars traded startled glances. They did not expect that. There was *another* variant with latent meta-faculties around?

“How does the distinction present itself?” asked one of the iskandars.

“The other type has a dense concentration of vital lines in the spinal cord.”

“And yours?”

“One of my brains has a region dedicated to meta-faculties and the coordination between my bodies,” said Lilit.

“You can actually discern such things?”

She nodded.

“I gather the other variant is not meant to have dual bodies.”

Lilit shrugged. She wasn't sure.

“Is one female pattern more prevalent than the other?” Nishmat wanted to know.

“Not really,” Lilit said.

“What of the men?” asked Yessod Olam.

“It's different yet,” said Lilit. A *third* variant?! “It's in the fascia, throughout the bodies of all younger males.”

Fascia? What could that have signified? the iskandars wondered. And for that matter, what was one to make of the heavier concentration of vital lines around the spinal cord in the other variant?

They thanked her for the testimony. Lilit was to go home and await their verdict along with the rest of the nation, as behind closed doors the iskandars would render their decision.

* * *

“It's clear that the puberty rite was, at least in part, a way to control those anomalies,” said Nishmat. “Shouldn't we uphold this safety measure?”

The Iskandar of Maradam was shaking his head. “I believe it was meant for a time when

such occurrences were exceedingly rare, and more to the point, *ahead of schedule*. I suspect we were meant to stop administering the rite's brew a few decades back." *So much information was lost during the Age of Shoah*, Yessod Olam thought to himself. They were fumbling in the dark.

"Did you say, 'ahead of schedule'?" Nishmat inquired, shifting uneasily. "Are you suggesting what I think you are?"

"The timing cannot be a coincidence," Yessod Olam said. "We've to allow for the possibility that the widespread emergence of people with meta-faculties was in anticipation of a looming calamity."

"Once again, you speak of the forecasted cataclysm alleged to occur in the next few years."

"Once again, I do."

"What we've discovered today certainly lends credence to your hypothesis," the other iskandar admitted, "though the connection between these events remains elusive." She glanced at Yessod Olam, who gave a slight shrug, also unable to see any link. "Nevertheless," she continued, "I maintain my position. Foreknowledge of the future, especially millennia in advance, is impossible. While I acknowledge the possibility of vast knowledge, I reject the notion that events unfold in preordained way."

Yessod Olam countered, "Think of it as a rock poised on a slope. Given the right conditions, its descent is inevitable. You needn't predict the future to understand that certain events lead to unavoidable outcomes."

"The world is filled, of course, with just such things," Nishmat allowed. "Yet, you can't escape the deterministic nature of what you're suggesting. The universe is not a line of tumbling obelisks; it contains free will and randomness. At any rate, we're already three years into the

arc.”

“Need I remind my esteemed colleague that four more years remained?”

“Fellow iskandars,” interrupted Ma’ayan, “with all due respect, you’re rehashing much of the exchange you’ve had several times in years past. I remind you that we’ve taken every prudent measure, placing hoses and water tanks in all population centers to prepare for the foretold fires. I urge you to return to the matter at hand. What timeframe do you propose for our deliberation on this issue before us?”

“We’ve taken a year to decide on far less weighty matters. I would have liked to put in at least that much time,” said the Iskandar of Tarqash, Ohr Tov.

“Ought we not do it in a day?” asked Yessod Olam.

“A day?” Ohr Tov looked outraged.

The Iskandar of Maradam gave a sardonic smile. “Make it two days, then.”

The other iskandar was scandalized. “This is likely to be the most monumental decision of our lifetimes. Choosing the right course of action is far more important than expediency.”

Yessod Olam pressed his lips together. “We must get ahead of it—or we may have a crisis of trust if Lilit and the public will piece together the truth while we stay silent.”

That gave everyone a pause.

The Iskandar of Maganot said, “Your point is well taken. But what if the girl is removed from society, at least until we reach a decision? We can keep the mater contained for an indefinite period, if necessary.”

“Can we now?” Yessod Olam asked quietly. “With everyone born with meta traits, who is to say there aren’t other functional metans ready to come out of the shadows, now that they know someone else shares their powers?”

No one could think of any rebuttal to that. It was conceivable—even probable—that at least one or two other mothers had circumvented the prohibition and did not administer the rite’s brew in recent decades.

Nishmat said, “We must also account for the respect, maybe even admiration, Lilit holds among a significant portion of the public after her gallant rescue of an iskandar. Banning her may not go well,” she added dryly. “There’s little to debate here, at any rate. The path forward is evident. We, the old variety, are in the process of being phased out, whether we like it or not. Now, if Yessod Olam is correct, and the world is about to be annihilated, then none of it matters. However, if that’s not the case, the new variety has emerged for a reason, and we must allow that metans have a critical role to play in the future of our society. It seems that trying to suppress it ranges from pointless to catastrophic.”

“I *am* worried about what we may unleash here,” Ma’ayan said with a sigh.

“Nonetheless, I concur; there is more to gain than to lose.”

“What if we’re too late?” asked the Iskandar of Timnah. “What if we made a cosmic mistake by inadvertently maiming this generation?”

“In that case, may Zeus guard us all,” said Yessod Olam under his breath.

* * *

The following day, the Iskandar of Maradam came to visit Sargon and Lilit. They welcomed him, and soon the three were seated in the main yurt.

“You’ve likely heard the announcement,” Yessod Olam began. “A special public gathering will take place tonight.” Indeed, they had; the news had swept through Areta. “Soon

everyone will learn what I'm telling you now: The council has decided to leave you be."

Lilit and Sargon embraced, relief washing over them.

"It'll be just like before," whispered Sargon, his eyes moist. "We'll remain a family."

"Better than before," Lilit managed through tears of joy.

Yessod Olam waited, a gentle smile on his face, allowing the moment to settle. "There's more to tell, something that affects not just you, but the entire community." His expression turned somber. "It concerns the black brew used in the puberty rite. From what we can now surmise, it had an additional intent."

Father and daughter shared questioning looks.

"It was used to prevent the manifestation of meta functions." The Iskandar looked at Lilit. "To prevent births like yours."

Sargon's mind reeled with the implications of what Yessod Olam had just said. Confusion, surprise, and uncertainty swirled within him. He turned to the Iskandar, his fingers instinctively intertwining with Lilit's. "So, how did Lilit happen?" he asked.

"Yes," Lilit said, "how *did* I happen?"

"Your grandmother," Yessod Olam said. "She circumvented the rite. She administered some drink that might have burned like fire, yet left her daughter's reproductive organs intact. Years later, Ishtar gave birth to you: a baby with functional meta attributes."

Sargon frowned. "Surely Lilit's grandmother wasn't the first to defy tradition."

"That's what the council struggled with, too," Yessod Olam said with a gentle tilt of his head. "It seems that in centuries past, meta traits were exceedingly rare, anomalies. The odds of someone circumventing the rite *and* conceiving offspring who happen to have meta traits were infinitesimal. In fact, as far as we can tell, it never happened."

Sargon's confusion deepened. "What are you saying?"

"We've just realized it ourselves, thanks to your daughter's insights." The Iskandar took a deep breath. "The new generation, well, all of them are like Lilit—or would have been if not for the brew their mothers consumed."

Lilit paled, her hand flying to her mouth. Now, it all made sense. She'd been haunted by the question of why young people had vital lines faintly resembling hers, yet manifested no meta functions.

The entire younger generation was like Lilit? Sargon was shocked. He looked from his daughter to the Iskandar and back.

"What happens now?" asked Lilit quietly.

"Now, everything is different," Yessod Olam said. "The black brew's purpose is obsolete, its use indefensible. Tonight, we announce that it will no longer be used. The rite will employ a harmless substitute. Something fiery, a befitting symbol, but nothing more.

"This year," continued the Iskandar, "hundreds will undergo the adolescence rite without impairing their reproductive abilities. A turning point. Within a few years, they'll conceive offspring, all of whom will be metans. And our society will become forever different, different in ways we can't even begin to imagine. This is a monumental shift, requiring people who will lead by example." He looked at Lilit as he was saying that.

"For now," he said, "we'll only announce the possibility that just some metans may be born on the heels of the brew's elimination. We need to acclimate the population gradually to the notion of an entire generation of metans that will succeed them. We don't want would-be mothers fearful of having meta children."

Lilit's gaze drifted to the patterned rug, her chest constricting painfully. The thought of

mothers afraid to conceive babies sent a chill down her spine. It would spell a societal collapse.

Sargon reached out and covered Lilit's hand with his own. He, also, understood.

The Iskandar went on, "You both have to give me your word that you won't divulge the full scale of the matter. In fact, that's the condition attached to our ruling regarding your future."

After a beat of heavy silence, Sargon raised his eyes to meet Yessod Olam's. "You have my word." Lilit bowed her head, her voice barely audible, "Yes." And they both pledged, hands pressed to their foreheads, lips, and then hearts.

The Iskandar rose, Sargon and Lilit following suit. "Walk with me, *Vyr* Sargon," he requested. Lilit bowed respectfully as the two men left the yurt and strode down the winding flagstone path.

"When your name came up," Yessod Olam said, "some of my colleagues urged me to separate you from your daughter, given your history and her unique abilities. They saw it as an unnecessary potential risk. However, as you're a Maradam resident, the decision rests with me. I believe more than a potential risk is needed to justify separating a father from his child."

The Iskandar stopped walking and faced Sargon. "Keep her and yourself on the straight path, son. I don't know for certain who augmented the water clock, and I don't want to know. But I also don't want to receive any more reports of additional innovations constructed by an anonymous person."

Sargon's jaw tightened momentarily. "I understand," he said, his voice gruff. A hint of warmth then softened his face. "In your own way, you've been fair—perhaps more than fair—to me and my daughter. For that, I'm truly grateful." He offered a deep bow.

Yessod Olam bowed in return. "I believe things will work out," he said, his voice tinged with wistful longing. A smile tugged at his lips as his gaze followed a flock of dwarf cranes

flying overhead, their trumpeting calls filling the air. “In thirty, forty years, our society will be unrecognizable. I’m an old man and will only witness the onset of this change, as the new generation of metans grow and come of age. Whereas you, *Vyr* Sargon, will see the true transformation of our society. At least I hope so,” he added that last softly.

Yessod Olam drew himself up. “Now, I must join the other iskandars in preparation for tonight’s announcement. It is a time for celebration.” With a press of his hand to his chest, he took his leave.

Sargon watched the Iskandar’s retreating figure, his mind awlirl. It was a lot to take in. The brew, the metans, and the warning from Yessod Olam. He made his way back and found Lilit on the large swing suspended from the ancient banyan tree’s sprawling branches.

“How does it feel?” asked Sargon, joining her.

She grinned back. “Liberating.” Her voice held a quiet joy and a hint of something unsaid.

Suddenly it occurred to him. “Lilit,” he said, tousling her hair. “I don’t know what to say or feel, but it just occurred to me that I had you drink the brew. This means that—”

“No, it doesn’t.” She gave him a small sheepish smile and glanced away. “I cheated. I never consumed it.”

He stared at her. “How? I distinctly remember.”

“You remember giving it to Norea, but she doesn’t have reproductive organs. I noted the way it interacted with her body and got anxious about it. With a little memory lapse and change of clothes, I had Norea take the brew a second time. The Lilit body was spared.” She patted her stomach.

Sargon burst out laughing, both in relief and amusement. He shook his head, still

chortling.

“Do you think there’re others like you, others who until now hid in the shadows?” he asked.

Lilit paused, the swing slowing beneath their weight. She had been truthful with the council; she’d never encountered anyone quite like her. Then again, what did that prove? She had always been a solitary creature, rarely venturing beyond Maradam’s boundaries. It was entirely possible that others like her existed, hidden in plain sight, just as she had been. “I think there are,” she said, her voice filled with a newfound hope. “I hope there are.”

“If so,” he said, “I’m sure they’ll make their presence known to you, sooner or later. Give it some time.”

“Yes, Father.”

Sargon reached out and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. Their smiles held happiness, but also a touch of apprehension of an uncertain future.

CHAPTER 27

Two weeks had passed since Angora and Sargon identified a potential departure point from Areta: the enigmatic Bridge of Heaven. Yet, given how much had transpired, it felt far longer.

Freed from the subterfuge of maintaining two identities, Lilit radiated with newfound confidence. She embraced the possibility of forming genuine connections. Previously, the deception of presenting her dual bodies as identical twins had precluded marriage or any serious relationship, as she couldn't commit to only one half of herself. But now, with her true nature known, she looked forward to a better future. She admitted that finding friends or intimates still wasn't easy—as a rule, people were intimidated by her—all the same, she walked the world with her head held high.

Sargon, meanwhile, had heard nothing from Angora. No news was bad news. He knew she wouldn't report unless she found something significant, and it seemed increasingly unlikely that she would. The weight of the situation settled on his shoulders.

Additional days slipped by as Sargon wrestled with a decision, going back and forth, the admonishment of the Iskandar on his mind. At times, he thought he would take the leap; at others, he berated himself for even considering it. In the end, he told himself that he was going to test out the flyer concept, that it wouldn't work, and that he would find peace of mind in the

failed attempt.

The following day, he acquired the lightweight yet sturdy spruce wood, then journeyed to the millforge he had acquired all those years ago.

Sargon paused before the sealed heavy doors, and tightness gripped his throat. Was he really going to do it? Working in his shed had felt experimental, easily abandoned. That felt different. To enter the millforge was to stir something within himself, something he might not be able to still again.

His fingers moved over the cipher disks, their intricate grooves familiar beneath his touch. He turned each plate, feeling the subtle resistance of wood against metal until they aligned in the desired combination. The lock released with a satisfying click. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the doors open and stepped across the threshold into the millforge.

He hesitantly walked in, taking in the familiar space: drafting tables draped in dust, dormant machine tools, silent treadwheel cranes, and the forge, now cold and lifeless. Memories flooded in, bittersweet and potent. This place had defined his purpose, where ideas had taken form in wood and metal. A sense of resurgence swept through him, fierce joy mingled with regret.

Set out of the way, not far from the river's source, the water here churned with a swiftness born of the steep decline—ideal for powering the undershot waterwheels he'd installed. Ferrying goods would have been a challenge, had there been any. He'd chosen this out-of-the-way spot by the rushing river years ago. Seclusion, once an inconvenience, was now its greatest asset.

This is where he was going to test his most far-reaching, audacious idea.

Sargon spent hours meticulously crafting a two-bladed wooden frame, tapering the center

and widening the ends. He stretched latex tautly over the frame, then constructed a sturdy stand designed to hold a wooden pole upright, ensuring it could rotate freely without toppling. Toward the top of the pole, he affixed two hinged arms capable of folding upward. After days of painstaking effort, he mounted the blade assembly to the tip of the folding arms.

Today, no commissions would bind him. Today, he belonged solely to his millforge. He worked tirelessly, the ache in his arms a mere inconvenience. Tonight he would put the concept to the test. Hours later, he stood back and regarded his completed handiwork.

It was time.

He connected the contraption to one of the stationary pedaling units on the floor using a bevel gear installed at the pole's base. These units were ubiquitous in Areta, often equipped with a flywheel to smooth out the pedaling motion and maintain consistent rotation. They were designed to power various appliances and tools, from blenders to lathes to sewing machines to circular saws.

The previous day, Sargon had climbed onto the pedaling unit. The pole and attached arms rotated, spinning the blade assembly mounted on top. Soon, the two wooden blades spun so fast their movement became a blur. However, nothing much else happened. He then tried to visualize the blades cutting through the air while set at a level plane, and it hit him—he'd been a fool. That morning, he'd carved a new set of blades, this time angling them. This was the problem he'd been toiling over all day.

He mounted the pedaling unit again and spun the vertical pole. The blades whirred, and this time, the folding arms extended almost instantly, the angled blades finding purchase in the air. He had done it!

But his excitement subsided just as quickly. The blades managed to lift their own weight:

less than one pound. No, on its own, this experiment meant little. The only thing that mattered was whether he could create something powerful enough to lift both himself and his flying contraption into the air.

He proceeded to add an increasing amount of small weights, and it was not long before the rotating oar failed to lift. There was only so much it could lift and carry—and it was nowhere near anything meaningful.

It did not look good. In fact, it was shaping up to be a dead end.

Yet he kept at it. Every few days, he would sneak into his remote millforge in the middle of the day to tinker and try different things. He spent the entire next week adjusting the length and number of blades. He didn't bother with fine-tuning; it would only matter if he could achieve some meaningful lift. Fine-tuning wouldn't transform lifting a few pounds into lifting a few hundred.

It all added up to naught.

If anything, it was even more of a dead end than the one he'd hit all those years ago. He now generated much more "wind," using now the major muscles of his body, legs. And it got him nowhere. Human powered flight was impossible. Earlier, he'd just not realized the magnitude of the impossibility.

He needed something that could generate far, far more power than his muscles. Something both portable and that he could harness. He had no idea what such a thing could be.

* * *

The dismal failure of his flyer concept was supposed to give Sargon peace of mind, a sense of

completion. It did anything but. Seeking out a source of immense portable power started as a question, then it grew in his head into an obsession. It gnawed at him, it pestered him, it would not leave him be. He found himself thinking about it in the oddest moments.

Time and again, he hit mental impasses; it was turning out to be an exercise in futility.

In the evenings, despite Angora's brave face, he knew her search through old writings hadn't yielded any new leads. Their walks were contemplative, with little said.

Days turned to weeks. His only comfort was the knowledge that he hadn't instilled false hope in Angora about searching the skies for the Bridge of Heaven, and that others dear to him were leading a life of blissful ignorance.

He insisted Lilit attend plays as often as she wished, secretly adding coins to the box from his stash meant for *Inscriptions*. They would share laughter and conversation until she departed, his smile fading as he watched her figure recede, memories resurfacing. To quell the hollow ache in his stomach, he would then seek out Angora and her friends, finding some reprieve from the nagging thoughts and deep frustration in their discussions.

One such evening, when he arrived at their usual meeting spot, the small group of friends was already there, deep in discussion about the speed of light. Just the day before, Mede'a had clashed with Shammai over whether muscles developed over a lifetime were passed on to offspring. And the day before that, Assur had argued that if heat turned water into gas, surely cooling water to a sufficient degree ought to turn it into solid.

After listening for a few minutes, Sargon realized they were debating whether light travel was instantaneous, as Assur argued, or not, as Shammai contended. "How can something be simultaneously at two different places?" Shammai snorted.

"What if we position a few miles apart two focused-beam lanterns with shutters," Mede'a

said, holding her slender arms up, illustrating. “The first person signals with his lamp. The moment the second person sees the light, he signals back. The time between signals is how long light takes to travel that distance.”

“Mede’a, this is a terrible idea,” said Assur over Shammai’s open laughter. “The speed of light may be so fast that all you’ll measure is the reaction time of the operators, not the light’s speed.”

Mede’a gave Shammai a dirty look.

“Do you think air slows down the passage of light?” wondered Angora.

“What makes you say that?” asked Assur.

“Well, air has substance, of sort. Light may be going around air particles or passing through them. Either way, it stands to reason that air slows the passage of light.”

“So compressed air might slow it even more,” Assur mused, intrigued.

“Or maybe less light gets through, with more of it absorbed by air particles,” said Angora, a gleam in her eyes. Her expression turned thoughtful. “But then again, can air be made denser?”

“Yes,” replied Shammai, reclining on his back, hands behind his head.

“You seem pretty confident of that,” said Angora.

“I am. A Tarqash tube.”

“Just so,” said Mede’a.

“Never heard of it,” announced Angora.

“Unbelievable,” said Assur, shaking his head sadly. “Her father is the foremost scholar on atomos theories, and she has not even heard of that experiment.”

“The shame of it.”

“The scandal.”

Angora clapped loudly once, and they stopped. “Just tell me about it before I box your ears.”

“Truly, you have not heard of it?” asked Assur incredulously. “Eynbar’s experiment on concentrated air.” He noted her blank expression. “Later in life, she became known as Ha’mud’anit.”

That last did ring a bell “The mathematician, about a hundred and fifty years ago? The one who published a commentary on *Gaiometria*?”

“The very one,” confirmed Assur. “Well, as it turned out, she also dabbled in natural philosophy. She conducted a rather curious experiment with air in Tarqash. Her reasoning was that if air is made of indivisible atomos, and it can be compressed, then the concept of atomos as fundamental building blocks may be flawed.”

Mede’a shooshed Assur with a sharp gesture and got to the point. “She had her team construct a hollow metal cylinder, open only on top. It was about three feet high and half a foot in diameter. The interior was perfectly smooth, and it had a fitted piston that could go up and down within the shaft. After installing a small platform atop the piston, she essentially stood on it, bearing down. The big question was whether the piston would come down, indicating that the air within the sealed shaft is compressed. If air is made up entirely of atomos, this should not be possible.”

“And?” Angora was intrigued.

“It did.”

“By how much?”

“About 5 inches.”

“But—”

“Hold on. Let me share the rest,” said Mede’a, her green eyes bright with excitement.

“Eynbar then placed a thousand-pound gold cube atop the piston, compressing the air column to 15 inches. With three cubes, it shrunk to 7. Finally, twenty blocks—the equivalent of over 100 men—pressed the air down to just over an inch from its original 36.” Angora’s jaw dropped. Sargon listened with rapt attention.

“Eynbar concluded that most of what we consider air is actually empty space,” Mede’a said. “The proponents of atomos theory argued this didn’t invalidate their beliefs, but rather suggested there’s space between the atomos, explaining air’s fluidity.”

Assur interjected, “As I see it, the experiment suggests that there are potent forces, which atomos theory doesn’t account for—forces that resist compression. It seems these repulsive forces might be far more important to the structure and behavior of air than the atomos themselves.”

Angora was spellbound. “What happened when the weight was removed? Did the air, well, rebound?”

“Instantly!” Mede’a was beaming. “From the detailed notes she’d left, Eynbar loaded and unloaded weight, and the lid dutifully rose and fell without showing any sign that the forces keeping the atomos apart were weakened. It was like a sponge that one squeezes and then let go. It is said that it was quite a sight to see a few tons of gold being lifted by nothing more than air that sought to restore its original state.” Compressed air seemed to have had extraordinary power to rebound, mused Mede’a. Could it be the explanation behind Kadesh Barnea’s mysterious buoyancy: a vast, unseen column of air, somehow contained and directed beneath it?

Angora clapped her hands in excitement, caught up in an idea of her own. “To think that

what we're breathing is mostly void. Just let this sink in. From what you've told me, the atoms occupy at most three percent of the space. Even if we assume—" She trailed off. "Sargon, what's the matter?"

He was on his feet, appearing startled as if just noticing he was standing. "No, nothing. That experiment gave me an idea. You'll have to excuse me," he said, pressed his hand to his heart in farewell and left.

"Probably gave him an idea about how to scrape a statue," murmured Mede'a. "By Heracles, his brain may not be his largest organ, but his broad shoulders and chest more than make up for it," she went on dreamily.

"Would you stop talking about his chest?" Angora snapped in a low voice that only reached her friend.

Mede'a laughed, like silver bells tinkling in the wind. She loved to nettle Angora on that count.

CHAPTER 28

That could be it: the power source for the flyer, Sargon mused as he walked briskly through Taberna quarter's hushed alleys, his mind racing. By Zeus' whiskers, even a bit of hyper-dense air could push up thousands of pounds!

Reducing a three-foot column of air to a mere inch was no small feat. Even so, a few cubic inches of hyper-dense air wouldn't suffice. Assuming such concentrated air was able to power a flyer, he required a volume of hyper-dense air that could provide continuous power to the blades, not just a single, fleeting burst. To that end, he needed a piston that could compress air, lock it in—and then repeat the process countless times. But how?

He snapped his fingers as the answer struck him. A piston could drive air downward, forcing open a valve leading to a secondary chamber within a cylinder. When the piston retracted, the pressurized air in the lower chamber would close the valve shut from its end. By repeating this process, he could accumulate an ever-increasing amount of dense air.

And for once, the mechanism worked precisely as he had imagined.

He meticulously forged the parts. When the time came for testing, Sargon pushed the piston into the cylinder, feeling initial resistance as he forced air into the lower chamber. He pulled the piston out, allowing more air to fill the upper chamber, then drove it downward again.

The resistance was markedly stronger this time as he forced more air into the lower chamber—a good sign.

He proceeded to withdraw the piston again, and this time he peeked inside. The spring-loaded valve was sealed. Prodding at it with a slender rod, he was rewarded with a brief hiss as the compressed air from the lower chamber rushed out. A corner of his mouth lifted. He'd proven it was possible not only to compress air but also to trap and build up its pressure.

Now came the hard part: devising a contraption that could compress vast quantities of air. It wasn't enough to prove a piston could do the job; he needed a repeating mechanism to generate and store the dense air.

Nights blurred into a relentless cycle of work and worry, doubt his constant companion in the long hours of solitary toil. His mind was a maelstrom of calculations and adjustments. He pushed back with each setback, the thought of Lilit's future and that of his society fueling his resolve.

Night after night, Sargon would depart after Lilit went out, pedaling quietly to the millforge outside Timnah. He'd told Angora he craved solitude, and she'd nodded, swallowed, and said she understood. Night after night, he worked on the mechanism; progress was painfully slow. Each evening meant another clandestine trip, juggling his commissioned work with the burning desire consuming his thoughts. He couldn't risk discovery—not even by his own daughter. Especially not by his own daughter. Lilit might have sensed the strain, the way his extra hours yielded no extra coins. But she remained silent, and for that, he was grateful. Yet, gratitude did not temper his anxiety.

At first, he thought in terms of taking the piston out repeatedly. But then he had a better idea.

After two weeks of tireless nights and countless discarded sketches, Sargon stood under the lime lights of the millforge, his creation—a stubby metal cylinder—resting on the stone floor. By walking within a treadwheel, he turned a metal rod that pierced the cylinder's wall. A series of interlocking rings where the rod entered the cylinder prevented air from escaping. This rod rotated a crank inside, driving a piston up and down.

As the piston rose, it squeezed the air within the cylinder, forcing open a valve at the top. Compressed air rushed into a channel and then into a large spherical metal tank. As the piston descended, the pressure within the cylinder dropped, and the rising pressure in the tank closed the valve. Now, the low pressure inside the cylinder allowed air from the room to force open an inlet valve, filling the cylinder once more. The cycle then repeated.

Sargon found a way to compact vast amounts of air, one compression at a time.

The intricacy of crafting each component had posed a formidable challenge. The parts had to align flawlessly; the cylinder's inner walls had to be perfectly smooth; and the piston had to achieve a level of precision beyond his technical abilities.

Without offering an explanation, he had brought the rough pieces to Azai and had him machine them to his exact specifications. Azai might have been the best machinist in Areta, his skill with the treadle-powered lathes unparalleled. The old man was too delighted to see Sargon working on an intricate machine to press him for answers. That was good, because Sargon had no intention of divulging any details. Not yet, at least. At the next Tishrei eve gathering, he brushed off any overtures from Elam and ignored the curious looks from Tamuz.

Next came the monumental task of casting a forty-inch brass sphere with two-and-a-half-inch-thick walls to serve as the air reservoir. Weighing thousands of pounds, it had to be moved into place with a crane.

The sphere probably didn't require such thick walls, but Sargon didn't mind the excess; this sphere was never intended to be airborne. For now, he wanted to experiment with the highest degree of compression he could achieve. Sargon reckoned that if this extremely high-pressure air wasn't sufficient, nothing would be. And if it proved effective, he would later see if a lighter and thinner container would be effective in storing sufficient volume of air.

Finally, all the components were fitted together.

His pulse quickened as he walked inside the treadwheel, the rhythmic creaks the only sound in the millforge. The piston began to rise and fall, each stroke compressing more air into the large metal sphere.

At first, the motion was effortless, but as more and more air was forced into the massive sphere, resistance built. Each upward thrust of the piston required slightly greater force, and beads of sweat began to form on his brow. It would have been easier, of course, harnessing the waterwheel, but he wanted to monitor closely, be able to react if needed. Hours went by, marked by the growing strain on his legs.

Sargon's heart sank as the acrid scent of overheated metal filled the air. He dared not compress yet more air without finding a way to dissipate the heat. Releasing the air, he listened to the prolonged loud hiss until it faded into silence.

Desperate, he tried everything he could think of to cool it. Eventually, he ended up installing thin metal fins around the contraption and that brought the heat down some.

At long last, he went the distance. Using the treadwheel, he pumped air for about ten hours over two days. He compressed more and more air until he could not overcome the internal pressure. That was it. The moment of truth.

It was time to find out what this power might be capable of.

CHAPTER 29

The following night, Sargon returned to the millforge, this time accompanied by Azai, Tamuz, and Elam. The trio were bemused and expectant, knowing that Sargon wouldn't have flung open the long-sealed doors for something trivial.

“No, I'm not resurrecting our old firm,” Sargon began, looking from one hopeful face to another. “In fact, I've gathered you here for something more... ambitious.”

Tamuz raised his eyebrow at that.

Azai nodded to himself. Considering the intricate components Sargon had recently asked him to machine, he wasn't overly surprised.

“Please, go on,” said Elam, cracking his knuckles.

“Human flight,” said Sargon.

They all stared at him, speechless.

“Wait, are you talking about those mechanical wings?” Elam asked, a nervous chuckle escaping him.

“Obviously not,” said Tamuz, looking intently at Sargon. “He must have something in store that is truly different—and, dare I say, more promising.”

All eyes turned to Sargon.

“Different, for sure,” he said. “Promising? Enough to share it with you, at any rate.”

He regarded their faces. Elam looked excited. Tamuz, expressionless. But Azai was shaking his head. “This will go against the Sanhedrin. And you saw what befell you the first time you tried. The second time—”

“I know,” said Sargon quietly. “There’s not a day that goes by that it had not crossed my mind. This time, however, I don’t intend to make any of it public. There’s a reason I had you pledge secrecy.”

“I’m all ears,” said Elam, drumming his fingers rapidly on the workbench. “Show us what you have been working on.”

Sargon bowed his head and motioned for them to follow him through the bay doors in the back, out to the open.

“What in Nargul’s name...” muttered Azai under his breath, eyeing the large metal sphere resting on the wild grass. A tube with a conical tip, containing water, rested on top.

Sargon approached the sphere and opened a valve. A loud hiss erupted, followed by a burst of water and a powerful whoosh as the projectile shot skyward, leaving a trail of vapor. They watched it climb, swiftly becoming a blurred, receding dot. Sargon slammed the valve shut, and the sound of escaping air ceased with a snap.

For a moment, his colleagues were too stunned to say anything.

“Much as one may throw a rock high up, the projectile has reached its highest point and will soon be coming down,” said Sargon quietly.

His words seemed to break the spell of silence.

“How did you do it?” Tamuz demanded.

“Compressed, hyper dense air.”

“Astonishing!” blurted Azai, his usual composure gone. “To think that air, something we can’t even see, can wield such force...”

Tamuz raked his fingers through his hair. “It’s like the tales of Aeolus’ bag of winds, yet here it is—not a myth, but...”

Elam cut in, his voice high with excitement, “To send something up with such velocity...it’s a marvel, Sargon!”

Azai stared up at the sky, then turned back to Sargon. “Is such a projectile”—he wet his dry lips—“is that what you have in mind for flight?”

Sargon shook his head. “Nothing of the sort, my friend. This is but a demonstration of the power we can harness by compressing air.” He proceeded to recount the Tarqash Tube experiment he’d learned of and the path it had led him down.

Tamuz looked at him strangely. “This can transform things. Such concentrated power—”

“Just might be able to lift a contraption with a man inside,” said Sargon.

“How?” Azai wanted to know.

This was when Sargon showed them the arm with the propeller. Pedaling, he got it to spin very fast.

They watched as the twin blades rose as high as the folding arms would allow. “If human muscle can lift a few pounds, maybe a lot more power can get a person airborne,” he told them.

Azai folded his arms as he regarded the massive air tank resting on the grass. “It’s brass, isn’t it? How thick are the walls?”

“Two and a half inches. Why?”

“This must be weighing a few tons!” the old man said. “Forget about a person. How in blazes do you fancy you’ll get this tank off the ground?”

“I never intended for this metal hulk to leave the ground,” Sargon said, his voice steady. “We’ll worry about a lighter sphere later—if there is a later.” He spread his arms wide, encompassing the apparatus and the three men. “The question is, could this be a path to human flight?”

They traded uncertain glances. They didn’t know *what* to think. The entire idea was so outside any of their frames of reference. It sounded like pure fantasy. Except that it was devoid of any of the splendor that accompanied bedtime fables. Instead, Sargon had shown them a pair of spinning oars that rose up on their own accord, and he’d shown them a large metal sphere bursting with air that shot a small projectile faster and with more power than they thought possible.

“What do *you* think?” challenged him Azai.

“I called you up just as soon as I could see a possibility,” said Sargon. “Just that.”

He turned to face them, his silhouette framed by the lengthening shadows of the day’s fading light. “This may be the path to human flight. What do you say, gentlemen? Will you join me on this journey?”

“By Tartarus, yes!” shouted Elam. It was the most exciting opportunity he’d ever been offered. In fact, that must have been the most exciting thing anyone had ever been offered, as far as he was concerned.

“Elam, would you excuse us,” said Azai, eyes on Sargon.

Azai waited until Elam walked back inside before turning to Sargon. “‘Big’ does not begin to describe it.” He paced a few steps then stopped. “I’m an old man with no family ties, but you have your daughter, and Elam has his whole life ahead of him. I don’t know what possessed you, my friend, but I’ll not be party to ruining Elam’s life. Whether this contraption flies or not,

the authorities will not be lenient, mark my words.”

Sargon took a deep breath. “Tamuz?”

Tamuz wore a grim expression. “Azai’s right, Sargon; this is groundbreaking, but dangerous. He scratched his head. “I can’t say what it could mean for society, but it will be disruptive.” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “But mostly, I’m just... surprised.”

“Surprised,” repeated Sargon, his expression growing dark.

“Yes. You’ve turned down even millwright commissioned jobs not to get into trouble with the authorities. And now, here you are, set on doing something that surely will get you ostracized.”

“I have a reason,” Sargon said quietly.

Tamuz steepled his fingers and regarded him in silence. A reason? What did he mean?

“I was hoping to avoid it. A secret I’m not sure I have the right to share. Yet, I don’t see a path forward without it.” He sighed, looking at his friends. “Ever since I learned of it, I’ve wrestled with whether you’ll curse me or thank me for what I am to tell you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose with a weary sigh. “I don’t suppose there’s an easy way to say it. So I’ll just give it to you straight. There is a possibility our world will be consumed in flames in the next few years. The Sanhedrin is aware of it. Some of the iskandars are convinced of this, some are not.”

Azai and Tamuz exchanged glances, as if seeking confirmation they heard him correctly.

“You better start at the beginning,” said Tamuz heavily.

So he did. Succinctly without wasted words, Sargon told them everything Angora and he had discovered and deduced about their world, about its imminent fate.

Azai’s fingers drummed lightly on his knee, interrupting only once to ask a clarifying

question. Tamuz remained quiet, his expression inscrutable as he listened.

Sargon could tell they were unconvinced; the whole thing was just too preposterous. Yet, he could see their skepticism waver as he described his descent to the bottom of the world, his hand touching the metallic hull under the water. Ancient writings and obscure references were one thing; this was actual, tangible evidence.

“A few weeks ago,” Sargon continued, “Angora found some writings suggesting that we, the inhabitants of Areta, were destined to have a different fate than that of our world. We were meant to disembark.”

“Disembark where?” asked Tamuz. Confusion, hope, and dismay warring on his face.

“Presumably, at the destination of the millennia-long journey Areta has been taking.”

Tamuz shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his unease palpable. “So where is that point of disembarkation?”

“Bridge of Heaven.” Sargon noted the questioning glances. “That was what the ancient placard said. We’ve no other information, I’m afraid.” He compressed his lips.

“I don’t follow you,” said Azai. “What a flying contraption has to do with locating and reaching that Bridge of Heaven?”

“Heaven. Sky,” said Sargon. “Don’t you see? It must be somewhere up in the sky section of the hull. Look, it’s a long shot. But as far as I can tell, it may be the only shot.”

Silence.

