

Sweet Muse of Madness

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SWEET MUSE OF MADNESS

BOOK ONE IN THE SONG OF GREECE SERIES

By Anthony Giarmo

For

Barbara,

like the earth, in all seasons, wonderful.

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A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

This story takes place in a small farming community in what is now known as central Greece about five thousand, three hundred years before the time of this writing, or, to put it in terms of our odd backward-forward reckoning of history, around 3,300 years Before Common Era.

On nearly every continent at this time, people are engaged in some mix of hunting, herding and farming. Lost to their memory is humankind's epic migration out of Africa millennia before. Uncomprehending of the enormous dimensions of time and space, these ancient communities live mostly in isolation from one another, on a flat earth under a finite domed ceiling alternating reliably between sunlit blue and starlit black.

There is at this time a sprinkling of urban areas in Sumer, now Iraq. The common culture of these early cities, each with its own king, constitutes the first great civilization, Mesopotamia.

To the Sumerians' west, Egypt is a few generations away from uniting its own cities in what will be the first nation-state under a single ruler.

However, to the north, across the then daunting expanse of the world-sea now known as the Mediterranean, the farmers of our story, toiling in the shadow of Mount Olympos, have close to three thousand years to journey before attaining that "golden age" most of us associate with ancient Greece. In fact, the gulf of time between the events of this tale and the Athens of Pericles is greater than the span between that golden age and our time. Pericles has much more in common with you, dear reader, than he has with the characters you are about to meet.

These characters are merely striving to spend their brief, anxious existence as painlessly as possible. They have no inkling that their actions will be viewed as extraordinary and exaggerated into legend by their descendants. Tall tales, intermingled with the traditions of later ethnic groups, and infused with a belief in the hero's connection to the elemental power of nature itself, cross the threshold from local legend to universal myth. Finally, as the myth is ritualized and structured into a cultural and political

force, myth becomes religion. So it is that desperate lives can be transformed into the central symbols of a society millennia after those lives have returned to dust.

And yet, despite their own magical perceptions of the world, and their future mythological potential, the individuals in this story are bound by the same physical laws that limit you and me. One must seek wizards, dragons and messiahs elsewhere.

My apologies to mythology purists in regard to the liberal use of names, which I draw from mythological sources all over the Mediterranean and Middle East. These names, indeed the very languages from which they arise, are anachronistic. I use them because the elemental relationships of the mythic namesakes are reflected in the way my fragile, mortal characters relate to one another. And also because, as a young reader, I grafted onto these names as securely as a newly hatched chick attaches to the first living thing it sees. I have been trying to express my own version of these basic relationships ever since then. There are also place names and names for general ideas in this story that were probably not in use at the time, but which I call upon simply to maintain geographic and conceptual familiarity.

I ask forgiveness also from those seeking specific historical data regarding Greece five millennia ago. From the archaeology, we know something of their physical lives, but really next to nothing about their spiritual views, other than that they more than likely worshipped a Goddess, and represented the invisible forces of the world in female terms. What I have done is draw upon traditions and practices of indigenous peoples from different continents and various periods of history, to bring forth not a definitive statement of a culture, but what I believe is a reasonable suggestion of what might have been. And so, while I aimed for general factual accuracy and character credibility, my intent ultimately is to use a distant time and place as a means by which we may experience, as much as words allow experience, a human condition that is both alien and familiar, disturbing and wondrous.

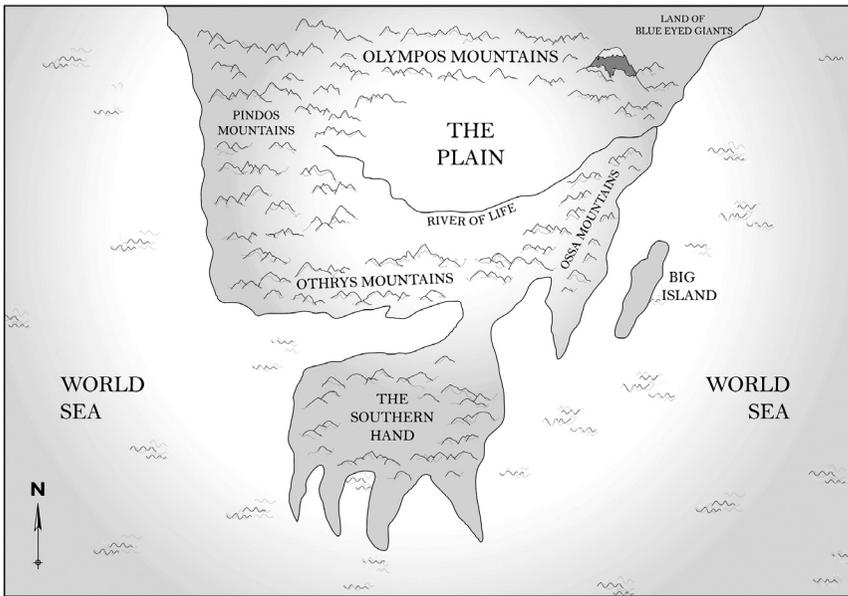
A.G. – 2010 Common Era

THE WORLD



3300 Years Before Common Era

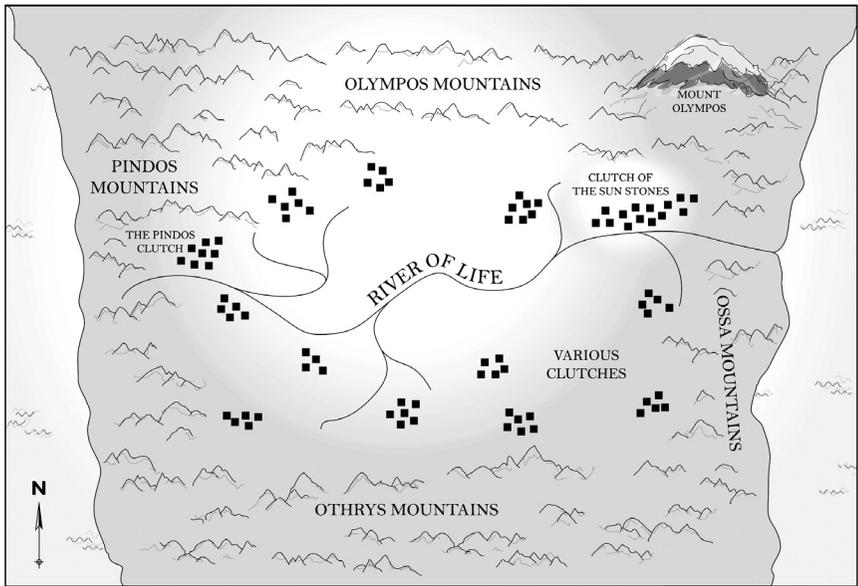
GRAIA



3300 Years Before Common Era

THE PLAIN

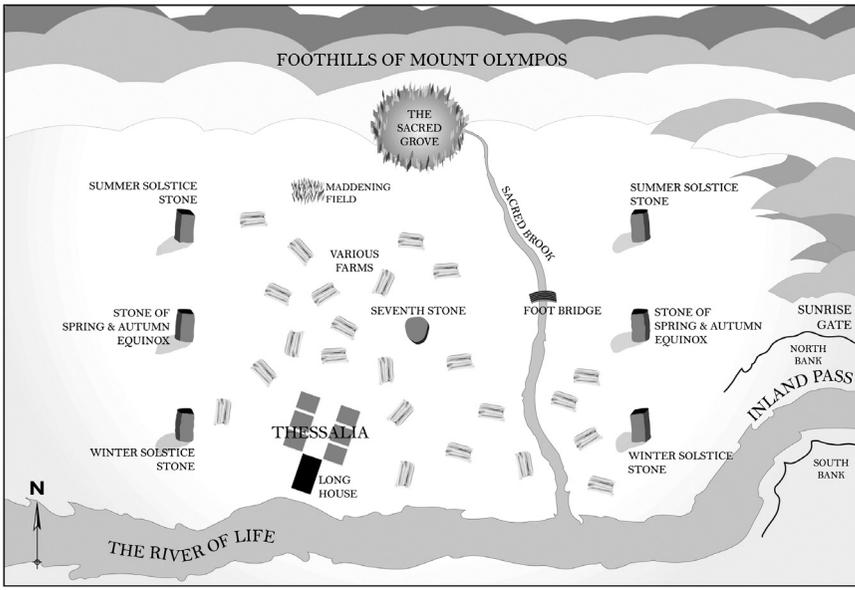
THE BOWL OF FEASTING



3300 Years Before Common Era

CLUTCH OF THE SUN STONES

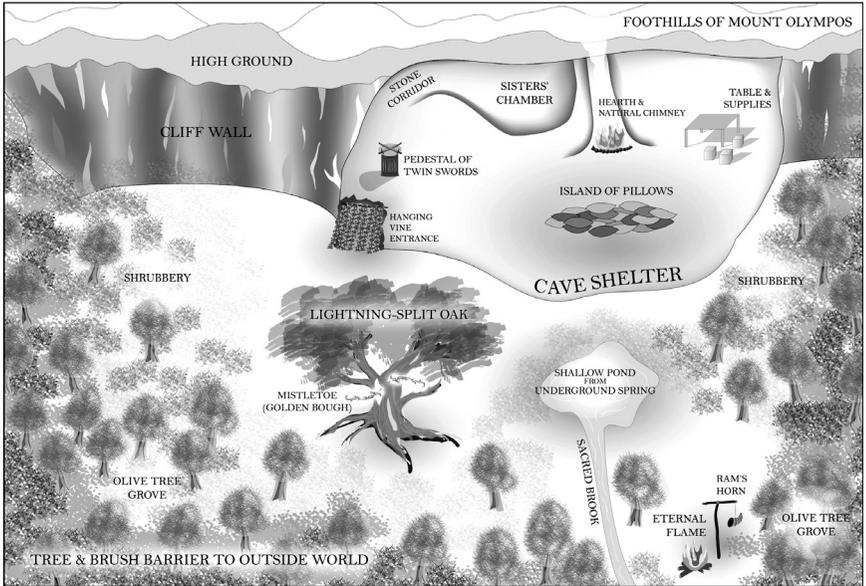
FURROWS BENEATH THE SACRED GROVE



3300 Years Before Common Era

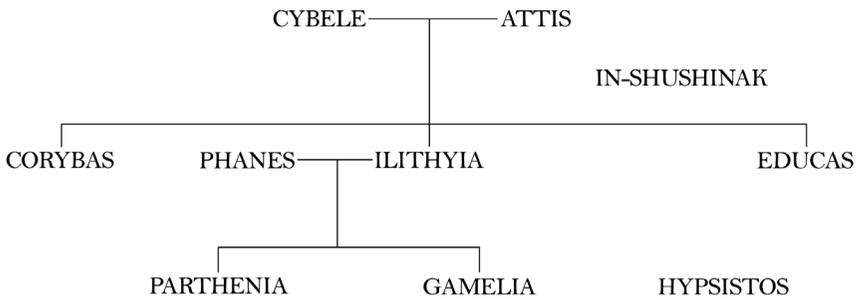
THE SACRED GROVE

THE NAVEL OF THE WORLD



3300 Years Before Common Era

LINEAGE OF THESSALIA



3300 Years Before Common Era

My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms, ye gods, for you yourselves have wrought the changes, breathe on these my undertakings, and bring down my song in unbroken strains from the world's very beginning even unto the present time.

Ovid

Metamorphosis

Common Era Year 7

ONE

Like the song of the great World Snake, who dances deep between the thighs of the Earth Mother, shedding his sheath to be reborn with each new season, the hiss of the night wind glided through the Sacred Grove. Dark air slithered among the leaves, among the lush branches, shelf upon shelf, layer upon layer of bough, the full boughs rising and falling in the sable breezes, like the craving breaths of a many breasted beast.

Phanes stood silent and still in the thickness of the Grove. The surrounding leaves rested upon him, nestled against him, seemed to grow as scales from him. He was child and father to the wood. It was his swaddling clothes. It was his shroud. There was no longer any thought of his time before the Grove. That was a different life, another person, a forgotten name. Now he was Phanes, Light of the World, Chaos King.

The air was warm for a night in autumn, damp and clinging on his flesh. Moisture from the strong but brief shower earlier that evening gathered on the leaves like beads of sweat emerging from the Goddess' ardor.

Eyes closed, Phanes breathed in the aroma of the olives of the Grove. Olives, for all the People of the Plain, were life. So Phanes, in darkness, breathed deep and grew strong. Soon the olives would be harvested. It had been a long wait, for wild olive trees bore fruit every other year. Phanes had killed five challengers since the last harvest.

There was also the smell of pine trees that were interspersed throughout the Grove. In the very center of the sacred area stood a great and solitary oak, its wide trunk partly split by a bolt of lightning long ago, its leaves, newly blushed by the breath of autumn, hovering in the half-moon light like dim stars. Unseen, unheard, but felt by Phanes as surely as a serpent on his own skin, mistletoe slinked its way along the oak's trunk and branches. Mysterious mistletoe, never growing from the ground, nor falling from the clouds, caught between earth and heaven. The People of the Plain told the tale of the oak, a beautiful gift arising from the Goddess, then touched by the thunderous finger of the Sky God, bringing forth the mistletoe, divine

snake of the white berry, branch of the yellow leaf, fork-tongued lightning transformed into a golden bough, infused with the power of life and death.

Accompanying the scent of olive and pine and oak was the music of the brook, which gurgled forth from an underground spring and collected in a small pond not far from the great lightning split tree, before descending the rocky incline to the flatlands where it ultimately joined one of the main rivers of the Plain. This water was at once the blood of the Goddess and the nectar of the Sky God, whose life force poured onto and through the Earth Mother as the cream of man flows through woman.

And so Phanes, still and silent, breathed deep the Sacred Grove and heard its song.

At twenty-eight years, Phanes was nearly past his prime, or at least he would be were he not one with the Grove. He was not particularly big and strong in comparison to others on the Plain, but he had been faster than the God-King who had preceded him and fortunate enough to survive the first few challenges to his own reign. Thus he had gained the warrior skills needed to be worthy of his divine position for thirteen years, during which time fifty-three men had fallen to his sword. True, the disadvantage leaned toward the challenger, but this was fitting. Godhood should not be easily attained.

Hanging beyond his shoulder blades, the hair of Phanes was straight and black. It was said no King of the Wood had ever lived long enough to see a grey hair. This, too, was as it should be. An old God-King was reflected in a withered and barren Plain. Phanes had pledged with his life that such a Plain would never come to pass.

The eyes of the Chaos King were dark and unsmiling, his nose crooked, the result of a break that had not healed properly. A nearly fatal blow had made a small indentation on the left side of his skull, where hair only partially had grown back. His beardless jaw was set with determination. Ten of his teeth were lost to age and violence. Forbidden by tradition to carry a shield, his left arm was badly scarred and bruised, but still functioning. His breathing was even and relaxed, yet he stood poised to move instantly in any direction.

Phanes the God-King wore a short-sleeved vest of wool, which covered a muscular torso developed by a childhood of working the fields. A bull leather belt held up his goat-hide leggings, and a soft skin of lamb wrapped his feet. All these animals had been fed by the Goddess, and now Her power enveloped him, swept into him. He felt Her nurturing presence with each shift of his clothing, just as he did when he walked through the Grove itself.

Among common folk, tradition held that a newborn's birth cord be cut and tied in such a way as to protrude slightly from the navel. So had it been at Phanes' birth. The little fleshy finger was decorated with flaxen ribbon, a constant reminder of his unbreakable bond to the Mother of all life.

In each hand he held a short sword, blade of copper, the strongest metal known to the People of the Plain. His belt had no sheathes for these weapons, for it was unwise to let the blades out of hand even for a moment. The Earth Mother had given this gift of copper as well and Phanes could feel its divine force pulsing in his grip as powerfully as he could the throbbing of his own penis. And yet, in its sharpened form, the metal could not be permitted to touch, certainly not stab, into the ground, lest it wound the very source that had brought it forth.

He took a step forward, out of the brush, which had hidden him, and looked outward beyond the boundaries of his immediate domain. The Sacred Grove was on a step of sorts, chiseled by the Goddess out of the foothills that overlooked the Plain. The distant horizon was lost in the darkness so that the stars above and the campfires and burning hearths on the Plain below were countless points of light on a vast black curtain. For all he could tell, the spirits of the dead, which Phanes knew the stars to be, walked among the living this night. And who was to say some of those twinkling points above were not fiery hearths warming the dead in their eternal rest? Phanes smiled at his own silly notion. Everyone knew the Sun God and Moon Goddess alone warmed the heavens.

Phanes carefully put the blade of one sword in place under his armpit and held his free hand, fingers fanned out, above his head. Swaying his hand side to side, he watched the stars disappear and return to view between his fingers.

How easily the God-King transforms the sky, he thought playfully, then, with the sudden realization that he actually might upset some cosmic balance, he quickly withdrew his hand. For Phanes, Chaos King of the Wood, knew that just as he was the recipient of the power of the Great Unifying Source, so, too, did he radiate that power, with results that, for the People of the Plain, could be beneficial or disastrous.

Phanes, Light of the World, moved within the center of an awesome dance, ecstatic and horrific, and heavy upon him was the responsibility to direct the music to the advantage of those who worshipped him. The dancing World Snake was everywhere, in the remaining tendrils of cloud from the recent storm, in the twisting branches of the Grove, in the meandering mistletoe, the brook worming down to the Plain, the breeze blown tentacles

of his own long hair, the darting tongue, the curling finger, protruding navel, writhing birth cord, stinging sword, piercing phallus. The serpent was in every fiber of the web of life, all of it embraced by the Goddess, brought forth by Her, and ultimately, consumed by Her. It was All One.

And Phanes breathed deep, standing silent, listening for the call only a deity could answer.

A soft snap, followed by a shadow flashing past the eternal flame that was maintained on the edge of the Grove. Phanes himself had restarted the sacred fire after the shower. Now he sprang toward the burning light. The dark figure made straight for the oak, and the God-King, sparked by the thrill of the chase, ran to intercept him. Phanes' eyes were well accustomed to the night, and drawing closer to the intruder, saw him to be a youth of about twenty years, five years older than Phanes himself had been when he first entered the Grove on that terrifying night so long ago. The youth was slightly taller than Phanes, and wore nothing but short leather leggings. As expected, he was without a weapon. Going by the markings on his copper arm band, the unannounced visitor was identified as a slave, who, like most of the other trespassers, was compelled by desperation, ambition or religious fervor to risk his life in an attempt to achieve godhood, and all the privileges and burdens that came with it.

Reach the oak, break off a piece of the mistletoe, and you will be shielded from harm, so went the story on the Plain. Obtain the lightning bough, and you will have earned the honor of challenging a god, so the slave was told. The prospects of the glory of divinity and the pleasures of a God-Queen's embrace were enough to drive him this far, but now that he was in the Grove, what had seemed to be paradise from a distance, suddenly felt overwhelmingly threatening and bleak.