“Has Angora been informed of your plans?” asked Tamuz.

“No. I don’t want to get her hopes up over it.”

“Lilit?” asked Azai.

“Definitely not. You two are the only ones who know. And it stays that way.”

“That’s a heavy load,” said Azai in a low voice. He was silent for a few moments. “All right, I’m with you.” Sargon flashed him a wintry smile and turned to his other friend. “Tamuz?”

“How convinced are you about all that stuff you’ve been telling us?” asked Tamuz. He’d already reached a conclusion of sort but wanted to hear Sargon say it again.

“Convinced enough to undertake this perilous venture.”

Tamuz leveled a steady gaze at Sargon. “Fair enough,” he conceded, “count me in.” He paused, a fleeting smirk playing on his lips before his demeanor turned serious again. “You believe the world will come to an end. Maybe it will, maybe it won’t. Can we agree, though, that if we fail and the world remains standing, then this technology”—He pointed at the compressed air sphere—“and whatever else we may end up contriving will be destroyed, and its secrets won’t be shared with the broader community?”

Sargon scowled at this. In the end, he bowed his head. “You have my word.”

Minutes later, they joined Elam inside the millforge.

They had nothing to wait for. The four embarked on their unprecedented journey right there and then.

CHAPTER 30

For days, Sargon labored over sketches, his mind in constant churn. At last, he believed he'd conceived a design with the potential to channel compressed air into rotary motion, at the crux of the entire flyer conception.

Inside a cylindrical chamber, a piston would move back and forth, driving a connected hinged rod. This rod, in turn, would rotate a crank, which would spin gears and ultimately the rotor shaft where the blades were mounted. The concept was simple enough; the challenge lay in how to make the piston oscillate within the chamber. Sargon came up with something he thought would work.

Compressed air from the spherical tank would blast into the horizontally mounted cylinder through an inlet valve on its left end, slamming the piston to the opposite side. There, an exhaust valve would open, releasing the pressure. Instantly, another blast of air would rush in through an inlet on the right, driving the piston back to its original position. This rapid alternation between left and right blasts would create a continuous, oscillating motion, keeping the crank, and ultimately the rotor shaft, spinning.

Timing the opening and closing of the inlet and exhaust valves proved trickier than Sargon had anticipated. He involved Tamuz and Elam, and after days of tinkering, they had little

to show for it. Frustration mounted.

But finally, they had a breakthrough: a single sliding plate that covered and uncovered the cylinder's openings. The movement of this plate was powered by the main crank, which drove the piston. However, to achieve the precise timing required, they attached a separate hinged rod that controlled its slide.

Once Azai machined the piston crank—as they came to call the entire mechanism—they carefully lubricated the tin-bronze parts with a thin coat of castor oil, particularly the parts that came in close contact with each other.

It worked. And incredibly fast at that. Attaching a reduction gear train, Tamuz ascertained that their oscillating piston allowed the attached gear to reach 2,800 revolutions per minute. Their eyes met with a quiet sense of accomplishment as the fruits of their endeavor began to coalesce. They decided for now on a 3:1 gear reduction—an educated guess, they hoped would work. Either way, it meant a lower speed and more power. Tamuz got working on it. Mechanical linkages and gears were his forte.

Earlier, Elam had designed a handwheel to regulate the flow of compressed air released from the sphere. A full turn would take the valve from fully shut to fully open, allowing for minute changes in air flow with each incremental turn of the wheel.

The rotor shaft, which held the blades, was mounted to the chassis via a robust bearing assembly. This chassis housed the spherical air tank, the heaviest component, at its base. On one side of the tank, the team mounted a seat for the operator. Opposite the seat, they installed the piston-crank mechanism. Fed by compressed air from the tank, this mechanism, through a gearbox, drove the rotor shaft.

The contraption was impossibly heavy. But they were able to cheat, as much as was

needed. A network of sturdy metal chains linked to the construct stretched upward, then hung over a circular rail encircling the device. Hefty gold bricks, suspended from the tips of these chains, counterbalanced the bulk of the machine, their downward pull effectively lightening the load. By adjusting the number of bricks, they calibrated the contraption's perceived weight to a mere three hundred pounds. This was the bare practical minimum. Sargon reckoned that if the blades couldn't lift that much, they need not spend any more time on this endeavor.

The apparatus's ascent was restricted to five feet by a thick tether firmly bolted to the floor, and to minimize the risk of tipping over, the chassis sat at the bottom of a well-like structure, featuring curved lattice sidewalls that constrained the assembly to a vertical path. The exceptionally long rotor shaft allowed the twin blades to clear the top of the lattice enclosure, even when the chassis rested on the floor.

They proceeded next to test blades.

They began with an enlarged version of the miniature blades Sargon had fashioned out of a spruce frame and stretched latex. Each blade was crafted to eight feet in length, which they deemed a reasonable size for a flyer carrying a human passenger. However, these blades splintered as they began to gain speed. The team learned their lesson: What worked in small sizes did not necessarily translate to larger dimensions. From that point on, they would experiment solely at full scale; there were no shortcuts.

They fashioned a new pair of blades made from solid spruce. In fact, they did one better. The team fashioned a mechanism where they could rotate the blade within a socket, and lock it into any desired pitch angle.

Sargon sat in the makeshift chair they'd installed above the air tank, his eyes fixed on the blades, tracking their spin as the team incrementally increased the blade pitch. He would get the

blades to rotate rapidly, then shut off the airflow when no lift occurred. Elam and Tamuz would then adjust the blade angle upward, and Sargon would start the blades rotating again. They continued increasing the angle, one degree at a time, observing a dramatic increase in air resistance and a corresponding decrease in blade speed. By the time the blades were set at four degrees, they, too, succumbed to the immense pressure, cracking as they struggled against the wall of air.

They didn't expect that. They carved out new blades, this time not from spruce but from panacoco ebony. While this wood was heavier than true ebony, it compensated with superior strength. In fact, no other wood matched panacoco's ability to resist fractures under stress. Yet, even these blades fractured after flapping badly once ultra-high speeds were reached.

Disbelief and disappointment hung heavy in the air; panacoco was not supposed to crack. "That went well," guffawed Azai. "We've just invented a remarkable new way to splinter wood."

Sargon's jaw clenched. Higher speed must have been the ticket for flight. Alas even the strongest woods couldn't withstand such forces.

They considered fashioning blades from solid metal. But no, each blade would then weigh over one hundred pounds; there had to be a better answer, Sargon resolved. It was clear that at ultra-high speeds, the blades were fluttering violently, leading to fracture. And the sound! At that speed, the blades might as well be pushing through water—the resistance was so fierce. His eyes lit up, struck by a sudden inspiration.

"What is it, my friend?" asked Tamuz, noticing the change in his demeanor.

"Fish," Sargon said. "Think about how they move through the water. So effortlessly fast..." His hands moved animatedly as he spoke. "What if we modeled the blades' cross-section

after a trout? Tapered front, a gentle curve, then tapering down again.”

The other three men were taken aback, contemplating the unusual idea. But eventually, there were nods of agreement around the drafting table. Even Azai had to admit it was worth a try. They started carving blades in the new form.

That same day, they tested the new blades, and indeed, they cut through the air *far* smoother. This time, the wood held.

Yet, no lift.

Overwhelmed and demoralized, they called it a day. None of them spoke. Even Azai did not grumble, which Sargon thought was an ominous sign that the old man might be close to giving up on the whole thing.

The next evening, they gathered again. No smiles, only grim determination etched on their faces.

“I don’t know if the blades will ever be able to lift and carry any substantial weight,” Elam began, “but if we stand any chance, the blades need to grab some air; they cannot be at a zero angle. If we start with blades pitched, however, the air resistance is such that they cannot achieve a truly high rotational speed.”

“Sounds a bit paradoxical,” said Azai guardedly.

“Not necessarily,” Sargon said, and the others turned to look at him.

“I know that look he gets,” said Tamuz darkly.

Sargon ignored that. “What we need,” he told them, “is a mechanism that can alter the pitch of the blades while they’re in motion. This would allow us to start off level and then increase the angle once high speed is attained.”

Tamuz could only shake his head in disbelief.

“How in the world are we going to do that?” demanded Azai. “All this flaming work and hardship,” he muttered, “just to find out it’s little more than a pipedream.”

“Agreed,” Sargon declared, eliciting mild surprise from the others. He continued, “I pondered this last night. In all these years, none of us have faced such technical obstacles. Worse yet, just as we believe one peak is conquered, another, even greater, looms ahead—and that dream of flight feels as distant as ever.” He paused, studying their faces. *We’ve been masters of our craft for too long, unaccustomed to forging new paths*, he thought. “But consider what we’ve accomplished.”

“Flaking rust, that’s what,” snorted Azai, but Sargon could tell that Azai took his meaning.

“Over a span of a few weeks,” Sargon went on, his voice growing stronger, “we’ve contrived solutions that rival centuries of prior craftsmanship. We’ve scaled a dark cliff face, and we’ve ascended far.” A quiet strength emanated from Sargon, infusing his companions with a renewed sense of purpose. “Now, it seems, we must climb even higher. What say you?”

Azai cracked a smile, a glimmer of his old fire returning. “I sure hope we’ll see some daylight soon.” A moment later, they exchanged back-slaps.

The men had no idea what would allow them to change the blades’ angle while in motion. But they were going to give it their all. And so they did. Days turned into nights as they fumbled with unknowns and chased dead ends. At last, the men emerged with a mechanism that achieved it. They thought it was the most difficult thing they had ever done.

Each blade now terminated in a metal bracket. In turn, the brackets were slotted into sockets riveted onto the rotor shaft. By rotating the brackets, the attached blades would also rotate, changing their pitch angle—the entire goal of the design. While the brackets could rotate,

their pitch angle was held firmly by a self-locking worm gear, ensuring it would remain unaffected by external forces such as wind or blade movement.

Vertical metal rods extended down from each bracket, all connecting to a single circular plate that could move up and down the rotor shaft like a sleeve while simultaneously rotating with it—a thing made possible by a set of bearings. When the plate moved upward, it pushed the rods, causing the brackets to angle and change the blades' pitch.

But how to nudge the plate up or down while it was spinning? This would be akin to trying to guide a spinning top while it was in motion. Their solution was a second plate that was not attached to the spinning shaft and installed just below the first plate. A bearing between the two plates allowed the up-and-down movement of the lower plate to transmit without friction to the upper, spinning plate.

To control the vertical movement of the lower plate, they attached a lever with a hinge to it. The lever's end travelled up and down along a notched track, each notch corresponding to a one-degree change in blade pitch. As the lever moved into a notch, a spring-loaded pin would engage, securely locking the lever—and therefore the blades' angle—in place.

A few days later, all the elements of the new mechanism were fabricated and assembled, the fruits of their tireless labor and ingenuity coming together. They had reached the moment of truth: would their contraption fly, or was it just an “elaborate, fanciful way to piss away time,” as Azai grumbled with ever-increasing frequency. It was the big moment. The first real test.

The apparatus generated tremendous downdraft. And so, ahead of time, they'd emptied half the floor area and cordoned it off, placing the flyer machine in the center. Anticipation and trepidation were palpable as Sargon climbed inside and fastened himself. He gave the three men a thumbs-up, and they returned it. Deep breath, and he twisted the handwheel. He could feel the

vibration through his seat as a rhythmic clanking erupted, the gears and valves shuddering to life. A high-pitched hiss of compressed air joined the mechanical clatter as the blades began to turn, deceptively slowly at first, then faster and faster. The roar of the machine filled the cavernous space.

Wide-eyed, the three men watched as the blades blurred with speed. Sargon sat below. He moved the lever incrementally—click, click, click—adjusting the blades pitch one degree at a time. At ten degrees, it happened.

One moment the contraption rested on the ground, the next it rose. It was an astonishing sight, forever etched in their memories—the entire apparatus lifting into the air with Sargon inside, oddly pivoting around its axis along with the chair and the sphere underneath it. In that fleeting instant, they realized: This must have been the first time a manmade construct had lifted a man into the air.

The assembly rose about five feet high—as far as the tether would allow—and remained hovering, the blades screaming as they tore through the air.

Still faster the blades went. Faster and faster. The piston crank noise intensified, a relentless pulsing and clanking that reverberated through the floor and walls. The sound of the blades tearing through the air rose to a deafening roar, a cacophony of wind and metal that buffeted them. They covered their ears against the onslaught, the vibrations from the contraption palpable even at a distance.

Through the roar of the blades and the shriek of wind, they could tell that the blades were now shuddering then flapping. Suddenly, one tore loose, slamming into the wall and bursting into pieces. Shards flew, one missing Elam by a hair. The flyer crashed down within its confines with a heavy, metallic thud.

For a moment nothing moved. In the next, Elam, Tamuz, and Azai rushed to Sargon, who was shutting down the air flow with openly shaking hands. And then it was over. The oppressive silence was broken only by the ringing in their ears.

They helped Sargon out, their hands trembling as much as his. Sargon's face was pale beneath the grime, a sheen of sweat on his brow. A gash on his forearm trickled blood, but he waved it off. "It's nothing," he muttered, his voice shaky.

"It was as if we tore a hole in the fabric of reality," grated Tamuz.

"Flaming horror," Azai swore, his eyes wide as he looked at Sargon's arm and the bruise on Elam's cheek. "Flaming horror."

"What do we do now?" asked Elam, his gaze fixed on the wreckage, breath still ragged.

Sargon rubbed sweaty hands on his trousers then drew himself up. "We clean up, shutter the millforge, and get out of here. The noise must have been heard over half a mile away. We'll discuss everything later." He surveyed the window and glass fragments that were scattered throughout, a grim reminder of the forces they had unleashed. "Word of this *will* reach the Iskandar of Timnah, who may seek to investigate."

CHAPTER 31

A few days had passed.

Desta stepped onto the treadwheel, its frame elevated a few feet above the ground on the grassy river bank. The large wooden wheel started to turn as she walked within it to the familiar groans of tightening ropes and occasional faint creaks of wood. This treadwheel crane was augmented with five compound pulleys, and before she climbed in, Desta reached for a series of adjacent levers, disengaging three of the pulleys—to give her body a strenuous exercise, as she always did.

Soon, she felt the added strain as the crane lifted the large water tank off the ground. And by then her thighs were on fire. Just the two hundred gallons of water by itself weighed well over a ton. Like most everyone, Desta was transporting water to her residence every few days.

Not today, though. That was not really her tank, nor had she ever been to that watering hole before. She'd never worked a target in her home town; none of them did. It minimized the chance of them being recognized, as her handler, Pandora, had once explained. She didn't know the reason for this assignment, but if the iskandars approached her handler, she knew it must be important. And that was good enough for her.

From a handful of yards away and a few feet below, a man was eyeing her. She was sure

it was Elam; he fit the description Pandora had provided her with. He thought it was his idea to ogle her. They all did. The faintest ghost of a smile twitched at her lips, amused not by him but by the sheer predictability of it all.

Earlier, she'd gotten out of bed and, without bothering to change, walked out in her threadbare light-gray nightshirt and matching leather-soled thigh-high socks. A fifteen-minute ride on a di-wheeler from Maganot brought her to this spot.

And here he was, as she'd been informed. And his eyes were irresistibly drawn to the naked expanse of her upper thighs, as she'd known they would. His roving gaze didn't stop there. Naturally, it didn't. He was trying to get a brazen peek, but the slats and the deep shade conspired to obscure his view. Men were such gawkhounds. She had to quell a grin lest it crack her somewhat disapproving facade.

Desta gauged the matter would take about fifteen to twenty minutes: He would first haul her water tank, and then he would disclose any secret he might have. After that, she would make the short ride back home and get on with her breakfast and the rest of her day.

<How do you know he'll make a move?> Electrae asked inside her head. <He looks like the shy, awkward type,> the younger girl went on.

Desta could sense Electrae's mood: a touch peevish, a touch defiant. She didn't bother to respond; Electrae was probably just trying to provoke her.

She'd let her younger friend virtually tag along, allowing her to see from her vantage, with some stark warnings not to interfere under any circumstances.

<So if you wanted you could have any boy to do the water tank chore for you?>

<Of course,> Desta replied absently, her thoughts reaching Electrae who was at Desta's residence, a couple of miles away. <But I'll never do it for personal gain. I explained this all to

you—>

<Come on, chubby. Youcandoit. Youcandoit. Youcandoit.>

Desta tamped down a surge of annoyance as she tried to ignore the insistent chant of her mercurial friend.

The man was finally on the move. He walked up to the treadwheel. “*Vyre*, can I be of assistance?”

<Oh, such a *good* boy.>

<Shut up, Electrae!> “How kind of you!” Desta called out, her voice carrying a hint of surprise and gratitude as she peered at him through the wooden slats. She continued walking, putting one shapely leg in front of the other, the giant wheel turning steadily. She tugged down on the blouse, trying in vain to pull it down and cover a bit more of her upper thighs. “But I wouldn’t want to trouble you,” she said, casting a soft glance downward to where he stood.

“It’s no trouble at all, I assure you,” he called. Inside her head, Desta could sense Electrae snickering.

A sudden wind gust made Desta hastily hold down the rebellious nightshirt. “You sure?” she asked. Elam didn’t need to be asked twice. He reached over and grabbed a hold of the tank suspended in midair.

The man made short work of it, and a few minutes later, the water-filled tank was on her flatbed. He proceeded to disengage the ropes.

Stepping out of the large treadwheel, Desta walked toward him. She did it with an easy gait, her twins animated, slightly bouncing, under the nightshirt.

As Desta came to stand, towering over him, Elam flushed. He caught sight of her prominent contours straining against the thin, worn fabric of her nightshirt, the absence of

undergarments readily apparent. A man's desires were like the wind, Desta thought absently, ever-present and easily stirred. With a flick of her wrist, she pushed back an errant lock of hair. Luring a man was simple enough; extracting a well-guarded secret was another matter altogether. Hence, the Iskandar enlisted one of the temptweavers: her.

Desta was one of the handful of temptweavers on Areta, once in a great while employed in that capacity. However, a fresh chapter was unfolding for Desta. She was already twenty. A child, a family, a meaningful path—those were the things occupying her thoughts in recent months. While the teasing game was vital for gathering intelligence for the Iskandars, its allure had faded. It was a younger person's game. There was a quiet satisfaction, a different kind of power, in building something lasting.

No longer deemed a child but not yet declared adult, Electrae was still a few years shy of having to deal with mating and offspring, but she grew impatient and curious. Desta relented and allowed her to come along, so to speak. It was the first and probably last chance for Electrae to witness her in this role.

Reluctantly, Elam tore his gaze away and looked up at the woman's face, meeting her penetrating green eyes. Fortune seemed to favor him; she hadn't noticed him admiring her bosom. Or maybe she had but was too gracious to say anything about it. "Do you need help with anything else?" he asked.

Desta flashed him a smile and tossed her long, smooth hair back. Looking into his eyes and occasionally at his lips, she reached out and grazed his arm with her fingertips as if to convey her gratitude. "I can take it from here, but I thank you, *vyr*," she said in a low voice and smiled inwardly. At this point, he was as likely to back out as a bee flying away from a nectar-rich flower.

<Go on, trip and give him an eyeful. He'd love it!>

Electrae was as subtle as a water buffalo.

<Imagine if you slipped a gear, and showed him the Milky Way stretch!> Electrae went on, irritating Desta even more.

During her brief exchange with Elam, Desta had assessed him with a practiced ease and determined what tack she would use. Anyway, with Electrae observing she wasn't going for anything with manic elements or emotionally wrenching. Rudimentary approach would do; nothing fancy.

Elam, meanwhile, was clearly enjoying the scenery. "You sure?" he asked, trying to balance concern with pleasure. "If you don't mind me saying, you're perspiring. Obviously, you had quite the workout."

Desta blushed.

<Wow, you're genuinely blushing. Did you just...conjure it?>

She did, but now was not the time to explain; her attention was fixated on her target. "I couldn't ask...I couldn't possibly ask." Her voice wavered, eyes laden with indecision as they met his while her white teeth tugged at her lower lip.

He reached out and touched her arm. "It's fine. I don't mind."

She took a deep breath, her breasts swelling beneath the thin fabric, ensnaring his gaze anew.

Desta caught the direction of his stare and held his gaze for a long, charged moment. "My face is up here," she said and fixed him with a look of reprimand. "But I guess that's not where your manners are."

He reddened, stammering an apology.

“It’s quite alright,” she said, her voice now cool and distant. “I suppose it’s a lot to ask of a man to look at my face—instead of into my blouse.” Her disillusionment was evident in the slight quiver of her full lips; the sheen in her arresting almond eyes hinted at disappointment and vulnerability. The rapid shift from warm to cold left him off-balance, eager to regain her favor.

<He’s so easy,> Electrae giggled. <Lemmi try now.>

<Absolutely not!> Desta was outraged.

“I assure you, it was an unintended lapse,” Elam mumbled, clearly embarrassed.

Her face was stern as she regarded him, but after a pause, her expression eased. She lowered her head, graciously accepting his apology.

Desta smiled demurely. “Perhaps you’re right,” she told Elam. “Perhaps it’s best if someone pedals the tank back some of the way to my home.”

<Was that the temptation and reproach cycle you’ve told me about?>

<Yes, stoke their desire, then shame them for it.>

A few minutes later, Desta perched on a makeshift seat and faced the man—who began pedaling with fervor, determination evident on his face. Beneath them, a flywheel made of bronze and ironwood spun to life, gathering speed. Once the flywheel reached its full speed, Elam pulled a lever. With the clutch engaged, the energy of the flywheel surged into the wagon’s eight thick-tired wheels. As the wagon rolled forward, its lateen sails caught the wind, adding to the momentum. With the ultra-low gear, it was slow going. But Elam didn’t seem to mind, his eyes following Desta’s legs as she uncrossed and recrossed them. He seemed determined to memorize every curve.

<Can’t you make things happen faster?>

Desta sighed mentally without bothering to answer. That impatient little imp.

They drove on for a couple of minutes before she heard Electrae in her head again: <How long are you going to keep this up?>

Desta started to regret bringing Electrae along. <I picked a spot five minutes away,> she told the younger girl. <No need to stoke him up any longer than that. And no need to cause him to walk back over a longer distance needlessly. I'll have him stop there, pump the information I need—that shouldn't take more than a few minutes—then let him go about his business.> She could have read Elam's mind—literally—but he would've been aware of the mental intrusion, potentially exposing her secret ability. A secret she shared only with Electrae, one they were determined to keep.

<Can you crank his sexual desire any higher?>

<Not without making it appear it's an invitation to something more. And that's a big no-no.> There were other things she'd drilled into Electrae much as Desta was drilled before she'd turned adult: no married men, no soliciting favors, no abusing power. In the end, all people deserved basic decency.

Desta eyed him. Though he was undoubtedly stronger, he wouldn't have fared well in a fight with her. Since the Shoah, all girls had undergone years of relentless combat training—grappling, close-quarters, no-holds-barred fighting. So far, she hadn't needed to do more than reassert boundaries by using body side-turns, pushing away on throats, and hand grabs escapes. But she could inflict serious damage if necessary. While the average man might have been in a scrap or two, girls fought hundreds of battles by adulthood, every position and scenario drilled into muscle memory.

Desta cracked open a book she'd brought along. The pastel-orange sails of the wagon cast a gentle shadow over the pages, the rhythmic turning of the large wheels soothing. From

time to time, Desta made it a point to praise his strength and stamina, lowering the book and flashing him a smile of well-deserved gratitude. This seemed to have rallied him, and he resumed pedaling with gusto.

Elam huffed and puffed as he drove the heavy flatbed, unable to believe his good fortune. The makeshift chair she perched on was—as pure luck would have it—elevated just so, offering tantalizing peeks, while the jostling of the flatbed accentuated the mesmerizing sway of her bust. The young woman in front of him was oblivious to all of this. If she could read his thoughts, she would surely give him a well-deserved slap. From time to time, he checked to make sure she was still reading and unaware.

<Is he engorged at this point?>

<Need you ask?>

<Well, look down. I wanna see.>

<No!> Desta was outraged. <That's...disgusting of you to even ask.>

Had she been as crass, immature, and tone-deaf at fifteen? No one was, she concluded. Facing an actual person was completely different from indulging in a voyeuristic trip without consequences.

Electrae must have pretended she didn't hear those thoughts. Or maybe she just didn't care.

Silence. Then...

<Those legs of yours...bet they could make him do anything. I can prove, I can show you...> Electrae's voice had a new, teasing edge. Desta's stomach clenched, as a flicker of heat, odd and unwelcome, pulsed through her. Her hand twitched, fingers curling as if reaching out to touch him...then the sensation vanished. What in blazes? Where did this come from?

<He's staring at your thighs...What if you were to—>

<Electrae, stop it.> Desta told her sternly.

<Come on, Desta! Live a little!> Electrae's voice was insistent, wheedling.

And to her shock and horror, her body began to move of its own accord. Electrae had seized control, causing her back to arch and her thighs to part. Desta became a horrified spectator, trapped in her own body. <Letgo. Letgo of me!> she inwardly yelled, panic welling. Her hand formed a fist, slamming down to pull the hem of her blouse lower. <You crazed harpy!> She screamed inside her head.

The pressure abruptly vanished as Electrae retreated, but the violation lingered, a sickening heat pulsing between her legs. A shudder coursed through her, the chilling realization that Electrae had released her, not that she had regained control, leaving her shaken and horrified.

A voice, tinged with a hint of amusement, chimed in her mind. <C'mon, Desta, lighten up. He was practically begging for you to flash the firefly!>

With a mental snarl, Desta lashed out. It was the meta equivalent of a backhanded slap across the face. A well-deserved one.

Inside Desta's head, Electrae howled in pain and rage. Desta could also sense the surprise, the shock of the younger girl.

<You violated me!> Desta screamed internally. <You took away my control, my body! Don't you dare try to justify that!>

Electrae didn't answer. Desta could feel her presence, sullen and subdued. A stark contrast to the playful amusement of moments before.

Luckily, the man was too preoccupied with keeping his eyes from falling out of his

sockets to be aware of anything abnormal that had transpired.

He was breathing laboriously by the time Desta asked him to stop by the nearest house, a few minutes later.

Desta jumped out of the carriage, and raised her arm, signaling him to remain seated. At this point, she needed him to be at an eye level. Time to put her extraordinary skills to use. She came close, and loose strands of her silky hair brushed against his face, carried by the gentle breeze. Her lips parted, and he caught glimpses of her tongue behind the white, even teeth. “So what are you doing when you are not valiantly helping girls in need?” she asked softly, playfully.

His breathing was shallow, quickened by her proximity. He managed to rasp out, “Working on an idea. I’d rather not to get into it, though.”

Ready or not, you are going to share it, thought Desta, smiling inwardly. But before she had a chance to make her first real move, her mind blanked out, and she felt a wave of all-consuming desire coursing through her. One hand of hers got hold of his head, and she kissed him with intense passion, her tongue penetrating deep.

Desta shrieked mentally and Electrae fled her head. She recoiled and stumbled back a few steps, breathing hard. The man gaped at her, shocked.

“I’m...I’m so sorry,” Desta gasped, eyes wild. “Do forgive me. I don’t know what overcame me.” She was gagging on her mortification and rage. And she backed away. A moment later, she was at a full run, leaving a baffled man behind.

“Think nothing of it,” he shouted unconvincingly after her, a faint smile of pride on his face.

“Will do,” she said to herself, teeth gritted. I am just going to strangle that little runt!

CHAPTER 32

There was no point for Electrae to hide. The two girls could both triangulate and locate each other wherever they were in the world.

Desta flung the door open, sending it crashing against the wall. Her eyes, blazing with fury born of betrayal, found Electrae huddled in the corner, her petite form pressed against the limestone bricks.

“How could you?” Desta’s voice was raw, barely contained. She stalked across the room and yanked Electrae to her feet, the lykaia’s head reaching Desta’s hips. “How could you?” she growled, each word laden with disbelief and pain. With one hand, she pounded the wall with sheer fury.

Desta gazed down at Electrae, and the young girl shrank farther back. “Dare you play me as your puppet?” Desta’s voice, though quieter now, thrummed with a controlled intensity. “To invade me, use me—do you grasp the depth of that betrayal?”

Tears streamed down Electrae’s face, blurring her vision. “I didn’t think it would be like this...” she stammered.

“You crossed a line, Electrae. A line we promised never to cross.” Her voice broke, and anger gave way to a deep sense of weariness. She slumped to the floor, dragging weeping

Electrae down with her.

Electrae's blue eyes, red-rimmed and large against her pale face, flame-red hair, and freckles streamed with tears. Whimpering, the petite teenager clambered onto Desta's lap. Without thought, Desta engulfed her in her arms. For a long while, they remained like that, Electrae's muffled sobs the only sound.

"You cannot treat boys like this," said Desta gravely. "You cannot treat people like this."

<It felt like I was there,> Electrae transmitted weakly.

"No, it didn't," Desta snapped. "Because out there's reality and dimensions to consider that you can't perceive sitting alone and indulging your fantasies."

Desta let out a sigh, all fight gone from her. "Don't you get it?" she said. "You're too strong for me. You are getting stronger by the day, I can't restrain you anymore. We need to tell someone. We need some support." But there was no one out there who was like them. The blind was leading the blind, Desta thought.

<What are we going to do?>

<I'm going to make contact with Lilit, make our presence known.>

"No... no!" wailed Electrae, wet eyes round and frightened.

<The authorities did nothing bad to her. They'll not punish us for being who we are. And I think she'll keep our secret, anyway.>

Electrae was terrified. As Desta made to go to the kitchen, the short girl wrapped her arms around the towering nymph's thigh for dear life, all the while begging and pleading with the older girl not to let anyone know of her, of them, of their secret. With a sigh, Desta relented, sinking back down to the floor. She promised to give the matter some consideration. She didn't say "no," and she didn't say "yes." This non-answer seemed to calm Electrae some.

Silence stretched between them, heavy and tense. Electrae shifted, moving to sit beside Desta, their backs against the stone wall. “So, what was he working on?”

“I was going to coax it out of him—just when you—” Desta could feel the rage building up again.

“I’m so sorry, Desta,” the younger girl said under her breath.

Desta could never stay angry with her sister-friend for too long. She tenderly pulled away the flame-red tresses from the flushed, tear-stained face of the other girl. “There is no way to know now.”

“What are you going to report?”

She was not going to tell her handler, Pandora, that the job was botched, because then Pandora might want to know why—as it had never happened before. And Desta couldn’t afford Pandora probing into *her* and uncovering the secret of their meta powers.

“I’ll make up some dung-heap tale,” she eventually said, forcing the words out. That stung.

At any rate, why the Iskandar of Timnah would care about what that Elam did in his spare time was beyond her.

CHAPTER 33

Sargon's gut still twisted at the memory of the contraption violently breaking apart, the sight of the ashen faces of his comrades, and the blade fragment that hurtled toward Elam, missing him by inches. He strode down the familiar path to Azai's workshop, knowing what must be done.

Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of oil and old wood. Tamuz and Azai rose to greet him, clasping his hands. Momentarily, the three sat down, a quiet anticipation hanging in the air as they awaited Elam.

Azai's workshop overflowed with the tools of a life's work. Here, amid well-worn implements and pools of warm lamplight, the incident on the millforge floor felt more distant. Sargon fell silent, lost in thought.

Elam arrived soon after. Curious eyes followed him as he strode in. Curious eyes followed him as he strode in. "What's with the grin plastered on your face?" demanded Tamuz.

"I met a girl yesterday," announced Elam and plopped himself on the stool across from them. "By blazes, she was a stunner!"

Sargon arched a dubious eyebrow. Elam was not exactly what one would call breeding stock. And stunners would not pay him any heed—unless they wanted something from him.

"I helped her with the water tank," Elam explained, then quickly added, "not that she

asked. I offered, and she seemed genuinely grateful, couldn't keep her eyes off me. I swear she was leaking lust when I touched her arm."

Sargon gave a boyish grin. Tamuz looked at Elam approvingly, and Azai slapped the young man's back. It was well known that girls liked guys who took the initiative.

Meanwhile, Elam recounted the encounter, half-snickering, half-boasting. He told them how she couldn't keep her hands off him, how she made it all too easy to sneak a little peek. His tale earned him jeers.

"And let me tell you," he said, concluding his triumphant account, "she gave me a thank-you kiss that made my head spin." Elam shook his head as if to clear the lingering sensation.

"What kind of a kiss?" demanded Sargon, suddenly wary again.

"She went all out on it," Elam said proudly, beaming. Obviously she couldn't resist his charms.

For Sargon, it sounded too good to be true. "Did she...probe you about anything?"

"Well, she asked what I'm doing. Just the kind of stuff you would be asking if you met someone and were interested."

A temptweaver! thought Sargon, alarmed. *She must have been sent by an iskandar to investigate.* Elam had gone the day after the craft's blowout to the millforge to replace the shuttered glass windows. He must have been spotted.

"I tried to say something, but she ran off. Apparently, she just couldn't control herself."

The grins reappeared. And this time Sargon joined in. Not what he'd suspected after all; a temptweavers would have gotten out of Elam the information desired. As incredible as it sounded, it must have been just as Elam described. What an encounter!

Tamuz slapped Elam's knee. "See? It's those fiery passions, I tell you. Females can't

keep them in check!”

Azai chuckled. “You said it. Always a whirlwind of emotions.”

The men nodded sagely, a shared understanding passing among them.

“Women,” Tamuz concluded, “they’re a mystery wrapped in a riddle, hidden behind a locked door. No wonder we, men, can’t figure them out!” He briefly recounted his favorite tale of when he carried some bags for a sirena a few years back.

But of course, they had convened for a different reason. Sargon regarded them as the chitchat died down and everyone’s attention turned to him. He said, “I suspect that in the last few seconds, just before the machine ripped itself apart, we crossed a line we didn’t even know existed. Yet, there was no mistaking what took place.” Nods followed. “Like Tamuz said, it felt like we punctured a hole in the fabric of reality.” More nods followed.

Sargon took a deep breath. “We accomplished some things that only weeks earlier were deemed impossible. I cherish this. Nevertheless, it’s time now to let go of the idea of flight.” As he said it, he saw it in their faces: the relief. He felt it, too. Had he been caught, the authorities would have forbidden him from having contact with Lilit. He would have lost her, just when he thought he had found her. And then there was Angora, who had recently gained a hold over his heart.

“We gave it our all,” offered Elam.

“We did,” said Sargon.

“In a way I’m glad we did it,” said Azai. The ordeal behind them, the old man looked relaxed and back to his quietly cheerful self. “It was an adventure, the best I’ve had. The biggest challenge we could have asked for.”

“For several moments, we even succeeded,” pointed out Tamuz. “For a while, it really

was airborne.” They chortled at that. No one else in the history of their world could say that.

By unspoken agreement, none of them brought up the possibility that their world would come to an end again. Maybe it would happen, maybe not. It was time to let go, embrace the future, and savor the present, however long that may be.

CHAPTER 34

Tamuz, Elam, and Azai invited Sargon and Lilit to join them for an evening stroll along the moonlit promenade by Naiad Lake. The stone walkway was filled with laughter and lively conversation while the air carried the enticing aroma of roasting nuts. They walked through the crowds, enjoying the warm evening air, occasionally pausing to watch children chasing each other in gleeful games.

The group passed by the awned kiosk of Hummus Arif, and Tamuz insisted on treating everyone to a freshly baked flatbread pocket stuffed with chickpeas, drizzled with olive oil, and topped with hummus. It was an iconic eatery, beloved by young and old alike. Its signature dishes passed from one generation to the next with meticulous care and love.

This tradition was mirrored by the other eateries across the land. Their fares consisted of elaborate wraps and pocket flatbreads stuffed with anything from a light dessert to complete meals, each stallholder a testament to culinary traditions passed down the centuries. People flocked to them for quick lunches, convenient dinners, and evening snacks.

Sargon relented, allowing Tamuz to treat them to food from the popular eatery. As he glanced at his daughter, his heart swelled as she laughed in delight over something. She looked back at him affectionately, her carefree sound a stark contrast to her past reserve. With the

terrible fear lifted, her true, bubbly personality seemed to have asserted itself.

Sargon banished thoughts of the Bridge of Heaven and of the failed flyer experiment. Instead, he embraced the fleeting beauty of his daily life. He spent more time than ever with his friends, with Angora, and with his daughter—living each day as if it were his last. Only a handful of people were aware of how literal that might be for all of them.

Lilit had drawn curious stares wherever she went, and this evening was no different. Taller than most, she was easily recognized when she was out and about with her two bodies. No one sought to engage her, and she did not seek out company. Sargon and his friends had occasionally encouraged her to socialize. However, she remained content in her solitude, frequenting the amphitheatron to watch her beloved plays. There, she sensed awe and respect from fellow theatergoers, along with a lingering wariness. None dared to approach her or strike up a conversation.

A week earlier, the Sanhedrin had given her a task. Blindfolded, she was led to a house and asked whether the man inside had life patterns indicating he'd taken the black brew. She said yes; after observing adolescents who had refrained from taking it, she could tell the difference. When they brought her back home, they revealed that the man was her mother's sire. This meant an intact child could be born if the mother did not drink the brew, regardless of whether the sire did.

Later that night, sleep eluded Sargon. As he lay on the mat, staring at the domed canvas ceiling of his tent, an idea struck him. He sat upright, a smile spreading across his face.

Sargon quickly scrambled to his feet, lit an oil lamp, and walked over to the adjacent yurt, Lilit's quarters. Entering silently, his agitated state must have registered with his daughter and awoken her. One pair of eyes opened and regarded him in the dark. "Father? What is it?"

He sat down by her side, setting the oil lamp on the nightstand.

“Lilit, you ought to open a food kiosk.”

She propped herself up on her elbows. “Wait, what?”

“You were born for it, Lilit.”

She stared at him.

“You’re serious,” she eventually said. “You’re actually serious. Food kiosks...you’re talking about joints that have been operating for *centuries*. People apprentice for years before—”

He put his finger to her lips to silence her. “Your cooking skills are only matched by your passion for it.”

“So is theirs.”

“Then you could take your place next to them,” he replied. “But you offer something more, Lilit: food preparation as performance. You make mouths water before a single bite is taken.” He smiled encouragingly at her. “And most of all, your dishes aren’t just traditions passed on. They’re born of your heart.”

Lilit now had both pairs of eyes open.

“Your love of theater and food has brought something novel into Areta,” Sargon said.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Then go and make it happen,” he told her.

She swallowed, excitement beginning to take hold.

“How? They all have their designated spots. I can’t just—”

“You can. A mobile food wagon.”

She understood now. Not common, but mobile food wagons were not unheard of.

Sargon leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “It’ll be a great thing for you.”

She grinned back, her face now beaming. Yes, it would, she thought. Yes, it would.

Then she thought some more and uncertainty clouded her expression.

Sargon, correctly guessing what she was thinking, reached out and rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Somehow—one way or another—I’ll construct you a food wagon.”

She regarded him skeptically. “You?”

He nodded.

“How could you possibly do such a thing?” Scraping grime from windowsills was one thing, building a food wagon was something else entirely. She tried to figure out how to put it diplomatically.

He spared her the need to. “I’ll reach out to Azai, Tamuz, and Elam,” he assured her and then winked. “They can construct anything they set their minds to. It’s not going to be easy, or cheap, nevertheless, we’ll make it work.”

Her doubt was replaced by elation. “Oh, that’s wonderful!” she cried and threw her arms around him.

They spent some time discussing the details of the food wagon, with Lilit’s excitement growing. Sargon basked in his daughter’s joy, knowing that this project would give her a sense of purpose and fulfillment. As dawn approached, Sargon returned to his own yurt, his mind already racing with the steps he would need to take to make this dream a reality. He would not let her down. He was determined that before the world ended Lilit would know the satisfaction of sharing her passion with Areta.

CHAPTER 35

It was the time tamarisks were in full bloom throughout the land and speckled it in mauve color. It was the time when ripe flax and wheat fields turned molten gold. It was the time of the harvest festival, Khag Ha'asif, when virtually the entire population of the world came together for three days and three nights.

Through its humble beginnings as a communal harvest with simple meals in the field, the event had evolved and grown over the centuries to become an occasion for feasting and merriment, a time to reacquaint oneself with old friends and make new ones. Daytime was for harvesting wheat, while nights were dedicated to celebration. Not only did people bring food to share, but also all the iconic food stallholders were in attendance.

It was the perfect opportunity for Lilit to make herself known as a food maker.

As the weeks had flown by and the date of the festival drew closer, Lilit became increasingly engrossed in preparation, dedicating every moment she could spare. Azai, Elam, and Tamuz shared her fervor, pouring their energy into constructing the food wagon. The men now had something both worthy and feasible they could strive for.

At long last, the first day of the harvest festival dawned, and practically everyone in the Maradam district made their way to the wheat field on the outskirts of town—much as members

of other districts gathered in their respective fields.

It kicked off with the cutting of the grain. Hundreds of men fanned out across the field, positioning themselves in a staggered formation, a few paces apart. A deep drumbeat set the pace, and they began the rhythmic swing of their grain-cradle scythes, humming as they advanced as one.

With each stroke, the air filled with the scent of freshly cut wheat and the rich aroma of earth. Time and again, they swung the large gleaming implements, then took another small step onward. Following about a dozen paces behind, numerous children scurried about, deftly gathering the cut wheat stalks with small, curved hooks of various designs and skillfully bundling them into sheaves.

In between the growing rows of stacked sheaves, the wheat wagons rolled in. Women jumped down and started to pitch the sheafs into their respective wagons while the drivers kept pedaling, the heavy carts steadily plodding forward.

Behind them, another line of wagons spaced apart rolled at a slow pace. Beneath each of these wide wagons, a massive bin, filled with compost, employed rotating paddles and cast the organic material across the soil in an even spread. Chatting animatedly, adolescents trailed close behind, their hands busily broadcasting seeds of the cover crops: a blend of sorghum-sudangrass, pearl millet, and sunflowers. Both the compost, cured from food scraps and bodily waste, and the cover crop seed mixture ensured the field would be ready for the next season.

When a given wagon became filled with wheat stalks, the driver would take its cargo to a designated central processing area, where others waited. The straw was unloaded and run through elevated metal meshes by many hands for an initial separation. Amid conversations and general chatter, the wheat berries and some of the chaff got separated from the straw and fell

through the mesh into containers. From there, others hauled the filled bins to children responsible for separating the seeds from the chaff, using winnowing baskets. Later, those wheat seeds were spread out on drying surfaces, and eventually carted off to the granaries, where lime salt desiccant acts as a silent sentinel against humidity.

Last year, the Iskandar of Maradam had nearly fainted after he'd swung the large scythe time and again, along with other men, for the one-hour shift duration. This year, the people in the field were treated to a loud argument between the Iskandar and his daughter, who practically wrested the scythe from his hands, "forbidding" him to mow. "This is a job for younger men," Angora had pronounced and glared at him. Eventually, the old man relented with much good-natured laughter and calls from the gathered people. But rather than retiring to the sidelines, and to the delight of the children, the Iskandar joined their ranks helping to gather and bundle the hay, and later joined those who honed scythe blades in between shifts.

For Lilit and a few others, things were different. They were preparing food that was to be offered that evening to the festival goers. Their preparations had begun weeks earlier.

Lilit was intent on creating an aesthetic experience. She'd decided on serving two dishes, and she was determined to give it her all. These would be her masterpieces.

For the first dish, she chose to make a flatbread wrap stuffed with spit-roasted lamb. She was not the only stallholder to offer such a dish. The obvious question was how to elevate it to something one can salivate over and make it distinctly her own.

The first order of the day had been to create the marinade. After weeks of daily experimentations, Lilit finally arrived at a carefully crafted blend of coriander and cardamom, black and white pepper, nutmeg and cumin, cinnamon and salt. The blend was to be worked into yogurt mixed with water, olive oil, and vinegar. Finely-chopped parsley, garlic, and green onion

would be sprinkled in at the last minute. It felt really good to have accomplished it. Each established stallholder had their own marinade, and now she had hers.

Lilit had procured one hundred pounds of lamb meat from a butcher, a purchase that drained the remainder of Sargon's savings. One container held the sliced meat, which she immersed in the marinade. The other contained cubed lamb intended for a different purpose. Just as she was heading out, the meat arrived from the butcher in sealed glass containers stuffed with sprigs of rosemary, a few slices of lemon, and crushed garlic cloves—all to ensure the meat remained fresh.

From their end, Tamuz and Azai used their funds to construct the food wagon. It was a financial investment, explained Tamuz with a straight face to a bemused, somewhat speechless Sargon.

The day before the Festival, Tamuz and Elam had rolled out the wagon from the millforge on its slow journey to Maradam, parking it next to Sargon's abode. The next day, the four men helped to load it up. That completed, Lilit and Norea started to pedal the few-thousand-pound behemoth, slowly working their way to the tent encampment that was sprouting up in the now-barren wheat field. Many paused in their activities to gawk at Lilit's food wagon. It was a quiltwork of riveted copper and brass sheets with wood paneling and a few large prismatic lenses making up most of the roof. With sinks, fresh and gray water tanks, it indeed functioned as a traveling kitchen, and an aesthetically pleasing one at that.

Lilit parked the wagon in the designated area, hooking it to the water tower with trembling hands. The four men who'd made this possible were now far away, harvesting wheat. This last leg of the journey was hers to take alone.

Typically, cooks worked out of sight, but Sargon had persuaded her otherwise. Lilit

wasn't sure how she felt about it, yet she trusted his instincts, and she propped the awning-like windows open. About a hundred people milled about in the clearing, most standing in lines for stallholders who'd already started serving food. Only a few paid her any heed.

As she worked over a large tree stump with a smooth top, adrenaline surged, and the world narrowed to her four-handed chopping: parsley, onion, a blur of green and red under the swiftly moving blades.

Done. She glanced up and saw some stares from the people in the clearing.

Deep, steadying breaths. She mixed the cubed meat with the vegetables, then went to work. Two heavy, curved blades, with a knob on each side, rapidly rocked back and forth, mincing the mixture against the tree stump. Eggs followed, then spices. Hands burning, she pressed on. Now she understood why cooks used grinders. Well, too late for that. After about a minute of doing it, she thought her hands would fall off.

A small gathering formed, and Lilit flashed a smile at a few onlookers that clapped when she was finished and took a sip of water from a canteen. Time to build the spit with alternate layers of meat preparations—something no other cook did.

Lilit laid at the bottom of the spit a thin white layer of lamb fat, then a round flat patty she'd molded from the now ground meat. Next she put a layer of tomato slices and then a layer of the sliced, marinated lamb. Again and again. It dawned on her how she'd grossly underestimated the labor involved when producing food at that scale. Then again, it was not like she had the means or need to ever prepare food for a large number of people.

Ages later, the final mound of meat went on top, edges trimmed. Done.

Lilit and Norea, faces illuminated by oil lamps, grunted under the effort as they hefted the loaded spit, their arms straining under the immense weight. With a click, it settled into the grill,

and with a few vigorous cranks, the spit began its slow rotation. The vertical metal plate alongside the column of stacked meat glowed in muted red and orange, heated by reflectors designed to funnel and amplify the evening's invisible hypo-red beams.

Showtime. Lilit swiped her long knife against the honing rod, bracing for the unknown. Looking up, her tightness melted into giddy relief: a crowd gathered before her food wagon. That had been her big fear—which she had woken up to every day in the weeks leading to the festival—the fear that her work would be ignored. This fear subsided, replaced now by a bigger one, that people would try and find her food unappealing. If that was to happen, mortification didn't begin to describe it for her.

She grabbed a freshly baked flatbread, slathering it with yogurt-garlic sauce—a creamy, tangy counterpoint to the meat. Next, she shaved off some slices from the moist glistening pillar of meat and tomatoes, then pressed those into the warm flatbread. Grilled-hot zucchini and eggplant followed, their smoky char blending with the savory richness. A salad of lettuce, green onion, cucumber, and pickles cut through the richness with fresh flavors. With sizzling sheep butter drizzled over the top, she handed off the wrap, snatching a copper coin in return. Her first.

No time to look at that person's reaction. She built the next wrap, then another. Finally dared a glance at those who'd bitten into the flatbread. Eyes closed in bliss, approving nods... She did it. Suddenly it was worth all the countless hours of labor and trial and error. This dish sang.

Time for the next dish. It was something more daring, perfected through relentless trials. Three free samples, she announced to cheers. Dozens watched as she liberally spread tahini, then a streak of fiery zhug over a flatbread. Scallions, tangy pickled mango, lemon sauce. She layered fried eggplant slices over these. Then the surprise—sliced hard-boiled egg, dusted with salt,

cumin, pepper. A growing crowd of people watched as she then stacked fresh green lettuce, fried white onion, sauteed red cabbage. Diced tomatoes, cucumber, and parsley were next. She finished with another burst of pickled mango, tahini, and eggplant.

The wrap was a riot of colors—glistening purple and cream, golden-brown and fire-red, deep green and pearly white—promising complex flavors. As she rolled it, the end flared open, revealing a cross-section of textures and colors, layer after layer.

It was another winner.

Lilit delighted the viewers with her speed. She couldn't focus her attention on more than one thing at a time any more than anyone else could. However, she was exceptionally adept at transitioning from one body to the other and back.

Lilit's movements were a blur, not through speed alone, but through her fluid shifts. One moment, she'd engage a customer, the next, Norea's hands would chop vegetables with startling precision. Lilit would freeze mid-word, later seamlessly returning, flatbread flying through the air. Each flip was perfect, some daringly high, as if Lilit willed them to land just right. Norea kept the rhythm at her own station.

The evening was a resounding success. Over its course and well into the night, Lilit served countless people until the food was all gone. Earlier, word had spread of the delicious, novel two dishes and the crowd steadily swelled, both to see her perform and with the hope of getting some of the food for themselves. At some point, there must have been about a hundred people crowded in front of her food wagon.

When the last serving was sold, a great groan came from the audience. She announced that tomorrow evening and the next night she'll be open again. After that, her wagon will be traveling around Maradam. That got a big cheer out of everyone.

When the crowd started to disperse, Azai, Elam, Tamuz, and Sargon approached the wagon, grinning from ear to ear. They'd stood toward the back that past one hour, drinking in the sight of Lilit laughing and joking with her customers. It made all the financial risks and work worth it a few times over.

At the sight of them, Lilit and Norea ran up to the men, hollering, whooping and hugging them excitedly. They laughed at her obvious delight and excitement, and she wanted to know if they watched her, if they watched the crowd that'd gathered, if they heard the reaction to the food she'd made.

They all walked back to the wagon, helping to clean things up. They also emptied the food leftovers into a traveling cart that made the rounds and later was to deliver the discards to a co-composting facility.

Sargon wore a big proud smile. "You've done it," he said time and again. In response, Lilit triumphantly brandished each time a box filled with clinking coins. Tamuz peeked in, and after deducting the expenses of the ingredients, he announced that Lilit netted close to six silver coins. That amounted to as much as Sargon made in close to two weeks.

That was an incredible financial return on time spent. However, it was not something she could do time and again, day after day. It was not sustainable to buy, prepare, serve, and clean those volumes of food all by herself—even if she did have four arms and two pairs of eyes. She needed helpers. Tamuz calculated that even with two young, low-paid assistants, Lilit would still end up with a handsome profit.

Her future finances now seemed reasonably assured, Tamuz pointed out as they were all strolling together, enjoying the night air.

As they walked through the throng of mirthful people, Lilit felt a shift. Once given a wide

berth or met with bemusement and apprehension, she now found herself surrounded by well-wishers eager to congratulate her, crack jokes, and ask questions.

That was the day she was truly accepted, the happiest day of her life.

It seemed only befitting that their merry group would share knafeh that night. Anyway, how could anyone attend the harvest festival without eating its signatory dessert?

Throughout, myriad stands staffed by groups of two to three men with massive round metal trays whipped out knafeh as fast as they could. It was made of fried semolina dough mixed with ghee, and underlaid with a layer of molten stretchy white cheese. The sweet and buttery aroma of the dish with hints of orange blossom wafted through the air. The still-hot knafeh, crispy on the outside yet soft and fluffy within, was briskly cut up, the slices inserted into flatbread pockets. In short order, each in Lilit's company was holding the pocket bread, biting into the warm, cheesy desert, laughing and talking animatedly to one another.

Seeing her like this, Sargon was happier than he'd been for years. And he was suddenly consumed with resolve to see her happy for many, many more years to come. It could not stop in a few months. It would not.

On that night he decided to locate and reach the Bridge of Heaven, come what may. He just had to think through how to go about it.

CHAPTER 36

Lilit repeated the performance for two more nights, even managing to hire temporary help to serve the dozens of people who constantly queued at her wagon.

But as all things must, the festival ended. Her father, taking the food wagon as per her request, gave her a final hug and left. Gradually, the open field emptied of people until she was alone.

Lilit and Norea lay flat on the ground, arms outstretched, palms open to the sky, while their dresses fanned out around their legs. A contented smile played on her lips as she gazed at the dramatic expanse of inky black above, streaked by a breathtaking river of starry light. She did it. Her dream came true, the thought came to her again and again. There was a new edge to her joy, a thrilling hint of recklessness, the vast, unobstructed space above mirroring her own sense of boundless possibility.

<Hello.>

Lilit sat bolt upright, her heart hammering. She strained her meta senses reaching, but detected nothing. Then it hit her: There was no sound; the vocalization happened inside her head, clear and tinged with amusement. She felt a distinct presence, a woman—she somehow knew.

What in the...

<Word reached our town about you, about the verdict. I've been debating ever since whether to make my presence known to you.>

<How are you inside my head?> Lilit's thoughts raced, laced with panic.

<I can do this.>

<And you can hear my thoughts!>

<Yes, that's exactly it. And until now, I wasn't sure if you were capable of hearing the ones I send over. The normal people can't.>

Lilit grappled with the implications. <Who are you?>

<The name is Desta. I'm intact, like you. But I'm the other kind—I can read and transmit thoughts. Can't do some of the things you do, though.>

Intact! The word hit Lilit like a shower of molten copper slugs.

<Are there others like you?>

<One that I know of. She's fifteen years old, and I am kind of like a big sister to her. She often comes over to my place.>

<Two bodies? You've two bodies, like me?>

<Nothing of the kind; outwardly, I look like an ordinary twenty year-old.>

<And you read thoughts.>

<Those near the surface, as yours are now.> Vulnerability flitted alongside a hint of defiance.

Lilit felt exposed. That was a new feeling for her. <Why didn't you reveal yourself earlier?>

<Been a coward all my life. A habit that's hard to break.>

<Afraid that you'll be turned in?>

<You risked it all to save the life of an iskandar. Whereas I'm a freak with nothing going for her. Worse yet, I can poke into people's minds—how about that for an invasion of privacy?>

For a moment neither of them communicated.

Lilit grew pensive. <I've been wondering all my life if I'm the only one, you know.>

Lilit sensed something akin to a sigh from the other end. <Until I encountered Electrae a couple of years back, I was much as you: alone, isolated, and wondering if this is how the rest of my life was going to be.>

<And now?>

<I don't know.> Pause. <Do you want to marry me?>

Lilit laughed at the absurdity. <What if you're toothless with bald patches and warts?> she asked.

<Good point. Anyway, I now can see that the proposal was a bit rushed. We need to talk it over for a few minutes first.>

Lilit warmed to Desta's sly, outrageous humor. <Tell me about yourself.>

<Well, I'm a devotee of the Cyrenaic school of thought.>

<The words "school of thought" had almost knocked me off my feet into a dreamless, heavy sleep.>

<You may want to stay awake for this one, sister. It maintains that physical pleasure is the goal of life.>

Ah! Lilit felt herself smiling. <I admit I feel a sudden, newly-found interest in philosophy.> She pondered. <What would it take to become an official practitioner?>

<Admission criteria are terribly strict, you understand. Hands-on field research is a part of the admission process.>

<How about doing it to myself? Does that qualify?>

She felt startlement, then chortle. <That's right. You can do that, can't you? How does it...feel?>

<Wearing an attachment, it definitely beats just using your fingers.> She thought about it some more. <All the same, in the end, it's still you touching yourself—fantasizing about being with someone. How tall are you?> Lilit suddenly wanted to know.

<Seven foot four. Our lips will meet perfectly.>

<I did not realize we're already at that stage of the relationship.>

<Neither did I. But why wait?>

<Good point.>

Silence. Then Desta asked, <Are you a good kisser?>

<I didn't kiss anyone.>

<Tragic.>

<Exactly my thoughts. Though I did kiss myself, tongue and all.>

<And?>

<It's like trying to tickle yourself—anticlimactic at best.>

<Sounds like you are virgin with a lot of hands on experience.>

<Hands-on, strap-on, and pretty much anything that isn't bolted down.>

<So you've never been with anyone.>

Lilit shivered as she recalled touching Angora. Unexpectedly, She now wanted to do the petite woman. <How about you?> Lilit sought to divert.

<Had my share of fun.> Desta did not offer more details.

She heard the other woman again in her head: <Earlier today, I stood in the distance and

watched you, as you worked the knives and flipped in the air the flatbreads. It was such *a turn-on*.>

<I'm glad my culinary skills are stirring more than just pots.>

She could sense Desta's internal smile.

<You should've approached then,> prodded Lilit.

They both knew that Desta's utterly unique pattern of vital lines would have allowed Lilit to single her out in an instant. It was obvious the mysterious girl was not ready yet to reveal herself to Lilit.

<Had someone purchase on my behalf. The dishes you've created are *fantastic*.>

Lilit sent gratitude her way.

More silence and Lilit turned reflective. <It's funny to think that our paths are crossing due to a decision our grandparents made.>

<Oh? Oh. Yes, that's right. I wasn't aware that my mother wasn't made to take the rite's brew until the public announcement.>

<What about you?> asked Lilit.

She sensed hesitation on the other end. <Same.> Desta's laugh was light and carefree. <I've never told anyone, you know. It has been so ingrained in me all those years. But it's fine now, isn't it?>

<It's more than fine, girl; it's the future.>

<Speaking of which, I got myself pregnant not that long ago>

<Boy or girl?>

<It's going to be a girl. And by the size, I suspect twins. In other words, I reckon I got here a little Lilit in the making.>

<When the time comes, I'll be around to help,> promised Lilit and the levity was gone, replaced by earnestness and an unexpected excitement.

She sensed gratefulness from Desta.

<I want to meet you,> thought Lilit. <This isn't fair, you know.>

<Indeed it's not. I'll be in touch.>

And before Lilit could protest or even respond, she felt the presence wink out. Once again, she was alone in her head.

Lilit felt a thrill. What a day! Connecting with Desta sparked a newfound sense of belonging and possibility. For the first time, she glimpsed a future where she didn't have to be alone. She felt like she was on the cusp of an exciting new chapter in life.

She also felt like she was on top of the world. And the familiar rush surged through her veins, a single river fed by two pounding hearts now pulsing into the juncture of her thighs. Angora's image...the silk, the warmth, the bare skin... The memory ignited a primal hunger. A tremor ran through her, a yearning to reach out and to grab and to engulf. Lilit clenches her fists, attempting to fight off the overwhelming urge.

With a shuddering breath, she releases her clenched hands. She succumbed to it. And it felt...so good.

Lilit rose to her full height, then threw her head back and laughed, an unbridled sound. She could see it now: No longer bound by shadows or apologies, the world was to be a playground for her, a place where she was to bend rules—or break them entirely. And no one would retain memories of any of it.

A need clawed within her. The fire that never quenched burned in her and demanded it. Yes, she will go prowling that night.

Lilit started walking, making her way through the dark streets and alleys of Maradam. No one could stop her, not if she didn't want them to. That thought sent a shiver down her spine, a delicious mix of high-flown exhilaration with something deliciously darker at its base.

CHAPTER 37

Unease pierced Angora's slumber. Her eyes fluttered open in the dim alcove, the coarse texture of her sleeping mat pressed against her. She gasped as she spotted Lilit's towering figures striding toward her in eerie synchronicity, bare feet swiftly closing the distance. Adrenaline coursed through Angora, a cold jolt in the darkness. Her fingers clawed at the mat, bunching the rough fabric as if it could shield her. Yet beneath it something else writhed—a traitorous heat that sent a flush rising to her cheeks.

A few paces away, they halted. The eyes of one figure, twin pools of emptiness, raked feverishly over Angora's body, a silent hunger in their vacant gaze. The fingers of the other figure climbed the taut fabric of her own dress, which strained against soft curves. With a sharp tug, they released the top button from its tenacious hold. The act slammed into Angora with chilling clarity. A prickle of heat bloomed low in her belly, threaded with a surge of panic that shattered her paralysis.

She scrambled to her feet, lunging for the space between the figures: a desperate flurry of flailing arms, each strike punctuated by feverish gasps that tore from her lungs. Her attacks lacked form or power: the rabid struggle of the cornered, not the calculated moves of a fighter. Long shadows danced on the walls, mirroring the disorienting haze in her mind. Each jab met

only with the patience of someone watching the frantic scramble of prey. Confusion bled in—was Lilit even trying to block her?

“With each push, your hands find purchase on me,” Lilit’s soft voice drifted through the haze.

In response, Angora gritted her teeth. With a silent snarl, her strikes turned wild, blind lashes—which did nothing against the warmth engulfing her from both within and without. Sweat stung her eyes, breath labored. Her frenzied arms met yielding flesh, her strikes absorbed by relentless warmth, her struggles shrinking her space—her skin shivering with traitorous pleasure at each brush against Lilit. Sweat blurred Lilit’s forms as they gradually closed in. Her struggles grew feeble, each failed strike sapping her resolve as Lilit’s unbearably delicious poison seeped in, enveloping her.

A slender hand reached in, its touch like a phantom brush against her ribs. It vanished, yet a wave of warmth washed over her, soaking through her nightdress. It elicited frustration mingled with burning urge. Another touch, another touch, another touch—until her desperate swats turned to half-hearted twitches of her wrists.

She finally just stood there, body quivering, sweat-dampened hair clung to her forehead, the last reserves of defiance spent. Her body, the traitor that it was, thrummed with anticipation and desire.

In the charged, prolonged hush that followed, Lilit extended her hand and unfastened the top button of Angora’s nightgown with the look of someone savoring the unwrapping a present at long last.

The undone button pierced her dream-like fog, a jolt of chilling reality against the haze of confused desire. That single button had been a flimsy shield, the illusion of control shattered.

Lilit was here to claim, to dominate; Angora's consent a mere footnote as she was pulled into an abyss.

Lilit's fingers curled around the hem of Angora's nightgown. As Angora felt the fabric begin to rise, slowly, inexorably, under Lilit's possessive touch it blew away the last remnants of the seductive haze that had enveloped her. Clarity sliced through, and her hand lashed out, delivering a sharp slap across Lilit's face. "No!"

In the electric aftermath of Angora's slap, Lilit froze, her hand rising to her stinging cheek. For Lilit, time shattered into a thousand fragments, hurtling her back to a long ago moment she'd been slapped, a moment that had fractured her world. Her voice, when it came, was laced with odd vulnerability, breaking under the weight of a buried past. "Why...why would you do that, Mama?"

Angora, consumed by fear and indignation, barely registered the peculiar slip. "Enough, Lilit! You can't do this!" she yelled. Yet, the childlike tone of the other woman left an unsettling aftertaste.

Lilit's demeanor gave way to a haunting fragility, her eyes no longer piercing but distant and lost. "Why won't you listen? Why are you doing this to me?" Her tone was heart-wrenching, like a child's cry for understanding amid adult complexities. She took a few unsteady steps forward. "Don't send her away...she's part of me...please..." Tears streaked her face, and her voice gained an urgency that cut through the mounting dread. "Don't send Norea to Aunt Dekla...without her, I won't be." With every choked plea, the room seemed to crackle with pent-up energy.

Lilit's hands clawed at her own face. "I won't be hurt again!" she screamed. "You can't control me, Mama!" Her wild gaze became unfocused, then locked onto Angora's. In a desperate

last attempt to save Norea—to save herself—she unleashed a meta bolt upon the woman in front of her.

Angora convulsed, then crumpled to the floor and fell still.

For a heartbeat, a deafening silence filled the room. Then, as awareness of what she'd done crashed over Lilit, she let out a raw, guttural sound—the wail of a child witnessing the unthinkable. The familiar room dissolved around her as her memories engulfed the present. Wailing, she crouched by the unmoving figure, her hands groping with anguish and uncertainty. Angora and the room she was in—lost to Lilit, swallowed by the gaping maw of her childhood trauma.

“Mama, please, wake up! Wake up!” Each plea raked at Lilit's throat. “Please, Mama... wake up!” Her tear-blurred vision focused on the fallen figure. Something was wrong. The delicate curve of a chin, the gentle wave of dark hair...a stranger lay at her feet. Confusion furrowed Lilit's brow. It was only as her fingers hesitantly brushed Angora's skin that the veil of the past began to lift.

The dissonance between memory and reality sent a tremor through her. “Angora...” The name cracked from her lips. Recognition dawned, shattering the illusion of her mother's presence. Years of self-deception had shrouded her memories in a protective fog, but now, that fog was ripped away, revealing the harsh, jagged edges of a buried truth. The realization that her hands, in a blind surge of emotions, had once wrought irreversible tragedy—the death of her own mother—sent her spiraling into a torrent of anguish and horror.

A second wave of grief and guilt crashed over her with a crest more devastating than the last. *This was not the past. This was not her mom.* “No, no, no,” she rasped, her voice raw with anguish. Fear iced her veins. This couldn't be happening again. She staggered away, collapsing

on the floor, a silent scream tearing through her. The weight of her past and present wrongdoings pressed down on her, threatening to crush her beneath their unbearable burden.

She scrambled back and cradled Angora's head in her lap. Seeking... seeking...the tendrils of her mental powers gingerly probed for signs of life. There! Like a dying ember refusing to extinguish, a faint signature of life pulsed deep within. Angora wasn't dead. A sob tore from Lilit's throat—a strange mix of joy and desperate urgency.

She delved into the other woman, making a connection with a focus borne of penance. Harnessing the entirety of her powers, Lilit enveloped that fitful spark with her own energy. She willed strength into the other woman, her essence intertwining with Angora's, coaxing the dormant life within to rekindle.

The first rattling breath was a sound more beautiful than any she had ever heard. As Angora stirred, tears Lilit didn't know she'd been holding streamed down her face.

Angora's consciousness fluttered back to the sound of someone crying; a wave of disorientation swept over her. Her eyelids opened to the dim light of early dawn filtering through the room. A tangle of limbs... warmth... the sensation of being held. She registered that it was Lilit who cradled her. Her mind reeled. Confusion and fear gripped her as the memories of their confrontation came flooding back—the violation of her boundaries, the terrifying surge of Lilit's power, and the haunting revelation of a traumatic past.

Lilit's expression was etched with haunting sorrow, tears still tracing paths down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry," she murmured, her voice breaking with emotion. "I don't have the words..." Lilit swallowed hard. "The darkness within me, this hunger for domination... it's been growing for years."

Angora, still gathering her bearings, felt a wave of conflicting emotions. The remnants of

fear and betrayal mingled with an unexpected swell of empathy for the figure before her. “Lilit,” she started but then stopped; she didn’t know what to say. Angora’s heart hammered in her ears with a sudden realization. The slap, it must have unwittingly shattered the fragile illusion Lilit had built around her past, forcing her to confront a reality she had long denied.

Lilit’s grip tightened, a silent plea for understanding, or perhaps forgiveness. “I lost myself,” she said, the vulnerability in her admission stark and unguarded. She met Angora’s gaze, her eyes a tempest of regret and determination. “I know that now and won’t let that happen again. I’ll find a way to master this darkness within me, to channel it in ways that don’t harm others.” The confession, heartfelt and laden with pain, offered no excuses, only the raw truth of her actions and their consequences.

As the tall woman rose to leave, Angora reached out, her hand gently brushing Lilit’s arm. In that fleeting touch, a world of understanding passed between them.

After Lilit left, Angora remained sitting, her mind reeling, the feel of the stone floor underneath her backside uncomfortably warm. Lilit’s touch, her overwhelming presence, lingered. It disgusted her, but an unwelcome part deep inside, older than thought, stirred. She squeezed her eyelids shut, pushing away the unwelcome heat that bloomed in her core. She drew her knees up, trying to make sense of it all.

Angora took a deep, steady breath. She refused to let the encounter with Lilit dictate the course of her life. She had a world to save and a love to nurture. These would be her anchors, her guides.

Angora rose with newfound resolve.

CHAPTER 38

The following day, the sound of chimes startled Angora from the scrolls she'd been poring over. Someone was at the door, an unexpected interruption on this quiet afternoon. She gave her dress a perfunctory pat and walked over to answer. As the door creaked open, Angora's eyes widened. It was Apshafel's daughter. Her heart quickened; what could bring her here?

An awkward silence stretched between them. "Do you care to come in?" Angora finally asked, her voice gentle.

The older woman hesitated before nodding curtly. Once inside the small residence, she settled across from Angora, eyes downcast.

"You don't know what it was like to grow up as a daughter of a forger and a thief," the woman said at long last, her voice strained. She glanced at Angora, her lips pressed into a thin line.

Angora remained silent, unsure what words could offer comfort.

"Did you mean what you said when you came over?" the daughter of Apshafel asked, her fingers twisting a loose thread on her sleeve. "Could the scroll have been authentic?"

"Yes, it's possible," Angora said carefully.

A hint of bitterness twisted the older woman's lips. "Last I saw my father, I said some..."

hurtful things.” She paused, a slight tremor in her voice. “If it turns out he didn’t forge Tygliat Pesser, I would very much like to know.”

“Of course,” Angora said kindly. *The whole world would want to know*, she thought.

The woman’s gaze drifted away again.

Angora leaned forward. “Did your father ever say anything about where the scroll might be, or what he did with it? Anything at all?” She held her breath.

The elderly woman began to shake her head, then paused. “He mentioned that he would put it back where he found it. He said that in our last conversation. Later that same day, he...well, he...” Her jaw tightened.

“Yes, I understand,” said Angora, sparing the other the need to complete the sentence.

The woman looked at her. “The thing is, I don’t know where he’d discovered the scroll in the first place.”

Angora’s heart sank.

The elderly woman climbed to her feet and took out from her satchel a leather-bound notebook. She handed it to Angora. “I did keep this. It contains all of his notes. Perhaps you’ll find something that will prove useful.”

Angora rose and escorted the woman to the door. “Did you show this to anyone?”

“The binder?” The woman seemed surprised. “No. It didn’t occur to me, and certainly no one inquired about it.” She stopped by the door, and her smile broke into a hard, bitter laugh.

“When he was rejected, my father tried to sell a reproduction of an illustration from the scroll to some artists. Even that failed.”

Angora grinned and pointed to a painting on the wall. “Maybe it didn’t.”

The woman stared at the painting. “I recognize this...from the scroll.” She looked back at

Angora, the question plain in her eyes.

Angora smiled. “Someone was inspired by the illustration in the scroll and made a drawing. Then someone else was inspired by the drawing, and made this painting.” Her smile broadened. “I bought the painting, and here it is.”

Apshafel’s daughter burst into laughter and unexpectedly embraced Angora. She was still chuckling as she departed.

Angora shut the door behind her and sat down. She undid the leather strap of the notebook and opened the flap. Instead of a bound stack, she found a jumble of loose sheets of different sizes and varieties.

She spent the next few hours methodically sorting through the papers, setting aside all the sheets that had something to do with Tygliat Pesser. The contents were revealing. Apshafel’s notes and sketches contained a great deal of questions, theories, and words presumably copied from the scroll. These appeared in fractured chunks, crossed out with hesitant symbols crowding the margins. It seemed he was attempting to decipher the script, yet struggling. Now, why would he try to decipher a scroll he had supposedly forged?

Written in faded ink were several characters unlike any she’d seen before. Nonetheless, they possessed a consistency that spoke of a genuine writing system. With a stylus, she traced over the sweeping curves and precise angles. A shiver ran through her as she recognized a tantalizing resemblance to known letters. An ancient aleph? A primeval kaph? The shapes were different, but the underlying structure echoed familiar forms of some Shoah scripts. In fact, this was exactly what scholars would expect writing to look like in the Age of Genesis—more pictographic, less linear.