The intruder could see the great black mass of the tree in the night, and the glint of starlight in the brook that stretched diagonally between the eternal flame and the oak. He hesitated at the pond formed by the underground spring, knowing he had to get past it, but in the darkness, unsure of its depth. The pause cost him.

Without warning, what appeared to be a great bat swooped down from nowhere upon the water. Phanes, at full speed, had leaped from the far side of the pond and had hit the shallows running. He swung his right-hand sword at the young slave, who reflexively ducked, only to be cut across the abdomen by the left sword. As the point of the blade arced away from the youth, it whipped streams of blood into the blackness. The strange beauty of the crimson threads caught the eye of the God-King for an instant, and in

that instant the slave threw his body, shoulder first, into his attacker, casting Phanes heels over head into the pond. This maneuver greatly impressed the Protector of the Oak, who instinctively positioned his weapons to ward off another strike.

Such a defense was unnecessary, for the slave, shocked into clarity by the perilous moment, left the adversary behind and splashed his way across the pond, his attention focused on the sacred tree. Only when he stepped upon dry ground did he feel the sting of his sliced stomach. He pressed on, too frightened to stop and examine the depth of the wound. The splashes of the King of the Wood were close behind.

Now he was before the oak. Reaching up, the youth grabbed a short sprig of mistletoe and ripped it from the trunk. He turned swiftly, knowing his pursuer surely was upon him and, risking all on the good will of the Goddess, held the mistletoe high.

Phanes checked his swing, then took a step back. The two men, breathing heavily, stood facing one another. It was rare that an intruder actually reached the oak. Phanes smiled and nodded in admiration, and knelt before the lightning branch held high. Was it the astonishing event of a God-King bowing to him, or the power of the mistletoe itself that filled the young slave with a sense of magnificence he had never known in his hard, demeaning life?

“You are a slave no more, my friend. You have earned the status of Carrier of the Golden Bough,” Phanes said. It was a proud proclamation.

After a moment of reverent silence, the God-King stood once again.

“Now you have a choice. You may, under the protection of the mistletoe, walk back to the border of the Sacred Grove and return to the People, in hopes that they may heal your wound. Or you may continue your challenge to me. Choose.”

“I wish to continue...my challenge...”

“Very well. Tuck the golden bough in among the larger vine on the oak. Take care not to let it touch the ground or I will slay you where you stand.”

The youth did as he was told. Then Phanes presented one of his swords, and spoke with great respect and gentleness.

“Accept this, friend, and know that in this moment, in life or death, you will be transformed.”

The man no more a slave put his hands on his body wound and bent over in pain.

“My wound, my Lord. It hurts...”

Now Phanes was stern.

“Take this blade in your hand or in your heart. It matters not to me.”

The twenty year old slowly took the sword.

“Good,” said Phanes. “Who knows what the Goddess holds for either of us. You may yet prevail. Your torn flesh may yet know the healing needle and thread of the God-Queen, Ilithyia. And then, joy of joys, your snake may yet dance to the rapture of her love.”

Ilithyia. It was a name more naturally sung than spoken, and the very sound of it quickened the pulse of the youth. He had heard of the unsurpassed beauty of the wife of Phanes, although no one had actually seen her in many years. Still, the thought of such a union swept away the pain in his abdomen and inspired the challenger to take the stance of combat.

A healthy distance between them now, the two men cautiously circled one another. Phanes made a token stab, knowing the other would deflect it. This young man, thought the God-King, deserved the belief that at least he had put up a fight before meeting his fate. Now it was the youth who thrust at the King of the Wood. As Phanes easily parried it, he could sense the attacking blade was about to simply drop out of the challenger’s ever weakening grip. Time to finish this while the youth could still feel that he had been a warrior. With an adroit motion, Phanes stepped in, pushed aside the other’s sword arm, and slid his sharpened copper into the challenger’s midsection. This was executed carefully, even tenderly, as a lover slips into his beloved. There was a crack and scrape of bone as a rib briefly blocked the advance of the blade, but Phanes’ experienced hand shifted the sword slightly to complete its passage through to the opponent’s back.

Now the sting in the intruder’s abdomen became a searing fireball melting his innards. An expression of surprise appeared on the youth’s face, followed by curiosity surrounding these new internal sensations, then sheer, shocked, open mouthed, voiceless agony. Finally there was in his countenance surrender to the inevitable, as prey submits to predator, and the possessed to the possessor.

Phanes smoothly withdrew his sword and both sides of the youth’s midsection became red fountains. The challenger collapsed, his released blade snatched by the victor before it touched the earth. For a few moments, Phanes stood silently over the vanquished. Even with a relatively easy kill, it was always a relief to have survived yet another would-be usurper.

“Thank you, Mother,” Phanes whispered.

The Chaos King bent to his knees and placed both swords gingerly upon the ground, saying, “Forgive me, Mother, this offense, I mean no injury to you.”

Then he put his scarred left arm beneath the dying youth's neck, as if cradling a child.

"Rest now," said Phanes. It was almost a chant. "Rest now, Dying Warrior. You have been transformed. No longer are you slave. No longer will you be called by your slave name. Just as I am no longer called by my mortal name."

With his free hand, Phanes combed his fingers through the admired one's wavy black hair and caressed the life drained face.

"I will sing the praises of that man who threw down Phanes into the sacred pond. I will sing to the glory of that man who ignored his great wound and held high the golden bough."

His body numbed beyond pain, the young fighter looked up at Phanes with wide eyes, with amazed, awed eyes watered by happiness, with the sweet, sublime madness that comes at the moment of death.

Phanes sang on.

"I will celebrate that man who fought furiously the battle of the gods. This is how you will be remembered. We are Brothers of the Sacred Grove, and the day will come when I, too, will fall as you have fallen, into the embrace of the Goddess."

The deep voice of the God-King resounded in the dying one's skull, the visage of the divine Guardian of the Golden Bough burning more brilliantly than the sun. It was the last image the youth beheld.

A spasm of bile and blood from his mouth, and he was gone. Phanes, as he had done so many times before, gently closed a comrade's unseeing eyes and kissed softly the ooze crusted lips. Such a kiss, of course, posed the risk of the dead man sucking in his killer's soul to rejuvenate his own lifeless body. Phanes was confident, however, that his flattering chant had eliminated any vengeful intent and protected him as he bestowed the conquered one's spirit with a generous breath of divinity with which to shine most brightly among the stars.

Now Phanes took the honored dead in his arms and stood. Deliberately, solemnly, giving way to his own mournful tears, he walked away from the oak and across the shallow pond. By the time he reached the eternal flame, Phanes was covered in the dead man's blood. There he set the body down. Then he stood and took hold of a great ram's horn that hung from a short pole next to the fire. Phanes blew three long blasts that cried out over the Plain like the birth giving wail of the Goddess Herself.

Almost immediately, before he could place the horn back upon the pole, he noticed the robed figures of the caretakers of the Grove scrambling

up the rocky slope. Not for the first time, the caretakers would bring the corpse back down to the Plain in great haste, for there was much to be done before the body stiffened. Phanes knew that even now there were those from surrounding farms jumping out of their beds at the sound of the ram's horn, eager to participate in the feast. The body would be cut up and the pieces roasted. What was not eaten would be thrown into the newly furrowed fields with great ceremony, for was it not glorious that the King of the Wood had provided yet another sacrifice to fill with grace those mortals who partook of it and to slake the Goddess' unceasing hunger? Surely She would return with wheat and barley what She had received in blood.

Phanes stood humbled by this opportunity to bestow such a gift unto his people. Someday it would be his supreme honor to be himself collected by the caretakers, after having made every effort to see to it that his successor truly was worthy of godhood.

For tonight, however, he had fulfilled his role, for no other challenger would enter the Sacred Grove after the blowing of the ram's horn. He felt radiant with the blessings of the Earth Mother. Mindful of the danger of the approaching caretakers accidentally setting eyes upon him and thus being driven to madness, Phanes, Light of the World, turned from the corpse and the flame and strode back across his hallowed realm. He waited in the shadows until the body had been removed, then, alone once again, shed his clothing, sat down in the shallow pond and bathed under the stars. The bloody vest, goatskin leggings and the two copper swords were washed as well, and the color of sacrifice turned the little brook into a vein further vivifying the land. When he was finished, Phanes, with a shiver, stepped out of the pond and, naked but for the belongings he carried, continued on toward the cave that was located deep within the Sacred Grove, the cave in which his beloved Ilithyia waited.

Soon the fragrance of the sacrifice would waft up to this holy place, consecrating its olives and pine and oak and mistletoe with the power of that ineffable presence dwelling within all things.

TWO

Ilithyia slept by day. After all these secluded years within the bounds of the Sacred Grove, far from the practical concerns of the People of the Plain, the shapes and sounds of what, as a child, she had thought of as the waking world, seemed but a dream compared to the formlessness and sublimity of night. She had come to understand that as God-Queen, it was not only her social duty but her divine privilege to be immersed in that fathomless source of both daylight and darkness.

But it was not her godly role alone that compelled Ilithyia to spend her starlit hours in roundabout circuits of the cave shelter, occasionally pausing to perform some menial domestic chore, then once again taking up her aimless amble, waiting either for the dawn and sleep, or the return of the God-King. Her thoughts told her that whoever entered the cave shelter each daybreak would have earned the title King of the Wood. Whether it be Phanes or his vanquisher, her own desires were supposed to be of no consequence. She was expected to submit to his advances, and if rejected by him in favor of a new God-Queen, accept her own execution by his sword.

So it was, twilight after twilight, Phanes held her with trembling arms in what they both knew might well be their last embrace, and stepped out to fulfill his destiny as Guardian of the Bough. Dusk upon dusk, Ilithyia committed herself to the will of the Earth Mother. If the Great Goddess chose to replace Her mortal personification with one who would bear more healthy children, and thereby deliver that vitality to the People of the Plain, so be it.

Yet Ilithyia was a woman. She loved Phanes. It had been Phanes who, thirteen years earlier, slew not only his predecessor but the previous God-Queen and her children as well. It would be catastrophic for the People of the Plain to have the offspring of the prior occupants of the Grove rising up to avenge their parents and igniting a blood feud that might destroy the Divine Realm itself. Better to wipe out the entire family line, like a sickly strain of wheat, and refresh the land with a new grain. This Phanes had

done. Then he chose Ilithyia to live with him in the Sacred Grove. At that time only thirteen years of age herself, Ilithyia had known no other man. She gave Phanes two daughters, now aged thirteen and twelve.

Although they were a royal family, the foursome inhabited the cave shelter without benefit of servants or slaves, for no mortal could look upon a god and live. The daughters, however, were considered to be not yet fully imbued with divinity and so were permitted by the general community to roam freely outside the Grove among common folk. Beautiful and healthy, the two children were a clear confirmation of their mother's continued suitability as God-Queen. More importantly, Phanes chose to keep Ilithyia as his wife, and their love had grown over these many years, along with the abundance of the crops on the Plain. Indeed, their consistent reign was believed by all to be the cause of the abundance.

Earlier this evening, when the brief shower had come and gone, Ilithyia had kissed her husband with a passion that spoke of many things, of her gratitude for the protection he had provided for the family, of her fear that he would not return, and of her acceptance of their mutual duties and possible fates. Phanes had looked with kind eyes at her face, touched her cheek tenderly, then, taking up his two swords, strode off into the thickness of the Grove.

Now Ilithyia, God-Queen of the Lightning Oak, waited within her private domain. The shelter in which she stood was only in part a natural structure, the limestone cliff wall curving overhead like the Earth Mother's cupped hand. A tall fence of thin wooden posts, long since covered by vegetation, filled in the remaining cave opening. This fence was more in the manner of a partition from the rest of the Sacred Grove, and any animals that passed through it, rather than a fortification against attack. It had been more than a generation since any barbarians had threatened the Plain. A curtain of vines from the overhanging cliff covered the shelter entrance. The arching stone wall and ceiling, the wood and vine partition, this was the loving embrace of the Goddess.

Bear and deer and boar skins, more gifts from the Earth Mother, covered much of the smooth, cold floor. A rocky alcove, sculpted by time itself, enclosed a small, stone hearth burning forth heat and light, with smaller flames coming from camphor torches inserted into thin copper stands scattered about the interior. Smoke rose from the torches up through natural vertical vents in the cave ceiling. The camphor oil was drawn from the wood of evergreen trees, the everlasting emerald hair of the Life Giver. Whenever she lit the hearth and torches, usually with a beeswax candle fed

by the Sacred Grove's eternal flame, Ilithia would chant a short prayer of thanks to the Goddess and close her eyes and smile in pleasure at the touch of the Mother's hot, sustaining breath. In truth, the divine power surging up from the heart of the world far beneath her, intensified by the vital force of the animal hide on which she stood, fanned by the frenzied tongues of fire around her, often brought Ilithia to the edge of ecstasy.

But now was not the time for sweet abandon. Not just yet. It was well into the night, and if any challenger were to confront Phanes, it would be soon. She waited, unable to escape the inevitable anxiety that was her nightly visitor.

The God-Queen turned from the hearth and stepped toward some wooden chairs that were cloaked in calfskin. Not far from the chairs was the bed, a collection of goose-feathered pillows wrapped in flaxen cloth. Deeper into the cave, almost blending with the dark browns and greys of the limestone wall, was a naturally formed corridor leading into a smaller chamber where the two daughters slept. Unlike their parents, the girls were up and about during the day and went to sleep when the Sun God reunited with the Goddess in the west.

Ilithia, God-Queen of the Golden Bough, prayed that her beautiful offspring would sleep deeply, that if a stranger entered the cave this night, if they were all to be put to the sword, that it would happen quickly, before the children could awake and know terror, that the bloody act be carried out with little pain to them, and that their spirits would join Phanes, not in the sky, where the souls of ordinary mortals often went to be transformed into stars, but rather deep in the Earth Mother's womb, to be reborn as life giving stalks of grain in the fields of the Plain.

A loud splash came from the pond in the Grove. It could mean only one thing. Her fists holding a tight rein on the demons of fear, Ilithia rushed across the living space to the cave entrance. She took a deep breath, cautiously parted the vines that hung over the shelter threshold, and peered into the night. There was only a half moon and little clarifying light from the stars. The central lightning split oak was a giant silhouette among the smaller pine and olive trees. At the Grove's outer boundary, the eternal flame, actually the size of a campfire, was as a candlelight in the distance. Shards of flickering gold were cast from the flame onto the brook that spilled out of the pond and down the slope to the Plain below. The view of the pond fed by the underground spring was blocked by shrubbery, but the water sang of two men running across its shallow depths.

Then, silence but for the chirp of grasshoppers. Had the intruder

reached the mistletoe? Must Phanes do battle yet again? Ilithyia's hand stroked her forehead. She closed her eyes with worry. There were voices drifting up from the other side of the oak, but she could not discern the words. Suddenly the clang of copper and her heart fell into the ever tightening coils of the World Snake. She slumped in fearful uncertainty as she had done so many times in the past. And, as before, Ilithyia, Queen of the Wood, found the will to straighten, to listen, to ward off the horror.

Now from the blackness, an unmistakable grunt of pain. Then a single voice only, chanting softly. Ilithyia knew Phanes sang a prayer after a kill, but this did not console her. The intruder could have understood that he should do the same were he to be victorious. In due time, there appeared by the eternal flame a form, one combatant carrying the body of the other, their two shapes fused by the night into a strange solitary figure. The body was set down. Ilithyia squinted but it was no use. One dark form looked much like another. Then the wail of the ram's horn. Again, no comfort to the God-Queen. Surely the intruder, probably a slave, would have heard this loud signal to the caretakers many times and appreciated his own duty to summon them.

Turning from the body and the flame, the victor strode back toward the oak and melted into the impenetrable mass of the Grove. Whoever he was, he'd have to wait for the caretakers to collect the fallen one, then wash the blood off himself in the pond. Ilithyia would have time to prepare for his arrival. She should look beautiful for the man who stepped through the threshold into the cave shelter. Bowing her head, the God-Queen prayed her husband to forgive her, even though she knew that if Phanes had joined the spirits of the dead this night, he would want her to see to her own survival and that of the children.

"You are all I know of a man's love," she had said to him years before. "I would rather die than be embraced by another God-King."

And Phanes had answered, "No, Ilithyia. You must open yourself to my slayer. Convince him to accept you and the children as his own. And if per chance he is so blind and crude as to reject one so radiant as you, teach our daughters to charm the snake so that they at least may be spared."

"Yes, my beloved."

Now, letting go of the parted vines and allowing them to once again shut off her view of the Grove, Ilithyia set her thoughts to her preparations, which, at this point in her life, had been repeated so many times as to become almost a ritual, and yet never free from dread of the unknown. The preparations had become her ceremony of seduction, her dance of death.

She moved back toward the blazing hearth, next to which was a wooden table pressed against the stone wall. Lying upon the table was a disc shaped mirror of polished silver, about twice the size of an open hand, inserted into a copper handle. Silver mirrors were a luxury among the People of the Plain, most common folk having only their reflections in water or glazed clay pots to determine their appearance. Even the God-Queen could see but a dull, distorted image staring back at her. But it was a visage of beauty, its most striking aspect being the rich, green eyes that, despite the glossy grey surface of the mirror, shone forth with the unrestrained power of spring. It was an eye color found nowhere else on the Plain, possessed by neither her parents nor her two daughters. Ilithyia's thick eyebrows were an unbroken strip of black hair that naturally peaked slightly downward in the middle. In profile, the bridge bone between her eyes created a nearly perfect diagonal line from the top of her forehead to the tip of her nose. She still had just about all of her teeth, which was rare for a twenty-six year old. The teeth's whiteness was the result of attentive rubbing with a twig stripped of its bark. Her sharply sculpted temples, cheekbones and chin produced a feral quality. Indeed, a passing glance at her could give one the impression of a graceful beast smiling wisely through the Goddess' luxuriant, leafy mask.

Ilithyia positioned the mirror so that it rested on the tabletop but leaned against the stone wall. Then she pulled a chair toward her and sat before the table. Picking up a small comb of cow bone, she untangled her full, black hair, which matched her husband's in length, and which hung freely without styling. There was a collection of copper vessels and cosmetic tools arranged neatly on the tabletop. She dipped a little brush of rabbit hair into some black dye drawn from the leaf of the ink shrub, and applied it to her eyebrows, accentuating the natural downward peak and thus forming two black arches joining just above her nose. Next she rubbed clay ocher on her eyelids and cheeks, and red berry juice on her lips. A smaller pigment brush drew a dark line around her green eyes, which widened with satisfaction at her own skill. Dipping her fingers into an ointment vessel containing finely crushed flower petals, she dabbed her neck and upper body. Ilithyia had immersed herself in the secretions of the Earth Mother, and in so doing was sanctified by the Goddess. The wife of Phanes paused briefly in reverent gratitude.