The more Angora consulted the notes, the more convinced she became that Apshafel was

not the forger everyone believed him to be. He was a man consumed by a discovery he couldn't fully comprehend, driven to the edge by a world that failed to recognize he had stumbled upon something truly novel.

As she stared at the fragmentary script, an inexplicable certainty settled over Angora, an intuition that went beyond the scholarly evidence. Deep in her bones, she knew she was looking at references to a piece of their lost heritage—a tangible link to a time before the Age of Shoah. Tears pricked at her as the weight of the discovery sank in. Apshafel had found something genuine, something momentous.

With trembling hands, she set the notes aside, her mind spinning. She needed to get hold of the scroll, the only scroll that had recorded writings from the Age of Genesis.

All she knew was that it was tucked away somewhere on Areta.

* * *

Sargon doubled down on his wish for Lilit to be happy—for the rest of her *natural* life. Then he thought of Angora, who had taken an ever-increasing hold on his heart. All of which brought him back to the need to somehow locate and reach the Bridge of Heaven. Now if he could only—

The flap of the tent was pushed aside, and Angora entered. Sargon looked up from the low cluttered table, a question in his eyes.

She settled across from him, her face a curious blend of exhaustion and anticipation.

“You found something,” he stated, studying her.

Angora nodded, her eyes gleaming with excitement. She took a deep breath. “Somewhere out there is a scroll,” she began, leaning forward and resting her arms on the table. “A scroll

unlike any other.” She then proceeded to recount all she’d found, her voice growing increasingly animated.

“This document contains writings from the Age of Genesis,” she concluded. “Do you understand the significance of that? We know a few things about the Age of Shoah; we know *nothing* of the Age of Genesis. We’re talking about writings from the first generation or two on board the space ship that is our world. Sargon, it may shed light, it may answer our questions.”

Eagerness and guarded hope were warring within him as he listened to her.

Angora added, “Before committing suicide, Apshafel told his daughter he returned the scroll to where he’d found it.”

Sargon stared at her. “He put it back, you say?” She nodded. “Did he say anything else?”

“Not from what I was told.”

Sinking back into his cushion, Sargon’s mind raced. Based on what Angora had told him, it appeared Apshafel had a reputation for looting. “So, he attempted to steal an ancient artifact and stumbled upon Tygliat Pesser,” he mused. “The author of the scroll must have concealed it within an artifact during the Age of Shoah, a relic that has endured to our time.”

“Yes,” she said, her earlier reflections leading her to the same conclusion. “In fact, I suspect the author *constructed* an artifact—one expressly made to store the scroll with the intent that future generations will discover and crack it open.”

He could go along with her reasoning. “Where does that leave us?”

“There are myriad artifacts from that era spread throughout Areta.” Angora rose from her seat. “I’m going to inspect each and every one of them if need be—however long it may take.” She walked over and crouched beside him. “I want you to join me, searching for it one day at a time.”

Sargon regarded her for some time. “Of course,” he said, and the two of them rose to their feet.

The first artifact on their quest—the statue of Typhon—stared back menacingly, taking pride of place at the Tiamat town hall lobby. Sargon ran calloused fingers over its stone scales, searching in vain for a seam, a crack, anything. Nothing opened, nothing indicated this was more than what it appeared.

Hours passed in a fruitless blur as the two moved from one relic to another, examining each, yet finding no hidden compartments or concealed scrolls. “Shall we go now to Tarqash?” Angora asked, weariness creeping into her voice. The task felt endless, each artifact as unyielding as the last.

Sargon paused mid-stride, his gaze unfocused as if staring through the ancient stone obelisk in the courtyard. Angora, already turning toward the exit, noticed his expression and stopped. “What is it?” she asked, turning to face him.

“I feel we’ve been going about it the wrong way,” he said. “We can spend weeks searching, perhaps weeks that we don’t have. But what if we don’t have to?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“The scroll’s author sought to hide the writings from his contemporaries. Herein must have lain the dilemma he faced: How to hide the true function of the artifact from his contemporaries while at the same time make it possible—likely, even—that future generations will discover its true nature and uncover the scroll within.”

He was right, she realized. The solution to their quest lay hidden within this seeming contradiction. They find the answer to that, they find the artifact they sought. Still, how? She

needed a clue, a starting point. How to conceal something for centuries, yet invite its eventual detection? It felt like a paradox. Unless—

“Wait,” she said. “*Wait*. I think I have it. The Staff of Moshe, the one housed in the Mouseion of Maganot.”

“What about it?”

“Sargon, the entire statue was originally coated with pigmented plaster, which over the centuries cracked and flaked off. At some point, the entire layer of plaster was removed, revealing the wood beneath.” Her face flushed with excitement. “It’s possible—even probable—that the ancient author-artisan intended this to happen.”

“How could such a thing be possible?”

“Any number of different ways,” she told him. “He could have applied the plaster unevenly, allowed for air pockets, or introduced some clumps of sand or straw to the plaster blend—any of these things could have weakened the clay structure over time.”

But his excitement at her words gave way quickly to skepticism. “Since the artifact was fashioned two thousand years ago, it means that by now it has no plaster for many centuries.” She nodded in affirmation. “And all that time, no one came upon the scroll?”

Angora hesitated, her own enthusiasm wavering. Then, a realization dawned.

“Mouseion,” she breathed. “The Staff of Moshe has been housed all that time at a mouseion. No one would inspect it, no one would handle it beyond the occasional dusting.”

Sargon gave her a slow grin. Without another word, they turned and headed out, a renewed sense of purpose in their strides.

An hour’s ride on the deserted paved roadway, and they stood in front of the locked Mouseion of Maganot. Angora, however, knew the cipher combinations for mouseions

throughout Areta from her time as a director. The lock clicked. With a firm push, the heavy door swung open, and she stepped inside, Sargon at her side.

Leading the way, Angora crossed the lobby, entered another large hall and then another, smaller one. There, in the center, stood a large statue of a bearded regal-looking man, gripping a massive staff in both hands as if poised to strike the bowl at his feet—a strike that would herald *Yom Tikkun*. The origin of this venerated tradition was lost in the mists of time. Yet across the land since time immemorial, such hefty ceremonial staffs have been used to strike gong-like bowls, announcing the start of the most somber day of the year: the day of amends.

Angora intently inspected the seams, running her hands over every part of the statue, pressing, feeling her way. “See those nicks and gouges in the wood?” She pointed.

“What about them?” Sargon took a step closer, examining.

“Over time, even small movements in the wooden structure can make those cracks more pronounced. As time goes on, this can create bigger and more serious stress points in the plaster layer, which could eventually lead to the plaster breaking off.”

Angora meticulously examined the staff, her fingers tracing its length, seeking a hidden mechanism. With a sigh, she stepped back. “There’s a seam, yet no obvious way to open it,” she said. “Feel like trying your hand? See if I missed something?”

“Sure,” Sargon said.

He inspected it for a minute or two. Nothing. Well, so far, he’d done what anyone before him would have done. He stepped back and regarded the bearded figure of Moshe as he was about to bring down the staff in a mighty blow downward.

Unless of course...

“Sargon—what? Don’t!” Angora all but yelled that last as he was prying loose the staff.

He stopped mid-swing to look her way.

“What are you *doing*?” she hissed.

“I’ll bring this down hard on the ground. Call it a hunch.”

“This is an irreplaceable artifact from two thousand years ago!”

He freed the priceless object and was now hefting it. “Then let’s hope it’s as sturdy as it looks.”

And with that, he raised it high, pausing for a heartbeat as if in salute to the bearded figure of Moshe, before bringing it down hard upon the stone floor. Angora’s cry of consternation was lost in the crack of wood against stone.

Time seemed to suspend itself—Angora’s hand flying to her mouth, Sargon’s eyes fixed on the staff. Then, a click, a metallic sigh—and it cracked open.

“No wonder no one discovered it until now except for a talented thief,” Sargon muttered to himself. He gave the staff a begrudgingly appreciative look. “Whoever constructed this statue never counted on it being housed in a mouseion, treated like a sacred relic.”

Angora, however, was too busy gaping at the open, hollow rod to muster a retort.

Sargon pried it wider, and there, nestled inside, was a thick roll of dark-brown parchment. Their eyes met in a shared moment of triumph.

Angora’s unsteady hands reached into the hollow rod, tracing the worn edges of the parchment. “Tygliat Pesser,” she breathed, her voice filled with awe. But as she turned the scroll, a thick crease marring the ancient paper caught her eye. The hushed reverence of the moment shattered, and a curse escaped her lips.

“What is it?”

“When a scroll has been bound for as long as this must have been, you don’t just roll it

open.” She pointed at the thick crease. “It must have been Apshafel’s doing.”

He saw what she meant. Still, he wasn’t too concerned with a crease in the scroll and was ready to make another one right there and then. Angora was adamant, though; she would not repeat this folly and force open the scroll. She would place the scroll for a few hours in a special high-humidity chest. “To soften and relax the fiber,” she told him.

He bit back a sigh, impatient to get to the scroll’s contents. He made Angora promise that they would be out of there well before morning, before staff members would be coming to work.

And after that, there was nothing to do but restore the hollow rod to its original position and pace about for a few hours. Finally, Angora emerged, the tall scroll cradled carefully in her arms. “It’s in remarkably good shape,” she pronounced and proceeded to lay it on a large table.

Sargon drew closer, his heart pounding with anticipation as Angora delicately unfurled a portion of the scroll. The first panel contained the illustration of their world from outside; it was the same as the reconstructed mural image. She unrolled some more. The second panel exhibited a long passage in some cursive script. “This must be the introduction I’ve told you about,” she said.

He studied the symbols, his eyes narrowed in concentration. They were similar to those used in handwritten documents at the present—similar enough that he could make out some letters, yet not enough to make out the meaning of the text. “Can you read it?” he asked. His voice held a hint of urgency.

“Yes.”

She spent a few minutes examining the text.

“It’s as the committee’s report noted,” she said distantly. “This introduction is alleged to be written by someone from the Age of Shoah, late period—when the world laid in ruin. The

author claims the rest of the scroll contain copies of wall inscriptions from a gutted mouseion that was constructed during the Age of Genesis.” She looked up for a moment. “According to him, nothing else was left; everything that belonged to that prior era had been destroyed.”

With visibly trembling hands, she unrolled more of the scroll. The next panels were written in block script. But it wasn’t a block script she had ever seen. Her heart leaped as she recognized a few of the characters from Apshafel’s notebook. Here, though, they were in their full, glorious context—an entire scroll filled with the long-lost words of their ancestors.

“Can you...read these?”

Angora glanced up at him, awe in her eyes. “No one in living memory can. Sargon, those are writings from the Age of Genesis.”

CHAPTER 39

Angora took the Tygliat Pesser scroll to her residence. She flicked down the open palm symbol at the top of her door, signaling that no one was to interrupt her under any circumstances.

At first glance, the writing from the Age of Genesis seemed indecipherable, a world apart from familiar scripts.

She meticulously jotted down all the distinct glyphs within the scroll, twenty-two in total. This matched the number of letters in their modern alphabet, bolstering her hope that it was the same language, only obscured by time. If true, her task of deciphering it shifted from impossible to merely formidable.

Fighting back heavy eyelids, she scrutinized the copied glyphs, comparing them to known characters from various scripts. Just as she drifted off to sleep, she thought she recognized three symbols resembling aleph, tet, and beth from the Shoah script.

Angora awoke with a start, unsure of how long she had slept. She glanced up at the sky light. It was still dark outside. She refreshed herself before brewing a pot of masala tea. The strong black tea was going to keep her sharp.

She returned to the table and reviewed the notes she'd made. She noted that three of the twenty-two Genesis glyphs closely resembled characters from the Age of Shoah script,

confirming her initial assessment.

Minutes later, a short caption beneath a drawing of their world caught her eye. A thrill shot through her; she could wager anything that the word “Areta” was included. Sure enough, she spotted a four-letter word that looked like a match. The first letter was unmistakably aleph and the third was tet. The remaining two bore a passable resemblance to resh and hey. Without a doubt, the word spelled “Areta” in the ancient Genesis script.

With mounting excitement, Angora added two more letters to her list, bringing her total to four of the twenty-two glyphs. As she studied the text further, she spotted feminine and masculine inflections, identifying yet another piece of the puzzle. Now, it was a matter of seeking words with mostly known characters, allowing her to deduce the missing ones. Despite a few missteps, each deciphered word made the others fall into place with greater ease.

Five hours later, she allowed herself a satisfied smile. Rising from her chair, legs stiff from hours of intense focus, she paced the room, elated. She’d done it! She’d identified all the archaic forms. In fact, without intending to, she had effectively memorized the ancient glyphs.

At last, the true task could begin: unraveling the secrets of the scroll itself.

Tygliat Pesser held nineteen panels in total, making it perhaps the most significant archaeological discovery ever. It offered a real glimpse into the Genesis Age, an era they knew nothing about. This genuine, unfiltered insight into the enigmatic epoch had the potential to revise centuries of conjecture and tales. Even a year earlier, such a discovery—well, never mind that. All of that had to take a backseat. She had to see if this ancient text could provide a way to help her people.

The next nightfall, Angora sent a runner to summon Sargon.

“I’ve done it,” she said in a hoarse voice once he arrived, shut the door behind, and took a seat. Her pale face was stark in the dim light as she continued, “The language is archaic; that said, it bears similarity to the vernacular of the Shoah period. I deciphered it, then read it. All of it.” She swallowed and sought to collect her thoughts.

“In some ways, the ancients were advanced. In other ways...” She shuddered. The Age of Genesis was no golden age, as many had thought. “They were savages—routinely felling trees and breaking up the soil.” She met his eyes. “Oh, Sargon, it’s worse yet. Their superstitions were grotesque, their thinking violent and tribal. Each lineage assumed superiority over the others.” The scholarly community had believed the Age of Shoah had ravaged the culture of the prior era. But Angora was coming to the grim realization that the Shoah was a culmination of the Age of Genesis, not a departure from it.

There were deeper, more disturbing differences between those ancient people and present-day ones, but those findings were for another time, when she would have more time to reflect and sort her thoughts out. She was going to keep that last to herself, for now.

All of these revelations hinged on the authenticity of Tygliat Pesser. Its last panel had unexpectedly sown seeds of doubt. She pushed aside those nagging uncertainties and forged on.

“Sargon, the scroll indicates that our ancestors originated from another world. I found in the text something referred to as *tevël*, and some still remembered it or had secondhand stories about the world they’d left behind.” Remarkable, simply remarkable, Angora mused. What a treasure trove Tygliat Pesser was. Among other things, the text confirmed the long-held belief that in ancient times, men widely used a musical string instrument called the “bow and arrow,” reputed to produce a distinctive twang when played. She’d also learned what many scholars had speculated through the ages: the original names of the districts had all been different, except for

Tarqash. Each bore a name given by the original lineage of the respective district. Someday, she would share with her father that Maradam had originally been known as Camulodunon. For now, she had to be content with the knowledge that she was probably the only person alive who knew this.

But of course, that wasn't what they should be discussing now.

She reached out across the small table, her fingers finding his, their hands clasping.

"There are several references to 'the arrival,'" she said. "Evidently, there was no way to calculate exactly when it would occur. It seems that they could only estimate the arrival within a seven-year timeframe—in other words, one arc. However," she said raising her head as he was about to speak, "they mentioned a telltale sign when we're around *eleven months* away."

Sargon braced himself.

"The sign is when a star in the Cetus constellation becomes as bright as a single candle one yard away."

He sucked in air through his teeth. There was no doubt or ambiguity about it. The document from two thousand years ago was talking about Thalith Na'amat. And what she just said about the level of brightness left him with a sinking feeling.

Angora rose to her feet and motioned for him to follow her. Using a ladder, they climbed to the flat rooftop. Once there, she pointed at an elongated box opened on both sides with an eyepiece protruding from its center. She invited him to peer in.

"What—" he started, but then he understood. It was a light meter.

"I've put a candle on one end and angled the tube so that the light of Thalith Na'amat is to pour in through the other end." That was one of the reasons she'd waited a bit to summon him; she wanted the star to be high in the night sky.

He peered in, first at one side, then the other. A wedge in the center was painted white, offering an effective and reflective partition.

“Less than eleven months,” he said in a low voice.

“Definitely,” she said and blew out the candle.

“What else?” he asked.

“We’ve been flying toward Thalith Na’amat, and we’re getting close to it. That’s why this star is growing brighter.”

He mulled it over. “How can that be?” In the Burning Ship festival, all the stars were impossibly far.

“If you think it through carefully, you’ll note that in the festival one of the stars is quite close, actually,” she said softly.

He peered at her frowning. What was she talking about? No star was close in the simulation.

Unless—

“You mean—” he stopped and visibly paled.

“Yes,” she said, seeing his realization. “The massive bonfire must represent Talith Na’amat.”

“And we’re hurtling toward it,” he said, his jaw clenched, muscles tightening in his face. So that was how their world would come to an end in a few months.

Silently, they climbed back down to the main room below and sat down again.

Angora said, “The festival was never about the demise of our space ship, but the disembarkation process meant to precede it. It must’ve served as a kind of ritualistic drill, a symbolic reenactment of what’s to come—a way to preserve the memory of the routine, should

all else fail.”

“You speak of Elysium.” He took a deep breath. “Did the scroll referenced Elysium by name?”

She nodded. “In fact, it’s explicitly mentioned as the destination of our people.”

“Does it describe what it is?”

“It’s referred to as a ‘planetes.’” He looked quizzically at her, and Angora shook her head. “I don’t know what that may mean. In the Old Tongues, ‘planetes’ meant ‘wanderer,’ but that’s clearly not the meaning here.”

Pity. He would have liked to know. Be that as it may, even that was now secondary. The entire content of the scroll, all of it, came down to one question, the only one that mattered at the end. Steeling himself, he asked, “How were we meant to disembark and reach Elysium?”

“Kadesh Barnea,” Angora said, and bit her lip. Despair, confusion, and doubt bled back. “The scroll states that Kadesh Barnea is the Bridge of Heaven.”

“What?” He rose to his feet, his voice incredulous. “No, that’s impossible. People have had no way of reaching it. No stairway.”

Silently, Angora crossed to the table and unrolled the scroll to its end.

Sargon took a seat next to her, his eyes went round as he took in the detailed illustration of the last panel. Its top part depicted Kadesh Barnea; the shape was unmistakable. Beneath it, a spiraling staircase reached all the way to the ground, one mile below.

He let out a harsh breath as implications sunk in. He covered his face for a long moment before looking up again. “Did a staircase exist during ancient times—or is the Tygliat Pesser a fraud, after all?”

“I’ve been agonizing over it ever since I came across this illustration,” she said. “While

the stairs may have been wrecked, the underground foundation stones could not have been. Yet, extensive digs centuries ago turned up nothing.”

Angora sat back, her fingers absently tracing the edges of the scroll as Sargon leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on the ancient illustration. The silence between them was heavy, filled only by the distant hum of cicadas. Angora rose from her seat and moved to stand under the skylight window. She turned to Sargon, her gaze searching his face for an answer she feared he didn't have.

His brows drew together. “What if we dig and find out for ourselves? This schematic”—he gestured at the detailed drawing—“will pinpoint the location of the foundation stones.”

She stared at him incredulously. “The plaza is paved over. We can't—”

He interrupted, “The drawing indicates that the foundation stones lie *outside* the plaza.” He traced a finger along the intricate illustration, and Angora realized he must be right. The stairway complex was unlike anything she'd ever imagined. Instead of a single staircase plunging downward, it split into three spiraling structures, each connecting to the ground some distance apart—likely beyond the paved plaza. That much was true.

“More recent digs were conducted beyond the edges of the plaza,” she said wearily. “The reports are unclear on the details, but the excavation teams came back empty-handed.” Angora sank down to her seat. “Despite everything, my gut still tells me that Tygliat Pesser is authentic. Everything else fits. I don't know what to think anymore.”

Sargon took her hand in his, his touch gentle yet firm. “If the foundation stones exist, then everything described in the scroll is probably true. If not, perhaps none of it is. We've got to know.” He gestured to the detailed illustration. “With this, I can calculate the location where the three staircases connected to the ground. The height from the ground to Kadesh Barnea is exactly

one mile, giving us the scale. We won't have to dig blindly all over the region, as others have done."

Angora regarded him silently, then nodded in agreement.

"However deep the foundation stones may be," Sargon told Angora as they pedaled side by side, "they couldn't be too far down."

Upon arriving, they found it to be carpeted with wild grass.

"I guess we should leave," said Sargon.

Angora agreed, and they quietly started to pedal away.

Until frowning, Sargon stopped his di-wheeler. Angora stopped next to him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"What did just happen?"

"Why, nothing," she said listlessly. "We explored the area, didn't find anything, and—" She looked at him, bewildered. "It's strange, I forgot we were supposed to dig."

"So did I."

They looked at each other, uncertainty in their eyes.

"Well, let's return to the site and dig," said Sargon.

They turned around, but Sargon stopped almost immediately. "I no longer remember where to go. Things are suddenly confused."

Angora raked a hand through her tousled, thick hair. "Same here. It's as if an unseen hand is clamping down on my thoughts—at least when it comes to the location of the site."

"I understand now," Sargon finally said in a low voice. "It's similar to the aversion we experienced when we went down the shaft. It's the architektons, Angora. Things weren't meant

to be uncovered when it comes to the nature of our world or perhaps to some technologies.” His jaw tightened. “No wonder no one has ever found anything. Even if they knew the exact location, they wouldn’t have succeeded. It’s only because we knew what to look for, where to look, and we’re aware of the implanted phobia that we have a chance.”

He was quiet for a few heartbeats. “Luckily, we don’t need to dig at all. I’ve thought of something else,” he said.

“Oh, that’s good!” Relieved, she laughed happily and kissed him.

“Would you lead the way?” he asked, then collapsed.

“Sargon!” Angora cried, rushing to his side.

He sat up and held a hand to his head.

“Let’s go home,” she urged. “We can return tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll be fine,” Sargon said, wincing as he settled onto the flatbed hitched to Angora’s di-wheeler. “Just pedal. I’ll guide you.”

Angora hesitated, her brow furrowed. “Alright,” she said, puzzled that he would be so insistent on searching for some silly foundation stones that held no importance. Despite her misgivings, she started pedaling, her eyes darting back to his pained form every few moments.

Sargon sat hunched over, fighting waves of nausea and a piercing headache. Grimacing, he whispered directions, using the aversion itself as a twisted beacon. He let it wash over him, each subtle shift in intensity guiding them toward the site.

As they neared their destination, his body began to shake violently. A strangled cry escaped his lips as he choked out a final instruction, “Left... a few more yards... stop.”

Angora jumped out, her heart drumming. She hurried to Sargon’s side, alarm rising at his pallor and labored breathing. He was slumped against the tools, sweat-drenched, and gasping for

air. He moaned, struggling out of the flatbed, using a shovel as a crutch. He stumbled twice, refusing her help each time, and pushed himself back up with the shovel. Now that she thought of it, she wasn't sure what they were doing there, in the middle of nowhere. It was Tishrei. Surely they could have found a better use of their time.

“This is the right place,” he said, his speech slurred. He staggered a few steps. “Right here. Definitely right here.”

She was baffled. Had he lost his mind? “What are we to do next?”

“This,” he said through gritted teeth—and plunged the shovel into the ground.

Angora let out a piercing shriek, her face contorting in agony as the veil of subterfuge was ripped away and the compulsion to flee the site slammed into her. She stumbled backward, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The aversion twisted in her gut, threatening to overwhelm her with sickening nausea.

“Help me!” Sargon yelled. “Grab a shovel and fight the aversion!” He pushed the shovel deeper with his foot, his entire body quivering with the effort to resist the primal terror that clawed at his sanity and urged him to flee.

He heard Angora crawling toward his position, panting as if she were climbing a sheer cliff. At one point, she retched, but he couldn't afford to take his eyes off the ground. He sensed that if he turned back or wavered even once, it would be nearly impossible for him to resume digging.

At long last, she came into his peripheral view, using the shovel to drag herself closer. Under the moonlight, they dug laboriously, their shovels biting into the earth and removing dirt with each grunt and heave.

Three feet deep, the shovelheads scraped against metal. A cold sweat broke out on

Sargon's skin, mingling with the grime of their labor. "Doesn't sound like a foundation stone," Angora gasped, forcing the words out through clenched jaws. He couldn't afford the breath or the distraction of a response.

Bit by bit, they uncovered what appeared to be a smooth circular plate about four feet in diameter. They lay there gasping, the metal plate clear of all dirt, and the overwhelming urge to withdraw receding.

"It seems to be the kind of metal we came across at the bottom of the underground lake," Sargon said, still breathing heavily. He wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. Angora rolled over and ran a fingertip over the smooth surface of the plate. "Yes. Untarnished, just like the other one." She then studied the relief on the circular plate, frowning.

"What is it?"

"It's the same style of drawing I encountered in Tygliat Pesser. I assumed it to be some form of an insignia." A doubt crept into her voice.

A peculiar-looking protrusion rested in the center of the circular metal plate. Gingerly, Sargon prodded it with the tip of his shovel. They both recoiled, startled, as with a sharp hiss, the plate cracked open, the two halves rapidly sliding to the sides and vanishing into the ground. As the metal plate disappeared from view, it revealed a vertical passage beneath. A cold glow emanated from the depths of the opening. They cautiously peered in, taking in the smooth-sided walls of the shaft. A metal ladder was attached to its curved surface, the rungs gleaming in the otherworldly luminescence.

"Well," Sargon finally broke the silence, his voice hoarse. "We didn't come this far to turn back now, did we?"

Angora offered a shaky smile. "Not a chance."

They descended, one after the other. It was a short climb down; couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty feet. At the bottom, they stepped into a softly illuminated corridor. They stood in awe, gazing around in wonder. The ethereal light seemed to emanate from the ceiling itself. An arcane technology of some kind.

"The architektos," Angora said. "They must have constructed this tunnel before our ancestors boarded Areta." It felt so strange to say those words.

"Look," Sargon said. One side of the corridor was made of a pale, mammoth slab of stone. He reached out and gave it a thump with his fist. "This is it," he declared, his voice rough with satisfaction. "We found the foundation."

They shared a brief hug.

The colossal stone stretched for dozens of feet and rose to a height of around seven feet. Atop this giant slab rested two other segments of similar dimensions, followed by another set of three massive blocks.

"This must be a service tunnel," Sargon mused aloud. They walked all around and ended up where they started. It appeared that indeed they had uncovered one of the three foundations for the ancient stairway. A silent exchange passed between them, a shared understanding solidifying. This was their proof.

They had their proof.

The stairway to heaven did exist in the ancient days.

The scroll was genuine; they had no doubt about it now.

After climbing out, Sargon prodded again the protrusion that was now flush against the perimeter of the shaft. Another hiss, and the two parts of the plate closed up. Methodically, they backfilled the hole.

“It’s no wonder that the service tunnel and foundations had never been uncovered,” said Angora, as she was throwing dirt into the hole they’d dug. “What a dreadful, strong aversion.”

Sargon grinned wolfishly. “I’m still amazed we found that oil lamp in the service tunnel,” he said, shaking his head. “Right after we managed to pry open the rusted trapdoor. What luck!”

Angora tried to remember seeing an oil lamp, then she remembered and chuckled in appreciation. Silly of her to have forgotten such a thing.

CHAPTER 40

“The madcap fools in the Age of Shoah destroyed the staircase leading to the Bridge of Heaven,” Sargon said, back at Angora’s residence, driving his fist into the palm of his hand. He looked at her, face dark with anger. “They doomed us all.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, they did.” The awareness of it, held back by the lingering doubts over the scroll’s authenticity, now settled with unshakeable certainty. The Bridge of Heaven was one mile high in the air. It might as well have been one hundred miles high.

For some time, they were both silent.

“So I guess this is it. It’s just a matter of months now,” Angora said, her voice cracking, eyes welling up. She’d hoped that knowledge from the past would offer them salvation. It did not. Worse yet, she found that there was meant to be a way out. And then she found that it was out of reach.

He turned away, his jaw clenching.

“Sargon?”

He did not react, keeping his back to her.

“Sargon, what is it?”

“There’s... a way. Maybe.”

She looked at him, bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

He remained facing away, his posture rigid. “In the last few months,” he said, his words tumbling out in a rush, “I sought to locate the Bridge of Heaven. I brought together my former associates, and we constructed something. I didn’t share it with you as not to raise any false hopes.” He now turned, and his heavy gaze held her. “It may still be possible to get a person up to Kadesh Barnea.” He cleared his throat. “A manmade flight.”

Angora recalled his juvenile attempt to fly with attached wings. She lowered her head so he wouldn’t see the embarrassment in her eyes.

Sargon understood and shook his head. “This is different. Completely different.”

She lifted her head. “Did the thing you devised...did anything?” she asked delicately.

“Yes, something.”

She remained quiet, waiting for him to continue.

He said, “It rose a few feet up carrying more than the weight of one person. For a good long moment, it defied gravity and held there—before it violently came apart as its moving parts reached prohibitive speeds.”

She stared at him. Indeed, it was not much, but even what she’d just heard strained her credulity. “A contraption rising into the air? How is that possible?”

He paused, searching for a way to explain the concept. “Imagine a tall pole with wide, flat blades attached at the top—similar to the arms of a windmill,” he explained, gesturing to help her visualize. “Now picture that pole and those blades spinning rapidly, driven by a controlled burst of air.”

It wasn’t difficult to visualize what he was describing. “These...paddles rotated, and the whole contraption lifted?”

Sargon could hear the skepticism in her voice. “I don’t think you understand the sheer force involved—the winds it whipped up, the blurring spin of the blades, the violent way the machine tore itself apart.”

She rocked a bit back and forth while regarding him. “Do you think it could ever carry someone to the Bridge of Heaven?”

“I don’t rightly know,” he said and grimaced. “I was reluctant to continue down what proved a dangerous path toward a nebulous end. Now, everything has changed, though. Now, I know our destination: Kadesh Barnea. We must reach it and then activate something or, well, do whatever needs to be done up there.”

She considered this for a moment. “Those friends of yours, did you tell them about our world’s fate?”

“Two of them are aware of what we face,” he said. “They understand the risks of widespread panic and the imperative for secrecy. They’ve kept the secret close to their chest and will continue to do so. All the same, I wouldn’t have told them if I had another way to bring them on board.”

“I believe in you and that the information is safe with them,” she said simply.

He inclined his head.

He climbed to his feet. “Time is of the essence.”

“Wait,” Angora said. “My father ought to be apprised of the impending doom.”

Sargon froze then turned. “According to you, he’s already aware of it,” he said warily.

“Yes, yet he doesn’t realize that there is—or at least there was meant to be—a way out.”

“And what good would telling him do? unless you also plan to tell him—” he stopped.

“Angora, no. This is our only chance. If the Sanhedrin learn of an attempted manmade flight,

they may decide to shut it down.”

“Why in blazes would they do that!?”

“Because the source of power harnessed by the flyer might alter the technological underpinnings of our society,” he said. “They won’t want to see that happen. Blazes, *I* don’t want to see that happen.”

“But—”

“Did you not tell me yourself that the other iskandars do not believe our world will be destroyed?”

“The scroll of Tygliat Pesser will convince them otherwise,” she said heatedly.

“Are you willing to gamble on that?” he stepped closer, his voice urgent. “Are you willing to gamble the fate of our world on it? Think. What advantage would there be in them knowing? But the risk, small as it may be, is that they’ll not see past the upheaval the technology may bring. No, we cannot—we must not—chance it.”

She sucked in air through her teeth. “I see your point, yet I still disagree.”

“Why?”

“What if the council can think of ways to reach the Bridge, ways other than by flight?”

He looked flustered. “The only other means is to build a mile-tall structure. And this is utterly impossible. We have neither the capabilities nor enough stone, metal, and wood in the world for such an undertaking—even if we had years to build it, rather than months.”

She was back at it. “What is there to lose by telling them only about the scroll?”

Sargon ran his hand through his cropped hair, vexed. “They won’t just let it go at that. They’ll want to know what led you to search for the scroll, and how you found it. They’ll retrace your steps, leading them to the discovery that we’re on a space ship. The risk of exile would then

be real enough—extinguishing any prospect we have of saving our people.” He touched her arm, his gaze intense. “Angora, if I believed they could offer any meaningful help, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell them. The reality is, they can’t.”

Reluctantly, she agreed.

She was going to keep it to herself.

* * *

Sargon summoned Tamuz, Elam, and Azai to the old millforge after hours. He assured them that everything would be explained and swore them to secrecy, ignoring their obvious questions.

Once seated around a drafting table, Sargon said, “Angora has deciphered some writings from the Age of Genesis.” He was met with blank looks.

“Isn’t that the time before the Shoah?” Elam asked, recalling something he had heard.

“It is,” said Sargon. “Now, we finally have some answers.”

All eyes were on him.

He said, “We’ve learned that whatever is to befall our world will happen in a matter of months.”

This was the first time since the mishap with the flyer that any of them brought up the ominous specter of their world’s demise.

“What do you mean?” asked Elam, his brow furrowing in confusion. “What will happen to our world?”

Tamuz covered his face with his hands and shook his head in disbelief. Azai let out a resigned sigh. “Why,” the old man said. “Why did you have to dredge it up in front of Elam?”

Sargon was unremorseful. “Because he has the right to know and make his own choice about how he wants to act in the remaining few months as he sees fit. But, foremost, because there may be a way to save us all.”

Elam’s face drained of color at those words, his hands gripping the edge of the table until his knuckles turned white. “Please, just tell me what’s going on,” he said, his voice strained.

And so, Sargon did.

Long after Sargon fell silent, Elam sat on the stool, hugging his knees and rocking himself.

“Elam?” said Azai in a worried voice.

“No, I’m... I’m fine,” said Elam, his words coming out in a strained rasp as he continued to rock back and forth, his eyes distant and unfocused. “I’m fine.” A strangled, manic laugh that sounded more like a sob escaped his lips. “Of course I’m fine.”

A concerned look passed between Azai and Tamuz.

Sargon turned his stool to face Elam and said, “I brought you here tonight not to—”

“We’re all going to be fine,” said Elam, his voice taking on a monotonous quality. “We’re all going to die. But who gets out of life alive, right? It’s destiny. It’s just destiny,” he continued, his tone eerily flat. Then leaping to his feet so abruptly that his stool toppled over, he rushed out, his footsteps echoing in the empty millforge. Through the open bay doors, they could hear him retching in the grass.

Azai looked in dismay at Sargon, who looked back at him, his face impassive.

Elam stumbled back a few minutes later, his breathing ragged and his face ashen. “This is a nightmare,” he said, his voice trembling. “A nightmare.” He stared down at the stone floor of the millforge.

“It is,” agreed Sargon. “I called you here tonight because we might be able to do something about it.”

Elam raised his head, a flicker of desperate hope in his haunted eyes as he met Sargon’s steady gaze.

“There may be a way to somehow get off our world,” said Sargon.

“Getting off our world,” murmured Tamuz. “What a strange turn of phrase.”

Sargon said, “As I shared with you, it appears that we’ve been traveling for millennia, and Areta is about to meet its fiery end. However, this is meant to happen *after* we disembark.”

Elam’s gaze sharpened. “Disembark, you say? Disembark where?”

“Another world,” responded Sargon. “Think of Areta as a gigantic barge and we’re the passengers who’ve been undertaking a two thousand year long voyage and are about to stop by the shores of a new land.” He told them what Angora had gleaned from the scroll.

“You’re telling us she uncovered this,” said Elam slowly.

Sargon gave a slight bow of acknowledgment.

“But there is a catch,” offered Tamuz. “Isn’t there? Or else you would have been joyous—rather than troubled.”

Sargon looked at their faces. “This is not how it was meant to be,” he told them. “We were supposed to just climb up the stairs to Kadesh Barnea and activate or do what need to be done for us to disembark.”

“What stairs?” Tamuz said, brows knitted.

“The stairs that got destroyed during the Age of Shoah. The stairs whose foundation Angora and I had uncovered a few days ago.”

Silence fell as they processed the information.