But her adornment for the approaching God-King, this unknown victor, was not yet complete. On the tabletop were gemstones of lapis lazuli, blue and flecked with yellow, tied to thin cords formed of twisted grain stalk

fibers. These she looped about her ears. Gleaming carnelian stones formed a necklace that now graced her shoulders, and to crown her head, a lapis wreath with gold metal leaves. Gold also ringed her wrists. She stood and fastened about her thin waist a belt of carnelian and green feldspar. None of the precious stones and metals that she wore came from the Plain. They all were delivered by those few traders who came to these parts from the Great Mother's farthest reaches. The People of the Plain were honored to sacrifice much of their own produce in exchange for these treasures, which they would stealthily leave near the eternal flame for her to discover. It was to the greater glory of the God-Queen, even though the People themselves would never see her wearing the gemstones.

Ilithia took a step back and tilted her head this way and that in order to see as much of her body as possible in the silver mirror. Earlier, she had shaved her face and limbs with a copper razor, leaving her armpit and pubic hair in short braids. Except for the adornments, her shoulders and arms were bare of clothing, as were her splendid breasts, the nipples painted, like her lips, with the juice of the red berry, promising the abundance and sweetness of her sacred nectar. At her navel, the birth cord was tied and ribboned like her husband's, and protruded just above her gemstone belt, which topped a heavily flounced skirt of yellowish linen woven from the flax plant. The skirt length went all the way to the floor, hiding her bare feet. Draped over another chair was a long scarf of the same flaxen material and color. She took it up and put it about her shoulders, the two scarf ends hanging down in front of her breasts, which peeked enticingly from behind the linen. Out of the earthly abyss, life's indomitable current had ascended into the flax plant, transformed into linen, penetrated her flesh and now coursed her veins.

She was ready. Ilithia, God-Queen of the Golden Bough, wrapped in and permeated by the power of the Great Mother, faced the cave shelter threshold. Fifty-four times, counting this very night, she had heard the sounds of battle amidst the Grove. Fifty-four times she had waited in silence, commanding herself to stay calm. In moments a man would part the hanging vines and enter. Then, and only then, would Ilithia know whether her family's life was going to continue, change radically, or come to a terrifying end.

"Ilithia!"

Phanes understood perfectly well what his wife was going through and had no intention of prolonging her agony. He entered quickly as to put an end to the suspense. Tossing his clothing aside, but still holding the two

copper swords, he stood just inside the threshold, his arms spread, and turned about slowly, showing her that he was not wounded.

Always it was the same for Ilithia. A wave of relief almost knocked her over. Her knees came close to buckling. She bowed her head in thanks to the Goddess. Then her tearful, green eyes gleamed happily at her husband.

The King of the Grove slid his swords into the leather sheaths that lay upon a wooden pedestal not far from the entrance. He paused over the weapons, thanking them for their service, and turned once again to his queen. Earlier, as he bathed in the shallow pond, he had washed away not only the blood and grime, but the tension and heat of battle. Walking toward the cave shelter, he had allowed himself to be consumed with a craving for the woman who awaited him, his own stiffening branch pointing the way.

Now Ilithia, her composure gathered, straightened and threw her shoulders back, exhibiting herself alluringly.

They moved closer without hesitation and embraced. Only two people who shared this precarious life could have kissed as they did. There was physical lust, yes, but binding memory as well, the memory of two individuals exposed in full to one another over the years, the memory of a family made, a home preserved. Their tongues danced.

Phanes moved his hand down along his wife's skirt. Experience led his fingers to a particular flounce under which was a slit in the material. He slipped his hand through it and found Ilithia's braided pubic hair. She was standing with her legs well apart under the skirt so as to make it easier for his fingers to enter the fleshy grotto, already moist, in which dwelled her small, erected mound. This mound was the gift of the Sky God, a tiny penis to bring the power of heaven and earth, male and female, together inside every woman. Phanes' fingertip barely touched the mound peak and music flooded her being. Ilithia caught her breath and flung her head back in blissful response to her sensations. She was looking up toward the shelter ceiling, but saw through it to the stars and the moon and the sun. And as her king skillfully stroked her, Ilithia felt as if she rose toward those heavenly bodies. She held fast to his wrist, making sure he did not withdraw his hand from her skirt too soon.

When this first rush of pleasure had crested and subsided, the God-Queen released a latch made of animal bone connected to the skirt waist. The flounced dress collapsed to the floor. Now Ilithia was naked but for the gemstones about her head, ears, neck, wrists and waist. She removed her crown of gold metal leaves so that it would not interfere with what she

was about to do, and tossed the wreath onto the goose down pillows. Then the Queen of the Wood dropped to her knees, using the collapsed skirt as a cushion. Bringing her hands to Phanes' penis, she reverently drew back and licked its foreskin, which, like the protruding navel, was a reflection of the sacred connection to the Earth Mother. Her tongue felt the scar running the length of his member's underside, a scar from a cut traditionally made to all young men at puberty, creating, if only temporarily, a female cleft of sorts. This tradition of cutting brought the Earth Goddess into the male's body, as the vaginal mound brought the Sky God into the female. Thus were men and women one. The actual sex act confirmed the unity of all life even further.

Phanes grunted with desire. After a while he took Ilithia by the shoulders and brought her up to kiss her again. In one another's arms, they fell upon the collection of feathered pillows. The Chaos King's lips touched tenderly his queen's painted nipples, then slowly moved down to the decorated navel, and breathed over the braided short hairs. Ilithia raised her legs and crossed them over her lover's shoulders, pressing his face deep into the delight that was his alone to relish. Phanes drowned in the taste and the smell of her. She swayed her arms aimlessly like stalks of grain in the wind, and surrendered to the enchanted breeze rippling across her soul.

"Writhe with me!" Ilithia whispered. It was a command.

Obediently, Phanes raised himself over her and effortlessly slithered into her garden. All words, all thoughts, now fled. For him there was only the experience of this ecstatic world called Ilithia. He glided in and out of her rhythmically, deeper with each thrust. Now the lovers' glaring eyes were intensely focused on one another. It was as if an invisible harness had locked their mutual stare in place, their facial expressions cast in the serious venture of sensual gratification and spiritual fulfillment.

At last, Phanes spit his sweet venom into her, and in return, felt more than heard the World Snake's irrepressible song. In that same climatic moment, Ilithia screamed, "Sajet Krulk!"

This was the name, expressed only during emotional extremes, of the Great Serpent. To utter it was to set in motion a cascade of consequences, for good or ill, resounding throughout the web of life, like the first pluck of a cosmic lyre.

"Sss-a-j-j-j-et-t-t K-k-k-r-r-r-ul-k-k-k!"

Each fragment of the name took its turn squeezing through her clenched teeth. She was lost in a furious passion, hungrily demanding every last morsel of satisfaction. Finally, with delicious slowness, Ilithia's frenzy

diminished and she and Phanes rested, exhausted, limbs still entwined, relieved of the night's excesses of violence, anxiety and lust. Now the smiles and gazes between them spoke only of gentleness and caring.

Phanes held his beloved in much the same way he had embraced the vanquished intruder not long before, and similarly, felt united with a person with whom he had submitted to a presence greater than himself.

“We are one with the Goddess,” Phanes chanted softly.

“All is One,” Ilithyia quietly replied.

Phanes and Ilithyia both had become quite adept at blocking any thoughts of the future's inevitable horror. This night together was all that mattered. Tomorrow was a world away, and daylight but a dream.

THREE

Parthenia hated doing anything after Gamelia. As the older child, Parthenia felt it was her divine right to be first in everything the two sisters did. And so, when the thirteen year old was awakened by the familiar sounds of their parents' lovemaking, and turned to see that Gamelia was already standing in the limestone corridor leading to the cave shelter's main area, Parthenia was naturally infuriated.

Only one standing torch was required to lend heat and light to the girls' small chamber through the night, but even in total darkness, Parthenia would have known her way well enough to throw off her fur blanket, jump up from her feathered pillow bed, and dart straight to her twelve year old sister's side. Gamelia was quite still, her face barely peeking out from the corridor to watch breathlessly as Ilithyia and Phanes performed their ritual of sacred sensuality. Then the child's head jerked back as Parthenia grabbed a fistful of her younger sister's hair and pulled Gamelia aside, thus claiming the prized viewing position. Gamelia suppressed a cry in response to the pain, knowing that the punishment for intruding upon her parents' privacy probably would be worse than anything her older sister could do to her. So she settled for looking over Parthenia's shoulder.

The sisters both had long black hair that cascaded over their naked bodies. In form they were already beginning to echo Ilithyia. To Parthenia's displeasure, her younger sibling was not only a little taller than she, but had breasts that were as well defined. Their faces resembled more that of Phanes, especially in the possession of his strong jaw. Both girls also had their father's dark brown eyes, but envied the bright green ones of Ilithyia, green being the color of life. Parthenia and Gamelia sometimes wondered whether their eye color meant they were not looked upon with favor by the great Goddess of All Things.

These young females were rarely reminded of their features when they traveled among the common folk, because most people had not seen the King or Queen for thirteen years and had little memory from which to draw comparisons. Ilithyia's parents, who still lived on the Plain,

would occasionally comment on the girls' physical characteristics and give Parthenia and Gamelia some sense of family heritage. The two daughters never heard their mother and father referred to as mortal, even though it was understood by all that Ilithyia and Phanes must die someday. Everyone simply believed that the spirits of the green eyed beauty and her husband would live on in the new God-Queen and God-King.

As a child, Ilithyia could not have foreseen her extraordinary future, and so spent her early years as a common mortal on the Plain. But for her daughters, believed by the People to be touched by divinity, life was very different. When under the care of their grandparents, the two sisters were allowed to visit various farms and play with other children, who, being children, gave no special deference to them. The adults of the farmlands, however, treated the offspring of the Sacred Grove with much greater respect, keeping a watchful eye over their safety, not wanting to anger the Earth Mother by allowing injury to befall either girl. At age seven or eight, when ordinary children were put to work in the fields or households, Parthenia and Gamelia found themselves with few friends and began to grasp their high station among the People of the Plain. With the passing years it became more frustrating for them to have less and less contact with common young people at a time when their interest in boys was getting stronger.

So it was that now the sisters gazed with eager fascination as their parents expressed an intimacy which each daughter hoped she someday might know. Gamelia peered a little further over her older sibling's shoulder for a better view, and for her efforts received Parthenia's elbow in her ribs, telling her to back off.

It had been but a few months earlier that Gamelia experienced the time of First Bleeding, which for the People of the Plain, was a profound moment of transformation, as significant as birth, male puberty, the first grey hairs, death, dawn and dusk and the changing seasons. These moments, even in the life of an ordinary mortal, concentrated the powers of the world like no other, and if not channeled properly could unleash devastating upheaval throughout the land in the form of famine, plague, earthquake, flood, and only the gods knew what else.

First Bleeding, for the daughter of a God-Queen and God-King, was therefore an occasion of even greater awe and concern, when much care had to be taken to make sure the young woman, who was revealing for the first time her possession of the power of the Unifying Source, made contact with neither land nor sky. The Sacred Grove, positioned as it was on a rocky step in the foothills overlooking the Plain, was considered to be

already suspended, like the mistletoe, between earth and the heavens, but as an added precaution, Ilithyia and Phanes followed the tradition of the common folk, and had secured Gamelia in a hammock within the girls' chamber, disconnecting her, as it were, from the rest of the world, until the First Bleeding was finished.

Parthenia, an old hand in such matters by this time, was happy to play the wise one guiding her younger sister through this apprehensive period, confidently assuring Gamelia that she would survive. But even though she had witnessed with amazement the elder child going through this same experience, Gamelia was no less frightened by it. For her, as for all girls of the Plain, this was a true metamorphosis, a genuine death to childhood and resurrection into a new kind of being, a confirmation that the world was continually Becoming. The swelling breasts, increasingly tender, the lower body cramps, the uncontrolled blood flow down her legs and onto her clothing and pillows, it all terrified her.

Ilithyia, anticipating this inevitable change, had quickly led Gamelia to the hammock, which had been stretched between two wooden posts in copper stands. Over seven days and nights, with the help of her first born, the dutiful mother cared for her second child. Gamelia would reach out from her suspended isolation, screaming with fear and begging to be held. But Ilithyia was firm, commanding the girl to be still and not get out of the swinging bed. The bleeding youth was touched by her mother and sister only when she was fed and washed and her waste taken away, and even then with as little contact as possible, lest the power of this event fly free of the hammock, escape the cave shelter and wreak havoc upon the world. Gamelia was ashamed to be the vessel of such a threat, but it was out of her control.

Phanes, meanwhile, had been ordered by his wife to stay clear of the children's chamber. This was fine with him. The death and rebirth of a daughter humbled the Chaos King more than any armed adversary ever could.

Finally, the seven day rite of passage had ended. Gamelia's feet set down upon the cold stone floor once again. She stood, relieved, proud of her endurance, and graced by a new sense of herself. Parthenia, happy for her sister's health, yet resentful of the fact that she was no longer the only person in whom her mother could confide regarding female things, ran down the slope to her grandparents' farm to spread the good news.

The ordeal of blood behind them, the sisters were looked upon by their parents and the community as adults, with all the obligations and privileges of womanhood. Ordinary thirteen and twelve year old females

on the Plain were expected to find husbands and begin child rearing, or at least writhe with males now and then. An unmarried farm girl with child was left to the mercy of her immediate family. It was not uncommon for the remains of an infant to be found in a field, no doubt abandoned with hopes that the baby's spirit would be embraced by the Earth Mother. This was a perfectly acceptable sacrifice to the great Goddess as far as the community was concerned.

For Parthenia and Gamelia, the prospect of each starting a family of her own was more complicated. Were they to marry mortal men and take up the life of farming on the Plain, the sisters would give up any claim of divinity, which was acquired through habitation of the Sacred Grove, and therefore be free of the risk of being murdered by their father's successor, since the new God-King would have the right to kill only those offspring still living in the Grove itself. On the other hand, staying in the cave shelter night after night left open the appealing possibility that Phanes' killer might choose either Parthenia or Gamelia as the new God-Queen, a development made more likely if it were known throughout the Plain that the sisters were virgins. But none of this guaranteed survival, much less ascendancy to godhood. Was forsaking the joy of writhing with a handsome farm boy or shepherd a reasonable price to pay for the glory of becoming Queen of the Bough? Could either Parthenia or Gamelia bear the horror of witnessing the murder of a father, mother and sister, and then make a commitment to the killer?

These were the questions that lay before the two daughters, questions that could be postponed as long as Phanes stepped through the cave shelter threshold victorious. But their father was twenty-eight, no longer young in a world where most people were fortunate to die painlessly of old age at forty-five years. Still, the girls had lived in safety and security all their lives. It was all they knew. They did not appreciate their tenuous existence as powerfully as did Ilithyia. The consideration of what tomorrow might bring was more a game than a reality inevitably to be faced. Was a decision necessary at all? Why not simply listen to the song of the World Snake and surrender to the currents of the dance?

Entranced, Parthenia and Gamelia now beheld the passion of Ilithyia and Phanes, the sight and sound of the sweet madness intoxicating the two young spies. Parthenia's hands roamed her own body, as did Gamelia's. Each girl pleased herself. It felt good, but was it as pleasing as having a man inside, they wondered. In their imaginations it was Ilithyia who lay dead outside, on the edge of the Sacred Grove next to the eternal flame, and Parthenia and Gamelia who lay, legs spread under Phanes.

Grabbing her sister's hand, Parthenia guided it between her own thighs. Then the older sibling inserted part of her hand into Gamelia. The touch of another's fingers, and the knowledge that each had the power to ignite a fire within someone else, brought the two females to new heights. For Parthenia especially, controlling the rising and falling of a lover's passion was actually more emotionally satisfying than the physical pleasure she herself received. This was not the first time the sisters played to the sensational melody sung by Ilithyia and Phanes. Each young woman was the sensitive stringed instrument, each the devoted musician. Now the Daughters of the Bough entered a shared spasm of lust, their grunts and sighs uttered without a care of discovery by their parents, who were lost in their own joyful vortex. Their timing was well practiced. The four lovers together felt the bite of Sajat Krulk. It was All One.

Now, as Ilithyia and Phanes lay at peace, the two daughters quietly returned to their feathered beds. Parthenia and Gamelia fell asleep in one another's embrace, each dreaming vaguely of a young man writhing into her, a divine infant climbing out of her, a blood soaked warrior killing the family and laying claim to her. Then a procession of serpent men, composed of former plowmen, carpenters, coppersmiths, slaves, every one of them a God-King capable of transforming a young woman into a goddess, every serpent man entwined about her limbs and penetrating her garden and mouth, and each snake bearing the indomitable face of Phanes.

FOUR

The Stag was gigantic, clearly a beast far greater than the deer normally roaming the forested mountains surrounding the Plain. Unlike the antlers of lesser males, which extended into long boney branches, the Stag's crown swept out as two massive spoons with dagger sharp points around the edges. Spanning more than the length of two full grown men lying head to toe, these magnificent wings graced a four legged god. The head and neck of the creature easily surpassed in size that of a horse, its body from breast to tail longer by half again its antler span. A man standing atop another would still have to reach up to touch the furry, red shoulder of the Stag. So big was it that tree limbs continuously bent and snapped on either side of the large buck's passage. Despite its immensity, the deer was as quick and agile as any animal of these parts, save perhaps a mountain goat. A formidable beast indeed. One would have to be starving, or mad, to even think of taking it down.

In truth, the Stag was the last of a dying breed, which had survived through good fortune, and sheer will, from a long ago time of cold and ice. But though solitary, it was no less proud, requiring nothing more than the vegetation upon which it grazed, and perfectly capable of defending itself against any predator. As it fed upon a tree bark, the beast seemed relaxed, and completely unaware of the hunter who had been tracking it for the better part of this clear, autumn morning, and who now observed it at a safe distance, downwind, from behind a clutch of pine.

It had been four years since Hypsistos had known the exhilaration of the hunt. In a deeply wooded land far, far to the east, across the World Sea, he had, as a boy, prepared for the great pursuit with his father, a Shaman of the tribe. The wise man would take his son into the depths of a cave, and there, underground, where the animal spirits lived, would draw pictures of deer and boar and wild oxen, using powder from finely ground rocks mixed with water into a pasty pigment. Healthy herds sprawled across the torch lit stone walls, not as mere representations of the hunter's world, but as a call to the animal spirits to transfer their abundance in all their great variety of

form onto the land, where they could provide food for the tribe. Sometimes Hypsistos' Shaman father drew a spear in one of the animal figures, trusting that the power of such an image would fly out of the cave, into the forest, and fulfill itself in a successful kill.

Then the chase and the rush of excitement that came with it. The signs, fed upon shrubbery, ground prints, trails of excrement, the sounds, the smells, all of it immersing a young boy in a sensory celebration of the sacred, blood-lusted dance of predator and prey. He took his first blood, a sling shot to a rabbit's skull, when he was nine. And after the arrow, the spearhead, the flung stone hit the mark, and the sublime surrender of the animal to the tribe, there would follow the hunter's humble beseechment to the Great Bear of all bears, the Great Fox of all foxes, the Great Ram of all rams, to understand the need of the tribe for food, to accept the tribe's gratitude, to forgive the killing of the animal and not punish the tribe with empty hunting grounds.

Hypsistos was eleven years old when he was ripped from this vigorous life. Parties of strangers entered the wood and began cutting down cedar trees for lumber to be used in distant places. The game animals fled and the tribesmen protested, but they were merely hunters up against well organized warriors. Almost all the adults, including Hypsistos' parents, were wiped out, and the children sold into slavery and sent to a great walled city called Jericho.

For two years the boy lived in chains and was compelled to perform household and stable chores. He tried to escape and make his way back to the forest a number of times but was always caught and beaten. By age thirteen, Hypsistos' life in the wild was a vague memory. His daily goal was not escape but rather getting from dawn to dusk without being sexually brutalized.

Then came the merchant-priest from Sumer, In-Shushinak, who purchased Hypsistos and worked the boy in service to a caravan plying a lucrative trade route. This was an easier life. Hypsistos was not beaten very often by his new master, who also became his teacher. There was a sense of freedom in the open air of camel and mule travel. With the passage of two more years, the young apprentice saw himself increasingly through his teacher's eyes, and the call of the hunt grew weak.

Thus Hypsistos found it strange that, after learning the ways of the city, and even visiting the islands of the great World Sea, he would be suddenly drawn into this thick forest on the far western edge of the earth. He had caught the scent of the beast just after sunrise, immediately upon

stepping out of his master's pavilion, which always was erected in the center of the trading party's encampment. His master and mentor, the merchant-priest In-Shushinak, was still fast asleep, and there were only a few cooks and mule tenders about at this early hour, so no one noticed as he placed a long knife in his leather belt, took up a bow, a quiver of arrows and a spear, and silently headed out of the camp. He did this without a thought, as if the four years away from his life as a hunter had been nothing more than a dream. Such was the power of the great creature's scent, washing away, at least for the duration of this glorious morning, the youth's civilized identity and reawaking his true being.

Only now, as the fifteen year old, hidden behind the shrubbery, gazed with awe upon the giant red Stag, did he fleetingly acknowledge the anger his master would exhibit when he returned to camp. Hypsistos' head, like that of In-Shushinak, was shaved bald in the manner of the priests of Ur in distant Sumer. Had he allowed it to grow, the youth's hair would reveal itself to be a light brown. His skin was unusually light, even in comparison to his native tribe. One could find a freckle or two on a handsome, almost pretty, brown-eyed face that belied the raw life of the hunter and the slave. A deep scar down his right cheek was the single piece of evidence pointing to the abuse meted out to him in Jericho before his adoption by the merchant-priest. Underneath his clothing, however, were marks that spoke of his relationship to his present master. But beyond all this, Hypsistos possessed the earnest countenance of the seeker. Perhaps this quality was what had attracted In-Shushinak to him two years earlier.

Like his mountain brethren, the young man was a head taller and somewhat more robust than most city or farm folk. He wore a humble sackcloth tunic and leggings woven from coarse plant fibers. On his feet were lambskin slippers. At this moment, as he shifted the bow and leather quiver of arrows on his back, he wished he wore instead a suit of buckskin, so that, if the Stag did pick up his scent, he would not be recognized as a hunter.

Then the powerful neck of the majestic beast raised its great winged crown and the Stag looked about, clearly aware that it was not alone. Hypsistos slumped down in disappointment, thinking he had been detected, but further rustling in the brush nearby told him, much to his unease, that he had not been the only predator stalking the reddish titan.

At a distance of about fifteen paces, halfway between himself and the giant deer, an adult male grey wolf stepped clear of the brush. Then one more, and another. Still other wolves appeared beyond the Stag, encircling it. Hypsistos slowly and anxiously looked behind him. To his relief he saw

no wolves closing in his direction. But some in the pack stared directly at him, then back at the Stag, as if weighing one potential prey against another. Now Hypsistos counted ten wolves. They had obviously taken great pains to surround the enormous buck and were not about to let it go in favor of a lesser prize, namely Hypsistos himself. The Stag was trapped. All the young man could do was bear witness to the inevitable battle, and hope the bloodlust did not carry over to him.

In a tightening circle around the deer, the wolves bared their teeth and uttered low, threatening growls. But the Stag was not simply going to wait to be torn asunder. Bowing its head low and emitting its own high pitched battle cry, it suddenly charged right at the two nearest wolves, scooping up the surprised pair in its great spoon shaped antlers and tossing them in a steep arc high overhead. The two once fearsome predators flailed and yelped like helpless pups in midair, crashed through the thick branches and hit the ground with a chilling crack. One wolf died instantly of a broken neck, the other, its spinal column twisted out of shape, limped a few paces, then collapsed in spasms.

Two down, only eight to go. A snarling wolf jumped straight for its prey's throat. The Stag ducked and rammed its own skull into the attacker's midsection, squashing the wolf between the giant's head and a tree trunk. Air streamed out of the wild canine in a long wheeze. Backing away, the Stag let the wolf, its ribcage crushed, slide down the bark to the ground, where it lay motionless. With a desperate leap, a fourth lupine warrior, this one with a patch of white fur on its ear, clambered onto the behemoth's back, biting into its shoulder. The big deer shrieked in pain, reared on its hind legs, then came down heavily, its sharp front hooves piercing like knives an unfortunate wolf who found itself directly underneath. This same downward and forward motion flung white patch off the Stag's shoulders, sending it colliding into yet another attacker with such force that both were killed on the spot.

Hypsistos stared agape at the carnage. In but a few breaths, the Stag had destroyed six of its enemies. But the four remaining wolves were too hungry to give up now. Cautiously, the salivating quartet approached their intended victim on all sides. A stealthy opponent coming up from the rear found its hopes fatally dashed by a quick kick of powerful hind legs. The attacker's jawbone snapped and hung limply from its face, leaving the wolf to whimper into the woods, where it was doomed to starvation. Taking advantage of the hind leg kick, another wolf slipped in under the great beast and sank its fangs into the Stag's genitals. A long, shrill wail escaped the

giant creature's mouth. Wide-eyed, this king of deer raised its head, as if looking heavenward for relief. But the movement exposed its neck. One more vicious enemy jumped up and gripped that mighty throat with ravenous jaws. A wolf at its loins and at its throat, the Stag leaped and stomped in a mad frenzy. The defender's hooves pounded the wolf hanging from beneath it until the feral adversary succumbed to the punishment, dropped upon the ground and howled no more. Next, the predator latching onto the thick throat was shaken loose. In one wide, sweeping motion, the Stag's antlers batted the wolf almost all the way to where Hypsistos was hiding. The fifteen year old heard the crunch of the living projectile hitting hard the solid earth. The wolf didn't get up.

Of the pack of ten, one wolf still stood. The Stag turned toward it, snorting and brandishing its antlers and digging its hooves into the dirt. Taking very little time to consider its options, the last wolf ran for its life.

Nothing now but stillness. The giant deer stood panting heavily amid the broken bodies. It was bleeding from its underbelly and its throat, but Hypsistos could not tell how serious these wounds were. In the young man's memory were other wounded, even fallen prey who were still capable of lashing out at an overconfident hunter.

The Stag looked straight at the youth. It was then and only then that Hypsistos realized he had stepped out of hiding, and furthermore, had taken a crouching position of attack with his spear held forward. Why had he exposed himself this way, he wondered. After all, he was Hypsistos, acolyte to In-Shushinak, no longer the hunter. Yet the Stag's eyes called to him, hearkened him back to when he strode the mountain forests of the east with his Shaman father.

"You did not enter the wood this morning simply to bear witness to my power," said the eyes of the Stag. "Be who you are, Hypsistos. Do what you must."

"And what is it that I must do?" Hypsistos said aloud.

The issue would be simple enough if this buck had been a common one. In that case Hypsistos could in good conscience finish the task the wolves had begun. But this was not a common buck. This was a giant. Was it a god? Was it the Deer of all deer? Was it the prime form from which all beings of the antler emerged? If so, what would happen to the deer of all the world were he to kill it? Dare he risk laying bare all hunting grounds? Wiser to respect this god, not to mention the will of In-Shushinak, who did not believe in forest deities and who, in any event, would certainly want his student to abandon the way of the spear and arrow.

But as Hysistos turned to leave, the high pitched song of the Stag beckoned to him.

“Is this why you armed yourself this fine morning, to walk away? Do you think gods do not need to die nobly? Be who you are, god-killer. Do what you must. Then return to your new life.”

No amount of civilized teaching could have countered such a profound entreaty. And so Hysistos, hunter, acolyte, shrugged from his back the bow and quiver of arrows, letting them drop to the ground. He tightened his grip on the spear, understanding that what was to happen next should not be done from a distant bow shot, but up close between two intimates in the great dance. The point and shaft of the spear, as well as the blade of the knife in his belt, was of a metal unknown on the Plain, bronze, a mix of copper and another element rare in these parts, tin. Up to now, Hysistos had killed animals only with sharpened stone and wood, and had not done so in more than four years. Yet, despite a fearful heart, he moved forward.

He had not taken three steps when the giant charged, its hooves pounding out an unstoppable, bone rattling drum beat. Letting his instincts take command, Hysistos quickened his pace toward the beast. The huge antlers loomed ever larger. They threatened like a gaping mouth to engulf the young man. At the last possible instant, Hysistos veered sharply to the right and ducked, allowing the great horn-wings to sweep over and past him. Then, before the Stag could adjust, the youth stopped short, pivoted to his left and, with all his strength, thrust the bronze spear deep into the deer’s left side. With an agonized screech, the Stag barreled onward, as did the embedded spear shaft, which swung like an unyielding bar into Hysistos’s midsection and carried him off his feet for several deer lengths before he lost his grip and tumbled to a stop, the wind knocked out of him.

Now the spear shaft could have been the spoke in a turning wheel as the Stag made a tight circle and came at the fallen hunter once again. Hysistos was still crouching when the beast was upon him. It was the primal moment. Life or death. Abandon thought. Act. In one strenuous effort, Hysistos sprang into the air from his squatting position, sighted the neck wound made by the wolf, withdrew his long knife and sliced into the previous gash, slitting the Stag’s throat. Through sheer momentum, the breast and foreleg knees of the creature hit the young man like a moving wall of rock. Hysistos grunted with the impact. He found himself to be nothing more than a stone flung haphazardly through the ether, landing many paces away among some bushes. Seeing nothing beyond the greenery

that now enclosed him, he heard the terrible cry of a being that, while divine, was nonetheless mortal.

For long moments Hypsistos lay stunned. His body ached. After awhile he cautiously felt his arms and legs and torso. Nothing seemed to be broken, but he was badly bruised. There was blood on his face and he knew it was not only deer blood. But he had been beaten enough in his life to know that he would heal.

He slowly sat up. There in the distance lay the great Stag. His long knife was still in its throat, from which blood gushed, this time clearly a death wound. The beast had fallen on its left side, its own weight pressing the bronze spear shaft right through its body. Now the shaft stood erect, its point marking the sharp upper tip of a blood soaked pole. Due to the extreme length of the antlers, the Stag's neck had been twisted and broken as it fell, its face now turned skyward at a right angle to its body.

With great caution, and a painful, stiff amble, Hypsistos made his way to the animal and stood over it. The Stag was surely dying, yet its wide eyes were alive enough to find the hunter's face. Intuitively, Hypsistos kneeled before the god and began to chant.

"O Forest God, O Deer of deer, I beseech you to forgive me. I have done only that which you requested. Do not punish other hunters with sparse game. Let the deer roam in abundance. I offer myself in sacrifice to make it so. By my own blade, to make it so."

And in his heart the youth heard the god's reply.

"Do not despair, god-killer. My body returns to the wood and my power lives on in all beings of the antler. Deer and hunter, prey and predator shall ever dance. But they will not be the only dancers. Farmers, merchants, others hear the song. The world no longer belongs to the likes of you and me alone. That is why we both had to die this day, so we could be reborn into this new world."

Hypsistos was overwhelmed with relief and gratitude.

"Thank you, O God," he whispered.

The Stag's eyes widened with one last message.

"Return to your new life, Hypsistos. You are not finished Becoming."

Then the Stag's brown eyes gradually lost their color and stared at nothing. A wave of both sadness and sacredness crested within the young man. He sobbed in mourning. He sobbed in renewal.

His cries echoed through the woodlands and were heard by the three huntsmen employed by In-Shushinak to provide fresh food for the trading party. When the trio came upon the scene of death, their first thought was

that the acolyte of their employer somehow had gotten himself lost in the forest and had been seriously if not mortally wounded by the wolves. But upon further inspection, they realized Hysistos had survived an extraordinary encounter. Apparently this young man was more than he appeared to be. Indeed, the carcasses of the animals scattered about the area were assurances that the party of merchants would be well fed for the duration of their journey through the mountains to the Plain. While one of the huntsmen ran back to the encampment to fetch more help in transporting the bounty, the remaining two began to cut up the great Stag, which they saw as nothing more than a fortuitous catch. Trained professionals raised in the cities of the east, they did not see this deer as Hysistos saw it.

Not that their view mattered to the youth. As the huntsmen went about their work, Hysistos composed himself and sat in silence over to one side. He was enthralled by the power of this experience, and by the mysterious message of the Deer of deer. It filled him with a feeling of hope the likes of which he had never known. So lost in this sense of possibility was Hysistos that the wrath of In-Shushinak did not even cross his mind until he was within sight of the camp.

FIVE

For perhaps the sixth time that morning, In-Shushinak stepped out of his pavilion in the center of the encampment and anxiously paced about, inquiring of his companions as to the whereabouts of his acolyte, Hysistos. He did so knowing his fellow travelers had no answer, but felt so helpless that he could do nothing else but ask. And of course, the others in this trading party of thirty men, merchants, huntsmen, scribes, slaves, cooks, mule tenders, paid laborers and bodyguards, could only shrug, offer general words of assurance and humor their leader with bowed heads when he prayed to his One True God for Hysistos' safe return. These were practical men who believed religion played a role in life, but not the central role. Why the merchant-priest would worship only one god when there were so many to choose from bewildered most of the traders. But In-Shushinak had put the company together and was in charge of this expedition to the far western edge of the world, so his god was as good as any.

At thirty-eight years of age, In-Shushinak the Sumerian, of the city of Ur, was a short man, and surprisingly thin, some might say emaciated. Despite his success as a merchant, and access to material things, he led a life of strict denial and expected the same discipline from others. His arrogant bearing and deep, rich voice created an aura of conviction and authority that could intimidate a much larger man. Yet he was, at least in his public actions, kind and fair, and was respected by all in the merchant company. There was a clarity of vision that compelled even those who were put off by his manner to follow him, but whether that clarity was born of truth or delusion, none could say.

Although he no longer worshipped the many gods of Sumer, In-Shushinak still shaved his head and eyebrows as did the priests of Ur. His beady eyes were knit closely to his small nose, which rested above a thin mouth that rarely smiled. Hanging from around his neck was a circular gold medallion, about the size of his palm, upon which was engraved a radiant sun, the symbol of his god. A garment of heavy wool draped over his right

shoulder, leaving bare his other shoulder and both arms. The length of the clothing hid his leather sandals. He knew from experience that this dress was sufficient for autumn in the mountains of this region, and while winter would bring harsh rains to these slopes, it would remain merely cool and wet on the Plain.

But the weather was not paramount in the Sumerian's mind at the moment. The three huntsmen previously had left in search of both game and the missing youth, but had not yet returned.

"O Mighty God, O One True God, O Heavenly Father, hear my plea," In-Shushinak prayed, his hands held high in beseechment, his companions standing about in respectful silence. "Let no harm come to the acolyte, Hypsistos. Let him find his way back to us. Lead him into your all powerful embrace, Mighty Father. So be it."

Pause. The merchant-priest's beady eyes shifted about, waiting for a response from the others.

"So be it," finally came their obligatory reply.

In-Shushinak lowered his arms and slowly walked back to his pavilion, while his fellows returned to their chores. Other than Hypsistos, no servants or assistants lived inside the big, chambered tent with the Sumerian. Although his own austere nature would have been satisfied with a humble fur bedroll laid out under the open sky, or in a one-man tent next to those of his companions, the merchant-priest intended the pavilion, with its large sun symbol sewn into its side, to remind one and all of the ever present god who looked over them on their journey. The pole supported, linen structure, no larger than a modest, three room cabin, was a moveable temple, a portal through which one could communicate with the creator of the world, and often would In-Shushinak gather the others inside it for prayer. Now he moved to Hypsistos' chamber and parted the curtain in hopes that his acolyte might miraculously appear, but he was met with an empty room. The youth's absence weighed heavily on the older man. It was not like Hypsistos simply to disappear like this. In-Shushinak brought his boney hands to his forehead, closed his eyes, and once again prayed, this time in a whisper.

"Please, Father, bring Hypsistos back to me. If I have sinned and chased him from me, help him to forgive me and let me see clearly my wrongdoing so that I may not repeat it. If he has gone in search of Truth, let him hear your Word and return the wiser for it. This I pray, O God of Judgment."

In-Shushinak understood well how one could leave a familiar world in search of something more. Sold at the age of five into the priesthood by parents he hardly remembered, he was taught to read and write and

calculate, spending his childhood applying copper stylus to clay tablet in the recording of merchant transactions. The child-scribe traveled with caravans and on trading ships, even, as a boy of ten, sailing west across the World Sea to a wild land of deep gorges and fertile plains called Graia. He lived there for two years before returning home. For young In-Shushinak, home was the city of Ur, where he was a priest of the temple of Anu, highest of the Sumerian gods. It was not a lonely life by any means. There were the other temple priests, who gave In-Shushinak both spiritual companionship and physical love, and the priestesses, who offered their bodies not only to priests, but, in exchange for an appropriate donation to the temple, common citizens as well, all in celebration of the fleeting pleasures offered to mortals by the gods. These celebrations were not public orgies, but rather more discreet encounters within the sacred walls. Thus the temple was well visited and prospered, but In-Shushinak was not happy. He hungered for an internal life that was somehow more substantial.

Then, at eighteen years of age, while accompanying a desert caravan, he discovered, in the solitude of a scorching ocean of sand, a god far more fulfilling than all the deities of Sumer put together, a god who not only was the creator of the entire world, but the supreme judge of the conduct of all people. As a result, under circumstances too painful for him to dwell upon within his memory, In-Shushinak abandoned his priesthood in the city of Ur, never to return.

He traveled far and wide with various traders, seeing the world anew through a sacred veil placed over his eyes by his Heavenly Father. By the time he was twenty-six, he had become the chief of his own trading party, his goal not wealth, but the spreading of his revelation. The merchant-priest was realistic enough to know that most of those with whom he traded were more interested in exchanging material goods than spiritual beliefs, but that did not discourage him. Transforming the world and freeing people from sin took more than one lifetime.