“Shouldn’t we bring this to the Sanhedrin?” Tamuz asked, breaking the silence.

“We already talked about it,” said Sargon, his words measured but tense. “The iskandars are aware of what might happen. Most of them do not think the risk is credible, while all of them are united in their opposition to any revolutionary technology that may upend our world. The risk of the council shutting us down, however small, is too great given what’s at stake. Besides, what can they really do to help?”

“What can *we* really do?” countered Tamuz.

Sargon took a deep breath. “What if we manage to find a way to reach Kadesh Barnea?”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” asked Tamuz, a troubled look on his face.

“The infernal machine,” said Azai heavily. “You yourself said that it was not meant to be.”

“True. But we weren’t meant to die, either,” Sargon said harshly.

They looked at him with anguish and dismay. Finally Tamuz shook his head. “You saw what happened with your own eyes. This thing rose a few feet and then broke apart, almost destroying the millforge and killing Elam in the process. This fancy of flight is folly, I tell you.”

“Well, it’d better work,” Sargon snapped, getting to his feet. “We have to build a flyer and get someone up to Kadesh Barnea to do what needs to be done up there—or else we’re all done for down here, in a few months’ time.”

“I’ll take a few months of living over a few minutes inside this infernal machine,” said Azai under his breath.

“You don’t mean it,” said Elam, now collected.

Azai looked at him, then looked down. “No, I suppose I don’t.”

Sargon pulled his stool closer to the table. “Let’s analyze what happened. The flyer rose

and hovered successfully. It only broke apart when the blades reached catastrophic speeds.” He met each man’s gaze. “We can prevent this with gears.” He fixed his eyes on Tamuz, who gave a reluctant nod.

Azai wore a sour expression. “What about the spinning of the chassis? That’s a real problem.”

It was. They all noticed it at the time, though a bit later there were far bigger issues to worry about. Still, it had happened: As the blades rotated and the contraption lifted, the chassis had unexpectedly rotated around its axis.

Elam spoke up. “I’ve been thinking about it since the incident,” he began, shrugging apologetically and drawing surprised looks from the others. “I noticed the same thing with the model. The blades spun one way, and the frame, the other.” A small smile crept onto his face. “What if we had two sets of blades mounted on the same shaft, rotating in opposite directions? What then?”

Tamuz chortled. “By Heracles, that just might solve it.”

Sargon smiled appreciatively at Elam’s clever idea. This might indeed resolve the issue. He looked at Tamuz, then Azai. “So what say you, shall we build an aerial carriage that will take us to the Bridge of Heaven?”

“I’ll get working on the gears,” said Tamuz.

“I’ll get working on new blades, two sets of them this time,” said Elam.

They all looked at Azai. “What are you all staring at?” he spluttered. “If there is a flaming way to rescue everyone, there is no time to waste with idle chatter.”

They smiled at each other.

“Tamuz,” Sargon said. “I need you to start working on the double rotor system.”

Tamuz bowed his head. “Very well. I already have an idea. A vertical bevel gear attached to the rotating shaft will make the upper set of blades rotate in the opposite direction.” He gestured with his hands.

Sargon nodded. “I’ve been thinking the same. The real challenge will be designing two nested rotor shafts, each turning in opposite directions, and ensuring the plate and rods reach the additional upper set of blades.” He shot Tamuz a wry look. “But if anyone can do it, it’s you.” He sobered up. “Before you work on gears to limit the blades’ rotation speed, let me try to come up with some sort of a gauge to measure the shaft’s speed. That will guide us.”

“Will do,” said Tamuz.

Sargon turned to the smiling young man. “Elam, once Tamuz has the gearbox in place, find out what is the best number of blades for each rotor. That will take some trial and error, I’m sure.”

“Consider it done,” said Elam, a grin splitting his face.

CHAPTER 41

Lilit gyrated amid hundreds of revelers in the shallow crater transformed into a dancing arena—where young men and women flirted, socialized, and danced the night away on Tishrei eves. Beneath her feet, a mosaic of thick, translucent glass bricks formed the dance floor, laid upon a sturdy metal grid. Below, oil torches cast ethereal glows upward, while flames in tubes capped with convex lenses sent roving spotlights.

Along the periphery of the sprawling dance floor stood six structures, each a twenty-foot lattice of interwoven wooden pipes sealed with taut membranes. From these lattices, musicians pounded out otherworldly sounds—droning hums and primal rhythms that vibrated through bone and sinew, compelling a collective movement from the crowd. Amid this sonic maelstrom, a solitary player generated a deep, resonant tone by blowing into an extremely long, cylindrical wind instrument.

Some danced, their bodies bouncing to the thumping beats, while others were instrumentalists. Giant drums dictated the tempo, clapping punctuated the melody, and a multitude of wood and metal-shod feet stomped in time, gradually introducing a chorus of booms that wove complex harmonies. Joining that ensemble required practice and skill. For now, Lilit was content to simply let the rhythm move her.

A prickle on the back of her neck...a warning shiver.

<Watch out for the three girls behind you!> came Desta's voice in her head.

Startled, Lilit extended her mental sight and sensed hostility from a female closing in behind her. She could not read the girl's thoughts, yet the intent was clear enough.

Lilit turned. Three tall girls were approaching her.

The tallest of the trio halted just a pace away. She gave Lilit a slow once-over. "Well, well, if it isn't the twin show," she said, a faint smile on her lips. The girl cocked her head and crossed her arms. "Caught half of you sneaking around without the other."

The second girl stepped forward, her voice a honeyed shade of concern. "Forgot your spare parts at home?" she asked. She exchanged a knowing look with the first girl, her voice taking on an overly earnest tone. "Half a freak is still a freak, right? Or does it make you half normal?"

The third girl, a flash of long red hair in the dim light, snickered but otherwise chose to stand back.

Lilit's eyes momentarily narrowed as anger flared. She noted their vital lines, their vulnerable points. A fleeting vision of them drooling on the floor flashed through her mind. It would have been so easy. The vision faded, replaced with a pang of sadness. She could tell—these three were like her. Had their mothers not drunk the black brew upon reaching adolescence, these girls would have been metans. They were the stunted ones, the true freaks; trapped in a normalcy they were never meant for, forever denied the meta power that should have been theirs.

"I'm sorry," she found herself shouting in reply over the music and noise. She bit her lip then thought to say something more. Then thought again. "I'm truly sorry."

One of them gave her a dirty look, while the others tensed. Somehow, Lilit couldn't quite say why or how, but somehow she knew they understood. Without another word, the trio turned and walked away.

"I'm sorry," she said softly to their retreating backs.

<What did they say?>

<They just spat some nettle,> Lilit replied inside her head. <How did you know?>

<I could see them from where I stand,> came the response from Desta. <One of them telegraphed her thoughts so loud, I was sure she wouldn't notice me reading her surface thoughts.>

<You're here? Right now?>

<Looking at you at this very moment. I followed you in. Wanted to meet.>

Lilit looked wildly around, scanning the ocean of faces. But of course she didn't know what Desta looked like. Focusing on her Sight, she searched the female forms for something unique, intact in a way she'd never seen before. There, amid the throng, a figure walked bearing a unique, brilliant pattern of vital lines.

She now refocused her eyes and saw Desta for the first time.

The woman was stunning, with an elongated, stylized body. Her earthy linen dress rippled as she moved gracefully through the crowd, brass threads shimmering in the torchlight like serpentine trails tracing her bare, narrow waist, long legs, and broad shoulders. She stood as tall as Lilit, with alabaster skin contrasting with inky hair cascading to the small of her back and raven-shaped eyes set within a broad face. As she drew closer, Lilit noted her green irises, high cheekbones, and a mouth upturned in a hint of a smile.

Desta stopped about a stone's throw away. She then held up two fingers to her left

temple. Lilit felt a quickening of her pulse. The other woman was inviting her to dance. And the two fingers pointing up indicated she, Desta, was going to be the lead.

As if on cue, the music shifted, the pulsing rhythm giving way to a softer, more playful one.

Desta stood still, her eyes alight with anticipation as Lilit drew near. Taking a deep breath, Lilit stepped into Desta's awaiting arms.

Their movements were a bit awkward at first, Lilit mirroring Desta too closely, their legs bumping in a clumsy two-step. Lilit let out a self-deprecating laugh, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Desta's relaxed expression, however, put her at ease. Wrapping one arm around Lilit, Desta's warm hand found the small of her back, guiding them into a gentle sway. Lilit followed her lead, falling into step.

With each passing beat, their movements grew more fluid, more in sync. They spun and swayed, lost in the music and each other's presence. Lilit found herself smiling broadly, enjoying the simple pleasure of moving in harmony with another person.

The song ended all too soon, and they came to a stop, breathless and still holding each other. Desta stepped back and offered her hand. <Want to leave this pit and find a quieter spot?>

Lilit nodded, taking Desta's hand and letting the other girl lead the way.

Desta walked some distance away from the lively, boisterous crowd. Then turned, an easy smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Hello," she said.

"She can speak!" crowed Lilit.

"And bite," Desta added.

"It was one of the first times I danced with someone." Lilit was laughing, adjusting the strap of her dress. "I'm relieved you didn't ask me to lead."

A playful grin spread across Desta's face, her eyes sparkling with mirth. She tilted her head, her gaze lingering on Lilit's lips for a moment before pointedly looking around. "Where is your other half?"

"Dreaming for both of us."

Desta sighed theatrically. "And here I was looking forward to feeling four arms, two sets of lips, and all the rest. Guess I'll have to ration my hugs." She came closer, and it just happened. They kissed, the warmth of it surprising Lilit. They kissed again, and the moment settled into a comfortable silence.

As they faced each other smiling faintly, Lilit regarded the vital lines of the other woman, fascinated by the novel complex pattern of glowing vital lines, and—

"You're pregnant," Lilit softly exclaimed. Then recalled; Desta had told her about it.

Desta chuckled. "I reckoned you'd sense them, or rather, *her*."

Lilit reached in again with her mental sight, probing, her hand lightly resting on Desta's arm. Two identical patterns. Yes, the baby Desta carried was a dual-body metan, much as Lilit was. "I think she just sensed me," she said, wonder on her face. She embraced Desta. "As I told you: When time comes, I'll help you with her."

"I know you will," the other woman said, grateful.

As their steps fell into a comfortable rhythm, Lilit's thoughts began to wander. The idea of motherhood, once a distant concept, now felt closer, more conceivable in the presence of the other woman. She bit her lower lip, considering. "Is it difficult?" she ventured. "You know...the whole seed-scouting thing?"

Desta reached out and stroked her arm. "The Seed House was a huge support. They help with everything—checking for inbreeding risks, scheduling conflicts." She noted Lilit's faint

expression of surprise. “There’s obviously a need for multiple tries to ensure conception. They also provide these individualized etched tokens to sanction each visit I made to my sire.”

“It’s certainly more structured than I expected,” Lilit said. “What of the actual... process?”

Desta waved her hand dismissively. The stories often embellished the details, painting a dramatic picture. Still, as many Sirenas discovered, the mechanics were simple.

Pumping a sire was as intimate as peeling a mango or sucking on a stick of candy. Most sirenas would pay a visit wearing a mask and a minidress and nothing else. They would wordlessly pin the men down, hands tracing hot lines, slowly stripping them bare before mounting them. By that point, the male organs would usually stand at attention, irrespective of their ostensible owners. If not, it didn’t take much gyrating—oftentimes for the benefit of the girls, too—to bring them into rigid compliance. And then the sirenas would engulf until they siphoned all the stardust and drained the males empty. Even more common, however, were the late-night visits to the sires’ dwellings. Without exchanging words, under the cover of darkness, warm hands would find the sleeping figures and stir them awake, only to withdraw and leave some time later.

As the sirena slipped away into the night, she left behind an artifact, a ritualistic offering, its absence a profound breach of trust and purpose. This artifact, a web of coarse fibers adorned with tiny wooden beads, bore the story of her desires; each colored bead signified a trait she yearned for in her future child. Woven into this tapestry was a single strand of pubic hair, encased between small stained-glass plates: an intimate memento of herself. Over time, the sire, if favored by many, would gather these braided creations into a larger tapestry, a testament to the women who chose him and the lives he would help bring forth.

Desta's pace slowed, and she glanced at Lilit. "I didn't quite know how to bring it up," she said, hesitant. <Are you...Did you ingest the brew?>

Lilit grinned and shook her head. <No, and I'm so grateful for that. The thought of bringing a baby into this world knowing they'd be stunted... it would have been unbearable.>

<I would've also felt that way> transmitted Desta. <The thought of my child born diminished...>

The two continued strolling, hands intertwined.

Lilit nudged Desta playfully. "So, spill! Tell me about the sire you picked." It didn't matter whether a woman was actively seed-scouting or not, or even having any intent of ever doing so, trait talk was enthusiastically discussed and debated among females of all ages.

"Han predominant, with a dash of Punjabi," said Desta immediately. "Six lengths tall, a 40-span chest, a 31 waist, with 17 shoulder slabs."

Lilit quickly ran the ratios in her head. "Those shoulders seem a bit narrow for such a build."

"In a fem sire? Please!" Desta glanced at Lilit. "Anyway, it wasn't like I was going for Inverted Triangle look."

Lilit was puzzled. "Then your aim was...?"

"Lotus Body."

Lilit thought it through and critically gauged Desta's torso. Made sense. "Nice. What else?"

"This sire has a Nymphaea face, sweet disposition, and—"

"Hold on!" Lilit gasped, mock-offended. "You've given up your stunning Northern Lights eyes—raven shaped, no less—for Almond shaped Obsidians?"

Desta grinned widely. “No, I didn’t. Guess what, it’s a subordinate trait with him. He has already sired seven babies, and all of their eye color came from the mothers.”

Lilit felt a pang of curiosity but knew that Desta wouldn’t offer the name of her sire as anonymity was paramount. Her gaze lingered on Desta’s hair. After a brief pause, she said, “You know, with your hair, you could have gone for the new mutation of blueish black.”

“Oooh, Midnight Shimmer—love it! But that sire? First off, he’s hotter than a forge right now. I bet his queue’s longer than the wait for knafeh on Khag Ha’asif. Plus, he’s a masc sire, and I’ve been set on a girl.”

She paused, then continued animatedly, “I forgot to mention the best part about the sire I chose. He has Paprika-Auburn hair! Imagine that with my traits, my baby could get that rare Garnet Glow. Wouldn’t it be stunning with my eye type?” she finished somewhat breathlessly.

“Depends. Is he also fair-skinned?” Garnet Glow indeed! With her hair type, the chances of that happening were about one in four. She didn’t mention it out loud, though; Desta must have known the probability when she made her decision.

“Of course,” Desta said and blew a wayward strand of hair off her face. “I won’t chance it otherwise. It’s not just that,” she said, “he has great teeth—”

“Teeth! You checked his teeth?”

“Of course. I was out for a stud—scouting for stardust—not a spouse,” she said, looking meaningfully at Lilit.

Lilit flushed. She ran her fingers through her long hair, letting it cascade over her shoulders. “By Zeus’ whiskers, when one day I seed-scout, I’m not going to examine someone’s teeth.”

“Why not?”

Lilit hesitated, unsure. “For one, it’s so awkward.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Desta scanned the throng of people standing some distance away, looking for an unattached man to call upon. “Let me show you how it’s done. I’ll get them so charmed, they’ll happily flash their teeth.”

Lilit put a hand on her arm. “Please don’t.”

Desta raised an eyebrow at that.

Lilit searched for the right words. “I suppose I can see why you need to check out the teeth. Yet, doing it just for demonstration feels...wrong.”

The other was silent for a few moments. “I think I see what you mean.” Desta cast a sidelong glance at Lilit, reassessing.

“When you’ve all those powers, you start thinking differently. At least I have, recently,” Lilit said. Suddenly uncomfortable, she sought to change the topic. With a lighter tone, she asked, “What do you do for a living?”

Desta clutched a hand to her chest. “The anticipation! It’s simply too much,” she exclaimed theatrically. “Tell you what, I’ll let you stew on it a bit longer. First update me about your food business; I’m dying to hear how it’s going.”

Lilit’s face brightened. “It’s thriving! I’ve trained and hired a team that now manages much of it. I split my time between the food wagon and teaching food presentation skills. My father’s friends recently constructed me a second food wagon.”

Money had ceased to be a problem for Lilit. If she wanted a dress, she could simply buy it, and they could even afford now to eat meat during the week. She no longer had to reach out and ask people for money on occasion, which had nauseated her and she stopped doing ever since she’d been unmasked.

Lilit looked archly at Desta and pushed silken tendrils of hair from her face. “Your turn now. What do *you* do?”

“I work at a purifying-flow field attached to the paper mill,” Desta replied. She had started as an apprentice at twelve and now planned to take a break. She intended to return to full-time work once her future children were old enough to play independently, around five years old, mingling with slightly older children during the day.

“Huh? Oh, you mean one of those lagoons with reeds.”

Desta pursed her lips. She didn’t care for the vernacular.

“Is it different from the lagoons attached to residential areas?”

“Well yes. Household ‘lagoons’ host plants such as bulrush and water lettuce for nutrient uptake from household wastewater. In ours, you’ll find cattails and some species of reeds to treat organic pollutants that are byproduct of a mill.”

“Do you have those cute snails?”

Desta smiled. “Yes, and carps, too. They are good for controlling algae.”

“So how does it work with—”

“Just don’t say ‘shit’,” warned Desta.

“I was going to say ‘fecal matter.’”

“Same thing.” Everyone had always asked her about that. The least interesting and savory part of her job in maintaining those incredible purifying-flow fields.

“You understand feces is transported to the co-composting facilities,” Desta said.

“Along with food scrapes, yes.”

“So that’s the thing, they stay in our tanks for only a few weeks. This reduces their volume and odor. Anyway, the liquid is mostly routed to the flow fields with the rest of the

influent. The sludge itself—”

“I like it, ‘sludge.’ It has such a nice ring,” Lilit said with exaggerated sincerity.

“Shut up. The sludge—”

“I believe you’re blushing.”

Desta playfully swatted Lilit’s arm, eliciting a yelp of mock surprise and a grin. “The sludge is lifted with turning screws,” she explained, “which is then hauled away by a bucket pulley system, loaded onto a sealed cart, and off it goes. That’s the extent of my involvement. Happy now?”

“And pee?”

Desta shook her head. “I don’t know. I think they mix it with slaked lime to create a powdered fertilizer.”

Lilit cocked her head, her focus shifting from the intricacies of waste management to a far more captivating subject.

“What?” asked Desta, noticing the other women’s open stares.

“They’re impressive,” said Lilit, looking appraisingly at the other woman’s bosom, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. “No wonder babies find comfort there. Do you think a little squeeze could conjure up some milk for a taste?”

Desta huffed, a mix of amusement and exasperation. “Oh hush, that’s just their natural size. We still have a way to go before things get really exciting.” A thought struck her. “With her meta-faculties, do you think the fetus would be able to sense sexual energy and arousal?”

Lilit blinked, the thought having never crossed her mind. “I guess there’s a whole bunch of things we’ll have to think about and modify around these powers, won’t we?” She reached out and tenderly touched Desta’s face. “But that can’t be one of them. If you’re worried about what

they may sense in a few months, just wait until they turn one—or four. You won't be able to have sex for *years*. Or touch yourself. Or even daydream.”

As their gaze met, the reality of their unique traits pressed upon them, and the playful banter faded away. The quiet stillness held a shared understanding. Their anxieties gave way to a profound sense of connection and belonging.

Lilit reached out, her fingertips grazing Desta's cheek. Eyes fluttering closed, Desta leaned into the touch. The casual warmth of their earlier touch ignited anew, a brush of skin against skin transforming into quiet sighs and unspoken hunger. The rest of the world seemed to fall away. They held each other and kissed, first softly, then deeply, their bodies pressed together, arms entwined around each other.

Lilit pulled back slightly, still within the embrace, her breath erratic.

<What's wrong?> asked Desta, her mental voice soft.

<Afraid to let go,> said Lilit, vulnerability flitting across her face. Desta pulled Lilit into her embrace, a silent promise of support.

Lilit closed her eyes, the warmth of Desta's body pressed against hers, the taste of their kiss still lingered on her lips. Emotions churned within her—desire, fear, uncertainty.

“Having two bodies... it warps things, Desta,” she said, her voice barely audible. <The arousal isn't just amplified; this sensation reverberates off each of my bodies, each a spark feeding the other in a rising spiral of ecstatic torment that threatens to drown me.> Her gaze turned inward. “There's an inferno inside me, not only of lust but the craving for sexual domination. Each suggestion in the other person's thoughts fuels this intoxicating craving to envelop their sexuality and possess it.” A shiver traced a path down her spine, and she turned her face away to hide her turmoil. “It's all tangled up and...scary.”

Desta reached out mentally, sending a wave of calm that washed over Lilit like soothing waters. In their shared space, Desta sensed the other woman's shame, fear, and a stubborn spark of hope. "That fire, Lilit, it's part of you, and maybe it doesn't have to consume."

Lilit looked up, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I want that more than anything," she said, her yearning palpable. "But what if I lose myself again in these dark flames?"

They drew closer, a hesitant dance of smoldering desire and undercurrent of apprehension. Their kiss began as a tentative exploration of lips and breath. Almost instantly, Lilit felt the familiar surge—the intoxicating hunger tangled with her desire. It was a precipice she knew all too well, a coil of lust tightening within her, demanding more.

Desta felt it too, the shift in energy. She reached out with her mind, not to suppress the fire, but to anchor it. Lilit felt the electrifying pleasure tempered, allowing space amid the rush. Instead of a tide threatening to drown, it became a powerful undercurrent under Lilit's conscious will, allowing her to remain present, grounded.

Lilit pulled back, her breaths quick, sharing her budding sense of relief and hope through their telepathic bond. The warmth of their connection lingered as they began to stroll, arms wrapped around each other's waists.

A sobering realization dawned upon Lilit. "We've found a way to manage this together," she said, half to herself. "Soon, however, there will be others facing the same challenges." She turned her head, regarding the people milling in the distance. "We're just the beginning."

Desta mulled this over as they continued strolling through patches of wild grass. Finally, she sighed, absently kicking small rocks in their path. "I can't even lead or train Electrae." She cast Lilit a questioning look. "How can we train a handful of metans born in the coming years?"

"A handful of metans," Lilit repeated with a mirthless laugh. "You must suspect

something.”

“Suspect what?” Desta asked with unease.

Lilit fixed her with a knowing look. “Your mother didn’t take the drink and you just happen to have meta-faculties? Same for me. What a coincidence.”

Desta paled, and Lilit took Desta’s hand in hers. “What I’m about to tell you must stay between us,” she said. The Iskandar had told Lilit to trust her instincts if she were to encounter other metans, and sharing this with Desta felt right.

After a brief hesitation, Desta touched her forehead, mouth, and heart.

“Desta, the entire new generation possesses meta traits,” said Lilit. “In a few years, all those entering adolescence without taking the brew will start giving birth to metans.”

Desta inhaled sharply.

Lilit waited a beat, her voice softening. “I know. It’s a lot to take in.”

Desta found her voice. “How sure are you about this?”

“They all carry our basic life patterns,” said Lilit.

“Oh,” Desta murmured. “Oh, my.”

Lilit stared off, wind stirring her long dark hair. “The old generation will pass away, and those impaired by the brew will become a historical footnote,” she said. “Her eyes, when they met Desta’s, were pools of resolve. “Our kind is the future, Desta, and the Iskandars’ knowledge offers no guidance for what’s to come.”

Lilit at last understood what drove Yessod Olam to risk his life to unmask her and help her gain public acceptance. “I may not have all the answers,” she said, “I’m determined, though, to prepare the ground for those who come after us, to create a framework for navigating this new reality. We need a set of principles to guide us in our interactions with each other and the

previous generation. The intensity of our desires has to be curbed and privacy and respect of personal boundaries redefined.”

Desta, still processing the enormity of Lilit’s revelation, could only nod in agreement.

As the night wore on, their responsibility transformed into a shared commitment to trailblaze a path for the next era. Hours later, Desta was as intent on it as Lilit was.

At some point, she turned to Lilit with a mischievous smile. “If we’re going to be the guides in this transformed society,” she said, “shouldn’t we start by being a living model?”

Lilit’s heart skipped a beat. “What do you mean?”

Desta’s cheeks flushed. “Let’s find a place of our own. A home that reflects this new chapter in our lives.”

Lilit’s eyes lit up. “I love that idea,” she replied, a warmth spreading through her.

In Areta, homes were testaments to time: built, rebuilt, and lovingly maintained over centuries. Around a thousand homes always stood vacant, an intentional and desirable surplus. Dwellings were sealed from the elements once their owners had passed away, standing in quiet wait, ready for new families to breathe life back into their walls.

This was what Desta and Lilit intended to do. They spent the rest of the night discussing their preferences and dreaming of the home they would create together. It was a small albeit significant step on the path they were forging for themselves and for the future.

CHAPTER 42

The men reopened their old millforge and accepted some jobs to help cover expenses. The occasional commission also served to explain the noises emanating from the building, though the sounds weren't a major concern given the secluded location.

If Lilit were to learn from Sargon about the millforge, she would've undoubtedly insisted on visiting it, inevitably discovering the aerial carriage. That was a secret he couldn't risk exposing. No, as far as his daughter was concerned, he was still doing what he'd been doing all those years: polishing metal artifacts.

After their near-disaster, the team desperately needed a way to measure blade speed during flight. In a flash of inspiration, Sargon recalled a toy from his childhood: a stone whirling on a string attached to a stick, rising higher as it spun faster.

He fashioned a vertical pole with a spring wrapped around it. A cap was fixed to the top of the pole, directly above the spring. A second cap was placed below the spring, acting like a free moving sleeve. With sufficient rotational speed, centrifugal force would pull outward on two sets of hinged rods, angled outward from the vertical pole. These rods were connected to each of the caps and had weights fused to their ends. The faster the pole spun, the stronger the outward force, causing the hinged rods to extend farther out and their angle to lessen. This motion pushed

the lower cap upward, compressing the spring.

This up-and-down movement of the lower cap was the basis for the instrument. Tamuz then linked this motion to a simple needle gauge. At long last, they had a spin meter, which provided them with concrete numbers.

They agreed on a blade-tip speed of six hundred and seventy-five feet per second, a compromise between Sargon's enterprising nature and Tamuz's caution. Much faster than that, and the whole contraption might shake itself apart—a terrifying prospect, especially after their last close call.

Next was the matter of installing a second set of blades above the first. Sargon's premonition proved to be well-founded: Redesigning the pitch control system for two sets of rotors was radically more difficult than for one. Tamuz declared it to be the most complicated mechanism he'd ever tackled. Yet somehow, he managed to pull it off, and the chassis stopped turning once the second set of blades, rotating in the opposite direction, was mounted on the mast.

Now, they had lift-offs with a chassis that didn't spin.

Could they improve the performance? Would a steeper blade angle mean even greater lift? As it turned out, yes. At a cost. Increased drag meant they'd needed to inject more precious compressed air to counteract it. From what they could tell, it was a worthwhile trade-off.

The team proceeded to find the best pitch angle. They'd assumed it to be 45 degrees, but reality had other ideas. At approximately 15 degrees, the blades began to vibrate. When they reached a 20-degree pitch, the blades lost all lifting power, and the flyer plummeted to the floor, a few feet down.

Thankfully, they'd planned for this, installing a large shock-absorbing coil at the base.

Still, the plummet was an unsettling, humbling blow. It often seemed as though they were fumbling in the dark with forces they barely understood. Once the shock wore off, Sargon wryly observed that it proved they didn't need to fully grasp something to make it work; they just needed to keep trying long enough.

After that incident, they restricted the plate's vertical movement to produce blade angles between zero and seventeen degrees.

Meanwhile, Elam wrestled with the blade configuration, trying to determine their optimal number. He concluded that numerous closely spaced blades prevented the air from being replaced with smooth, undisturbed air before the next blade arrived. Moreover, having numerous blades cutting through the air proved to be an energy hog. At one point, Elam reduced the number to two blades per set, and that caused increased instability. They settled on three blades per set, or six blades in total.

Elam also wanted to experiment with the length of the blades, but at that point Sargon had put his foot down. Each experiment or modification took days. And the days were quickly adding to weeks. All the while, the cosmic clock was mercilessly ticking down to zero. They stayed with the original design of eight feet long apiece.

The problems and challenges kept on coming, though.

They found out that the blades had to be identical. Truly identical. A chance spray of water warped one blade slightly, causing dangerous vibrations—necessitating the replacement of all three blades in the set with new ones, carved out from the same kilned log, at that. After this, they diligently protected the blades from moisture, coating each with boiled linseed oil and beeswax. Even with these precautions, they still needed small metal inserts to fine-tune the blade balance.

Haltingly, painfully, progress was being made.

By now, they'd achieved a stable lift with reliability. The contraption would rise a few yards and hover for minutes on end, its upper blade set spinning furiously scant half dozen feet away from the millforge's ceiling.

It was time to think about flying in truth: unchained, without the assistance of the counterweights, and with a compressed air tank along for the ride.

They cast a new sphere, thinner and lighter—light enough for the flyer to lift. Tension ran high. If the thinner-walled sphere couldn't hold enough compressed air to allow the flyer to reach the Bridge, their entire endeavor added to one big nothing. No one said that out loud, but they all thought it.

They maintained the sphere's diameter at forty inches but reduced the wall thickness from two and a half inches to a quarter inch. That increased the sphere's internal volume some and brought the sphere's weight way down, to under four-hundred pounds.

They decided to bring the new, thinner brass sphere to the point of failure—and then, once they learned what that point is, cast the sphere anew and pump it to its upper safety threshold. This step was critical. Pumping compressed air to the gills could spell the difference between reaching Kadesh Barnea—a success, or not reaching it—a failure. There was no middle ground.

So far, they've fumbled blindly, adjusting the air release valve by guesswork as the blade rotation slowed down due to dwindling pressure. No more. While the others fashioned the new sphere, Sargon locked himself away, determined to contrive an air pressure gauge of some kind. He paced, sketched, swore under his breath. Sketches filled sheet after sheet, only to be discarded and crumpled. He paced until his legs ached. Eighteen hours, then a flash: party horns.

These paper tubes that were flattened and rolled up, and then uncoiled with one's breath—only to later return to their initial flat, curled position.

He took a copper tube, slightly flattened to give it an oval cross-section, and bent it into a gentle curve, sealing one end. Under pressure, the tube fought to straighten, and the higher the pressure, the greater the unbending—returning to its initial shape when the air vacated it. Later, they modified the design to include a looped coil, which could withstand much higher air pressures.

Next, he linked the tube's movement to a dial. Without a standard measure, they declared regular room air pressure to be "1 air pressure." From there, they created a scale. It was somewhat arbitrary, but as long as it was consistent, it got the job done.

The structural integrity of the compressed air sphere was the big unknown. As a precaution, they wrapped it in a bamboo lattice and began pumping in air, watching it visibly deform and expand before their eyes. At 90 units of pressure, a bubble formed, and Sargon declared 85 units to be their safety limit. Given the obvious deformations at such pressures, they all agreed it was unsafe to use the sphere more than once; it would need to be reforged after each flight.

At long last, the moment came when they were to find out the yield of the thin sphere. They had a sand clock going. A short time later, the results were in. It turned out that the sphere provided the flyer with enough power to keep it airborne for one minute and fifteen seconds, that is, before the compressed air was depleted. Next, they timed the speed at which the aerial carriage ascended to a height of thirty-five feet.

Later, at the large table, Sargon calculated that given the speed of lift, the compressed air might last one-fifth of the way up the Bridge before the contraption would lose power and

presumably drop like a rock back to the ground. This test was necessary, he told them. Now, for the first time, they had a sense of the capacity of a thin-walled brass sphere. And it was altogether insufficient.

That was a big problem.

If any metal was strong enough for the task, it was emerald copper. Nothing else came even close. Nothing else was even a possibility, they now knew.

That was even a bigger problem.

A modest system of tunnels outside Maganot conveniently contained large deposits of gold and copper, silver and tin, and zinc with some traces of iron. Sargon suspected that this was made to appear natural but in fact was planned that way by the architektons of Areta.

Rarely was there a need to mine and extract new metal; most metallic elements had just been circulating, smelted time and again for new usage. Emerald copper was an entirely different animal. First, there was a need to harvest emeralds, and that was straightforward enough; the mineral was abundant and accessible. But then the manufacturing process got difficult real fast. Only a tiny fraction of the emerald contained a special element that was useful. Furthermore, the extraction process was both difficult and hazardous; inhaling the dust could cause sickness or even death.

The exact amount of emerald extract mixed with pure copper was well known: one part per fifty. However, just combining the two wasn't enough. The heating and time involved was critical in having this unique alloy acquire its full, acclaimed strength. And this process was a closely held secret by those who produced the alloy.

Once primed, it was the strongest metal alloy around. Unsurprisingly, all work tools, where hardness was paramount, were made of emerald copper—from kitchen knives to saws to

drill heads to scalpels to lathe tool bits to razor blades. And the alloy did not come cheap.

What it meant was that a large construct, such as their sphere was flatly outside their financial means. Worse yet, placing such an order would've raised many eyebrows and the kind of scrutiny they could not risk.

This was an impasse. An impasse that Tamuz intended to break.

He said nothing as they called it a day. Later that night, he'd requested Lilit to meet him. She agreed and met with him that night in a small, rarely frequented area of Maradam. This is when he told her of his idea. That and more.

CHAPTER 43

Soft morning daylight streamed through the translucent windows of the millforge as Tamuz entered, flanked by two tall young women. Elam's jaw dropped.

At the drawing table, Sargon rose. "Tamuz, what's the meaning of it?" he demanded, wearing a thunderous expression.

"Father!" One of the women, Lilit, rushed forward, her voice catching in her throat. "I'm so *proud* of you. A millwright, you're a millwright." In one swift motion, she dropped to her knees, her arms flung around him, her face alight. "And you've been working on something that can fly!"

Sargon's stoic facade faltered, secretly pleased at his daughter's words. He awkwardly patted her back. "Well, Lilit... well, yes. It's... quite an endeavor." Somewhat mollified, he still shot a hard look at Tamuz.

His friend walked over and casually leaned against a nearby workbench. "Lilit has offered to cover the cost of the emerald copper we need." Tamuz turned to Elam and Azai with a suggestion of a sly smile on his face. "I knew our friend here would be too proud to ask his own daughter."

Lilit laughed happily. "In fact, I wish to underwrite the entire operation."

Surprise and discomfort bloomed on Sargon's face. He opened his mouth to protest, however Lilit wouldn't have it. "No 'buts,' Father." She gently pulled away from his embrace. "Please, Father. Let me help, just like all of you helped me with my culinary dream. Do it for me," she pleaded.

"For you?" Sargon mumbled, his expression softening.

"Yes, for my sake."

Sargon looked at his daughter, his calloused hand absently rubbing the back of his neck. A part of him bristled at the idea of accepting aid, his deep-rooted pride born from a lifetime of self-reliance chafing against the notion. But another part recognized the depth of her love and the sincerity of her offer.

He swallowed, the silence stretching between them. Finally, he reached out, his hand touching her cheek. "You've grown into a remarkable woman," he said, his voice rough though sincere. "Thank you."

He cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. "The funding is sorted," he said, gesturing toward his daughter. "That does not resolve the problem in its entirety, though. I'm not sure how much Tamuz explained, Lilit, but buying the metal isn't enough. We need to fabricate the giant sphere ourselves—time and again—and that requires confidential knowledge." He finally noticed Elam's dumbfounded expression. "What is it, Elam?"

"That's her," Elam said. "The girl I met, the one I told you about."

Every head turned toward the lithe tall girl that had remained standing by the doorway. She inclined her head in acknowledgement. "Until recently, I was employed on occasions as a temptweaver by the iskandars," the woman said quietly. This was something Lilit had learned only days earlier, when her partner resigned and was released from her vow of secrecy. The

woman went on, "And as Elam may have told you, I've gained no insight into his work."

"This is Desta, my girlfriend," Lilit announced, flashing the other woman a bright smile.

So *that* was Desta, thought Sargon, that was the girl Lilit had moved in with. But why had Tamuz brought her in on their secret operation, too?

Desta approached Elam and bowed deeply, her hands clasped together in apology.

Elam mumbled something that only the young woman could hear, and she smiled and nodded back. The two spoke, their voices too low to be overheard.

As Desta and Elam continued their conversation, Lilit turned to her father. "Desta is here to help," she said.

Sargon's confusion deepened. "You mean—"

"You wish to learn the secret of the alloy," she said, her voice growing firm. "I cannot bring myself to do it, or anything of this kind anymore." For an instant, pain and resolve flashed through her eyes. She jerked her head toward Desta. "That's your woman."

Tamuz exchanged knowing glances with Azai. A former temptweaver; it ought to be a child's play for her.

Their conversation concluded, Elam and Desta joined the rest of them around the drafting table.

Sargon looked at the two young women, his lips a thin line. "I'm against stealing trade secrets," he said. "Trust me when I say it's warranted here."

"We understand," Lilit said. Tamuz had said the same thing. He refused to explain the reason, but she trusted him.

Desta's face drained of color. She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with horror.

“What?” Lilit asked, startled. “What is it?”

Desta’s voice was hoarse. “So they didn’t tell you.”

Sargon’s face turned to stone.

“Tell me what? Wait...” Lili gasped. “You *didn’t!*”

“What’s going on?” demanded Tamuz.

“Yes, Desta, why don’t you tell them what’s going on,” said Lilit, glaring now at her girlfriend.

“I... I’d no intention of doing so,” said Desta faintly, “but the thought fairly leaped out of his head—it was so vivid. It just happened.”

The room fell silent.

“Did she just say what I think she said?” Elam asked.

With a trembling breath, Desta confirmed. “I have meta-faculties, much as Lilit does—only in my case, I can read minds.”

The men stared at her, shocked. She was the other female variant. Intact. And she had just learned the truth.

Lilit turned to Sargon. “We were about to share Desta’s nature with you...” She paused, then turned back the other woman. “What did you mean? What didn’t they tell me?”

It was Sargon who spoke: “That our world is facing its final moments.”

“What?!” Lilit spun to face her father, her face contorted with disbelief.

“And that we are trying to save us all,” he added.

He motioned for the two young women to join them. Once everyone was seated, Sargon began to speak. He told them everything.

Half an hour later, it was a quiet group that sat there. Earlier, Lilit had sobbed, and many

minutes passed until Sargon had her calmed down. Now she stared vacantly at the far wall.

Desta's fingers twisted in her lap, her shoulders trembling. Suddenly, she lurched to her feet, her voice thick with barely contained alarm. "You're all wrong! The iskandars must be notified. They'll know what to do, how to guide us!"

Sargon stood up, eyes flashing. "It's not for you to decide!"

"But it's for you to decide?" she retorted. "You're playing with everyone's lives here!"

"Playing?" Sargon said. His voice rose with every word, "I won't call trying to save you and everyone else 'playing.'"

They stood there, glaring at each other across the hall.

A subtle shift in the men's expressions, a tightening of their jaws and a narrowing of their eyes, betrayed a shared unspoken understanding. Desta caught the fleeting exchange. Her voice hardened. "Even if you conspire to keep me here against my will, how long could you sustain it?"

"As long as it takes," Sargon said grimly. The other men rose, their faces etched with a mixture of determination, unease, and uncertainty.

"Stop it, all of you!" Lilit cried, also getting to her feet, looking from face to face, a storm of emotions playing on her face. The tension in the room was palpable. "Desta, don't share it with anyone until they finish building the craft."

"Even if she agrees, she can't be trusted with what she now knows," said Sargon, his stare never leaving Desta. "Lilit, if word gets out, hysteria may grip the general public, our world will descend into chaos within days if not hours, and everything will come undone. That *will* be the end."

Desta gasped at something.

“What is it?” asked Lilit.

“Electrae.”

Sargon’s brow furrowed. “Who in blazes is Electrae?”

“The other telepath girl,” said Lilit, glowering at Desta.

Tamuz paled. “There are *two* of them?”

Desta had the decency to look abashed. “Moments ago, I told her to go to the iskandars and inform them of it.”

Tamuz’s face turned grim. “She’s probably already on her way to the Sanhedrin Hall.” Elam groaned, his head in his hands.

“No,” said Desta, blushing. “She’s headed to the Emerald Copper House to extract from them their metal-hardening process.”

“Is that bad?” asked Elam, looking from face to face. “Would she be able to obtain it?”

“Yes,” Desta replied, “but she’s also a reckless fifteen-year-old lykaia who has just fallen to pieces by what she’d learned. She won’t care about any collateral damage caused by her.”

The men exchanged worried glances.

“I will go and stop her—Norea is nearer and is already running,” said Lilit, and her face went blank as she diverted all attention to her other body.

Electrae started as all the people in the room suddenly crumpled to the floor. She whirled around. A titaness filled the arched doorway, glaring at her. Though they’d never met, Electrae knew instantly: It was Lilit.

She staggered back, arms instinctively raised, then collapsed as her legs went numb. The paralysis spread to her arms and face, her thoughts fading into a haze. Cold dread filled her as

footsteps approached, but she couldn't even lift her head. Helpless, a puppet with its strings cut. <Letgo of me, you gorgon! Let me—> Agony ripped through her, a scream tearing from her throat, silenced as her vocal cords seized. She thrashed, face contorted in a soundless scream.

Then, just as abruptly, the pain stopped. She lay panting, body heaving with dry sobs.

“Don't send me your thoughts,” said a cool voice from somewhere above. “Just listen.”

Electrae felt herself drooling on the floor, her muscles slack. Humiliation and fury churned in her gut. However, she also felt something else.

“You'll make a choice now,” Lilit said, crouching next to Electrae. She used Electrae's blouse to wipe the spittle from her chin. Electrae mentally tensed but then relaxed under the unexpected gentle touch. “You start treating fellow people with respect without ever again abusing your powers,” Lilit told her. “Or you go into self-exile, and live the rest of your life alone, short as it may be.”

Shock. Horror.

Lilit caressed the flame-red tresses of Electrae, absently studying the prone figures of the men. “Your power is a boon, but it demands compassion and wisdom in equal measure,” she said softly.

Lilit looked down at the younger girl. “What's your decision?”

Electrae managed a blink in response—acceptance, albeit with a lingering resentment.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Lilit said, crouching over Electrae until her lips were almost touching Electrae's ear. “You must pledge never to reveal to anyone what Desta shared with you about the fate of our world.”

<I pledge.>

“Very well,” said Lilit, pulling away and giving the girl a smile of encouragement.

Electrae felt sensation slowly creeping back into her limbs, her body shuddering with residual shock. For now, she just lay there, taking ragged gulps of air, face red, tears freely streaming down.

“I’ll undo the damage you’ve caused and erase all memories of what took place here.” Lilit stood up, closed her eyes in concentration, then opened them, finished. She regarded Electrae’s limp form on the floor. “It’ll take a bit for sensation to fully return,” she murmured, hoisting the petite girl over one broad shoulder. Lilit stepped out into the warm wind and bright sky. The field of swaying sunflowers around the building offered a stark contrast to what had transpired inside.

<What now?> asked Electrae, mouth too numb to speak yet, her face dangling somewhere in the middle of the titaness’ back.

“Desta and I have been discussing this. As the only three metans, it falls to us to set the example for the generations to come. You’ll move in with us, and together we’ll navigate this new chapter, establishing the norms that will guide our kind.”

A lump formed in Electrae’s throat, the enormity of it all crashing over her. But beneath the trepidation was something she at last managed to identify: relief.

Things were tense on the millforge floor.

No one was talking. Lilit sat with legs folded under her while her Norea body was active miles away. She suddenly opened her eyes and smiled.

“Well?” Sargon asked.

“I cleaned things up,” said Lilit. “The people there won’t recall what transpired. They are all well, now.”

“That’s good,” Sargon said, relieved. The tension in the room eased, replaced by hesitant smiles.

“Did she learn...” started Tamuz. “Do you know the secret to working the metal?”

Lilit nodded. “Heat the emerald copper to a deep dark orange for thirty minutes, then quench in water. Afterward, hold it at a melting temperature between that of tin and zinc for ten hours, then quench again.”

Lilit’s words hung in the air for a beat. Then Tamuz whistled a happy little tune, while Azai let out a low chuckle. Elam looked at Lilit and mouthed “Thank you.” Desta, her cheeks flushed, avoided everyone’s gaze.

Later that day, Sargon used some of Lilit’s funds to purchase twenty bricks of emerald copper, and the team set to work immediately. Desta, meanwhile, had agreed to keep quiet; her appetite for involving the Sanhedrin had been replaced by a newfound caution after witnessing Electrae’s public display of meta-faculties.

Better yet, she agreed to help. It turned out that for a number of months she’d been doing bookkeeping and maintaining ledgers for a number of client companies. This experience made managing finances and purchases easy for her, just as she had done for Lilit’s growing food venture. Electrae also wanted to help; she had just finished her apprenticeship on spinning machines and thread weavers. Alas, it was nothing they could use.

Lilit and Desta had taken care of the venture’s finances, relieving the team of monetary worries.

This time, using a hardened emerald copper sphere, they compressed air to 345 units before a blowout was imminent.

Subsequent tests showed that the enhanced sphere could sustain the flyer in hover mode

for five and a half minutes—a significant improvement over the brass sphere. Sargon had real doubts about whether it would be enough. Still, he stated that, for the first time, their journey to Kadesh Barnea had entered the realm of the possible.

With this milestone achieved, it was time to tackle navigation: that minor, pesky detail of steering the craft forward, backward, and sideways.

To their surprise and relief, the solution proved less daunting than anticipated. Drawing inspiration from their existing designs, they reasoned that if rotating blades overhead could generate upward force, then side-mounted blades would provide sideways movement. That proved to be the case. After a series of rapid iterations, they ended up with a seven-foot propeller made of two spruce blades mounted vertically on the side of the craft.

Sargon came up with a mechanism enabling lateral movement in any direction. Any direction at all. The propeller was housed within a circular track, allowing it to be rotated and locked at any point along its circumference. To change direction, the operator simply slid the propeller around the track, locked it in place, and resumed pedaling like crazy again, powering the propeller with his legs. The entire assembly—chair, pedals, and propeller—rotated as a single unit.

Eager to test their creation, they wasted no time in taking contraption out for its first outdoor flight: a low-altitude pass over the millforge.

The aerial carriage ascended while gliding forward. Aided by a steady breeze, it reached a speed of nearly thirty miles per hour. As strong as Sargon's legs were, he couldn't have sustained this pedaling pace for long. But a few minutes was all that was probably needed.

He found that one of the unexpected benefits of reaching those forward speeds had to do with turbulence. Much of it disappeared. More importantly, they gained altitude with less

compressed air expenditure when the aerial carriage also moved laterally. They repeated the maneuver successfully, and it worked just as before.

That was the good news.

Alas, all other attempts that day and the next were a disaster. If the blades were spinning at full speed and a gust of wind hit, the craft would tip over. Even when it did manage to take off, it remained unstable, wobbling or tilting alarmingly. At one point, the vibrations were so severe that Sargon was forced to shut off the compressed air supply to prevent the flyer from tearing itself apart. This instability had not been apparent in earlier tests, which were confined to vertical movement in windless conditions.

It was more than a problem; they were suddenly in full-blown crisis mode.

The team gathered to discuss the recent issue with the craft. After a lengthy discussion, they believed they understood the problem: As the blades spun, they encountered varying resistance as they moved into and with the moving air. This uneven lift, exacerbated by wind gusts, had crippling effects on the aerial carriage.

Earlier, they had thought they had overcome the last of the navigation hurdles, but now they found themselves back at the drawing board. The meeting ran late into the night and ended in an impasse. With each passing day, Sargon had been growing more tense, the invisible countdown taking its toll. This latest setback hit him especially hard.

CHAPTER 44

Talmai awoke with a start, disoriented by the abrupt disturbance. Distant shouts pierced the night—frantic and anxious. He bolted to the back door and flung it open. His breath hitched.

Thalith Na'amat. It was still the dazzling-bright pinpoint in the sky, but now, for the first time, a blue sky had formed around it, darkening to a purple-blue at the horizon. What could it signify?

Talmai's eyes remained fixed on the celestial spectacle for a long time, his mind racing. In the distance, he could see the silhouettes of others, drawn by the same inexplicable phenomenon.

At long last, he stepped back inside. The people would look to him and his colleagues for answers. Answers they did not have.

“I suppose I can't blame you.”

Talmai spun at the voice. Angora sat in the shadows, her gaze piercing in the dim light. “It can't be easy being an iskandar of the last generation,” she said, and his eyes widened. “Keeping everyone calm,” she continued, “knowing that if news of our imminent doom was to leak out, all social services would break down.”

Talmai stared at her for a while. “How did you learn of this?” he asked.

“From your firm stance against having grandchildren to your growing melancholy and sentimentality,” Angora said in an even voice. “It started to make an ominous kind of sense. I felt compelled to look at things afresh. Eventually, I did. When you were gone, I went through the Notes of Exchange.”

“I see,” Talmai said heavily. “How much do you know?”

“Why don’t you tell me how much *you* know,” Angora said, “and I’ll fill you in on the rest.”

“What? What do you mean?” he stammered.

“You think that the world will be consumed by sun flames within a few years,” she said.

“Do you know anything else, Father? Do you know what a sun is?”

Talmai watched her intently and finally shook his head. “That’s all we know,” he said in a slow voice. “Tell me what else you’ve learned.”

“You better sit down, Father.”

“What, there is something worse off than our world’s demise?” he asked, bitterness and humor mixed in. All the same, he sank onto a floor cushion across from her.

“I should first tell you about the nature of our world.”

“Areta? What about it?”

“It is”—Angora inhaled audibly—“It is a construct. Dig deep enough anywhere, and you’ll reach its inner, metallic hull.”

His face went slack at this.

“Father?”

“A construct,” he mumbled in a daze. He recovered with some effort. “Go on. Do go on.”

“And it is in constant movement.”

He pondered her words, his fingers tapping a silent beat against his knee. “You mean like...a ship?”

“I mean *exactly* like a ship,” Angora said. “A space ship, if you will.”

The Iskandar held his head in his hands. Eventually he looked up at her through bushy eyebrows. “It’s moving toward Thalith Na’amat, Isn’t it? That’s why the star is getting brighter.”

“Yes,” she said. In any other circumstance, she would have marveled at his quick chain of deduction. “There is more to it, though. Thalith Na’amat is the ‘sun,’ Father.”

He didn’t understand. “What? It’s merely a dot of light. How could that be the thing that will consume our world in flames?”

“At this distance, it’s a dot in the night sky—and already bright enough to create the beginning of a daylight. In actuality, it’s probably far larger than Areta.” She was thinking of the simulation of the massive bonfire during the Ship Festival. “And it is only a matter of time before its radiance will paint the sky in light blue from edge to edge. And it won’t be long after that, the daylight will turn to a blazing, blinding light—and then more.”

Talmai was silent for a long time. “Thalith Na’amat is the sun,” he repeated to himself in disbelief.

He looked sharply at her. “How long have you known about it?”

“A good few months. But you need to understand that—”

Pain and disbelief filled him. “You did not trust me enough to come forward with this information?”

Angora scrambled out of her seat in a hurry, reached out, and clasped his hands. “I trust the Sanhedrin to manage our demise. Yet this... this is different. There’s a risk they won’t see it as I do.”

The Iskandar's face darkened at that.

"Father, we were never meant to be engulfed in flames along with this...construct. We're meant to disembark from the space ship we are on, to our new home."

Angora watched her father, her heart racing as she waited for his response. The distant shouts of people seemed to fade into the background as the silence between them stretched.

"A new home? Where? I don't understand."

"Neither do I, fully. The old text makes references to a place called Elysium. It seems that we've been on a two-millennia-long journey, and now we're approaching it. The vessel, our world, would then continue on its final leg into the sun."

"How then?" he demanded, clutching her arm.

"Kadesh Barnea holds the key," she said. "Reaching it will activate something, set something in motion that will facilitate this."

"But Kadesh Barnea is out of reach!" cried Talmai.

"Two things you must know. First, it wasn't always inaccessible; the old tales are true—once a stairway led to Kadesh Barnea. Second, and more importantly, Sargon and three others have been secretly working on a way to reach it."

"I don't understand what you're saying," Talmai said, letting go of her arm. "How can these men contrive to get us there?"

"Some sort of an aerial carriage. They've been laboring over it for months now. This craft *can* fly, Father. It might yet get a person up to Kadesh Barnea."

He looked at her in disbelief. A vessel that can defy gravity?

Angora went on, "It's some sort of a contraption with rapidly spinning oars, powered by vast amount of compressed air. It is no fanciful idea; it's real, I tell you."

He was silent for a while. He tried to still his beating heart. “How much time do we have?”

“A few months, at the most.”

For a few moments, he held his head in his hands. Finally, he raised his head and looked at her.

Seemingly reading his thoughts, Angora said, “There was always a risk the Sanhedrin wouldn’t go along with the plan—given the craft’s underlying revolutionary technology—and throttle it, killing our only chance at preservation.

“So why tell me now?” he whispered.

“The time for secrecy has passed,” Angora replied. “With the clear references from the Age of Genesis”—she pointed to the bound Tygliat Pesser scroll she’d brought with her—“and the undeniable signs in the sky, the evidence of imminent doom is too strong to explain away. Sargon and I feel confident that now the Sanhedrin will side with us. Furthermore, the council must act to stave off any widespread hysteria. I bring you the information you need for that.” Before she’d rushed out, Angora had talked with Sargon. He’d agreed with her reasoning.

Talmai was quiet. “That’s why you were willing to risk your life,” he heard her say.

“What?”

“Lilit. At the lake.”

He now understood and lowered his head, acknowledging. “It occurred to me that it may all be tied together. Maybe there’s a reason she has those powers, along with the rest of the new generation.”

“I think so, too,” said Angora. “And I have something related to share—something that may help you at the council, something I’ve seen no reason to share with anyone else, but

believe the Sanhedrin should know.”

Talmai motioned for her to continue.

Angora said, “I don’t think we’re quite the same species as the one who started off on Areta, over two thousand some years ago.”

“You speak of the meta-faculties.”

“That too.”

He was taken aback. “What then?”

“Did you know that in ancient days skin used to become inflamed, red, and painful under prolonged exposure to daylight? People had to cover their bodies if they worked outside for extended periods. I learned this from Tygliat Pesser.”

What was she saying? And Tygliat Pesser? Wasn’t that the infamous forged scroll?

Angora was still at it, “Those are the obvious changes. Who *knows* what other, subtler changes our bodies have undergone through the millennia. The air we breathe could have been incrementally modified, the fruit trees and livestock morphed; and the invisible spores around us may have been gradually altered.”

The rapid influx of information overwhelmed him; numbness was setting in. Talmai fought it. He couldn’t afford that now. “If so, do you have an inkling why?”

She had a lot of time to ponder this. “I think it’s to acclimate us to the living environment of Elysium.”

“Oh. Yes. I see what you mean.” He was silent for a long time. “Physiologically, we’re not quite humans anymore. None of us are... That will take some getting used to.”

“Outward appearance has not changed—but for the breeding choices we have collectively made,” she hurriedly said. “Historical paintings confirm this. However, on the

inside...”

“I understand,” the Iskandar said. “And you have evidence that can corroborate your claims, at least regarding our skin?”

“Yes, I do. This is what you can present to the council. This substantiates and brings everything into focus. We’ve been on an over two-thousand-years-long journey which is reaching its end.”

They talked through the night and into the dawn. Talmai called for breakfast as they kept conversing until it was time for him to depart to the Sanhedrin Hall.

CHAPTER 45

The Aretans' apprehension turned to jubilation as the Sanhedrin proclaimed the rare fortune of witnessing Thalith Na'amat, a star that graced the sky only once every few millennia.

In a few months, the celestial spectacle would begin to wane, but not before the night sky would turn blue from edge to edge, turning night into day. What a time to be alive! A time for celebration, for revelry! And as if that weren't enough, more joyous news poured in.

Tygliat Pesser, a scroll long dismissed as a forgery, had been rediscovered and authenticated. This priceless artifact contained the sole surviving writings from the Age of Genesis, including a detailed illustration of a spiraling staircase leading up to the enigmatic Kadash Barnea. The daughter of the late Apshafel was present during the public unveiling of the scroll, alternately beaming and crying. Curiously, some panels were missing, yet this minor detail did not mar the joyous occasion.

And the most amazing news of all: A few months earlier, the Sanhedrin had secretly tasked Areta's most gifted millwrights with creating an aerial carriage capable of reaching Kadash Barnea. Soon, perhaps in just a matter of weeks, this marvel of engineering would be operational and unveiled.

The Sanhedrin declared that the aerial carriage would be named *Merkavah*, which in the

Old Tongues meant “chariot.” The name was inspired by an old myth that spoke of beings that flew the skies with chariots. The writ proclaimed their intent to reach Kadesh Barnea at the height of the regal star’s brightness, thus linking the celestial structure to the populace on Areta’s surface, as in the days of yore.

Angora delivered that last piece of news to Mede’a in person, just for the satisfaction of seeing her friend’s face when she learned that the aerial carriage was the brainchild of Sargon. It turned out to be worth it; for the first time in living memory, Mede’a was rendered speechless.

After the announcement, the iskandars had stationed a few dozen guardians outside the millforge, securing the only passage in and turning away the idlers and the curious.

Two days later, another shockwave went through the world when it was learned that two young women had presented themselves to the council, revealing that they were intact members of the second variant: mind readers. At any other time, this would have been the talk of Areta for weeks on end. Now, though, that was just one more piece of wondrous news among many.

Everyone seemed to be in high spirits.

Except those laboring at the millforge. There, the mood ranged from somber to grim.

The team had thought they’d finally overcome all impediments—only to encounter lift imbalance when *Merkavah* attempted to take off. It either rolled over or teetered dangerously midair.

To make matters worse, they were operating under a relentless countdown without knowing the sands remaining in the hourglass. Every night, Sargon anxiously observed Thalith Na’amat’s ascent, gauging the sky’s color in an attempt to estimate their remaining time. Only then would he relax a bit, reasonably assured they had at least a few more days, perhaps more. Sargon and Angora had reckoned there would come a point when their world would be engulfed

in impossible brightness, heat, then flames. However, they reasoned that this wouldn't happen overnight. Beforehand, there would be a period of full daylight, marking their cutoff point: the point when they could delay no further. Whether this was several months, weeks, or mere days away, they couldn't be sure.

Day after day, the men returned to the millforge floor, tirelessly grappling with the lift imbalance and keeping at bay dread and hopelessness. A week passed, then another, as they pressed on with dogged perseverance.

And one day, it became too close for comfort. The sky, while not the bright blue of true daylight, was painted in light hues from edge to edge. Sargon halted the work, telling his team they would have to accept the reality of a flying contraption that tipped more often than not. They all understood what that meant. No one protested when he announced he was going to the Sanhedrin to inform them they were as ready as possible, and they would have to hope for the best. They all understood what that meant, too.

Everyone was quiet after that; each man was lost in his own thoughts. Sargon turned toward the exit, his shoulders weighed down by the reality of the situation. Just as he was about to step out, Elam's voice cut through the oppressive silence. "Wait!" he said with urgency in his tone. At the doorway, Sargon turned back.

"It just occurred to me; what if we've been going about it all the wrong way?"

"We're out of time," said Sargon, "we cannot afford to—"

"What if we let the blades find their way through the air?" Elam interrupted.

"Let the blades..." Tamuz began, then stopped. "Come again?"

"We install hinges," said Elam, talking rapidly now. "When a blade wants to flap up—encountering greater airflow and an increased resistance—it would be able to do so, a bit. When

it wants to sink—encountering a lower airspeed and a lower resistance—we allow that, too. To prevent them from swinging too wildly, we add tight straps at the hinges.”

Tamuz frowned, pondering this unusual idea. “What would that accomplish?”

“Well,” Elam said, “right now, when one side of the craft experiences more lift, it pushes the whole thing off balance, right? With the hinges, maybe the blades can sort of... absorb that extra lift? I reckon that way the blades do the adjusting instead of the whole flyer.”

A tense silence filled the large room.

Elam was looking intently at Sargon, who gave him a narrowed-eyed gaze, arms crossed.

“This might make sense,” Sargon said, though he seemed unsure. He walked back to the table. Retrofitting the blade assembly was going to take time. Could they afford to? Yet, as things stood, the aerial carriage was all but destined to crash. “All right,” he finally said. “Let’s give it a go.”

The team rallied behind Elam’s idea. They pushed on, fueled by a glimmer of hope that this last-minute modification might make the difference. Snatching what rest they could on the millforge floor, they worked tirelessly as they meticulously modified the hub system. They toiled on until at long last, the fully articulated blades were complete. Now the blades had hinges that allowed them to flap up and down slightly. They also sported lead and lag hinges with built-in resistance to smooth out the blade movements. It paid off.

In subsequent test flights, *Merkavah* rose steadily and reliably. For some reason, the flight was still an unstable, jarring affair. All the same, the flyer went up and flew as told, time and again.

Tamuz and Azai warmly congratulated Elam for his ingenious idea, acknowledging its key role in preventing a disaster. Privately, Sargon remained skeptical about their grasp of the

underlying aerodynamics. That said, if the unusual modification solved the problem, well, he was more than happy to offer his own heartfelt compliments.

They did it. They really did it.

Sargon informed the Sanhedrin that his team was ready for the first public test flight.

The following day, the entire council, all seven Iskandars, paid a visit to the millforge. They toured the facility for several hours, inspecting components and asking numerous questions, appearing both impressed and thoughtful about what they observed.

The Iskandars seemed to have fully embraced the urgent need for constructing a flying craft to reach the Bridge of Heaven. However, this did not mean they were untroubled by the immense powers harnessed and the potential technological impact on their society.

“Essentially,” Sargon told them as they gathered around the large gleaming metal sphere containing compressed air, “we found a way to store hours of muscle power and release it in minutes, creating a highly concentrated power source.”

“So it’s a trade-off—intense power for a shorter duration,” observed one of the iskandars.

“Precisely so, Your Wisdom.”

“Can you think of other situations where such a power scheme might be useful?” another one asked.

Sargon considered. “Initially, it seemed widely applicable,” he said, “but upon reflection, our society lacks the demand for such concentrated energy bursts. The sole exception, Your Wisdom, might be a smaller compressed air system to assist with heavy hauling uphill.”

His conclusion seemed to put some of the iskandars at ease.

Thousands of faces stretched across the open field near the millforge as Sargon

approached the aerial carriage, the likes of which no one on Areta had ever seen. Forewarned of the impending wind and noise, the crowd buzzed with festive anticipation.

Sargon settled into the operator chair, his fingers tightening around the handle of the ornate whip the Sanhedrin had crafted for him—a homage to the old fable of chariots driven by such curious artifacts. The weight of the moment settled upon him, but his earlier jitters vanished, replaced by a calm focus. With a twist of the handwheel, a sharp hiss of compressed air cut through the low hum of anticipation from the vast crowd. He turned it further, the pressure gauge needle climbing, guiding him.

First gear engaged, the large blades began their lazy rotation, gaining momentum with each passing moment. Second gear, then third, the final gear. The rhythmic clanking and grinding of the piston crank intensified, its vibrations coursing through the frame. Sargon cracked the whip and the blades whirred and blurred with speed, building into a deafening roar.

Degree by degree, Sargon angled the blades—click, click, click. With a final downward crack of the whip, the aerial carriage lurched slightly before lifting off the ground.

Sargon pumped the pedals, propelling the craft forward as it soared into the sky. His heart leaped as the ground fell away. He was flying in earnest. The shriek of the blades filled his ears, drowning out the fading cheers and exclamations from below.

Exhilaration was mingled with disbelief as he ascended for the first time above the tree line, wind whipping at his clothes. Higher still he soared, the upturned faces now a swarm of dots, the world expanding below in a breathtaking panorama of patchwork quilt of grass fields and tree groves, a sight no person had ever beheld.

He took the aerial carriage as high as his supply of compressed air would safely allow, then reduced the pitch of the blades and throttled back the air supply. The aerial carriage

responded, starting its descent. By incrementally and repeatedly sliding and locking the propeller assembly around the track, he executed a wide arc, eventually returning to the open, level field by the millforge.

The contraption touched down with a gentle thud. The roar of the blades subsided, replaced by the deafening cheers of the crowd rushing toward him. Moments later, he was surrounded by a sea of people, all eager to congratulate him and share in the historic moment.

Angora, her face radiant with joy and relief, broke through the throng and threw herself into his arms. The crowd erupted in cheers and applause as they held each other. Lilit was next, her embrace fierce and full of unspoken pride.

Sargon gestured for Elam, Azai, and Tamuz to join him, and the crowd's cheers reached a crescendo. The three men, who had been watching from the sidelines, stepped forward, oddly timid.

Sargon threw his arms around their shoulders, drawing them closer. "Those are my associates," he shouted over the crowd. Repeaters hollered his words for the benefit of those farther out, the throng quieting down. "Elam, Azai, and Tamuz." The crowd roared in approval. He continued, "Together, we dreamed of the impossible, and together, we made it a reality. This achievement belongs to all of us, and I am honored to stand with them today."

The four men stood tall, faces beaming with both embarrassment and pride as the crowd chanted their names. The weight of the past weeks lifted, replaced by camaraderie and shared triumph. Their eyes shining with gratitude and mutual respect as their eyes met, knowing they had accomplished something truly remarkable. The first true flight. History was made. And Sargon's childhood dream had at long last come true.

If only its outcome wasn't dire.

CHAPTER 46

Sargon and Elam entered the millforge, the tension from their brief meeting with the iskandars evident on their faces. They joined the rest of the team at the drafting table, a somber silence settling over the room.

“How high did the craft reach?” Tamuz asked quietly.

“Not high enough,” Sargon said. “Less than half a mile up before I had to turn back.” He glanced at Elam, who nodded in confirmation. As the aerial carriage flew up, it unwound a silk strand from a freely rotating spool, with one end secured to the ground. By measuring the length of the unwound cord and factoring in the horizontal distance, Elam calculated the altitude reached. *Merkavah* had ascended 700 yards, about 40 percent of the way to Kadesh Barnea. At that point, Sargon had about half of the compressed air left—just enough for the descent.

“I feel like I could sleep for a week,” Elam mumbled.

Sargon managed a ghost of a smile and absently examined the callouses and grime on his hands. “I think we all do.”

“What now?” Tamuz asked. “How do we fix it?”

Sargon looked around at his weary team, their faces marked by the strain of countless sleepless nights and the crushing disappointment of their failed attempt to ascend one mile. Their

moment of triumph had turned to ashes.

The men looked to him for guidance and strength. Alas, his mind now felt as empty as the spent air tank of *Merkavah*. He had no answers, no solutions. Rest, he thought. That's what they needed—rest. He would send them off to sleep, and tomorrow... Tomorrow they would regroup, reassess, and—

A sharp rap on the entrance doors interrupted his thoughts, and a moment later one of the guardians ushered in a burly, middle-aged man. After the guardian left, the man approached, and they all shook hands.

The man introduced himself as Tamzin, a master metalsmith from Martzot. Like many others, he had arrived yesterday to watch the maiden flight of the aerial carriage. It was the most wondrous day of his life, he said a few times. He'd decided to come in to offer his assistance. "If there's a need, that is," he added hastily.

All eyes turned to Sargon, who fixed a calculating gaze on the metalsmith. "Can you cast a hollow sphere of hardened emerald copper?" he asked, gesturing toward the lustrous sphere resting at the bottom of the chassis.

The man eyed it for a few seconds. "How thick are the walls?"

"A quarter inch."

"Yes, I can do it," he said, adjusting his leather tool vest.

"Good. I want you to—" Sargon began, but was interrupted by another knock at the door.

Elam walked over and returned with two men and a woman.

The newcomers introduced themselves. The woman was a machinist, one man was a millwright, and the other a general craftsman. They had also seen the flight and wanted to know if they could contribute.

Tamuz started laughing as another knock came from the door.

Over the next several hours, hundreds of people came in. Some were driven by curiosity, while others were drawn by the opportunity to participate and lend their support. The curious ones asked questions and eventually left. Those without the necessary skills were politely thanked and turned away. In the end, a core group of about three dozen people gathered around.

At first, Sargon was speechless. However, as the procession of people grew, a new light entered his eyes. Millwrights, metalsmiths, machinists, drafters. Along with Tamuz, Elam, and Azai, he recognized many of the people standing before him, having dealings with them in the past.

“Well, all right then,” he said to the assembled crowd, a genuine smile spreading across his face. “Your presence is much welcome!” Why hadn’t they thought of this sooner? They had started in secrecy and continued that way out of sheer inertia. But now, with the help of these skilled individuals, perhaps they might overcome the odds.

“You heard the Iskandars,” he continued, his voice ringing with renewed strength. “Our goal is to reach Kadesh Barnea at the moment Thalith Na’amat is at its brightest. This leaves us with a narrow window, a couple of weeks at most.” He didn’t share that, in truth, it was already too close for comfort. They had no alternative but to keep working and hope it wouldn’t be too late.

“We’re going to break into task teams,” Sargon declared, pacing the millforge floor. “Every component of this aerial carriage will be pulled apart, rebuilt, and optimized. We’re going to squeeze every last ounce of flight out of this contraption.” All traces of exhaustion vanished; his expression was alight with determination.

“It takes days to forge and cool a single sphere, and even more time to compress air into

it. All for a five-minute flight,” Sargon said. They had three in total. “Going forward, I want two dozen spheres ready at all times. This will drastically speed up our testing and development.”

He surveyed the eager faces surrounding him. “I’ll lead the team improving navigation,” he announced. “Elam, you’ll head the blade design optimization team. Tamuz, I want your team to examine every aspect of the rotor assembly. Azai, you’ll lead the machinists and woodworkers in rebuilding any and all components as needed, starting with recasting the piston crank parts in emerald copper. Tamzin, you’ll be in charge of the sphere casting team.”

There were nods and murmurs around the room.

“Time is of the essence,” he told the gathered people. “The work begins, and it begins now.” With Sargon’s final words, the gathered crowd dispersed to their assigned tasks. The once quiet millforge sprang to life with the focused activity of the newly formed teams.

Nothing of that magnitude had ever been attempted on Areta before. The millforge hummed day and night, with work continuing without letup under daylight and lamplight. The rhythmic clang of hammers, the whirl of lathes, and the rasp of saws filled the air. The hall buzzed with the sounds of people discussing, drafting, and machining.

Within several days, the ever-growing number of spheres enabled them to conduct multiple test flights daily, testing anything and everything. Sargon went up and down with the flyer seemingly every hour or two.

Lilit made sure everyone was fed, keeping one of her two food wagons permanently stationed outside. Desta, meanwhile, expertly managed the project’s finances, drawing on the funds allocated by the authorities for salaries and supplies. For everyone involved, it was a time of enthusiasm, even exhilaration. That is, for everyone except for the handful of people in the know: the iskandars and the core team.

With resources and manpower no longer a constraint, they experimented relentlessly, testing dozens of blade lengths. Through trial and error, they found shorter blades lacked lift, while longer ones exerted dangerous pressure on the hub, with worrisome flapping and vibrations. Ultimately, they extended the blades by two feet, each now spanning ten feet.

The blades also underwent design changes. The sections closer to the hub moved at significantly lower velocities, which meant their ability to produce lift was minimal. Elam called these areas “dead zones.” By angling the blades ever sharper toward the hub, they maximized their effectiveness. Everyone agreed it was an ingenious modification. That was not the only design change, though. They made the leading edge of the blades more rounded and compact, the trailing edge sharper and more elongated.

Lateral motion—forward, backward, or sideways—had been a jarring, unsteady affair, making for a rough ride with sudden jolts. Inspiration struck again from nature. Sargon’s team drew from the fish’s tail fin, recognizing its stabilizing role. After days of experimentation, they settled on two V-shaped fins. Crafted from thin metal plates attached to lightweight bamboo frames, these fins extended outward just below the lower rotor assembly. The stabilizers held the craft steady, making the flight smooth—a stark contrast to the white-knuckle rides of the past.