That was why Hypsistos was so important. When In-Shushinak, at age thirty-six, happened upon the thirteen year old slave in Jericho, city of abomination, he recognized immediately the face of a fellow seeker, someone who, with the proper guidance, could carry on the quest long after the Sumerian had turned to dust. But there was, in the beautiful eyes of Hypsistos, so much more than an individual soul worthy of a noble goal.

In-Shushinak loved Hypsistos, beyond the love of mentor to student, or even that of a man for a son he never had, but in the depths of the heart, where the object of that love is fuel for the heart's beating, and

where separation from that object, even for an instant, is worse than an eternity in the burning pits of the underworld. This was In-Shushinak's divine affliction, to live so close to his greatest desire, and to put that desire aside so that he may grow closer to the One True God, to reject the body so that he may know the glory of the spirit. But such a rejection was easier said than done. The Sumerian had surrendered more than once to Hypsistos' innocent temptation. Thus did In-Shushinak struggle in his imperfect way to pass the test presented to him by the Heavenly Father. And thus was he filled with guilt over his failure to meet that challenge. His woolen robes covered scars created by the self-inflicted punishment his failure warranted.

For nearly two years, the man from Ur and his young acolyte, who was also In-Shushinak's greatest burden, traveled the trade routes, from Jericho on the river Jordan, eastward across the desert to Uruk and Lagash, Sumerian cities on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, exchanging farm produce and craft items. The merchant-priest carefully avoided Ur, wherein enemies of which he rarely spoke awaited. A second trade route, again starting from Jericho, extended north along the coast of the World Sea, which lay to the west. Keeping the sea on their left, the caravan would reach the land of Anatolia, and the city of Cayuk. There the precious salt of Jericho was exchanged for Cayuk's obsidian, a black, shiny material from which personal adornments and weapons could be made.

It was at this point, in Cayuk, that In-Shushinak began to reconsider his strategy in spreading the Word of Almighty God. He realized he was not changing the thoughts of anyone by preaching to them and moving on. What was needed was a single location for the Word to take hold, a hub from which the spokes of righteousness would radiate. Such a vision required a people untouched by the abominations that took place in Ur and Uruk and Lagash and Jericho and Cayuk, people still innocent enough to be guided on to the Path of Truth. In-Shushinak had visited such a culture when he was but ten years of age, a young scribe with a trading party, long before his discovery of the One True God in the eastern desert. Yes, he remembered these folk to be barbaric in many ways, but like children anywhere, they were capable of growing beyond their immaturity and ignorance. It was time to return to the land called Graia, on the far western edge of the world, time to return to the People of the Plain.

In-Shushinak gathered this present party of thirty men, most of whom possessed no knowledge of, nor concern for, their leader's deeper motive. A long land route from Anatolia to Graia arcing across the World Sea's

northern shore was known to travelers, but that pathway was plagued by savages who mercilessly preyed on caravans, so an ocean passage was preferable, in spite of its own hazards. The merchant-priest led the way to the west coast of Anatolia and acquired three single-masted sailing ships, each vessel hardly big enough to hold, besides its own crew, ten men of the party plus trade goods. They set sail, bidding farewell to their camels and pack mules. Faithfully touching his gold medallion, In-Shushinak followed the sun across the World Sea. For his fellow traders, it was a frightening voyage into the unknown, their fear tempered more by greed than by curiosity or faith. Hypsistos, however, found it to be an exhilarating adventure.

The three ships visited the Sporades islands, land masses strung out across the vast blue expanse, each island like a great sea serpent's hump breaking the surface. They spent many days re-supplying at each island, the men never failing to thank their various gods for their safe landing. At times stormy waters delayed the continuation of the voyage, and so it was that the moon waxed and waned four times before the ships' lookouts sighted the east coast of Graia.

It was a rocky coastline that rose steeply out of the sea, with inland mountains always within sight, but there were beautiful bays in which fishing villages had prospered, the wood and mud brick houses positioned precariously, like natural outcroppings on the stony, seaside slopes. At one such bay village the merchant fleet dropped anchor. In-Shushinak and his party found these fisher folk to be most hospitable. Apparently the east coast of Graia was visited fairly regularly by other traders from the far southern World Sea. Like most people the man from Ur had come across in his life, the fisher folk worshipped many gods. In this case, the gods were ruled by the great King of Water and Sky. In-Shushinak did not even attempt to show these simple but good people the True Way. He had greater plans to fulfill.

Between the coastal slopes and Graia's eastern mountain range were strips of flatland snaking north and south. The band of the merchant-priest made its way northward along these strips, the sound of surf and salty smell of the ocean never far away to its right. Traveling further, they traded goods for mules, taking the burden of heavy baskets and crates off the slaves and paid laborers, until the number of pack animals was half that of the thirty man party. They planned to obtain even more mules once they arrived on the Plain.

After nearly a month of walking and interacting with fishing communities on the way, Hypsistos had picked up much of the strange language of this land, and with what his mentor had already taught him and

the other traders, felt confident that he could communicate well enough to participate fully in this enterprise. Although In-Shushinak had never fully explained his spiritual intentions regarding Graia, the youth sensed there was more to this venture than material profit.

Soon the party came upon a marshland formed by a river, not more than a stone's throw wide, streaming into the World Sea.

"The People of the Plain call this the River of Life," In-Shushinak explained to Hypsistos and the others. "We will follow this river upstream, to the west along the Inland Pass, through the mountains and onto the Plain."

Indeed, the river flowed eastward through a narrow valley that could have been ripped open by the gods in the midst of the great mountain range lying on the journeyers' left as they faced north. Pointing to the highest peak on the range, the merchant-priest identified an important landmark.

"Mount Ossa. The People of the Plain believe it to be one of the breasts of the Earth Mother. The Sky God feeds upon the breasts and repays the Goddess with rain, enabling Her to bring forth new life."

There was no wonder in the Sumerian's voice. It was an academic explanation and nothing more.

But Hypsistos smiled in appreciation of such a belief.

"How beautiful," he whispered.

"The superstition of children," In-Shushinak stated definitively. "But we will respect their simple beliefs while we are among them."

"Yes, Mentor. And where is the other breast?"

"What?"

"The other breast," Hypsistos repeated with genuine curiosity, "of the Goddess."

"On Mount Olympos," the merchant-priest responded, casting his gaze to the northwest. "We cannot quite see it from this position on the coast. It is further north and inland, and much bigger by far than Ossa. Our Inland Pass lies between the Ossa and Olympos mountains. The People of the Plain believe that upon the peak of Olympos, the Sky God and Earth Goddess are forever united. Such are the dreams of those who have not taken into their souls the One True Father, creator of Earth, Sky, World Sea and all living things therein. Glory be to Him."

"Glory to the High Father," the young acolyte replied, almost by habit. In truth, he hardly heard himself speak, so taken was he with his surroundings.

This raw world of rock, springing from the waves all the way to the clouds, sang to Hypsistos of a passion he had not experienced on the

contemplative deserts of the east. He did not know what to make of this powerful feeling, and spoke not of it to In-Shushinak.

That night, the party camped on a solid stretch of ground near the river-fed marsh, and entered the Inland Pass next morning. They were moving west and upstream. At the first shallow section of the river, they crossed to the north slope. It was In-Shushinak's recollection that the close friends he had made, as a ten year old child visiting the Plain, lived northward of the River of Life. Did they still? Would they remember him after twenty-eight long years? The merchant-priest could only trust in God that the answer to these questions was yes. Why else would the Heavenly Father lead him back to the edge of the world?

A young runner traveling light could have accomplished the length of the Pass from the coast to the Plain in little over a day, but a party of thirty men with fifteen pack animals, over heavily forested, muddy, steep sloped terrain with no roads, and with fog and autumn rains becoming more frequent, discovered the journey through the narrow valley to be a ten day endeavor.

Timing was critical in passing through the valleys and gorges of Graia. Winter rain storms always threatened to clog the Inland Pass, and then spring floods could make the passage back to the coast equally treacherous. In-Shushinak already had told the captains of his ships not to expect the trading company's return to the bay fishing village until early summer. This would give the merchants plenty of time, nearly eight months, to travel the Plain, exchanging their wares, before beginning their journey back to civilization. The captains and crews of the three small ships had no objection to enjoying the friendly people of the coast while awaiting the return of their benefactor.

In-Shushinak's concern was that a major autumn downpour might cause a mudslide, washing the whole party down into the so-called River of Life. However, one of the huntsmen, having scouted ahead, had reported that within two days the band would be emerging from the Pass and standing before the Great Plain.

Thus was In-Shushinak's spirit raised, and thus was his disappointment considerable at the sight of Hypsistos' empty pavilion chamber this morning. Now, his thin hands to his forehead in prayer, the Sumerian heard the sounds of activity outside the big tent. Were the three huntsmen returning from their morning outing? Had they found Hypsistos?

He quickly and hopefully stepped out of the pavilion. The encampment, situated on a relatively level clearing just above the river, had abandoned its

somber mood of just a moment before and was now abuzz with excitement. One of the huntsmen, a sturdy fellow from Cayuk, was telling, while trying to catch his breath, of the discovery of young Hypsistos, the stag and the wolves, and of the need of more help in bringing all the pieces of the giant deer and some of the wolves back to camp. As a number of volunteers followed the breathless huntsman back into the forest, In-Shushinak turned to his own thoughts.

So, Hypsistos killed a stag. Knowing his acolyte had grown up with a forest tribe, the Sumerian assumed such wildness had been purged through the years of slavery and priestly education. Did this morning's action portend anything more than youthful impetuosity?

By the time Hypsistos, the huntsmen and the volunteers transported the prized pieces of meat into the camp, the sun had passed its zenith in a clear blue sky. The blood-dripping, skinning and cooking of the stag and two of the wolves would take the remainder of the afternoon, and the feasting, well into the night. Obviously, the traders would not be making any progress through the Pass this day.

In-Shushinak magnanimously nodded his consent to allow the well deserved festivities to commence. Then he stood in awe of the antlers, which had been cut intact from the beast's head and required six men to carry. Standing on end, the antlers looked like an enormous stringless bow, twice the height of any archer.

"This is a sign from the One True God," the merchant-priest proclaimed approvingly to all in his party. "We will bestow this crown of bone as a gift to the People of the Plain. Pray that they accept our good will and welcome our company into their community."

Sounds and gestures of cheer met this announcement and preparations for the feast began. After such a difficult journey through this valley, everyone felt entitled to this gift from the gods.

In-Shushinak and Hypsistos were left to themselves. All in the trading party knew of the merchant-priest's great fondness for the acolyte and did not give it a second thought. Such relationships were not uncommon in the cities of the east or even in this company. Only In-Shushinak himself seemed oddly preoccupied with a pretense of mere companionship with his ward.

His face a contorted blend of relief and anger, the Sumerian stared at Hypsistos in silence, his own sense of propriety preventing him from embracing the youth in front of the others.

"I'm sorry," Hypsistos said hesitantly. "I didn't mean to worry you, Mentor. This morning...I sensed...something...a call..."

“We will speak of it later,” replied In-Shushinak with restrained emotion. “I am simply glad to see you are without serious injury. Go now. Join the others. You have earned your celebration, but whether you have earned my understanding is another matter.”

Hypsistos looked down at the ground in submission.

“Yes, Mentor,” he said quietly.

The youth felt ashamed for having displeased his teacher, but at the same time the eyes of the Stag still burned in him, filling his heart with courage. How could both feelings share one moment within him, he wondered.

SIX

In-Shushinak retired to the pavilion, where he would partake of his own modest meal of fruit and bread. Hypsistos walked among his fellow travelers and humbly acknowledged their loud congratulations and back slaps. Two or three in the company had some ability with the flute, so it was long after dark when the laughing, singing, dancing and of course, eating were done. Fortunately, no wine had been brought along by the trading party, otherwise few would have been in any condition to continue the journey in the morning. Hypsistos smiled as he watched the merriment. The Stag's prediction to him as it lay dying that morning had been accurate. Its body indeed would return to the forest, after first moving through those who would be strengthened by its passage. This was confirmed by the pungent, gamy taste of the deer meat, which seemed to toughen those who bit into it. The hunter, now acolyte, gave silent thanks to the Stag for this gift of its power.

While a handful of revelers still sang under the stars, Hypsistos bid his friends goodnight and approached the big tent, his feelings of good will shifting into uncertainty. Inside, he closed the cloth partition that was the pavilion's main threshold and fastened it shut with a short loop of rope. Heat and light emanated from a small torch secured into a bronze stand in the audience reception section of the portable shelter. Smoke from the fire rose through a hole in the pavilion's conical roof. But for the occasional cresting of voices raised in song outside, there was silence. No, something more than silence, tension, coiled tightly into the air itself. The veil of loosely woven thread that usually draped across the entrance to his mentor's chamber had been pulled open, and through the portal, In-Shushinak could be seen, strangely ominous in the flickering light, kneeling in prayer upon a silken pillow. Without looking up from his meditations, the merchant-priest gestured to the young man to come forward. Then, when Hypsistos was within the inner chamber, the Sumerian bid him close the loosely woven partition as well. The youth did so. Now the two men were alone, a world away from the encampment, torchlight writhing through the veil in

hypnotic patterns, the only sound, the breathing of the pavilion's soft walls in the night breezes.

His head still bowed, eyes closed, In-Shushinak said, "Tell me of this... call. You heard it, did you?" There was an even tone in his voice, but with an undercurrent of disapproval that was felt more than heard.

"No." Hypsistos searched for the words. "Sensed it...smelled it. I had to follow it. I couldn't help myself. And when I found it I saw that it was the Deer of all deer. It spoke to me."

In-Shushinak's head turned sharply upward, his eyes glaring.

"Animals are not gods! Nor do they speak!"

The Sumerian took a breath. He raised a hand slightly as if to ask his acolyte's forgiveness for the outburst. Then he rose gracefully from the silk pillow and stepped closer to the student, becoming now the patient instructor.

"Our Heavenly Father speaks to us through the sun, which is the portal between His world and ours, and through which His all powerful, all knowing, all loving light reaches down to us, the fallen, the unclean, and transforms us."

Hypsistos nodded in well practiced acceptance. He had heard these words many times before, but they were never tiresome. Far from it, these words, from the lips of In-Shushinak, rang of truth and beauty. And why shouldn't they? The Sumerian, for the most part, had been kind to the youth, had freed him from a life of brutal slavery, had revealed to him a world of travel and a pathway to salvation, even if the merchant-priest himself was flawed in his own progress along that path. And what, Hypsistos questioned, had the spirits of the forest ever given to him? Had they protected his tribe? Spared it from destruction? Saved his parents? No. He owed these animal deities nothing. And yet...

"This morning, Mentor...when I looked into the eyes of the Stag...what was I hearing if not its voice? What was I feeling if not its power? Could it be that the Heavenly Father spoke to me through this great beast?"

In-Shushinak slowly shook his head in disappointment.

"Have I taught you nothing, Hypsistos?" he asked sadly. "God does not speak to us through the action of life killing life, animal devouring animal. God speaks to us by touching our hearts with His everlasting silence. We must deny this savage world of violence and desire in order to know the One True Spirit."

Then, the older man turned and, with great reluctance, walked

towards a small wooden chest resting against the tent wall. Hypsistos straightened anxiously. He knew what was in the chest.

“This morning you found pleasure in bloodlust. You dared take that pleasure to be the equal of God’s Revelation.”

As he spoke these words, In-Shushinak opened the chest and from it withdrew a three-tongued whip of leather, each tongue about the length of his arm.

“When will you learn that the pleasures of this world lead only to the pain of this world?” the Sumerian continued, facing his ward. “If you are wise, Hypsistos, you will use this pain to purge yourself of lust, to be cleansed, to free yourself from the weight of the world, so that your lightened soul may rise up to pass through the sun portal, and bathe in light eternal.”

His smile serene, the merchant-priest gestured toward the silk pillow. Hypsistos took a deep breath. In-Shushinak had saved him from the slave pit that was Jericho. The mentor was wise, he was good. Nothing in the Stag’s eyes, no matter how strongly felt, could wipe away the reality of the Sumerian’s valued guidance. Of course the older man was right. The acolyte had allowed the material world to cloak him in soul corrupting sensations. It was time to shed this poisonous fleece with the shearing knife of God.

Hypsistos took off his sackcloth tunic. Wearing only his leggings, he kneeled upon the pillow and stared straight ahead, his jaw and fists set tight, his anticipation holding both fear and hope.

“I do not hold anyone else in this trading company to this standard,” said the merchant-priest. “Only you, Hypsistos. Only you are worthy of being my successor. Only you have the strength to carry the torch of righteousness after my days are done. Thus do I honor you, my son.”

In-Shushinak stepped behind his student and planted his feet firmly upon the woolen throw rug that was the pavilion’s makeshift floor. He raised the whip. It came down once, twice! Again! Four times! Five!

Each strike had its own special quality. An initial burning, like boiling oil poured in a line along the youth’s back. Then an intensification of the burn, the oil set afire. Hypsistos jerked in violent spasms, struggling to hold fast to his kneeling position, his eyes fixed on a single point on the tent wall. He made not a sound. Screaming would have provided a release he did not deserve.

Feeling his age at thirty-eight, In-Shushinak breathed heavily with his effort. The whip hung loosely at his side.

“Do you understand at last that the material world itself is a false god that brings only despair?”

The merchant-priest gasped these words and Hypsistos became afraid that perhaps his teacher had made too much of an exertion.

“Yes,” the young man answered quickly, eager to end this ordeal for both of them. “I reject the spirits of the forest. Trust in my commitment, Mentor. Did I not slay the Deer of deer? I killed a god for you!”

“No, you did not!”

In-Shushinak emitted a deep sigh.

“Hypsistos, the stag was a stag. Yes, a great one. Yes, one that will hold us in the good graces of the People of the Plain. But the animal was nothing more than that!”

Again the leather tongues snapped in preparation. Again the fifteen year old clenched his teeth.

“It is not enough to kill a god of the forest!”

The lash descended a sixth time!

“You must reject its very godhood!”

Seven!

“Reject!”

Eight!

“Embrace the light of the One True God!”

Nine!

Ten!

Now a strange, numbing coolness spread over the back of Hypsistos, as if his raw, red muscles, exposed in a crisscross of strips to the air, could not burn any further and so fell to the other extreme. He shifted his shoulders in an attempt to find a posture that might somehow keep his body together. Then, spreading his arms wide in agony, he called out that which he knew In-Shushinak wanted to hear, and what, at the moment, was the only truth that mattered.

“There is no god, but God!”

Hypsistos knew he was shouting, but the voice he heard was raspy and weak. The torchlight seemed to fade and the whole chamber tilted precariously. His hunter’s blood, however, would not allow him to surrender to unconsciousness.

Finally, In-Shushinak let go of the whip, dropped to his knees, and took hold of Hypsistos so as to put the youth in a more comfortable position. The older man’s arm accidentally made contact with the bare strips of flesh and Hypsistos stiffened in pain. With utterances of apology for this

mishandling, not for the whipping, the Sumerian gingerly placed his ward face down on the throw rug.

“Our own fallen natures have created this world of sorrow, Hypsistos, but only the Heavenly Father can save us from it, if we let Him.”

The merchant-priest was pleased with the young man’s cry of faith. He looked up at the pavilion ceiling and prayed.

“O Mighty God. Forgive my acolyte his youthful impetuosity. May he never again turn to false gods. Now, Father, help me to heal his wounds.”

In-Shushinak picked up the whip and, with some effort, got to his feet. This unpleasant task of carrying out punishment had taken a lot out of the Sumerian, but Hypsistos’ final response made it all worthwhile. Already the man from Ur could feel his own strength returning. He put the whip back in the chest, closed it, then moved to a copper basin filled with water. Dipping a rag into the clear liquid, he rinsed it, and returned to his charge. The life-hardened youth offered no resistance as In-Shushinak cleansed the ripped skin and bound the tortured torso with soft cloth. This was done carefully, lovingly. All the others in the encampment were fast asleep by the time the merchant-priest was finished with his healing tasks and alertness fully returned to the acolyte’s eyes.

As his thin, gentle hands tenderly touched the muscular body of Hypsistos, the older man was visited by an emotion that came upon him stealthily, mercilessly, an emotion he had hoped would be a stranger, especially this night, when his specific mission had been to rescue his student from the distractions of the physical world. But the very act of tending to his patient was In-Shushinak’s undoing.

“Father, please, help me to heed my own teachings. Help me to resist temptation. Dull the beauty of Hypsistos before my eyes. Let him not become my false god, I beg you.”

Still face down on the rug, Hypsistos began to stir and softly moan in satisfaction at the unexpected comfort of his cloth bindings.

“Mentor,” the young man said quietly, “thank you for caring for me. Forgive me my sins.”

“Shhh...It is you who must forgive me my weakness. God help me.”

In-Shushinak rubbed the shoulders and arms of his beloved as if continuing the healing process, and brought his hands down along the wounded one’s waist and buttocks and thighs.

Hypsistos did not protest. He knew well the In-Shushinak who denied the world and the In-Shushinak who was the world’s prisoner and saw them to be the same man, although he did not understand how this could be, any

more than he grasped how he himself could worship both the One True God of the Sun and the Deer of all deer.

Prior to In-Shushinak, Hypsistos' only sexual experience had been the brutal abuses of his slave master in Jericho. The merchant-priest had removed the boy from that life and introduced him to a better, or at least a different one. Over the past two years, Hypsistos had responded to his mentor's advances out of gratitude more than love. And although there were occasional whippings, punishment for too much singing and dancing or too much attention paid to this god or that, it seemed a small price to pay for the opportunity to see so much of the world, in a time when most people lived their entire lives within only half a day's walk of the place they were born. It was never quite clear, when In-Shushinak pulled out the three tongued whip, whether the Sumerian was being driven by righteousness or jealousy. Hypsistos did not give much thought to the answer to that question, nor to the question of where his own wanderer's life was taking him. No thought, whatsoever, until this very morning, deep in a rolling forest in mist shrouded Graia, when a giant deer happened to speak to him of Becoming.

But such questions dissolved in the heat of the moment. In-Shushinak let his own woolen robe drop to the floor and slowly pulled off Hypsistos' leggings. The older man gazed hungrily over the younger sprawled before him. Turning his head, Hypsistos looked back and up at his mentor and smiled, but it was a sad smile, full of knowledge of the inevitable events to follow before this night was over. In-Shushinak's bare, skinny body was trembling, as all bodies tremble when, against reason, they are suddenly stripped of philosophy and stand vulnerable to a world saturated with desire.

Unlike the People of the Plain, whose navels protruded as reflections of a divine birth cord connecting them to the Earth Mother, the city-born Sumerian and the forest-born hunter had navels that were pushed inward, proclaiming the fact that they had left their mothers behind and were on their way to male independence. In their world, the functions of men and women were strictly distinguished, with the scales of power tipping toward men.

This was not the only message their bodies conveyed. The penises of the men of the Plain retained their foreskins, reflecting an acceptance of the natural way of things, but In-Shushinak's member had been circumcised, by his own hand, shortly after his revelation in the desert twenty years before, at age eighteen. Inflicting such torture upon himself was proof of his commitment to his new god, a god who taught that a man's foreskin

intensified the sexual desire that was the cause of so much of the world's woes, and distracted both men and women from the life of the spirit. The foreskin was thus a barrier between Man and God, and the Heavenly Father commanded that this barrier be removed.

As a condition of coming under In-Shushinak's wing, Hypsistos, too, was circumcised by the merchant-priest. It was a testament to the Sumerian's powers of persuasion that the youth allowed such tampering with his precious tool. The man from Ur convinced his acolyte that this painful cutting of the foreskin was an essential rite of passage. To where, Hypsistos knew not. He simply trusted In-Shushinak who, in a way, was seen by the ward as the reincarnation of the Shaman father he had lost so long ago. At the same time their common cut bound teacher and student in an intimate brotherhood.

But In-Shushinak was the bearer of a physical feature not possessed by the younger man, a series of burn scars placed in tidy parallel rows on his stomach. Hypsistos tried not to think of what his mentor's scars implied, and instead concentrated on the cuts that he and his elder shared.

None of the others in the trading party had agreed to circumcision. The traders were interested in wealth, not conversion to a new religion. Indeed, no adults in the merchant-priest's travels, other than the desert nomads who had first revealed the One True God to In-Shushinak, were willing to make such a personal sacrifice. The Sumerian's experience was that it was easier to convince parents to allow their infants to undergo the sacred procedure on the belief that newborns felt no pain, although the little ones' cries unfailingly indicated otherwise. This was one of the main reasons the shaven headed easterner had for building a hub of faith in a distant land. A new generation of the Faithful, raised from infancy to practice and spread the Word of the Heavenly Father, a fresh population of males, expressing on their most private parts the sign of that fellowship of faith, such a community could, over time, circumcise the world, which now stood in all its violence and filth between mortals and the Almighty.

So it was with both unspeakable lust and overwhelming self-loathing that In-Shushinak of Ur stood over the irresistible form of Hypsistos. Nothing could convince the merchant-priest of life's fallen nature more than his own desires. And who more qualified to transform that unclean existence into something noble than he who knew those desires all too well?

The Sumerian, behind Hypsistos now, reached down and gripped the hips of his lover, who was bent on knees and elbows. In-Shushinak slid his stiffened penis into Hypsistos' anus gradually, thrillingly. Both men, in the

thrall of the union, moved rhythmically, their driving pulse increasing in speed and power. Thoughts of consequence, of loyalty to one's beliefs, were far away.

Hypsistos welcomed the sensations moving through him, sensations that distracted from the lingering sting of the whip. Yet he knew their dance brought more physical satisfaction to his mentor than to himself. The former slave was always the female in this lovemaking, a role he gladly fulfilled in repayment to the older man. After all, In-Shushinak, for all his stern discipline, had guided and protected his acolyte in adventures Hypsistos never would have had in the cedar forests of the east or in Jericho. Now the youth felt the final eruption of cream inside him and the pleasure splashing to all points within like a hot ocean spray.

At the same time, In-Shushinak cried out in ecstasy and, in contradiction to everything on which his faith was based, held his body perfectly still, savoring the vital moment. Remaining inside his ward, he caught his breath, and leaned forward to kiss Hypsistos softly on the young man's back, careful not to put any pressure on the whip scar bandage. Then the Sumerian slowly withdrew, and as he did so, removed himself also from the passion that had consumed him, and that would be replaced, as it had been so many times before, by regret and shame.

Hypsistos sensed the shift in mood. How strange, he thought, that his slave master in Jericho could rape the boy so brutally with no sense of guilt, while In-Shushinak despised himself for love so tenderly demonstrated. The student prayed to the One True God that this time, the merchant-priest might find the capacity to forgive his own nature.

The two men were sitting on the throw rug now. Beyond the veiled entrance to In-Shushinak's inner chamber, the single torchlight still flickered and fluttered in the main meeting room of the pavilion. The tent walls hung motionless, their interaction with the night wind expended of energy, like the pair of mortal lovers within them.

In-Shushinak sat silently, hunched over in remorse. His face was hidden in his hands, as if he were not worthy to be looked upon by God. Hypsistos glanced with dread at the burn scars on the elder's stomach. Then the youthful seeker reached over and compassionately put his hand on the Sumerian's shoulder.

“Mentor, do not condemn yourself for loving.”

The merchant-priest replied without taking his hands from his face.

“Lust makes love unclean. Go to your chamber, Hypsistos. You have suffered your punishment. Now I must suffer mine.”

“I tempted you. The fault belongs to me more than...”

In-Shushinak looked sharply at the acolyte.

“The burden of setting an example falls to the teacher, not the student!” Then, more quietly, “To your chamber. Now.”

Hypsistos reluctantly stood, and without another word, picked up his clothes, parted the veil and left his mentor’s room. The young easterner walked passed the central torch and went into his private area, sliding the blanket closed across his entrance. He lay upon his own pillows, but found no relief in sleep. His eyes were wide open, and he listened.

Alone now, the naked In-Shushinak moved to the same chest from which he had produced the whip, and withdrew a small bronze dagger. He stared at the weapon for a moment, this instrument of punishment, but not deliverance. Pulling aside his chamber entrance veil, the Sumerian walked solemnly, ceremoniously, to the standing torch. He held the dagger over the flames. Before long, the grey, bronze blade took on a reddish tinge, and heat spread through the metal handle. But the merchant-priest did not drop the object. Indeed, he tightened his grip, accepting gladly God’s purifying breath upon his palm.

The knife was red-hot now. In-Shushinak pulled it from the flames.

“Forgive me, Almighty Father,” he whispered. “Burn the sin from my soul.”

With that, the holy man put the blade flat against his stomach. He held it there as long as he could, his eyes bulging with the heat’s searing bite, his lips releasing little more than a grunt, lest a scream be interpreted as a protest against God. Was that the hiss of burning skin he heard, the smell of melting flesh rising to his nose?

When the words finally escaped him, they were not in anger, but in praise.

“There is no god, but God!”

He dropped the dagger and staggered back, falling upon the throw rug. For some time he lay there, wincing with each tormented breath. On his stomach, tiny beads of blood prickled up and formed a line where the blade had kissed him. Tomorrow there would be yet another scar decorating his torso, a striped testament to the price one must pay for surrendering to temptation.

With a piece of cloth, the man from Ur took up the slowly cooling dagger and gradually made his way back to his chamber, his bent form bespeaking his suffering. Inside, he approached the water basin and dropped the dagger into it. Then he dressed his self-inflicted wound as he had tended to

the lashing cuts on Hypsistos' back. Finally, with body and spirit pushed to their limit, In-Shushinak the Sumerian lay on his side, upon his pillows, his knees to his chest. He closed his eyes, and thanked God for allowing sleep to give him some brief respite from the Father's demanding standard.

But Hypsistos, in his quarters, did not sleep. He had heard the grunts of agony, the proclamation of faith, the labored breaths of his elder, all these the sounds of God's Law rigidly enforced. Why would a Supreme Being repay In-Shushinak, his most loyal follower, with such pain, the youth wondered. But then, did not the Stag punish Hypsistos himself in order to transform the youth? Into what? Had the Deer of all deer spoken with the voice of the Heavenly Father, or was there some other music, from another source, yet to be heard? The Stag's eyes had conveyed a hopeful message of Becoming, but nothing since that forest encounter, only this past morning, a lifetime away, had clarified what was to be. Now daybreak was brightening the tent wall. No such light, however, appeared to lead Hypsistos out of the wilderness.

SEVEN

Any day that began with Gamelia doing something before her older sister, Parthenia, had the chance to do it couldn't be all bad. This belief added to the younger girl's delight when she sighted Educas in the distance, with Parthenia nowhere to be found. It wasn't often that Gamelia had this handsome fellow all to herself. Just moments earlier, the twelve year old had left the Sacred Grove, wherein her parents, Ilithyia and Phanes, were fast asleep in the cave shelter, as was their pattern through the daylight time. Gamelia was descending the long, grassy path that snaked down amid the otherwise rocky slope toward her grandparents' house on the Plain. The ground was soggy from the brief shower earlier that morning, but her feet were dry and warm in her pliantly soft, snug lambskin shoes. Then she spotted Educas, who also was walking down the incline on the far side of the Sacred Grove. He had emerged from the tree line that bordered the area just above and behind the cave shelter. Beginning from this wooded edge, thick forest carpeted the foothills leading northward toward the magnificent slopes of Olympos itself.

Even with his broad brimmed cloth hat pulled down over his brow, and his shoulders wrapped in a woolen shawl to protect him from the morning rain, Educas' particular stop-go amble, as if his concentration on his destination was regularly interrupted by a random thought, made him immediately recognizable. Gamelia knew that in the shadow of that broad hat brim was a profile nearly identical to Educas' own older sister, Ilithyia, the high bridge bone between the eyes creating an unbroken diagonal line from the top of the forehead to the tip of the nose. This facial feature was common to just about everyone of Ilithyia's blood, including Gamelia and Parthenia, although both girls also shared the square jaw of their father, Phanes. However, neither the two young sisters, nor Educas, nor anyone else in Ilithyia's family, possessed the God-Queen's emerald eyes. Indeed, the sacred color of vegetation was seen in the eyes of no one else on the entire Plain.

The fact that Educas was her mother's youngest brother did not deter Gamelia from desiring him. Intimate relations between uncles and nieces,

aunts and nephews, or between cousins, were not uncommon among the People of the flatlands. Nor was Gamelia dissuaded by Educas being eight years older than she. On the Plain, any female past First Bleeding could practice the art of seduction. And so, with a quick flick of her long black hair off her shoulder, and a slight adjustment to the belt of her sleeveless blouse that extended to the knees of her bare legs, Gamelia altered her course to intercept her uncle further down the slope.

As she approached him, Gamelia noticed that tucked within the belt enclosing his long-sleeved tunic, were a copper knife, pick and small trowel, tools Educas always seemed to have on his person so that he might closely examine or unearth various curiosities he happened upon, things that rarely were of interest to anyone else, with the exception of Gamelia.

The young woman called his name. Educas was stroking his closely cropped black beard, as he tended to do when he was lost in thought. At the sound of her greeting, he stopped abruptly and tilted his head, pondering the sudden intrusion of her voice as he might some newly heard birdsong. He turned toward her and Gamelia saw that he was carrying a grey slab of stone about the size of a food plate.

“Another fish-stone, Educas?” she asked.

“Huh?... Gamelia... Good morning. Yes, another one. Isn’t it interesting?”

He presented the slab. The outer edges of the flat shale stone framed the image of what looked like three small fish crowded together. Gamelia brought her face close to the object and squinted. Even the fish scales were clearly defined on the shale’s surface.

“I have never seen such detail on a carving,” the girl stated, moving her finger over the ridge lines of the image.

“No artisan chiseled this picture, Gamelia. None of the fish-stones I’ve found are carvings.” The twenty year old tilted and shifted the slab in his hands, as if seeing it from another angle might reveal something new. “I believe they are imprints.”

She looked at him quizzically and he added, “Like a footprint in wet mud, when the mud dries the footprint is preserved, or like a design engraved into the surface of a clay pot before it cools and hardens.” Educas chuckled. “Only this time, the engraver is a fish.”

“But the slab is stone, not mud or clay,” Gamelia observed. “A stone is always hard, isn’t it?”

Her uncle shrugged.

“And what happened to the fish that made the imprints?” she wondered.

Educas said, “I suppose they decayed as all dead things decay. Consumed by the Earth Mother. What I’d like to know is how the fish came to be so high up on the foothills, far from any lake or river. It’s a mystery.”

“Yes, it certainly is.”

Gamelia was genuinely excited by her uncle’s discoveries. Educas always made the world seem fascinating in a way that was uniquely his own. She knew no one else on the Plain gave much thought to such matters, and was so pleased whenever Educas shared his ponderings with her. It was the young female’s hope that he would appreciate her interest and perhaps see her at last as a woman who took him seriously rather than view her merely as a curious child, or worse, a niece not allowed into the realm of his desires.

Suddenly, Educas lifted his eyes from the stone and looked past Gamelia. His face instantly shifted in expression from intense examination to bright expectation.

“Parthenia!” he cried happily.

Gamelia sighed in annoyance, her shoulders drooping like branches no longer uplifted by the wind.

By pure happenstance, Parthenia had come out of the Sacred Grove immediately after Gamelia had assured herself that her older sister was not anywhere around. Now the pretty thirteen year old was walking right past Gamelia, ignoring her completely, and up to Educas, almost pressing against him. Parthenia’s eyes and mouth formed an alluring picture, her posture perfect, shoulders thrown back, breasts leading the way under her knee-length blouse.

“Want some fruit, Educas?” Gamelia said with feigned innocence dripping of her displeasure.

The other two paid no attention to her.

“Parthenia, look what I have here.”

Educas’ voice was different now, softer, higher, less sure of itself. His eyes were fixed on the elder sibling.

“That’s very nice,” Parthenia replied, not even looking down at the slab in his hands, but rather returning his gaze. She couldn’t care less about her uncle’s strange notions, but pretending she did helped to keep him in her thrall. Possessing that kind of power over a man was more intoxicating to Parthenia than any thrill brought forth by a silly fish-stone.

“Did you come down this way, out of the woods, so you might see me outside the Sacred Grove,” she asked coyly, “and show me what you found?”

“Yes, Parthenia. Yes, I did.”

And that was true.

Gamelia had heard enough.

“I think I’ll go up the slope a bit and look for fish-stones,” the twelve year old said in a last feeble attempt to show it was really she who cared about the things that interested Educas. But as she turned and walked up toward the tree line, neither her uncle nor sister gave more than a casual wave goodbye.

The younger girl disappeared into the forest, and Parthenia’s smile broadened, less with affection for Educas, and more with satisfaction at having robbed Gamelia of her prize. This was as it should be, Parthenia thought. It was only appropriate that the first daughter would lose her virginity before the second, and her uncle was as useful a male for that purpose as any.

Most of the young men on the Plain kept their distance from Parthenia and Gamelia. The two children of the God-Queen and God-King were considered to be touched by divinity, and that meant laying so much as a finger on either one of the offspring could ignite a natural power resulting in unforeseen consequences. Or a boy might unintentionally offend the sisters, in which case his very life could be forfeit. So Parthenia and Gamelia had few friends of the opposite sex, which made their handsome uncle all the more appealing in their eyes.

Parthenia knew from general gossip among her female contemporaries that Educas had writhed with girls here and there, as any male youth of the Plain would have done. Yet, apparently he was not as sexually active as other twenty year olds. No doubt, thought Parthenia, this was because he was continually preoccupied with his fish-stones, his bird watching, or some other foolish distraction. But it was also obvious by the way he looked at his niece that he would fall prey to her charms if she tried hard enough. What was less certain in Parthenia’s mind was whether she wanted Educas merely as a lover, or as a husband.