Tamuz and his team made their mark as well. They increased the distance between the upper and lower blade sets to two feet, claiming it reduced turbulence on the lower rotor. Additionally, they increased a bit the lower blades’ length and pitch to compensate for the turbulent air they were subjected to. Sargon remained skeptical of their claims, but since the modifications didn’t hinder performance, he was content to let these be.

The cumulative effect of these improvements was significant. *Merkavah* could now carry more weight, and Sargon, his mind already racing ahead, knew precisely how to utilize this

newfound capacity.

They recast the spheres with half-inch thick walls instead of quarter-inch. That added close to four hundred pounds of weight, which now the craft could handle. In exchange, they could now compress air up to an incredible 655 air pressure units. The new, higher-capacity sphere bought them a few more minutes of precious flight time. And that was big deal—every minute counted. Blazes, every half a minute counted.

Maximum lifting power and speed were irrelevant; covering the distance to the Bridge with the least amount of compressed air expenditure was everything. It gradually dawned on Sargon that they might travel farther for the same amount of compressed air in a way that had nothing to do with design optimization. He tested an idea and realized he was on to something. Afterward, he assembled the teams and shared his insight: They ought to reduce the rotational speed of the blades.

The crew members spent the rest of the day and well into the night adjusting and testing blade speeds. They ended up with the lowest speed possible without risking a loss of lift: three hundred and fifty feet per second. This allowed *Merkavah* to travel from a given point of origin to destination with considerably less compressed air being expended.

The myriad improvements to the craft paid off. The test flight over the hills lasted significantly longer, the ride was remarkably smooth, and navigation was highly responsive.

Sargon announced that all preparations were complete, and that tomorrow he would make the historic flight to Kadesh Barnea. The people present erupted in applause and cheers. Two runners were dispatched to the Sanhedrin Hall to break the news to the iskandars.

True to Sargon's mission statement, the burnished flying craft that stood in front of him in the clearing outside the millforge floor had been rebuilt in every way. Alas by now, Thalith

Na'amat was no longer a pinpoint; it appeared as a tiny, well-defined, and impossibly bright yellow disk against a sky of blue.

And Sargon had no intention of waiting for it to become bigger yet.

* * *

That night, Lilit sought out her father.

“Ever since you told me about the Elysian Fields, I’ve been thinking about it,” she told him. “If it’s habitable, it should have some life, at least grass. I’ve never tried anything like this before, but in the past few days, I’ve reached out with my meta senses outside Areta.” Sargon looked startled. “Until today, nothing,” Lilit continued. “But now, I sense something, Father. It’s too distant to discern distinct forms, but I do sense life. We’re getting closer by the hour.”

Sargon was excited. That must have been Elysium. It was all true then! “Where is it?”

Lilit pointed at the night sky. “There, the bright dot near the horizon. I bet if you looked up a few days ago, you wouldn’t have seen it.”

“How far is it?” he wanted to know.

“I can’t tell, but I think we’re approaching it at incredible speed.” She paused, a new thought forming. “Could those oddities you mentioned—the river slowing, the changes in the birds’ flight—be signs we’re slowing down?”

Sargon looked at her, surprised and then amused. “They could be, if the slowing lasted for a few seconds or minutes.” He chuckled. “But I don’t think anything can move so fast that it takes months to slow down.”

He took a deep breath. “You’ve done well,” he said, looking into her eyes, and she

beamed at him. “Lilit, I want you to share with the council what you’ve just told me.” As he turned to go, Lilit got a hold of his arm, stopping him. “In the last few hours, I realized something else, too.”

He just looked back at her.

She pointed up again. “Those are not windows through which we peer at the open kosmos, like you thought.”

“You mean, it’s just...open?” he stammered. Then he frowned; how would she know this one way or another?

“No, that’s not it, either. You see, we’re spinning on our axis.”

“Well, yes,” he said.

But she shook her head. “I timed it, using Elysium as a reference point. It turns out we complete one revolution around our axis in three to four minutes—not twenty-four hours. Father, isn’t it true that had it been a window, we would have seen an ever-shifting view of the kosmos around us at a rapid clip? Somehow, what we see when we look up is a series of projected images, I guess.”

He gazed at the sky, bemused. Did it mean something? He wasn’t sure. But she must have been right; the movement of the stars suggested a twenty-four-hour rotation. Clearly, some visual manipulation was taking place.

At long last, Sargon looked back at her. “You’ve done well, Lilit,” he said again. “You go on now.”

CHAPTER 47

The aerial carriage performed admirably, Sargon mused with swelling pride. It was a remarkable achievement, made possible by the unremitting efforts of dozens of people. It stood ready, as ready as it would ever be.

Pity it was not enough, though.

He didn't share what he'd deduced as his people retired for the night: there was now more than enough compressed air to get him to the Bridge of Heaven, yet not quite enough for the return trip. He had feverishly hoped the lower, more conservative blade speed would compensate for the shortfall, but it didn't. He kept this to himself and had gone to great lengths to deceive everyone, including those close to him. Especially those close to him.

If it turned out to be a suicide mission, Sargon didn't want his loved ones to witness it, or try to stop him. A note on his desk, a silent confession, would reveal all if something befell him.

The team had discovered they could minimize the required amount of compressed air by not flying straight up, which was nearly impossible for long stretches anyway. That was why the aerial carriage had been carted atop a flatbed to an open area one mile away from the point directly beneath Kadesh Barnea. His climb to the Bridge would be as much forward as it was upward, requiring him to paddle furiously for the entire duration.

Hours earlier, *Merkavah* had been meticulously prepared for tomorrow's historic flight to Kadesh Barnea. The compressed air sphere had been replaced, every component inspected and cleaned. Now, it rested on the flatbed that had delivered it to its launch site.

Sargon nodded to the dozen guardians stationed around the aerial carriage, and they nodded back, recognizing him. He got some curious looks when he told them he needed to make an essential, last-minute test run. However, they were not going to question the person in charge of the entire operation. They stepped back to provide enough clearance.

With the guardians' assistance, he cast off the straps, then removed the latex-coated tarp covering the flyer. He then climbed into *Merkavah*. Once seated, Sargon looked up. One mile high and one mile away, the Bridge of Heaven shimmered in the moonlight, a celestial construct out of reach for two thousand years.

The aerial carriage had been the most difficult feat of engineering of his life. In all likelihood, the most difficult feat of engineering in the history of Areta. And all the unimaginable toil, it all came down to this one moment.

With a roar of the blades, he soared into the night.

Almost immediately, the soft darkness swallowed the landscape below, leaving only scattered lights from distant streets and the moonlit gleam of the river winding through Areta.

Sargon was certain he had more than enough compressed air to make it to the Bridge of Heaven. He would learn what was needed and record it. That ought to save his people and his loved ones. That was good enough.

As *Merkavah* climbed through the night sky, Kadesh Barnea grew ever more imposing. It had been calculated that the structure was around one thousand feet in length and width. Its walls, too far to clearly make out from the ground, resolved into vast slabs of coarse stone. He

was glad they'd installed the enclosed oil lantern; its glow allowed him now to read the navigation controls.

As he got closer, he spotted a circular opening on the underside, likely remnants of the destroyed spiral stairway. The shrouding darkness in the gaping hole made it impossible to make out anything inside. He thought it was wide enough to allow his flying contraption through, yet he dared not chance it with his rudimentary navigation controls. This would be his last resort if he found no other entry point into the construct.

He circled the colossal structure, searching for another way in. The stone walls offered no doors, no windows, only their unyielding surface. But then, as he neared the end of his circuit, he saw it: an open bay.

With hands now slick with sweat, Sargon lowered the speed of the flyer and angle of the blades, bringing *Merkavah* down. A few seconds more, and the aerial carriage landed in the center of the bay.

Sargon sat motionless, allowing his racing heart to slow. He had done it. He had reached Kadesh Barnea. The first person in millennia to set foot in this celestial structure.

As he stepped onto the platform with shaky legs, a mile above the ground, three things struck him. First, the air felt somewhat thinner. Sargon didn't know how else to describe it, and he wasn't sure what to make of it. The second thing was not subtle at all. It was markedly cooler on the Bridge. In fact, as he stood in his short-sleeve shirt, it felt downright cold; a thing that one had never experienced on the ground, day or night. Third, most odd of all, his body felt lighter.

How could any of this be possible?

Under the night sky, he lit a lantern and marched across the bay. The floor was made of large wooden planks, broken in one area at the circular gaping cavity he'd spotted earlier when

he'd flown underneath the structure. He carefully approached the cavity and peeked inside.

About a dozen spiraling steps went down before they ended unceremoniously. So there it was, an actual remnant of the fabled stairs that once connected the Bridge with the ground far below.

He looked around. Given the overall size of Kadesh Barnea, there had to be a lot more to it than the open bay. This must have been just an entrance courtyard of sorts, he realized. What he needed was to find a doorway leading into the interior of the structure. With this in mind, Sargon approached the towering wall at the far end and walked alongside it until he spotted a visible cleft about halfway down.

He tried to push on the wall at that spot but quickly realized the futility of it; he couldn't force open the giant stone portal. No, there had to be—yes! Shoulder-high, a few yards to his left, he spotted seven concentric disks, each smaller than the next, layered atop one another. Drawing closer, he saw that each bore an array of glyphs on its outer rim. This must have been the controlling mechanism for the stone portal before him.

After putting down the lantern, he grasped the largest wheel, turning it left and right in rapid succession. Sargon soon released the cipher when reason caught up to him; he didn't know the combination. In a burst of frustration, he pounded on the massive doorway, releasing a guttural cry. *No, no!* He had not given away his life on what was probably a one-way journey only to be thwarted at the last minute. There had to be a way to open the stone portal. There had to.

Slowly, it dawned on him the impossibility of it. A cipher wheel with seven dials, one atop the other—there must have been millions of possible combinations. In a fit of fury, Sargon pounded on the giant portal again. Breathing heavily, he sank to his knees, and leaned against the massive slab of stone.

Angora should have been here, not him. If anyone could puzzle it out, it would be her. And now, if he crash-landed, everything might be lost. He doubted there was enough time to construct a new aerial carriage.

No. This one flight must not be in vain. Sargon scrambled to his feet and walked back to the flyer. He returned to the stone wall bearing a large sheet of paper and a stick of black-tinted hard wax. At least he'd planned for this contingency, he thought grimly to himself, as he started rubbing around each of the concentric disks of the cipher. No matter what else happened, Angora would get to examine the glyphs on each of the cipher's disks.

His work done, he tightly rolled the paper inside the rugged metal canister he'd brought along with him and sealed it.

* * *

It took fifteen precious seconds of compressed air for the blades to attain full speed and launch *Merkavah* into the air and away from the edge of the bay. Almost immediately, he lowered the collective pitch of the blades to zero.

The gauge showed barely a minute of compressed air remaining—not enough for a controlled descent. Not nearly enough.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. Sargon assumed that if he shut the airflow, the blades wouldn't just stop; they would keep on going for some time out of sheer momentum. This might get him part of the way down at a less than catastrophic speed. He resolved to use the remaining compressed air in the final moments to slow down the craft during the critical last seconds.

He set his jaw and turned the handwheel, gradually shutting down the air valve. The scream of air became a muted roar as the spinning blades slowed.

With sudden insight, Sargon slammed on the clutch, disengaging the rotor and letting it spin freely.

He looked around anxiously, counting to himself. Ten seconds, twenty, thirty. Incredibly, the blades still spun briskly, showing no signs of slowing, while the aerial carriage descended at a moderate pace. Then, the realization hit him while the rush of air buffeted his face: the downward motion of the craft was forcing air through the blades, spinning them and, in turn, slowing the descent.

He jammed the metal canister in, keeping the clutch disengaged, and started pedaling. His suspicions were confirmed: the forward motion slowed the descent further, down to a safe speed. He wouldn't even need compressed air to land.

Down and down the craft spiraled. Now reasonably confident of a gentle landing, he laboriously steered the aerial carriage toward the level plaza in front of the Sanhedrin Hall, directly below Kadesh Barnea.

The ground rushed closer until it was just a few dozen feet below him as he pedaled, maintaining forward motion. A bump, then a touchdown. First the back two wheels, then the front. *Merkavah* came to a gentle stop at the center of the broad plaza. He remained seated until the blades gradually came to a full stop.

Finally, silence.

He flew to Kadesh Barnea and back. The entire journey down took about five minutes. He made the round trip and, just as importantly, he could repeat it time and again.

Sargon grinned savagely. For the guardians and the public, who might learn of this

unscheduled night flight, it was only a test flight, as he'd told those guarding the aerial carriage. As far as the world was concerned, the real flight was still to come, in the morning.

Rain was imminent; he could smell it. From the bottom compartment, he pulled out a latex-coated linen tarp, unfurled it, and covered the entire flyer. Just as he straightened up, he heard the sound of running footsteps.

* * *

The silvery plaza appeared vast and desolate under the waning moon. Angora's footsteps thudded as she sprinted, a knot of anxiety tightening in her chest with each breath. Please, please let it be him. Though the note Sargon had left was composed and restrained, to Angora it was a blur of ink and desperation, the careful words belying his perilous intentions. A chance night visit had revealed the note he'd left. Anger and dread filled her.

Relief washed over her like a tidal wave as the aerial carriage settled. There he stood, tall and straight, looking at her.

She tore across the remaining distance. "How could you?" Her voice cracked. Her hands found his shoulders, digging in as if to anchor herself. "Don't you ever—"

The words choked in her throat. His recklessness, his disregard—all of it slammed into her, and the slap was more a reflex than a decision. Yet, even as the slap landed, the tension drained from her hand. "Don't you ever do that to me again," she finished, her words trembling with a raw fear she'd never allowed herself before.

She saw him flinch, not from the blow, but from the sight of her tears mixing with the raindrops that had begun to fall. His hands came up, not in self-defense, but to brush away her

tears. His touch, usually so familiar, sent an unexpected shiver through her in the warm downpour, the calloused roughness strangely attractive by his heroic deed that night.

“Angora...” He swallowed, his eyes now dark with something deeper than concern. It was then that she knew her own heart had been mirrored in his. He stepped closer. The rain intensified, mingling with the sweat on his brow, releasing a heady, masculine scent. Every line of his body, every scar from past mishaps, appeared starkly beautiful. She felt a primal thrill, both exhilarating and terrifying, seeing him as a man who had dared the impossible and returned.

Sargon’s eyes were ensnared by how the thin, wet fabric of her sleepshirt molded to her curves, the downpour transforming her form into an artist’s fever dream. Rainwater ran across her flushed skin, mingling with her scent. Every rise and fall of her breasts stoked a fire within him, the promise of her body a heady ache.

For a charged moment, their world narrowed to the heat between them, their breaths mingling in the wet night air.

The moment stretched. Then reality intruded, the haze of desire clearing. This wasn’t right—not now, not with so much left unsaid and with the looming crisis hanging over them. His hands lingered with regret before dropping to his sides. He pinched the bridge of his nose, grounding himself back in the urgency of their situation.

“I landed next to where the ancient stairway ended,” he said. He motioned, and the two of them started walking toward the Sanhedrin Hall, in the center of the vast plaza. “I could still see the remnant of the stairwell. Angora, there is a colossal stone portal leading into the interior of the structure. It’s sealed by a cipher wheel.”

She stopped walking and peered at him, suddenly tense.

He went on, less confident, “I figured if anyone would be able to—”

“What? Figure out the combination that was set over two thousand years ago?”

Frustration and anxiety boiled up. But then she took a deep breath and resumed walking. “No, you’re right. We must. We *must* puzzle it out.” There was no need to spell out the consequences of not opening that portal. She pasted on a brave smile. “It has rotatable disks?”

He nodded. “Seven. Each has forty glyphs, and I have reproduced them.” Sargon patted the canister slung over his shoulder. “If we won’t solve the cipher, can’t we just keep trying until...” He trailed off, noticing her expression.

“No,” she said. “The cipher you describe contains over one hundred and sixty billion possibilities.”

Sargon’s face fell.

They walked on in silence as Angora pondered. “They needed a code that could be reliably passed down for millennia,” she mused, “something enduring, transmitted through generations. They couldn’t risk future world leaders being locked out.”

With this they entered the Sanhedrin Hall.

Angora, now draped in a robe temporarily loaned by one of the guardians, repeated what she’d told Sargon to the seven iskandars—all of whom had arrived the night before for the historic maiden flight scheduled for the morning. Moments earlier, Sargon had briefed them on his flight and the discoveries he’d made at the Bridge.

Angora said, “The cipher must have been installed to prevent mischief-makers from entering before the moment was upon us.”

There were nods around the room.

Sargon spread out the large sheets of carbon paper on a circular table, and they all leaned in, inspecting the hundreds of glyphs.

“Seven disks in the cipher,” Angora said with a thoughtful look, “and seven districts in Areta. Coincidence?”

“And you suspect each disk contains one of the district symbols...” murmured Nishmat. After several minutes of scrutiny, the Iskandar looked up. “The district symbols aren’t represented here.”

Angora didn’t respond immediately, her brow knitted as she studied the large sheets. Suddenly, her eyes lit up. “They do,” she said. “All the glyphs on a given disk bear the same district symbol—one of the seven, each woven together with one or two other shapes.”

“By Heracles, she’s right,” exclaimed the Iskandar of Maganot, tracing with her fingers a couple of the glyphs.

“That still leaves us at square one,” said Sargon. “We don’t know which of the forty variations on each of the disks is the intended one.”

Angora said, “Once again, I refuse to accept that the answer to this was simply committed to memory, to be passed down from one generation of iskandars to the next.”

“This information could very well have been recorded,” said Yessod Olam. “Alas nothing survived from the Age of Genesis, that is, nothing but what Tygliat Pesser preserved—and it doesn’t contain any references to it.” Those past few days, the iskandars had poured over the translated version of the scroll.

For a moment, no one spoke.

“Something else did survive,” said Angora, pushing back from the table. “Your breastplates are reputed to be from the time of Genesis—the beginning of our time on Areta.”

“This they might,” said the Iskandar of Timnah guardedly. “The leather was replaced numerous times. However, the metal faceplate”—she tapped on hers—“is perhaps the most

ancient relic we have in our possession. What do you have in mind?”

“May I ask you to lend me your breastplate, Wisdom?”

Without a word, the Iskandar unbuckled and handed it over.

Angora inspected the face of the plate for a long time. Sargon along with everyone else held their breaths.

Evidently the face of the plate contained no markings.

Angora flipped the breastplate over. Her eyes squinting in concentration, her lips moving silently as if reciting an ancient incantation. She tilted the breastplate, allowing the light to catch the surface at different angles.

A triumphant smile spread across her face, her eyes now gleaming. “Here!” she exclaimed, tapping a tiny engraving on the inside of the breastplate. The glyph was so worn it might have escaped notice if not for the desperation fueling her search. “This is the shape we seek. The combination of this glyph and the Timnah district’s symbol tells us how to configure the cipher disk correctly.”

For an instant the iskandars glanced at each other. In the next moment, they were all swiftly unbuckling their breastplates, proceeding to inspect their interiors.

They all possessed a tiny, distinct glyph except Maganot’s breastplate.

“The original breastplate must have been destroyed,” said Angora, “and replaced with a copy lacking the glyph. With only one disk’s symbol unknown, we’re left with a manageable forty combinations.”

Spirits were high, and the people were sharing smiles.

“Travel to the Bridge and enter it,” the Iskandar of Maganot instructed. “With luck, upon your return from the Bridge, we’ll finally explain our situation and share our plans for

‘disembarking’ Areta with everyone.” She paused, her eyes sweeping over the assembled people. She grinned. “Today will be momentous.”

CHAPTER 48

Sargon and Angora practically spilled out of the Sanhedrin Hall, their shared laughter the only sound in the deserted plaza. Arms linked, they broke into a lively stride, steps buoyant and swift, faces alight with joy. The aerial carriage was gone, carted away by the guardians while they'd been huddling inside with the iskandars.

Having faced the possibility of losing Sargon, Angora now craved a visceral affirmation of life. She met his gaze, a timeless challenge in her eyes. Then she turned her back on him, the sway of her hips a silent beckon woven into each movement. Her husky laugh sent a tremor through him as she sauntered into the open, fireflies winking around her like fallen stars.

Sargon caught up and overtook her. Turning, a teasing smile curved her lips. "So predictable," she purred, pressing against him and feeling the ripple of muscles beneath her hands. He reached, but she danced away with practiced grace—a martial artist's fluidity. A twist, a pivot, and he clutched only air. Each evasion a silent taunt, each touch an exploration—of him, his raw strength, the power awakening within her. Words faded, replaced by the labored sounds of their breaths.

Her scent teased him. Under his touch, the sleepshirt felt flimsy, a barely-there barrier between his hands and the smooth curve of her shoulder, the inviting swell of her breasts. He

hooked a finger in the tattered fabric, feeling it yield with a satisfying rip. A gasp escaped her lips as the material parted further, exposing pale skin. With a guttural growl, he tore it again. Each twist and turn offered a new glimpse: a flash of taut muscle, the sway of hips, a hint of long leg.

Angora arched into his touch, her heart pounding with defiant satisfaction. She savored his ragged breaths, the clench of his jaw, the way his eyes devoured her newly uncovered body. She could almost taste his need, reveling in the effect she had on him. Sweat mingled with arousal, born from the raw power of being desired this way.

Sargon shed his tunic, revealing his powerful torso. Moonlight painted his sweat-sheened muscles in silver as he paused for a heartbeat. A silhouette caught Angora's attention, its bold shape a testament to his fervent state.

He surged forward, and they grappled, a tangle of limbs and heat. The last vestiges of fabric yanked away, and the nightgown fluttered to the ground, a sigh against the stone, leaving her every curve and hollow exposed to the moonlight and to his eager eyes. His hands roamed, grabbed, and fondled, unapologetically claiming the firm curves and shadowed crevices. Her gasps and shudders beneath his palms were a testament to the fire he stoked within her.

He hoisted her up before he knew it, her body slung over his shoulder, her bare skin hot against his cheek. A low moan escaped her lips as his arm tightened across the back of her thighs. Fireflies scattered in their wake, their fleeting lights forming a pathway as he carried her away. With his prize claimed, her body a willing offering, their dance would find its consummation in a different, more intimate setting.

Much later, sated and languid, they rested among the fallen blossoms on the shores of a

murky pond. Dawn painted the sky in hues of rose and gold, a stolen moment of solace amid the upheaval of their world. In the soft light filtering through the leaves, Angora's eyes held a newfound depth, a fierce determination to seize life even with death's shadow looming.

"Sargon," she began, "do you love me?"

He looked at her startled. "I do," he said, his voice firm and unwavering. "I do."

"Then why have you not proposed?" Angora's voice held a hint of accusation, a touch of hurt.

For a moment, she saw a play of emotions on his face. "What can I offer you except death? What future can we have when our days may be numbered?"

She grasped his arms. "In spite of it," she said passionately, "or because of it, I wish us to get married."

His stunned silence stretched before he finally found his voice. "You do?"

Angora's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "From now on," she said, her voice thick with emotion, "I want every possible moment by your side, as your wife. Cherishing our time." She paused, her gaze unwavering. "And if we must die soon, I want it to be with you. That's why I came to you last night."

Sargon kissed her tenderly, then with passion. "I would be honored to be your husband," he said.

"Then let's do it," Angora cried. "Father had agreed to officiate the ceremony."

"Right after the flight?"

"No." Her green eyes gleamed. "Before. The fate of the world can wait a few hours."

And so it was.

The affair was rushed. What they lacked in pomp and ceremony, they made up for with

enthusiasm and numbers. The word went out, and many jumped in to help. Within the hour, Sargon was running the ceremonial mile to the cheers and encouraging cries of the crowd lining the path. A rope was strapped to his chest, pulling a chariot bearing Angora, veiled and adorned with gold and pearl-laced streamers.

Customarily, the first night of the marriage was to be full of intimacy, tenderness, punctuated with bouts of passion. However, time was of the essence. Any additional moments of intimacy would have to wait.

There was work to be done. A monumental task lay before them.

CHAPTER 49

The increased lifting power had allowed Elam and Azai to install a second seat in the flyer. At the time, it seemed somewhat frivolous. But now it turned into a blessing. After being notified of the modification, the Sanhedrin announced that the eminent scholar *Vyre* Angora would be joining *Vyr* Sargon on the historic flight to Kadesh Barnea.

Hours earlier, thousands had joined a grand procession escorting *Merkavah* as it was slowly transported on a flatbed to the launch site. While being carted off, its compressed air sphere had been replaced with a fresh one, and Elam had reverently wiped off any particles of dirt that clung to its blades.

The team and Lilit had learned of the previous night's flight and kept the details to themselves. Lilit was in shock, caught between disbelief at nearly losing her father and awe at his heroism.

Virtually all of Areta's tens of thousands of inhabitants had gathered for what promised to be a once-in-a-lifetime event. History was about to be made, on that everyone agreed, whether aware of the true stakes or not. To the roars and cheers of the vast crowd, Angora and Sargon approached the lustrous aerial carriage. A wide perimeter around the craft was cordoned off, guarded by over a hundred stoic figures.

With a hiss of compressed air and the crack of the whip, the blades roared to life, lifting *Merkavah* as Angora's excited cry joined the crowd's cheers. Sargon compensated for her weight by increasing the blade speed. Underneath them, the piston pounded, driving the crank in a relentless rhythm.

Throughout the breathtaking journey, Angora oscillated between elation at the sight of the world unfolding below and the fear of falling. She gripped the frame with white knuckles, gaping at the vista beneath. All the while, she pedaled alongside Sargon to propel the craft forward. The shriek of the blades and the mechanical clatter of the piston filled their ears.

Before she knew it, the Bridge of Heaven loomed large, and they were circling it. Moments later, they landed.

"Kadesh Barnea," breathed Angora, staring wide-eyed around the open bay constructed of wooden planks and stone. Sargon shut off the air valve, bringing the blades to a gradual stop. Shakily, Angora stepped out. It really was chilly, just as Sargon had said. And she did feel lighter! She shivered. What odd sensations.

A hushed gasp escaped Angora's lips as she chanced looking up. A crescent of blue and green, edged with wispy white clouds, emerged. They watched as the celestial body slowly slid into full view. It was a giant marble, larger than their moon, streaked with rich hues of brown, blue, and green, with white swirls of clouds scattered across its surface.

She exhaled, her voice barely a whisper. "What is this? Is that Thalith Na'amat?"

Sargon tore his eyes from the sight and looked at her, his voice thick with awe. "This is Elysium." That was the source of life Lilit had sensed the day before, he thought, in a bit of a daze.

"Yes, indeed," said Angora, the incredible reality of what she was seeing sinking in. She

looked back at her husband and met his gaze. Time was running out. With newfound urgency, she spotted the far stone wall and hurried toward it, Sargon close behind.

Once she reached the twin towering stone slabs, her eyes locked onto the embedded cipher wheel. With deft fingers, she rotated the topmost disk, aligning the correct glyph with the notch above the cipher, one click at a time. She moved to the second disk, then the third, and so on, expertly manipulating the ancient mechanism. After several tense minutes of working on the final, Maganot disk, she was rewarded with a distinct clunk.

Soon after, they heard a series of metallic noises followed by a distant fading hiss. Loud clacking ensued, and the giant stone portal groaned open. The two shared triumphant smiles. With a nod from Angora, Sargon stepped forward, pushing on one of the wall panels to widen the opening and peer inside.

“It’s pitch dark,” he announced. He trotted back to *Merkavah* and returned carrying a lit hand-held lantern. They’d come prepared.

As they entered, the lantern’s dim light hinted at a cavernous space, their footsteps echoing eerily in the darkness. A continuous hiss of a barely perceptible warm breeze filled the space. A dozen paces away, their lantern illuminated a four-sided stone pillar, an obelisk about six feet tall.

“A sand clock,” exclaimed Sargon, coming to stand before it. “A giant sand clock.” He gestured toward a massive hourglass-shaped structure embedded in the obelisk, next to which was a lever made of gleaming wood.

“It must have been activated the moment we cracked open the doors,” said Angora, her eyes fixed on the sand pouring from the upper glass bulb to the lower one.

They stood there, observing the process until the flow of sand into the lower bulb was

abruptly replaced by a barely perceptible trickle. They exchanged glances. Sargon drew closer and counted quickly. “The sand in the lower bulb reached nineteen marks. This bulb contains...” He counted. “Thirty marks in total.” He glanced at her. “Does this indicate what I think it does?”

“It tells us how much time we’ve left, doesn’t it?” Angora said, running her hand through her long, tousled hair. Some mechanism must’ve sensed their proximity to Elysium and calculated the time remaining. “There are eleven marks still empty,” she said, pointing at the lines on the side of the large glass bulb. “Does each one indicate an hour or a day?”

“We’ll be able to gauge that quickly enough,” he said. Angora nodded, she understood. They watched, lantern held high. Within minutes, it was clear: each mark represented a day. They had eleven days. Eleven days for the disembarkation process.

Sargon gestured at the lever beside the hourglass. “Imagine if we’d reached Kadesh Barnea two weeks from now. Regardless, eleven hours or eleven days away—it’ll take seconds to pull that lever and get things in motion.” He turned to Angora, a playful glint in his eyes. “Care to do the honors?”

“Gladly,” said Angora, laughing. She stepped forward, pulled the lever—
—and gasped as what appeared to be countless lanterns ignited, bathing the entire space in a soft, ethereal glow.

At long last, the two could take stock of their surroundings. They stood in an immense hall with ceiling panels soaring high above. At its center, illuminated by powerful beams, rested a colossal construct. It looked like a wooden box the size of a giant building, its two sliding doors open wide. A silent understanding passed between them. With a shared look of quiet resolve, they started walking toward it.

Angora’s strides faltered as she glimpsed the interior of the wooden structure. A chill ran

down her spine, the previous elation replaced by dread that mirrored the growing horror on his face as the nature of the structure—and the impossibility of their situation—dawned on them both. The walkways, the holds, the rope ladders inside... this was no device to be activated. This was a vessel, undoubtedly meant to transport the population of Areta to Elysium.

Stunned into silence, the two ventured into the colossal structure.

Thoroughly exploring its interior, they located a chamber at its heart. It bore the same cipher with the identical glyph combination as the one on the outer stone portal. Inside, the chamber's appearance was alien, yet its function was unmistakable: a control deck of some kind. After looking around, they exited, shut the door behind them, and scrambled the cipher disks.

Why didn't this occur to us before? Sargon wondered, feeling numb. It was the only thing that truly made sense. Kadesh Barnea housed a craft that was meant to carry them, all of them, to the celestial body they were rapidly approaching.

This had posed no problem when the entire population of Areta could ascend a stairway, thousands upon thousands of people. But the stairway had been destroyed. There was no way to transport the fifty thousand inhabitants of Areta to the Bridge in a matter of days. All they had was a single aerial carriage capable of shuttling one person at a time.

They walked out of the cavernous hall into the open bay area, greeted by an outlandish, surreal sky. When they'd entered the Bridge hours earlier, the celestial body had been the size of a large rock. Now, it filled almost the entire sky: a colossal orb with a shimmering blue halo, swirls of white above an expanse of deep-blue waters, and massive landmasses in shades of green and tan.

"Elysium," whispered Angora, reaching out as if to touch it, but of course, it was out of reach.

“Come,” said Sargon quietly. “We need to apprise the iskandars of the situation.”

CHAPTER 50

Sargon and Angora had been up on the Bridge of Heaven for three hours. A lifetime.

As before, Sargon landed the aerial carriage in the paved public square in front of the Sanhedrin Hall. Dozens of guardians swarmed in, converging on their position.

Talmi arrived, relief washing over his face as he clasped them both in warm embraces. After a brief, shared moment of silence, he stepped back. “Did you enter Kadesh Barnea? Did you learn its secrets?”

“We did,” said Angora simply.

“Come, let’s go inside. The guardians will secure the flyer.” He gave terse orders, his words cutting through the rising clamor.

“What’s happening?” Angora shouted over the din.

“Everyone was asked to disperse,” the Iskandar told them. “In light of the celestial body’s appearance, a public meeting was called for this evening.” Flanked by guardians, they entered the building. “We bought a few hours,” the Iskandar continued, “but the public will need real answers soon.”

Inside the main hall, an intense discussion among the Iskandars halted as Yessod Olam entered with Angora and Sargon. The massive doors swung shut behind them.

Angora walked up to the center of the floor, Sargon by her side. Her voice, though strained, was clear. “Wisdoms, we entered Kadesh Barnea. We understand its function.”

The silence in the domed hall was absolute.

“Kadesh Barnea is a boarding station,” Angora said. “At its center is a colossal structure, which we believe to be a vessel designed to ferry the entire population to Elysium—the celestial body now dominating the sky.”

Mutters and alarmed whispers broke out among the Iskandars as they immediately grasped the dire situation they collectively faced.

“We believe Areta will maintain a constant distance from Elysium for a time,” Sargon added. “After that, it will head toward the sun for the final leg of its journey.”

A new round of murmurs broke out.

The next question was inescapable, its weight pressing down on them all. “Were you able to ascertain how much time we have left?” asked Iskandar Nishmat.

Angora bowed her head. “Eleven days, Wisdoms.”

Heavy silence descended upon the hall.

At long last, Yessod Olam cleared his throat. “How many can we save with your contraption?”

Sargon bowed. He’d thought of little else since they first saw the giant wooden ark in Kadesh Barnea. “Flying day and night without letup, we could theoretically transport up to four hundred people, along with livestock and essential supplies. In reality, it would be less, as we must account for rain and wind storms, which would make flying too dangerous.”

Four hundred people, probably less. That meant out of every hundred people alive, fewer than one would survive to set foot in the new world. Iskandar Nishmat closed her eyes against

the crushing weight of that realization. At least a few would survive, and through them, their race might endure. Yet, how fragile that thread was. An unruly throng, desperate to survive, could easily snip it—fighting over a single seat and destroying *Merkavah* in the process, their only means of departure.

The Iskandar of Tarqash took a deep, shaky breath. “It seems we need to decide who gets to live and who gets to die.”

“You must go,” said Angora immediately, addressing the council at large. You ought to be the first up.”

“Thank you, child. But no,” Iskandar Ma’ayan replied, meeting the gazes of her colleagues. They nodded in agreement.

“You are the wisest among us, our leaders,” tried Sargon. “You need to be there to guide us in the new world as the survivors begin anew.”

“That may be true,” said Yessod Olam. “However, our personal sacrifice and example may be the only things that inspire others to consider the broader community and prevent utter mayhem. That said, I agree with the sentiment; we must send away our best and brightest.” He couldn’t help but glance at his daughter.

She shook her head. “What use are my skills in the new world, Father? What good am I without the ability to conceive?”

“She’s right,” said the Iskandar of Maganot, slapping the wooden board in front of her. “What we need are a few strong, fertile males to sire children, while the rest should be females—as many as time allows. If they are too accomplished, they are too old. Let a few of the most skilled among us go, but the rest should be adolescent females to maximize the birthing window. Let them conceive five, six, eight, or ten babies if they can. It’s simple: every male we include is

one less baby machine. Every elderly person we include is one less baby machine. It's about reaching a viable population base as quickly as possible."

A bunch of pregnant adolescents. Iskandar Ma'ayan grimaced at the thought. "What of people who collectively possess the vast knowledge and technology our world has developed over millennia—ensuring the survivors would rebuild our society rather than sink into primitive savagery?" Ma'ayan countered.

"Your Wisdoms," Sargon interjected, "with your permission, I'll take my leave to oversee the logistical arrangements for continuous flights. There's much to be done."

Iskandar Nishmat raised her hand. "A moment, *Vyr* Sargon." She beckoned the Chief of Guardians to join them, and the three walked toward the exit while the heated discussion continued at the table. "Ensure your people guard the aerial carriage discreetly, with their lives if necessary," she instructed the Chief once they reached the double doors. "Maintain a casual demeanor for as long as possible. No one is alarmed yet, and I want to avoid your people inadvertently causing panic. Once we make the announcement, establish a protective perimeter around the millforge. Discreetly recruit hundreds of trustworthy individuals, but await our signal to do so."

"Yes, Wisdom," the gray-haired titaness replied. She and Sargon bowed, and the Iskandar dismissed them with a wave, her focus already returning to the intense debate among her colleagues.