Eucas certainly would have made a perfectly suitable mate. He was of a family highly regarded across the Plain, not only because of his sister, Ilithya, Queen of the Golden Bough, but because of his accomplished mother Cybele, father Attis, and older brother Corybas. Aside from his excursions into the forests and along the rivers of the region, Educas was a productive farmer and skilled carpenter, respectful of women, kind to children and one of the most eligible unmarried men on the flatlands.

But for Parthenia, becoming the wife of Educas would mean surrendering any claim of divinity and spending the rest of her days as a common mortal on an ordinary farm. A part of the thirteen year old still envisioned herself as a future God-Queen of the Sacred Grove, continuing to live in the cave shelter where she had grown up. Why be merely respected when you could be worshipped? Why wear down your body doing farm chores when you could stay in the Divine Domain and be served by the entire community? In order for Educas to be included in that ambitious dream, he would have to kill Phanes, possibly his own sister Ilithyia, and niece Gamelia, and claim Parthenia as his new partner in godhood. She was sure this fish-stone collector was incapable of such acts. He was not as tall or muscular as Phanes, certainly not as aggressive. Educas was a farmer, a ponderer, not a warrior. Even if he were, was Parthenia ruthless enough to encourage him to kill her own family? The fact that this actually was an open question in her mind was something she kept to herself. In any case, choosing Educas would be choosing a destiny, her very identity, and such a decision was too big for the girl to make just yet. If only Parthenia's thoughts about the future were as clear as her desire for her uncle's body.

She fleetingly recalled her mother's admonition. "Do not surrender your virginity too hastily," Ilithyia had warned her daughters. "Someday, whether or not we will it, there will be a new God-King, and that man may require your body to be pure. Your life may depend on it."

But this advice faded as Parthenia looked into Educas' warm, brown eyes. She reached up and pulled his shawl more securely about his shoulders, saying, "You really should be careful wandering about in the rain. You don't want to become ill, now do you?"

"No...I suppose...I'm alright..."

Educas had to laugh inwardly at himself. The more attracted he was to Parthenia, the more tongue-tied he became. Why couldn't he just speak clearly and confidently to her, the way he did to Gamelia? There was only a year's difference between the sisters, yet the younger seemed no more threatening than an over eager apprentice, while Parthenia moved him to passion more than any woman on the Plain ever had. She pressed closer, her inflamed eyes telling him that she could feel his snake rising under his cloth leggings.

And yet he resisted the temptation to meet her inviting, parted lips with his own. It was the familial relation that gave him pause. Even though his own parents had hinted that it was entirely appropriate for either one of his nieces to come under his protection through marriage, Educas would

have preferred to gain Ilithyia's approval. But he had not seen his older sister in over thirteen years. Like every other ordinary mortal on the Plain, Educas was forbidden to speak, or even look upon the God-Queen. Of course Parthenia herself could always pass on to her mother Educas' intentions, if only he, aptly called the Ponderer, could determine what his intentions actually were.

He took a step back and when Parthenia moved forward, up came his hand of caution.

"I...think I should put this with the other fish-stones I've found," Educas muttered. "Also....I have chores."

"All right," Parthenia replied. She accepted the decision he was making, but just for now.

Eucas softly touched her face. She inclined her cheek to his palm. Then, in starts and steps, they went their separate ways, he down the slope, she up toward the Sacred Grove. But it was a reluctant parting, and they each turned and waved twice or three times before finally receding from one another's view. The thoughtful farmer was relieved that he had not made a fool of himself, but knew he could never extinguish his longing for Parthenia. Fortunately, on this day at least, he had a new fish-stone into which he could redirect his attention.

Parthenia possessed no such relief from the crosscurrents of emotion. Frustrated by the lack of a resolution with Educas, she re-entered the Sacred Grove, passing the row of olive trees that bordered the divine area. Then she walked by the ram's horn and eternal flame, which Gamelia had re-ignited immediately after the morning shower had ended. Stepping across the shallow pond fed by the underground spring, Parthenia moved beyond the lightning-split oak dominating the Grove. Now the thirteen year old parted the vines that hung over the threshold to the cave shelter.

In the center of the torch lit main chamber, upon a collection of pillows, the naked bodies of Ilithyia and Phanes lay in sublime slumber, their limbs still interlaced from the previous night's love making, their safety secured this morning, as every morning, by the tradition that permitted challenges to the God-King to be made only at night, when the forms of the world were lost in darkness, and all that remained were the essence of the Goddess Herself, and the eternal struggle within Her Sacred Grove.

Parthenia gazed upon her parents, their nakedness fanning both her desire and discontent. When would such satisfaction be hers, she wondered. The girl told herself that she should have been more aggressive with Educas. They'd be writhing right there and then, on the slope. Her

frustration turning to anger, Parthenia strode down the naturally formed stone corridor and into the sisters' chamber. Perhaps Gamelia might provide some distraction.

The girls' room was empty. Didn't Gamelia say she was coming back here? Think, Parthenia. That's right. The silly goose said she was going to look for fish-stones. Stupid Gamelia! She'll get lost in the forest. Better go after her.

Fuming now, Parthenia stomped out of the cave shelter, swearing to herself that if she muddied her clothes searching for Gamelia, she'd give her little sister a good thrashing!

EIGHT

Gamelia was not exactly in the best of moods. Whereas she originally had intended to visit her grandparents, Cybele and Attis, on the Plain, she instead found herself on a false search for fish-stones. Just as well. Cybele and Attis were the mother and father of Educas. Seeing them now would only remind her of Educas' incomprehensible attraction to Parthenia.

And so the twelve year old wandered into the forest, just inside the tree line, and for no particular reason followed the border of black pine and oak as it arced from the northern edge of the Plain, where the Sacred Grove was located, then southeastward, to the opposing slopes known as the Sunrise Gate, through which the River of Life flowed east into the Inland Pass on its way to the great World Sea. The sun was almost to its zenith before the girl realized she had meandered all the way to the eastern foothills above the river.

What did time and distance matter? Her life was over. She'd never find a man to love. Even her own uncle rejected the poor child. Soon Gamelia would be too old for anyone to want her. The Earth Mother and all Her subordinate gods seemed to have abandoned this unworthy female.

But had they? Gamelia stopped and thought about it. Over the years, Ilithyia had told her daughters fantastic stories about great heroes as strong and brave as Phanes himself, heroes so special they were born of virgin mothers whose wombs were seeded not by mere mortal men, but by the eternal powers of the world. Gamelia's desperate imagination took flight. Perhaps this was why ordinary males turned from her. Could she be meant for greater things?

At that moment, the grey clouds parted and the rays of the sun raced down to the earth like hurtled spears of gold. Surely this was a sign.

"O Great Goddess, O Earth Mother," Gamelia pleaded on bended knees, her palms pressing the still moist grass as if to soak into herself the power of both the fallen rain and the everlasting Female Spirit that lay beneath it. "Bless me with your beauty. Share with me the nectar, which

only this morning, the Sky Father in His lust spilled upon you. Allow His life juices to flow into me from your green hair. Let me be your humble surrogate, O Mother, so that I may bring forth a great hero to honor you.”

With that, Gamelia rolled onto her back. The knee length blouse was pulled all the way up to her waist, exposing her garden. She spread her legs, the sun an amorphous blast of light hovering directly above.

“O Sky Father, take hold of your fiery bow and pierce me with your golden shafts,” she chanted, writhing and touching herself. “O great World Snake, winding your way through both heaven and earth, linking the two in coils of passion, pass through me.”

And like a serpent, her finger found her mound. Eyes closed, she moved with increasing excitement, the wet grass caressing her.

“Wind and fire from on high, nectar from below, join in me!”

She could feel the sun’s heat on the inside of her thighs.

“O Father, bend your torch to me!”

Then Gamelia opened her eyes. More startled than frightened, she beheld before her the silhouette of a young man, his completely hairless and smooth head surrounded by a halo of light from the sun behind him. Never on the Plain had she seen a youth with no hair. And no eyebrows besides! Was he mortal? Had her prayers been answered?

She stopped writhing abruptly, still breathing heavily in response to her sensations. Bringing her hand to her brow to block the brightness, she squinted at the figure. Then, gathering her courage, she hesitantly spoke.

“Are you...Are you a god?”

Hypsistos had developed a fairly good grasp of the language of Graia, but even so the question was bewildering.

Earlier that morning, he had been pleasantly surprised when, after the brief rain, In-Shushinak, stiff-backed and controlled in spite of the previous night’s self-inflicted punishment, approached the acolyte in the midst of the encampment and asked in a reconciliatory tone, “Hypsistos...your back...are you alright?”

The student nodded, for the sting of the whip had indeed diminished.

“And your stomach, Master?”

“What discomfort remains is well deserved. Let our scars remind us of our failings. Of greater concern to me is whether or not all is well with us, Hypsistos. Our...respect...for one another.”

“Yes, Mentor. All is well with us.”

And the youth meant it. He was determined not to let his own questions about his destiny be the cause of still more pain to the older man.

The merchant-priest exhaled in relief, saying, “Thanks be to God. Any ill will between us would produce a wound I could not endure.”

This expression of vulnerability almost moved Hypsistos to embrace his teacher, but he knew the Sumerian would never want such a public display of affection.

In-Shushinak gestured toward the three huntsmen who were just then leaving to find the natural trail leading out of the Pass and onto the Plain.

“If you want to go with them, my son, I’ve no objection.”

“But, Mentor, last night, did you not say...”

“Last night was about that stag and false visions, which you must never again allow to lead you astray.” In-Shushinak’s face softened. “You are not my prisoner, Hypsistos. What you do in God’s name you must do willingly. If you are to carry on our Almighty Father’s work when my days are done, you will have to understand fully the People of the Plain, and to accomplish that end, you would do well to know the land upon which they live. So go with the huntsmen. Feel free to explore on your own if you wish, but take care that no persons from the Plain see you until our party is ready to present itself to them. I am confident your skills will guide you back to the camp, if you lose sight of those three scouts.” Then the man from Ur pointed a finger of warning. “But there will be no pursuit of game on your part. Those days are past. The quest before you is far more grand than merely dreaming of talking animals. Go now.”

And so Hypsistos hurried after the huntsmen and re-entered the wood, armed only with a short dagger for self-protection, and not at all sure he was worthy of In-Shushinak’s trust.

Before long the three huntsmen had found, on the northern side of the River of Life, a pathway broad and level enough to allow safe passage of all the party’s men and pack mules over the remaining stretch to the Plain. The trio kept within the tree line, careful not to expose themselves to anyone working the fields below the wooded foothills.

By this time, Hypsistos had wandered off by himself, not deliberately losing the huntsmen, but simply following his thoughts. He wrestled in his mind with all the influences that pulled upon him. Was the world big enough to house both the Almighty Father and the Great Stag? Could they be different masks of the same power? Or could it be that the god who lived beyond the sky and the animal spirits who dwelled in the Shaman’s cave were like opposing weights on the some eternal scale? Was the scale balanced?

His musings were interrupted by a whimper of some sort, a soft moan,

not far off. He followed the sounds to a clearing, somewhat smaller than the one in which the Stag had stood a day before. In the clearing's center lay a petite form, a girl, moving restlessly on her back. Had she been injured? Was she in pain?

Hypsistos hurried to her and saw immediately that the girl was pleasuring herself and chanting. He stood motionless, transfixed by her passion. The young man had never lain with a female. His experience as a slave in Jericho or as an acolyte in exclusively male caravans just passing through other cities of the eastern lands had not allowed much opportunity for contact with the opposite sex. And the teachings, never mind the behavior, of In-Shushinak only served to reinforce the youth's belief that sexual pleasure, even if it were to come from touching oneself, could lead only to pain and shame.

Nevertheless, Hypsistos found his penis hardening of its own will, and felt an unexpected hunger, the quality and intensity of which was entirely new to his soul. The acolyte in him wanted to proclaim his presence and put a halt to her unclean treatment of her own body, while the aroused hunter wanted to fall upon her like a wolf to a deer.

She suddenly opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her writhing stopped. The girl brought her hand to her brow, shading her eyes, so as to see him more clearly. Then she spoke, her voice trembling.

“Are you...Are you a god?”

What an odd question. Did he understand the language correctly?

“I am Hypsistos...” He was mindful of In-Shushinak's admonition about revealing the presence of the merchant party to the People of the Plain too soon, and so he simply added, “...from afar.”

“From afar!”

Gamelia was overjoyed. The speaker's accent was so alien, he had to have been from beyond the world. So it was true! She was destined to carry the seed of the Sky God! Take that, Parthenia!

Still on her back, the twelve year old began to churn and grind her lower body seductively. She stretched her arms out to him.

“Come to me, my lord!”

There was no mistaking her message, but Hypsistos was not at all sure how he should respond, especially after yesterday's events regarding his mentor. He was helpless to do anything but stare down at this entrancing, wild creature. Without warning Gamelia sat up and gripped the hips of her god, jerking him toward her. Then the girl quickly pulled down his sackcloth leggings. Beholding his circumcised penis, she noticed at once

that it was not like her father's. Surely only a true deity would possess such a divine member, a snake whose head was smooth and round, like the skull of this god himself! Gamelia also observed that on the underside of the stranger's penis there was no sign of any cut, which traditionally was applied to males of the Plain at puberty to reflect a vaginal aperture of sorts, uniting young men with the Goddess. She stroked the serpent and Hypsistos stopped thinking. He fell to his knees as she rose to hers. They kissed, their arms pressing one another close, their hands exploring what was for both of them newly discovered terrain.

Hypsistos supported her as she slowly leaned backward onto the moist grass again. Gamelia pulled him on top of her. They undulated to a common pulse.

“Writhe with me, Sky God from afar!”

She took hold of his penis and tried to maneuver it into her, but this was the first time Hypsistos actually was required to be the male in love-making. He was so anxious, everything was happening so quickly, he kept missing the viper's nest.

Having already brought herself to a fever pitch through her own self-touching, Gamelia could wait no longer. She grabbed his shoulders and threw Hypsistos to one side, rolling with him so that he was now beneath her. Then she sat straight, straddling her lover. The young man was hard and erect. Gamelia lowered herself gradually, relishing for the first time the luxurious pain of a living sword fitting into her sheath. She tossed off her blouse and was completely naked now, the chilly autumn air easily countered by her heated body.

Hypsistos, flat on his back, arms flung out, gave himself over to the experience, which, like a thunderous song, drowned out the whispering discomfort of his whip wounds. The whole world was reduced to his sense of touch, his emotions merging, all taking place inside this girl. Flashes of In-Shushinak and the Stag burned in his mind's eye, and somehow fused with this frenzied, long haired beast, its dancing locks like tongues of flame blazing above him. And it was good.

Gamelia's thighs moved her up and down and forward and back. The storm rose within her, and just as snake-lightning was about to strike, something tugged at her hair, ripped her right out of the clouds and sent her crashing to the earth.

Parthenia had been growing in annoyance, beginning to think she was on a wild goose chase. Perhaps her brat of a sister had doubled back somehow and wasn't in the woods at all. On the other hand, if something

happened to Gamelia in the forest, Ilithyia and Phanes would hold Parthenia responsible. But the older daughter possessed no tracking skills. How in the name of the Goddess was she going to...

Then she stepped into the clearing and saw the lovers. Not recognizing her younger sibling at first, Parthenia stopped and watched, forgetting about her search for the time being. Her mouth formed the same smile of secret pleasure that visited her face whenever she spied upon her parents in their most intimate moments. But that smile flew away as soon as she realized who the lust driven girl in the distance was.

“Gamelia!?”

She almost choked on the name. Now fury replaced prurient curiosity. Parthenia’s assumption that she would be the first to lose her virginity was crumbling before her eyes. It didn’t matter who the male was. This was a case of disrespect, and entitlement betrayed! She would have her revenge!

Parthenia raced over to the writhing couple. In their fog of passion, neither Gamelia nor Hypsistos noticed her approach. The elder female took hold of her sister’s hair and, with one mighty pull, tore the competitor off the young man.

Gamelia’s sensual moans transformed into a yelp of pain. She tumbled onto the grass, holding her head and detecting a spot on her scalp where some hair had been rather abruptly removed. There was an instant of fear when she was unsure as to what had attacked her. Then she looked up to see the thirteen year old standing over her.

“Parthenia?! What are you doing?”

“What am I doing? What are you doing, you stupid fool! Who do you think you are, disrupting the order of things!”

“What order?”

“I’m the oldest, Gamelia! I’m first! You don’t just go off and find someone to writhe...”

As she was talking, Parthenia glanced at the man on the grass. Then she paused to take a longer look. His shaven head and eyebrows were an exception to the Plain, as was his circumcised penis, but despite these features, he was attractive. And unlike her sister, Parthenia saw that he was merely a mortal. Hypsistos smiled meekly at her, completely at a loss.

The emotions inside Gamelia were all a jumble now. Parthenia’s interruption of the younger girl’s conversation with Educas earlier was one thing, but this intrusion into such a private union with the Sky God was intolerable. The twelve year old sprang to her feet and, before Parthenia could turn back toward her, rammed into the interloper. They smashed

to the ground, screaming and scratching and biting and pulling at one another ferociously.

Hypsistos made some vague call to them to stop, but wasn't sure whether or not to interfere. First the sagely Stag, now these two wingless furies. Obviously the spirits were alive and well in the forests of Graia.

Parthenia managed to kick her rival away, and took the opportunity to get off the ground. As Gamelia also rose, the older daughter punched her squarely in the face, sending the naked female stumbling backward and on to her rear. Blood gushed out of Gamelia's nose. She screamed at the sight of it and in response to the throbbing pain.

"My nose! You broke my nose!"

Parthenia laughed harshly.

"It's just a little blood, cry-baby!"

The sexual pleasure of the day couldn't be further from Gamelia's mind now. Hurt and humiliated, she got up and ran without her blouse from the clearing.

"Bitch! I'm telling Mother!"

"Go ahead! See if I care, cry-baby!"

Branches and bushes blurred past as Gamelia rushed recklessly through the woods. She sobbed uncontrollably, robbed of her glory, her divine destiny. Undoubtedly this defeat would cause her Sky God lover to see the truth, that Gamelia was unworthy of the sacred seed he was about to plant within her. Surely there could never be another day more disastrous than this.

In the clearing, all was quiet. Parthenia stood panting like a proud but merciless warrior. Hypsistos, still lying in the grass, sensed that what the young woman was feeling was of a quality quite distinct from the hunter's respect for and sadness over a fallen but worthy foe. He had possessed that very respect and sadness in regard to the dying Stag the day before. Not so this aggressive female, who plainly considered remorse in victory to be a weakness.

Then Parthenia looked down at him and it seemed at that moment that his role had been reversed. Now Hypsistos was the mere mortal, beholding an imperious goddess.

Wise beyond her years, she smiled and asked, "Did we excite you?"

He looked at his manhood, which was more stiff than ever.

"I...don't know..." the easterner blurted out.

"Well, your snake knows!"