* * *

Lilit entered the bustling scene of molten metal pouring from large crucibles, treadwheels

creaking, and hammers clanging. “Father!” she called out, spotting him leaning against a table with his arms crossed, talking to a few people. She rushed forward, but then her steps faltered as she sensed it—his grim determination. She didn’t need to see his face to know he bore bad news. Dread and dismay filled her.

Sargon nodded to her and raised his hands, waiting for everyone to gather around. Lilit had been the last to respond to his urgent summons to the millforge.

In a low, strained voice, he laid out the dire situation, holding nothing back. When he finished, the team members exchanged uneasy glances, and hushed murmurs rippled through the room. Some shifted uncomfortably, avoiding Sargon’s gaze. A few choked back sobs, their expressions pale and drawn. One burly man, hands stained with soot, slammed his fist against the table, muttering under his breath. Sargon glanced at Azai, Tamuz, and Elam standing beside him. He tried to read their expressions but failed.

“How can you let all these people die?” Lilit hollered from across the room.

Sargon looked at his daughter with anguish. “What would you have me do?”

“Save everyone!” she cried out.

“Lilit, dearest,” he said, his voice heavy with sorrow. “Don’t you think I would have—the iskandars would have—if we could? There’s simply no way to get everyone up to the Bridge in time.” He looked grimmer than before. “Evacuating a few hundred people to Elysium is the best-case scenario, not the worst.” Earlier, he’d warned them that if a word gets out they would risk a panicked rush for *Merkavah*, jeopardizing the entire rescue operation.

Mutters broke anew.

Lilit looked at him with dismay, but her father averted his eyes and addressed the gathered people. “Listen up,” he said, “it’s a single flame that we must throw ourselves into

preserving, a single flame of life that in a few generations will become something far more. If we're to see this happen, there's much work ahead of us and little time to execute it."

"No," said Lilit. Heat seemed to radiate from her and the people around her instinctively shrank away, clearing space. At this moment, she resembled Astrape, the goddess of lightning, reincarnated.

"Lilit, step down," her father said. "Let us do the work if we are to save some."

"No," she said hoarsely, eyes blazing.

Father and daughter locked gazes. Finally, Sargon gave a slight nod to the gathered people, and they started to disperse to their tasks.

"Father!" Lilit's shriek pierced the air, a mental assault that sent people stumbling. Some lost their balance, others clutched their heads as if struck by a sudden gust of wind. "Save them!" her voice came crashing down, overwhelming and crowding all other thoughts. "Throw a lifeline down to them!"

Sargon slowly turned, eyes wide. Throw a lifeline, she'd said. He stared at her, her face red, her body heaving with sobs.

Throw a lifeline. He saw it now.

He sharply turned to the guardian who'd accompanied him to the millforge. "Get me to the Sanhedrin Hall as quickly as humanly possible," he told her. "I know what we need to do."

Sargon burst through the backstage curtain, Lilit close behind. His eyes swept the dimly lit space, quickly locating a guardian. "Fetch the Iskandar of Maradam," he said, urgency clear in his voice. "It's of the utmost importance."

The guardian hesitated, having been instructed not to let anyone or anything interrupt the

proceedings. “Wait here,” she said.

She left and returned shortly with Yessod Olam.

One look at Sargon and the Iskandar of Maradam sensed something had changed.

“Do you trust me?” Sargon inquired, meeting the Iskandar’s eyes.

“Yes,” Talmai said simply. “What is it, son?”

“There is a way to save us all.”

The Iskandar of Maradam regarded him for several moments. “Come with me.” He led him up the stone platform where the iskandars were arrayed before a vast audience. Sargon’s unexpected appearance caused a flurry of murmurs among the assembled audience.

“*Vyr* Sargon may have found a way for us all to survive,” Yessod Olam said quietly. Some of the iskandars looked dubious; others remained expressionless, yet no one challenged the statement.

The iskandar whose speech was interrupted addressed the crowd again. “We’ve summoned *Vyr* Sargon to brief us on how we may proceed,” she announced loudly. She then turned to Sargon and, in a few concise sentences, filled him in on what had transpired before his arrival.

Sargon stepped forward and took in the ocean of expectant faces. “You’ve heard that we were meant to climb a stairway to Kadesh Barnea, a stairway mindlessly destroyed during the Age of Shoah,” he shouted, and the repeaters transmitted his words throughout the large clearing.

“All the same, we can still do so. It’ll be just harder.” Sargon continued, surveying the crowd. “A few hours ago, we could only think of the obvious: evacuate as many people as we can with the aerial carriage.” A nervous buzz broke throughout the vast gathering. Sargon raised his arms until the mutters died down. “But my daughter”—he glanced at Lilit, who stood in the

back—“kept insisting that we leave no one behind. She asked me to throw down ‘a lifeline.’”

He took a deep breath. “We’ll do just that. Every last one of us will board the vessel that will ferry us to Elysium, to our new home.” He paused, letting the words sink in. “Fifty thousand strong, and everyone has a role to play,” announced Sargon. “There’s work to be done, and it starts now.”

CHAPTER 51

Nothing of this scale had ever been attempted on Areta. Everyone pitched in, young and old alike, sleeping only when necessary. Some formed or joined makeshift work crews, while others coordinated the various efforts. Children ferried supplies and ran messages, grandmothers prepared meals. An air of urgency, mixed with camaraderie and shared purpose, fueled their endeavors.

Sargon's first flight to the Bridge carried Tamzin, who disembarked in the open bay. Upon his return, an awaiting ground crew swiftly swapped the depleted compressed-air sphere and meticulously inspected every component for wear, all while *Merkavah*, mounted on a massive flatbed, was inching its way again to the launching site.

Sargon's next flight carried a capstan, bolts, and tools. When he returned, a bundle was waiting for him. Dozens of people had scrounged thin abaca ropes and strung together a mile-long rope with an anchor. Coiled tightly, the rope bundle was about the size of the compressed-air sphere.

Once he brought up the rope to the Bridge, Tamzin secured it to the capstan that by now was bolted to the floor. Subsequent trips saw Sargon carry additional personnel, a second capstan, and another one-mile rope. These intertwined, relatively thin ropes, secured to the

capstan, hoisted a series of progressively thicker, mile-long ropes, too heavy for the aerial carriage to transport.

At that point, Desta joined the people on the Bridge while Electra remained below; the two facilitated communication between the people on the ground and the growing workforce on Kadesh Barnea.

Sargon was persuaded to train others to fly *Merkavah* and to take on the director role, managing the logistics of the entire operation from a makeshift headquarters on the ground. The first order of the day was the depleted abaca rope stock. He directed hundreds to fell abaca plants, strip and feed the fibers into decorticators for pulp separation. The fibers were kiln-dried briefly, then twisted into rope by thousands of hands. Concurrently, Sargon had others saw greenheart, panacoco, and katalox—the hardest woods available—into tens of thousands of ladder rungs.

The backbone of the imposing ladder to the Bridge of Heaven consisted of two 4-inch thick ropes, capable of supporting approximately 100 adults with belongings. Deeply staked into the ground, they supported a dozen or so horizontal rope ladders set at a steep incline. Every 500 feet, woven intricately between the rungs, were rest stops: sling-like perches with safety netting and water jugs for climbers to rehydrate.

As the ladder construction took shape, Kadesh Barnea buzzed with activity. Day and night, throngs of people labored, turning dozens of capstans and pulleys to hoist a seemingly endless procession of crates brimming with cargo. Livestock bleated, seeds rattled, tools clanged against burlap sacks of wheat, and precious books jostled alongside cultural artifacts.

Each person, now a carpenter by necessity, salvaged wood from discarded furniture, fashioning a box—a cubic yard, or larger for families. These chests were to safeguard their

possessions as they embarked on a journey into the new land.

During the climb, the air thinned with each step, a chilly wind whispered across exposed skin, and the bodies grew somewhat lighter against the fading pull of the world below. The ascent to Kadesh Barnea averaged a bit more than three hours, each climber equipped with a harness for safety. Climbers ascended in a continuous chain, the person ahead clipping a metal ring to the next two rungs while the person behind carried clips for the climber below them.

Babies were secured in slings and wrap carriers as their mothers climbed. Most people also carried canvas rucksacks on their backs, holding some of their personal possessions. One iskandar climbed up and down the rope ladder daily, encouraging those hesitant or terrified to join her. About a dozen others followed suit, emulating the iskandar.

Upon reaching the top, each climber dropped a pebble down a long chute, signaling the ground operator to send the next person up. The pebble's journey down the chute was followed by the climber's harness kit, thrown down for the next person in line. This process continued around the clock, with ten massive rope installations arrayed in a broad arc. This allowed approximately one thousand adults to climb at any one time.

For seven days and seven nights, the world's population ascended the ladders leading to the Bridge of Heaven.

The ladder installations, however impressive, were not the sole avenue to Kadesh Barnea. Those who were too frail, injured, or heavy with child were borne aloft by the aerial carriage. A dedicated large team continuously recast spheres and prepped them for use, ensuring the flyer could operate around the clock.

Early on, one iskandar went up to the Bridge, followed later by two more as the crowd grew and the need for order increased. The concourse of Kadesh Barnea was clearly designed by

the ancient architektons to accommodate tens of thousands of people for days on end. It contained numerous lavatories, drinking fountains, and food dispensers that produced surprisingly satisfying, thin, pale wafers.

Both sides of the immense concourse featured tiered staircases with open corridors, each leading to numerous alcoves furnished with mattresses. The main hall transformed into a social hub, where many respected elders circulated, providing a much-needed sense of sanity and calmness. No one had yet sought lodging in the Chest itself, as the imposing vessel at the center of the concourse had quickly come to be known. Even a cursory glance made it apparent that it was designed for a trip of short duration.

* * *

Angora and her team of scholars were among the first to climb the rope ladder and reach the Bridge. Their mission was clear: to scour the immense structure and find out about the particulars of their departure.

Ancient plaques embedded throughout Kadesh Barnea featured unique glyphs, the like of which they had never encountered. Deciphering these enigmatic symbols was a daunting challenge, but their journey's fate might depend on it.

Many scholars believed that during the Age of Genesis, before society unified, each of the seven lineages had its own language. Angora persuaded her teammates that the unique glyphs found on Kadesh Barnea were part of a universal writing system established by the architektons to facilitate communication among the lineages. She had encountered some of these unmistakable shapes in the service tunnel next to the foundation stones. Furthermore, she

recently realized that the emblems for each of the seven districts were glyphs from this ancient system.

Initially, Angora's team assumed that each glyph represented a word or concept. This theory quickly unraveled. Their own language contained tens of thousands of word families, and the limited number of glyphs couldn't possibly accommodate such a vast vocabulary. The idea that each glyph represented a syllable or letter also fell apart; there were too many glyphs for that.

They concluded that it was a hybrid system: some glyphs were logograms, representing entire words, while others formed syllables, representing consonants and vowels.

Throughout the concourse, the team of scholars located plates with inscriptions often bearing a single glyph. They started with these, as the context made these easy to decipher: "toilet," "bathing room," "drinking fountain." Each deciphered glyph was a small yet vital step toward decoding the writing system as a whole.

By the third day, the team had confidently deciphered thirty glyphs. Next, they attempted to correlate the identified monosyllabic glyphs with sounds from each of the Old Tongues. To their delight, one of the ancient languages, *Yehudit*, proved to be a match. This breakthrough was significant, as some of the shorter logograms were used to phonetically spell out more complex words, facilitating further decipherment of the glyphs.

The true breakthrough, however, occurred when they managed to examine the remnants of the spiraling staircase. While a few uppermost stairs were intact, no one dared test if they could support a person's weight. Instead, they ingeniously employed an articulated periscope—a multi-segmented metal pipe with mirrors and relay lenses, typically used to inspect underground sewers. Through the scope, they uncovered a large illustration on an intact fragment of the

stairwell. It depicted an exterior view of Kadesh Barnea. It was identical to the drawing found in Tygliat Pesser, with a crucial difference: this version was inscribed in the unique glyph system. This discovery, a few paragraphs of text accompanying the illustration, provided a crucial key to deciphering the glyphs by comparing them to their corresponding text in Tygliat Pesser.

After about a week of work, they managed to decipher roughly half to three-quarters of the symbols. It sufficed; it had to.

CHAPTER 52

Some had arrived at the Bridge hours earlier, others a week prior. And now the entire population of Areta—every man, woman, and child—was aboard Kadesh Barnea. Not a living soul remained on the ground, save for three figures in breastplates.

“Eerie beyond words,” murmured Ma’ayan.

“Come, my old friend, it is time,” said Yessod Olam.

“I still think that if I pinch myself, I’ll wake up,” she replied.

The three iskandars surveyed the land. Silence reigned, broken only by the gentle breeze.

“This has been our home for our entire recorded history,” said Nishmat.

“Give it a thousand years, and the long journey to Elysium will gain a proper perspective,” said Ma’ayan dryly, though her eyes crinkled with good humor.

“Our people await us,” said Yessod Olam.

“Is there no more space in the cargo bay?” asked Ma’ayan under her breath.

“Perhaps, but the sand clock has almost run its course,” said Yessod Olam.

And with that, the last three people started climbing the rope ladder leading to the Bridge of Heaven.

The moment was upon them.

“It is time,” shouted the Iskandar of Maradam, striking the floor with his staff like a mallet on a colossal gong. His cry was picked up by repeaters throughout the concourse, and soon the crowds were shuffling forward. Everyone was on the move.

“The first to board will occupy the uppermost levels,” hollered the Chief of Guardians. “We’ll fill the vessel from top to bottom.”

The vessel loomed high above those who, in days past, had come close to ogle it. Resembling a giant wooden chest, it measured roughly fifty paces in length and two hundred in breadth. Constructed of what looked like cypress wood, its underbelly and lower reaches were plated in thick copper. Its seamless wooden walls appeared to have grown organically, not assembled from disparate beams.

The giant vessel, coated in a clear sealant that resisted even the most persistent scratching and scraping by curious children, looked as if it was immersed in molten glass that hardened into a thin, unyielding, transparent film.

One massive gangplank led to the softly illuminated interior. Inside, the vessel was divided into ten levels, each containing a honeycomb of rope lattices, forming thousands of compartments. These seemed to have been designed to secure both souls and possessions for the duration of the journey. Notably absent were any lavatories; the voyage was clearly intended to be brief, likely lasting no more than a couple of hours.

After dialing the correct combination on the cipher wheel, Sargon, Angora, and the seven iskandars filed into the control chamber at the heart of the giant vessel. The chamber, shaped like an egg, enveloped them with its black, glassy surface. They took their seats in chairs bolted to the floor and strapped themselves in, forming a half-circle.

A few minutes later, they faintly heard the gong sound from outside, the awaited signal: It was the Chief of Guardians, confirming that everyone was aboard and that she was the last to enter. The concourse now stood silent and empty. The entire population, fifty thousand strong, was nestled within the bowels of the Chest.

Presumably, at that moment, a few guardians worked a capstan to raise and stow the gangplank. The expectant sounds of heavy booms and rolling panels followed as the outer doors sealed shut. A lever was pulled, a handle twisted, a few knobs pressed—the guardians meticulously followed the instructions Angora’s team had deciphered. The Chest was now hermetically sealed and ready for departure.

They didn’t have to wait long for what was to come next. From afar, the sounds of soft whirs and clicks reached them.

Sargon glanced up, his eyes bright. “Those last sounds...” he said. “If my guess is correct, this so-called vessel we’re in is nothing more than what it appears: a colossal wooden ark holding our people.”

Some of the Iskandars were puzzled. “Are we not in a craft?” asked Ma’ayan.

“I believe this giant wooden chest is now in the belly of the actual ship,” Sargon said, glancing at the seated iskandars as more clicks and whirs sounded in the distance. “A ship we’re not meant to see.”

“Not that I presume to understand how we’re meant to fly away,” said Yessod Olam. “However, I did wonder how the...crate we’re in was going to accomplish that feat. What you say makes a great deal of sense, *Vyr* Sargon.”

At last, all the clicking sounds and whirs ceased.

A jolt, then the distinct sensation of forward and upward movement. They were

underway! The pressure intensified against their bodies as the craft accelerated. Startled cries of wonder broke the silence as the black hue of the glassy chamber walls faded, replaced by a vivid image of the outside vista. Though deep within the Chest, the breathtaking scene was somehow transmitted and projected onto the glassy surface, creating an uncanny immersive experience.

Far below, the familiar landscape of Areta spread out: the fields, the tree groves, the towns—the only world they had ever known. The craft soared higher and higher, gaining more speed.

A collective gasp arose in the control room as an aperture appeared in the clear sky firmament of Areta, quickly widening. Moments later, their craft hurtled through it, streaking through a vast shaft hundreds of feet long, piercing the hull of their world. Strata of gleaming metal, earth, and water flashed by, followed by an ethereal, otherworldly glow, before they burst into the vast expanse of the kosmos.

The tunnel re-sealed itself behind them. Minutes later, fog billowed from hidden openings, blanketing the land and gently putting all living things into a sleep from which they would never awake. Areta was now ready to journey into the fiery ocean of Talith Na'amat.

In the control room, a peculiar weightlessness crept over the people. Strapped securely in their seats, they felt their bodies float lightly against the restraints, with their hair and clothing drifting upward as if underwater. The strange sensation left them disoriented, exchanging glances of wonder and trepidation.

Some of them glanced up, witnessing for the first and only time their world from the outside: a gnarled, olive-colored, colossal cylinder, flaring as it incinerated a sizeable rock on a collision course. Soon, the massive form receded into the distance, blending into the inky blackness of the kosmos.

From below, Elysium grew before their eyes, filling the entire screen and then extending far beyond as the craft made its way downward.

The new world was not just immense; its size was incomprehensible. The charts had hinted at it, yet nothing could have prepared them for the seemingly boundless vista that greeted them as the craft sped above the terrain. For those in the control deck, it was as if infinity itself unfurled beneath them. Some gasped, others clung to their seats, minds reeling at the sheer scale, humbled and exhilarated. The endless expanse of wild fields, towering mountains, and immense bodies of water seemed to go on forever, a stark contrast to the confined familiar environment of Areta.

The Iskandar of Timnah broke the silence, “Whereas on Areta, physical limits ensured a sustainable community, in our new home we’ll need to establish those limits ourselves, lest people multiply and spread across this world, reaching populations not in the tens of thousands, but in the *millions*.”

“I doubt humans can multiply to such fantastical numbers,” Nishmat remarked dryly. “We’re not ants.”

Good-natured chuckles rose from the people in the room.

“All the same,” the Iskandar of Timnah said, “if we spread and grow beyond fifty thousand, we risk losing the bonds of community and social cohesion, possibly splintering into warring nations.”

On this point, they all concurred and resolved to maintain their existing population numbers.

Their descent continued and the sensation of weightlessness has slowly dissipated. Those in the room felt their bodies grow heavier and sink into their seats as the familiar pull reasserted

itself.

Earlier, the iskandars had spent hours in the control room, poring over an illustrated codex detailing their new world. It detailed the geography of Elysium, outlining regional climates and topography. The codex divided the new world into sectors, and after much deliberation, the council chose the one most suitable for their people's needs. They then entered the combination of their chosen sector into the cipher inside the control room. Unlike the exterior cipher, which granted access, this one communicated their destination to the craft.

This is where it was taking them now. They cleared the fluffy white clouds and leveled off, swiftly cruising over an open terrain with scattered gentle hills and sporadic, exotic-looking trees.

The people in the room watched wide-eyed as a section of the wooden floor slowly slid open, revealing a hidden compartment below. From this opening, a wide metal column rose with a whirring sound, bearing atop it a leather seat and what appeared to be a control console. They had anticipated it from the manual, but seeing it emerge was still somewhat jarring.

Sargon glanced at the faces around the room. Some of the iskandars nodded to him encouragingly. Angora leaned in and gave his arm a reassuring pat. It was time. The craft had brought them to the desired sector. The precise location of their landing, however, was up to them. The iskandars would give instructions to Sargon, who would navigate the craft.

Strapping into the command seat atop the riveted column, Sargon reached for the controls. The large, spoked wooden wheel, the lever for ascent and descent, the two pedals beneath his feet—all were familiar from his study of the manual. The codex had prepared him for this moment, and now the weight of responsibility settled upon him as he prepared to guide the Chest to its landing site.

“First thing first, slow down this infernal craft,” said Iskandar Yetzir. “We need to be able to take things in.”

Sargon obliged, pedaling in reverse long enough to slow their pace to a leisurely glide over the landscape of lush meadows and glades below.

“Much better,” said Yessod Olam, stroking his short beard. “Breathtaking vista,” he added.

“Indeed,” agreed the Iskandar of Tarqash. “Warm year-round and with land dotted with lakes.” They now flew high above a herd of grazing beasts. “What’s not to love?”

Murmurs of agreements came from the other iskandars.

“Bring it down some,” instructed Iskandar Ma’ayan, and Sargon pulled back on the lever until the craft was cruising at thirteen hundred feet altitude, as indicated by a dial.

“There are mountains a few miles up ahead. Let’s bank to port.”

Sargon turned the ship’s spoked wheel, and the craft dutifully altered course. “Wisdoms, are you looking for anything in particular?”

“No,” said Yessod Olam, “but if nothing else, the more time we fly in this region, the more discerning our eyes become.”

“There, the waterfalls!” The Iskandar of Maradam exclaimed a few moments later. “Reduce the speed further and head that way.” Sargon did, and several minutes later, Yessod Olam turned to his colleagues, excited. “I believe this nestled valley is ideal. It appears to be about thirty miles in length, if I gauge it right. Those small waterfalls feed a river that flows through it.”

After a brief deliberation, they then unanimously agreed.

“*Vyr* Sargon, we shall make our landing in this valley,” declared Iskandar Nishmat.

He steered the craft accordingly and lowered its speed to a minimum. With small moves of the spoked wheel, he nudged the massive vessel to port, performing a gentle arc until it hovered over a large, relatively level rocky outcrop. Satisfied, he pressed the single button at the tip of the lever.

The craft began its final, slow descent, working its way down to the surface. The roar was deafening as they hovered mere dozens of feet above the ground. A jolt, and the mammoth wooden ark was descending again. With a deep boom, it touched down, and all motion ceased, leaving them in eerie stillness.

A small snap sounded from above, followed by whirring and then a mechanical roar from high up.

“We did it,” Sargon announced, turning to the clapping and cheers of the people in the room. “We’ve arrived.”

CHAPTER 53

The Iskandars, Angora, and Sargon emerged from the glassy, oval chamber, the door sealing shut with a final hiss. Moments later, intense heat engulfed the control room, reducing it to a molten, misshapen mass of glass, metal, and charred wood.

They emerged from the Chest onto the rocky outcrop, flanked by dozens of guardians wielding quarterstaves as an intense flash of light appeared somewhere above. “What was that?” asked the Iskandar of Timnah, glancing up at the now serene blue sky with fleecy white clouds tinted rose.

In a hushed voice meant only for Angora and the Iskandars, Sargon said, “I believe it was the destruction of something we were not meant to see, Your Wisdoms.” He alone chanced to look upward before the explosion and had seen it: a large, gleaming object streaking into the heavens before disintegrating in the flash of light. Momentarily, his memory of what had taken place faded away.

In reverent silence, the group surveyed the meadow that stretched before them on all sides. Wine- and straw-colored grasses swayed. Twisting trees with smooth, ivory bark dotted the landscape, their cascading curtains of fern-like lavender leaves whispering in the wind.

“Elysium,” whispered Yessod Olam, eyes wide with wonder as he inhaled deeply,

savoring the earthy scent. Beside him, Angora and Sargon held hands, drinking in the sight. A bit farther out, a turquoise river flowed and pooled, fed by waterfalls cascading from three sides. Along the riverbank, clusters of tall reeds with downy plumes bobbed in the current, while long-necked birds with violet plumage waded through the shallows.

After a brief exchange, the Iskandars signaled the Chief of Guardians, who instructed that the Chest's massive sliding doors to be opened. Moments later, the exodus commenced and a river of humanity poured down the multiple wide gangplanks, whispering in hushed awe. Children gasped and pointed at clusters of translucent petals floating in the air, while elders wept quietly as they gazed around in wonder. Some knelt to kiss the fertile earth, others reached out to touch the hull of the grand wooden vessel that had ferried them from Areta across the starlit void to this new world.

One hour later, everyone had exited the ark. Half a dozen large crates were brought out, serving as makeshift stages for the repeaters scattered among the crowd, who stood ready to relay the iskandars' words.

Climbing atop one of the large wooden boxes, Iskandar Nishmat raised her arms until the buzz of discussion died down and tens of thousands of eyes were on her. "Hear the words of the Sanhedrin," she called out. "Today marks the most momentous day in our history. We have completed a millennia-long odyssey, one we were unaware of taking." She paused, allowing the callers to repeat her words for those farther out.

Nishmat held aloft a book. "This codex was penned by the ancient architektons," Nishmat continued, her voice rising above the renewed buzz. "It has taught us how to harness the Chest. It is what allowed us to navigate and steer this titanic beast of wood and copper, and fly to this new world." She paused, reclaiming their attention. "We may never know who they were,

their motives, or how Areta came to be. Yet, they left us a message.” She opened the ancient codex, turned a page with obvious reverence, and read the single introductory note: “If you have possession of this book, it must mean you have completed the long odyssey. We cannot know who you have become, but we know you are not—cannot be—like your ancestors. For to survive the ages within the confined environment of Areta, you had to mature as a species.”

Nishmat lowered the manuscript and her gaze swept over the wooden behemoth. The Chest was not going anywhere; it was beyond anyone’s ability to ever relocate it. “This landing site, the Chest, and the *Merkavah* it cradles are hereby declared hallowed historic landmarks,” she proclaimed. “As the ages pass and our tales of Areta become legend, this site will remain a testament to our journey. Our descendants will stand on this very ground, next to this very vessel, and know the truth of our origins. This is to be their anchor, their connection to the past.”

She stepped down, and Yessod Olam took her place. He tracked with his eyes a pair of sleek birds with wingspans dozens of feet across that flew overhead, their keening cries carrying across the valley. At long last, he addressed the vast crowd: “We must trust that those who shepherded us through countless generations have delivered us to a place where we can live off the bounty of the land, drink its water, and prosper.”

He waited for the cheering and clapping to die down. “The Burning Ship Festival is hereby annulled,” Yessod Olam shouted. “For seven days and seven nights, we climbed a ladder leading to the Bridge of Heaven in a mass exodus of our people—culminated in our arrival in Elysium, our new home. To commemorate this event, we will celebrate exactly a year from today, for the first time, a newly founded public holiday, henceforth known as Ha-haga’ah, The Arrival.” The Iskandar of Maradam struck his staff of office, and the great gathering erupted in loud applause. “Take a look around at this wondrous, boundless world,” he cried, holding his

staff with two upraised arms. “This is home—today and forevermore!”

A roar of approval and cheers greeted these words.

Yessod Olam nodded to Sargon, who stepped up and took over. “It’s time to attend to the needs of the moment,” Sargon hollered. “We have the tools, we have the know-how, we have the numbers to rebuild our world—here, at this striking, idyllic valley. Today, we address our immediate needs. Some will draw and distribute water from the river, others will cook and bake. Some will set up the tents for shelters, others will dig latrines. Tomorrow, we explore. We’ll learn the lay of the land, identify resources, and start building homes and a proper sewer system with purifying-flow fields.” He gave a lopsided smile. “Fifty thousand strong, and everyone has a role to play,” he announced. “There’s work to be done, and it starts now.”

* * *

“Have you heard?” Desta joined Lilit. Bioluminescent grasses radiated beneath her feet, leaving a glowing trail in her wake. It was their second night in Elysium. “The Sanhedrin is cordoning off one hundred twenty-five square miles, the same size as Areta, but circular.”

Lilit considered it. The size was sensible, of course, reflecting Areta’s. But circular? Interesting.

“Also, no Tishrei this week. Too much things to do,” added Desta.

Lilit chuckled appreciatively at that—then froze, her head cocked. “Desta, do you sense it?”

Desta tilted her head, then picked it up too. Something was out there, about two miles towards the mountains.

The two stared at each other.

“We need to inform the iskandars,” Desta declared.

They took off running.

* * *

Meanwhile, the iskandars were gathered under a mammoth tree some distance away. Above them, vines with broad, velvety leaves wound through the canopy, their tendrils cascading down, with bumblebee-like insects buzzing about flecks of opalescent pollen that drifted in the warm breeze.

Nishmat said, “In the Old Tongues, ‘hero’ meant ‘defender’ or ‘protector.’ It is told that ancient men distinguished themselves through technological advancement and self-sacrifice for their communities, becoming heroes. Some of our men have displayed that same heroism in recent months.” Nishmat gave a slight nod as she met Yessod Olam’s gaze.

She continued, her tone reflective, “I confess, when we thought that only a few hundred could survive, I regarded men as largely expendable. I was wrong. Recent events have reminded us that humanity needs both its *men* and *women*.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the Sanhedrin members.

“Apologies, Your Wisdoms,” a guardian said as he walked up to the assembled iskandars. “Desta, Electrae, and Lilit wish to speak with you,” the tall guardian said, gesturing at the three girls standing a respectful distance away. The Iskandar of Tarqash nodded and beckoned them to approach. The three bowed in front of the seated figures.

“Your Wisdoms,” said Desta, excitement clear in her voice. “I sense the approach of a

caravan.”

“Herd, you mean,” Nishmat corrected.

“No, a caravan. These are sentient beings. I’m picking up some of their thoughts.”

“Sentient beings of this world!” Yessod Olam exclaimed, scrambling to his feet along with the others. “How far away?” he wanted to know.

“A few miles outside the valley, moving slowly in this direction.” She pointed.

“*Vyre* Lilit, what can you tell us?” Ma’ayan asked.

“The complexity of their brain patterns confirms it. Sentients.”

“How many?” asked Iskandar Ma’ayan.

“A few hundred,” Desta replied without hesitation.

“Their size?” Ma’ayan asked.

“I cannot tell,” Desta said.

“I can,” said Lilit. “At least enough to say that they are bulkier than us, but on a similar scale.”

“So, we outnumber them significantly. Perhaps they will avoid the valley once they see us,” the Iskandar of Maganot said.

Nishmat said, “I suggest it’s too important an opportunity to miss. Let’s assemble a delegation of a few hundred people and approach them. Everyone else ought to be at the ready. We know nothing of their intentions, nor their capabilities.”

“There is risk, Your Wisdoms,” the Chief of Guardians cautioned.

“There is,” agreed Yessod Olam. He nodded as Sargon and Angora walked briskly toward the gathering, having been summoned. “What are your thoughts about it?” Nishmat asked the two after they were briefed.

Sargon considered. “Wisdoms, they’re not going anywhere, and neither are we. This encounter is inevitable—whether now, in a year, or in ten years.” Angora nodded in agreement.

After a pregnant pause, the Iskandar of Tarqash turned to Lilit. “You can sense malevolent intentions, can you not?”

“Yes, Your Wisdom.”

“That’s good enough for me,” the Iskandar said, looking inquiringly at the other Sanhedrin members.

* * *

The seven Iskandars, accompanied by Angora, Sargon, the three metans, and the entire guardian force, assembled in a rugged, wide canyon a few miles from the Aretan encampment. As the sun ascended over a distant ridge, the silhouette of an approaching caravan slowly emerged.

The closer the otherkin drew, the more alien they appeared. Hairless and silver-hued with hints of purple and green, their rounded, bulky bodies varied in shapes and sizes, all notably wider than humans. Some walked, their heavy limbs moving with a rolling gait. But it was the heart of the caravan that left everyone gaping in disbelief and wonder. It was a floating village in motion.

A dozen feet above the ground, a school of gargantuan beasts, seemingly composed of spherical sacs, propelled themselves with flaps of their broad, thin flippers. Tethers descended from their underside, supporting airborne platforms teeming with activity and artifacts of unknown nature.

The caravan halted at the sight of the assembled mass of humans. Those who were

perched atop the aerial beasts tugged on rope harnesses.

“Lilit?” asked Yessod Olam.

“I read amazement... confusion... and now curiosity,” she said as the alien beings broke into a series of clicks and piercing whistles. The column soon resumed advancing and finally stopped a few dozen paces away. The silence between the two groups was broken when a figure at the front emitted a series of clicks, piercing sounds, and deep grunts.

Desta and Electrae were studying them intently.

Nishmat turned to them. “Can you make out what he was saying?”

“Not distinct words, but the entirety of their thoughts,” Desta replied after a moment. Electrae nodded beside her, eyes wide. “They delivered greeting and inquiry,” Desta said, turning to the Iskandars.

“Inquiry?” asked Nishmat.

“They want to know our intent.”

“All right then,” said Nishmat, relief evident in her voice. “Desta, direct your thoughts at whoever just spoke. Tell them we came from a place beyond this world and are here to stay in the valley. Try to discern if they have any objections.”

Desta remained silent for quite some time, concentrating. Whatever she was doing seemed to cause quite a stir among the otherkin, judging by the renewed piercing sounds and grunts. Finally, she turned to the Iskandars. “They seem indifferent to our claim of the valley. I don’t think they have a sense of land ownership or much interest in discussing such matters. From what I can gather, they lead a nomadic lifestyle.”

“They said they never saw lifeforms like us,” broke in Electrae. “What they really want to know is if we have something to trade.”

“Exactly,” said Desta.

The Iskandars nodded, satisfied. The odd, telepathic conversation went on for some time, allowing both parties to study each other. Eventually, the caravan of the otherkin broke off and continued on their slow trek. Iskandar Yessod Olam watched their retreating figures with satisfaction. It had been concluded that the otherkin would revisit their valley in the future, and the humans promised there would be much to trade at that time.

Soon the caravan disappeared from view around a bend in the canyon’s walls. Yessod Olam gestured, and the guardian force knelt, leaving the Iskandars to frankly regard the four remarkable individuals arrayed before them.

“Lilit and Desta,” he began. The two young women bowed. “Desta, your meta powers enabled communication with beings of another species. Lilit, you successfully located underground water by observing the root patterns of deep-rooted plants in the area.” Lilit nodded. “I also understand you believe you may be able to detect metal deposits by studying the density of underground fungal networks.” Lilit nodded once more.

Yessod Olam glanced at his colleagues before he continued, “We are the stewards of past lore and shepherds of a swiftly changing present. Lilit and Desta, we represent a dying breed, the last generation of our kind. The future belongs to you.”

The two tall girls exchanged uncertain glances. With a slightly trembling voice, Desta said, “I speak for both of us when I say that your lack of meta-faculties does not render you witless, and our powers do not make us wise.”

“Well spoken, child,” said Yessod Olam. “All the same, part of our wisdom is realizing that your voices are needed in the council. Though the details are still to be worked out, we have decided that you two will be a part of the Sanhedrin. What say you?”

Lilit and Desta looked at each other before they broke into grins and nods.

Yessod Olam nodded to Nishmat, who took a moment to regard Sargon and Angora. In a clear, carrying voice, she said, “Your names—and to a lesser degree, Sargon’s associates—will be forever remembered in our world’s annals, of this I have no doubt. We are here today because of your pioneering spirit, insights, and audacity to venture into the uncharted and the forbidden.” She bowed deeply. One by one, the Iskandars followed suit, then the kneeling guardians, and finally Lilit and Desta, until only Sargon and Angora remained standing. Overwhelmed, they bowed in return.

As everyone straightened up, Nishmat continued, “The traits you exhibited are the very ones we’ve been culling for generations and tried to curb in you both.” She smiled tightly. “We are forever grateful that we failed and you succeeded. It was a hard lesson, but we learned. We face an uncertain future, requiring this kind of thinking. In short, we invite you and Angora to join the Sanhedrin.”

“I would be honored,” said Sargon. By his side, Angora clasped her hands in agreement.

Suddenly, Sargon swept Angora off her feet, lifting her into the air and spinning her around, his wife laughing in delight and surprise. He kissed her. “I’ve a good feeling about the future,” he said to her with a boyish grin. She laughed and blinked tears away. “So do I,” she said and kissed him back to the cheers of the iskandars and guardians in attendance. “So do I.”

--THE END--