The exhilaration of her triumph over Gamelia and the sight of the

youthful stranger swept away any vestiges of moderation still clinging to Parthenia. She swooped down on him, gripping his penis like a usurper claiming the blade of the vanquished. The thrill coursing through Hypsistos, which had been interrupted by Parthenia's appearance, resumed its irresistible progress, washing away any loyalty he might have had to the younger girl who had first pulled him into this mad torrent.

Parthenia ripped away what remained of her blouse, which had been shredded in the fight. Naked, she kneeled astride him and eased down onto his member, the animal filling her as nothing had before. Now the girl took up the ride where her sister had left off. The viciousness she had directed at Gamelia was transformed into a ravenous assault upon this new prey.

For an eternal moment they writhed vigorously there in the clearing, the music of one another's sounds spurring them to greater, more powerful motion. Then, together, and for each the first time with someone of the opposite sex, they felt the bite of the World Snake, and Hypsistos heard his lover sing the strange song.

"Sss...aaa...jjj...eee...ttt...kkk...rrr...uuu...lll...kkk!"

Still they danced in unison until the all-consuming spell was lifted, and Parthenia fell breathlessly to the boy's side. For some time they lay unmoving and silent, their hearts in thrall to the glorious mystery of Becoming. After awhile she turned to him.

"You are not of the Plain," the female stated, looking at his penis and undecorated navel.

"No. I am Hypsistos...from afar."

"From beyond the Inland Pass?"

After what they had shared, the young man could not lie to her.

"Yes," he answered. "From beyond the coastal villages of Graia, east across the World Sea."

Parthenia's eyes lit with amazement. Neither she nor Gamelia had ever traveled farther than the farmlands in the vicinity of the Sacred Grove, but she knew that east of the Inland Pass there was a coast inhabited by people who fished a great body of water, the far side of which could not be seen. A few times during her thirteen years, a trading party from elsewhere across that wide sea had come through the Pass. Many of the shiny trinkets worn by Ilithyia and her two daughters came from these traders. Aside from happily receiving these adornments, however, Parthenia had no particular interest in the outside world, certainly not as much as Gamelia, who shared that odd sense of curiosity with Educas. The older sister thought of her uncle and laughed inwardly. Educas had been the object of her desire only

this morning, but had been removed from that lofty position rather unexpectedly. It was the fortuitous event of writhing with a visitor from so far away that filled her with wonder, in spite of herself.

Hypsistos thought it best to change the subject lest she ask more questions In-Shushinak did not want answered.

“That other girl...?”

“Gamelia. I’m Parthenia. We’re sisters. Daughters of Ilithyia and Phanes of the Sacred Grove!”

She intoned this announcement with the significance it deserved and was somewhat taken aback by his lack of awe, but Hypsistos had been given by his mentor only generalities regarding the religion and traditions of the Plain.

“Well,” he said, “I didn’t mean to cause trouble between you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. A good fight often leads to writhing. My parents always writhe after my father fights someone. It makes the World Snake, Sajat Krulk, bite all the more deeply.”

“Really?” he responded, not quite sure what she was talking about.

“Yes. I’d fight for you again if I had to. Would you fight for me, Hypsistos?”

She ran her fingers over his still restless penis.

“Yes,” he answered earnestly.

“Would you...kill...for me?”

“I...” He paused. Her eyes told him this was not an idle question. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” Parthenia waved away the issue. Talk of killing led to thoughts of what tomorrow might bring for her parents, and those thoughts in turn reminded her that Gamelia would be well on her way back to the cave shelter by now. No telling how much about the day’s events the brat would be revealing to Ilithyia. Better get home and limit the damage.

“I have to go,” she said abruptly, withdrawing her hand from his serpent and getting to her feet. “Goodbye, Hypsistos from afar. Perhaps we’ll meet again one day, and writhe once more.”

“I’d like that, Parthenia of the Sacred Grove. I’d like that very much.”

She gave a genuine smile of thanks to the youth who had led her through the threshold of First Writhing with a man’s snake. Then, not bothering to pick up her torn blouse, she stepped out of the clearing, turned to wave once more and, no longer the furious harpy but rather the beautiful, naked wood nymph, disappeared amidst the trees.

Hypsistos gazed in her direction for some time, assuring himself that what had just transpired was real. He put his clothes back on and glanced about anxiously. It wouldn't do to learn that the huntsmen had witnessed his uninhibited introduction to the two girls. Thankfully, the trio of for-esters was nowhere to be seen. The traveler breathed in relief. Telling In-Shushinak what happened simply was out of the question. It seemed this strange land of Graia was providing Hypsistos with more and more experiences of which the merchant-priest would never approve, yet which the acolyte knew in his heart, were exactly right.

NINE

Parthenia hurried northwestward along the tree line, which formed an arcing forest border about the Plain. Just as the sun had touched the topmost points of the western pines, she entered the cave shelter within the Sacred Grove.

In the main chamber, her father Phanes was still sleeping soundly. Soon he would be waking to stand his nightly vigil over the Grove, where he might or might not confront yet another challenger. But for now, Phanes slept, alone. Parthenia took a deep breath, bracing herself. Her mother Ilithyia could be nowhere else but in the girls' chamber, no doubt getting an earful of Gamelia's version of recent happenings.

Not eager for a confrontation, but sensing one was inevitable, Parthenia pushed herself along the stone corridor. Her younger sister's sobs and her mother's words of comfort echoed on the hard, cold walls. She entered the smaller, torch lit, rock enclosed room, and saw Ilithyia and Gamelia sitting on a collection of goose-down pillows, the parent applying a piece of cloth to her daughter's face, wiping away the blood. Back in the clearing, the defeated female's wound had looked much worse than it really was. Gamelia's nose was not broken, and the blood flow had ceased. That did not stop the twelve year old from crying now, drawing as much sympathy from her mother as she possibly could.

And sympathize Ilithyia did, more deeply than either child realized. The twenty-six year old had grown up on the farmlands of the Plain as a common mortal, not like her two offspring, both of whom were born in the Sacred Grove and therefore touched by divinity from the moment they first came into the world. Yet Ilithyia knew what it felt like to have her own worthiness for marriage, perhaps even her worthiness to live or die, be based on her potential for birth giving. A young woman of the flatlands, who was known to have writhed, and yet not given birth to a healthy infant, might be doubted as a future mother and never find a husband. On the other hand, a robust baby, even one born out of wedlock, could be a lure for a potential mate seeking proof of a productive womb. Other men preferred

virgins in order to assure themselves that they were truly the fathers of all their children. Ilithyia believed a man formidable enough to kill Phanes would want his new God-Queen to be untouched and entirely his own. Any females in the cave shelter who were not virgins could face the most dire of consequences. Thus, when Gamelia tearfully told her mother of the day's lusty activity in the forest, Ilithyia's first thought was that her two daughters could someday pay for their lack of purity with their very lives.

Why couldn't the girls be satisfied with their innocent flirtations with Educas? Ilithyia, from her hidden position just outside the cave shelter, had on occasion spied Parthenia and Gamelia talking to their eligible uncle on the slope beyond the border of the Sacred Grove. Isolated by her divinity, the God-Queen had not been seen by her brothers, Educas and Corybas, nor by her parents, Cybele and Attis, in over thirteen years. She sometimes wondered whether Educas ever gave serious thought to marrying either of her children, to which Ilithyia would have had no objection.

But today's incident with a perfect stranger...! Someone apparently not even of the Plain...! Ilithyia was at once understanding of her daughters' desires and infuriated by their recklessness this day, and was determined to bring home to Parthenia and Gamelia the discipline their station in life required.

Then Ilithyia, Queen of the Mistletoe, looked up to see her oldest child. Anger clouded the mother's face. She pushed Gamelia away, quickly rose, strode over to Parthenia and powerfully slapped her on the side of her head. Fire shot through the firstborn's temple and everything blurred. She staggered sideways, hitting the jagged limestone wall shoulder first, then to the smooth, uncompromising floor with a thud. The thirteen year old lay there naked, her skull and shoulder protesting in pain.

"Have I taught you nothing, child!?" Ilithyia raged. "Do you give yourself away so thoughtlessly? So freely? What if a new God-King steps through that threshold this night? What if he demands to see your maiden-head? What if he sees it has been breached? Then what!?"

The fallen one shook her head, trying to clear her senses.

"Mother, it was Gamelia who writhed with the stranger. I tried to stop her. Then I told the stranger to go away, never to return."

Parthenia was fairly confident her younger sister, after the fight, had kept running away from the clearing, and couldn't have seen what happened afterwards between Hypsistos and herself. If Gamelia felt compelled to confess every detail of her own life to their mother, so be it. That didn't mean Parthenia had to do likewise.

Unfortunately for the elder sibling, Ilithyia was having none of it. She bent over and brought her open palm down hard upon the top of the girl's head.

"Don't insult me with your lies, child! Do you think I don't know my own daughters?"

"It's true, Mother! I did nothing!"

"Oh, is that so! Let me see your maidenhead, Parthenia!"

As she spoke, Ilithyia clutched at her victim's knees, spreading the liar's legs wide.

"Obey me! Let me see!"

Parthenia tried to wriggle away, but her limbs were held fast by the furious parent.

"Gamelia!"

She who was summoned knew exactly what her mother wanted and moved quickly to the wrestling pair. Then Gamelia happily applied all her weight upon her sister's upper torso. Now the older child was pinned to the floor. Pushing her daughter's knees further apart, Ilithyia, on her own elbows now, peered into Parthenia's garden and probed inside with her finger. The mucous veil of virginity was not intact.

"Hah! You've been breached!"

"It was an accident, Mother! The other day... I fell... stretched somehow..."

"More lies!"

And with that, Ilithyia slapped Parthenia yet again.

Her ruse shattered, embarrassment and fear welled up within the exposed girl.

"I'm sorry, Mother. Please, no more! No more!"

Perhaps not surprisingly, as Parthenia's cries intensified, Gamelia shed fewer tears. A smile of sweet revenge crossed the young female's face. Her nose already bloodied upon arriving at the cave shelter, she had been spared any further physical punishment from Ilithyia. It appeared the twelve year old was going to get through this whole affair with nothing more hurtful than a stern lecture. As she had run naked toward the Sacred Grove earlier, the question of whether her selfish sibling would take advantage of the Sky God lover was subordinate to concerns over Ilithyia's response to it all, for Gamelia knew she could never keep anything from her mother. Now that she had survived the God-Queen's wrath, and Parthenia's own sexual recklessness uncovered, the always second sister reveled in long awaited, and silently celebrated victory.

But it was a celebration too soon engaged, for Parthenia's constitution was far stronger than Gamelia's. The first offspring could be hurt, but not easily defeated.

"Gamelia writhed as well, Mother!"

"Yes, but she didn't lie to me about it!" Ilithyia replied, once more raising her hand to her firstborn.

The senior woman's comment brought a change to the countenance of Parthenia, who seemed to receive a sudden infusion of strength, as if detecting a weakness in her attacker. Her submissive pleadings of only a moment before were instantly replaced by a self-defensive lashing out at Ilithyia.

"You speak to me of lies, Mother? Who knows better than you of deceit?"

Parthenia spoke these words calmly, venomously, and their very tone froze the punisher's hand in mid-strike.

"What are you saying, daughter?"

The knowing smirk and the sly eyes of Parthenia drove a shudder through the God-Queen's soul. Could her oldest child actually remember the secret, Ilithyia wondered. Parthenia could not have been more than seven years old by the time those early hardships had passed. The face of the parent now bespoke the pain wrought by the memories of those difficulties.

Gamelia couldn't help but notice her mother's expression, and the sudden swing in advantage away from Ilithyia and toward her sister. All this time she had been applying her weight to keep Parthenia pinned to the floor, but the shift in mood compelled the younger girl to release her hold and sit up. The three females were all on the floor now, each one quite still, their physical struggle having ended, the real war just beginning.

"Mother, what's wrong?" asked Gamelia anxiously.

"Go ahead, Mother." Parthenia sensed she was in command. "Tell your little darling about our other three sisters."

This statement bewildered Gamelia.

"Other three sisters?"

Parthenia's secret weapon, unsheathed like a hidden dagger to skillfully cut her elder, was the reality of three stillborns, all girls. The first had happened when Ilithyia was seventeen years of age. Gamelia was only three and Parthenia four years old. Ilithyia and Phanes were horrified by the event, not only because they had lost a child, but because a stillborn was a clear sign from the Goddess that She no longer deemed the God-Queen and God-King of the Sacred Grove to be worthy of bringing forth healthy

children, a fault which surely would be reflected in poor crops or some other devastation upon the Plain. Were the community to discover the dead infant, both Ilithyia and Phanes, and possibly Parthenia and Gamelia, would have been killed, and a new divine couple established in the Grove. Even Ilithyia's own parents and two brothers would have been bound to the tradition requiring her death, and against all their feelings of love, compelled to participate in killing her.

It was a moment of testing, wherein Ilithyia and her husband would either nobly accept the consequence of their failure, or surrender to cowardice and sacrilege. Terror driving them nearly to madness, they chose the latter. Outside the Sacred Grove there had been no knowledge of Ilithyia's pregnancy, and so, in the depth of night, unseen by the People of the Plain, Phanes, himself nineteen years old at the time, had taken the dead baby and abandoned her above and behind the cave shelter. He left the infant just beyond the location where the members of his family usually went to pass their food. That which they ate was itself a form of the Goddess, and its passage through their own bodies merged them evermore with the earth.

The stillborn girl was reclaimed by She Who Dwells Within All Things, as so many other unwanted babies, dead or living, were left to the elements over the years by various families on the Plain. Ilithyia and Phanes' secret was safe, but wouldn't the Earth Mother be offended by their impious acts? Wouldn't She wreak havoc across the land? Both parents desperately prayed to the Goddess to forgive them their weakness and not take out Her anger on the People. The wife and husband suffered through anxious months until the next harvest.

It was good. The wheat grew tall and in abundance. There was neither flood nor drought. The children on the Plain were robust. No plagues swept away the People. Phanes continued to strike down all challengers. Ilithyia gave thanks to the Goddess.

And then another stillborn. Another secret abandonment. More dread of the Great Mother's wrath. But no wrath came. Parthenia was six years old by this time, aware now that not all was well but not quite grasping the circumstances. A year later, the third and final dead infant emerged from Ilithyia's womb, and Parthenia was ordered by her mother and father to speak of this to no one. Gamelia was only a year younger than her sister, but that year made all the difference. She had no memory of these hardships. Parthenia remembered, however, and sometimes overheard her parents talking quietly of these matters, but she kept her silence all these many seasons, her own youthful lusts eventually replacing the concerns of long

ago. Even when images of the stillborns randomly rose to her consciousness, be those images accurately recalled or simply reconstructed by her imagination, she quickly submerged them back under the surface, having no desire to accidentally let slip the secret and bring ruin to her mother. No desire, that is, until now.

As for Ilithyia and Phanes, there was happiness in that the farmlands, over which they reigned from their Sacred Grove, not only were spared disaster, but prospered. It became increasingly easy, as the full moons came and went, for the two divine lovers to assume the Goddess smiled upon them despite their flawed service to Her. But every so often, the God-Queen was chilled by the suspicion that the Earth Mother was patiently biding Her time, with each passing moment adding another stone weighing against the family, until the scales of fate were tipped, and the stones came crashing upon everything Ilithyia loved.

All this lived in the woman's heart as she tried to return Parthenia's stare with equal ruthlessness. The mother and two daughters were all still sitting on the floor.

"What three sisters?" Gamelia repeated.

"Three baby girls," Parthenia rushed out the words before Ilithyia could stop her, "born dead from our mother's womb!"

The God-Queen sighed in despair. She had wanted neither child to be burdened with this knowledge.

"I...don't remember," Gamelia whimpered, confused by what she was hearing.

Ilithyia shifted across the floor and embraced her, saying tenderly, "The last stillborn was six years ago, Gamelia, when you yourself were only six."

"What were their names, Mother?" asked the twelve year old.

"It is best we do not name them. Let us think of them as three beautiful spirits in the eternal warmth of the Goddess. Three singing, dancing muses, inspiring us to love life."

These words brought sadness to Gamelia. She had never known such loss in her family, and besides, other sisters almost certainly would have been nicer to her than Parthenia had been. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Your sisters have been reclaimed by the great Earth Mother, as we all will be someday, my darling Gamelia," Ilithyia explained to her youngest as soothingly as she could. "She Who Brings Forth All Things and Consumes All Things has forgiven us. No catastrophe has befallen the land. The People of the Plain have no knowledge of these stillbirths, and there is no need for them to know."

“I understand, Mother.” Gamelia hugged Ilithyia more tightly. “No harm will come to our family through me. I will keep the secret.”

“Pay it not another thought,” the God-Queen wisely advised. “Think of your own fate, of your future husband, and how to conduct yourself with dignity and kindness throughout your life. Will you do that for me, Gamelia?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“No!” Parthenia realized she was missing an opportunity to rally her sister to her side. “Gamelia! You cannot be loyal to a woman whose sacrilege nearly brought ruin to our family!”

Ilithyia gasped at Parthenia’s boldness. Was the family secret ultimately going to turn her own children against her? Was this the vengeance of the Goddess so long delayed?

But Gamelia, still in her parent’s arms, simply looked at Parthenia and repeated quietly, “I will keep the secret.”

Now the two embracing females gazed upon the older daughter with disappointment, and Parthenia found herself with no ally against her mother. Yet her pride, and her physical bruises, prevented her from conceding to Ilithyia’s authority. She got up from the floor and stood defiantly before them.

“If you ever strike me again, Mother, if you ever again dare to violate my garden, I will reveal the secret to everyone,” Parthenia threatened. “Grandmother and Grandfather, Uncles Educas and Corybas...everyone I see!”

Gamelia’s understanding had helped Ilithyia recover her stride. For the second time in this fierce exchange, she gently pushed her sympathetic daughter away, stood up, and approached Parthenia, this time not in a fury, but with quiet confidence.

“Do as you will, bold Parthenia. Let us see whether the People of the Plain will spare your life once the truth is known. Or whether they will cut all our family down like a sickly grain. Including you. Go ahead, proud daughter. Do your worst.”

“I will not be cut down if I renounce any claim to divinity and simply live out on the Plain as an ordinary mortal,” Parthenia snapped back. “Only those still living in the Sacred Grove would be sacrificed were I to reveal the secret.”

“Is that true, Mother?” Gamelia asked fearfully.

“Perhaps,” Ilithyia answered, unshaken. “And what would your grandparents and uncles think of you then, sweet Parthenia? Do you think you

could find a husband after openly betraying your own family? What man would want such a treacherous woman for a wife?"

These questions gave Parthenia pause. Her mind raced, searching for an answer. She found none. Suddenly Ilithyia was nose to nose with her and Parthenia took an involuntary step back in response to the stark reality burning in her mother's eyes. Those beautiful, terrible, green eyes, in which dwelled the indomitable essence of the Goddess Herself. The thirteen year old said nothing now. Even a fool could see the weapon of knowledge she wielded could hurt herself as much as anyone else. She looked at the floor, defeated, but refusing to admit it out loud.

Then, like a viper's tongue, Ilithyia's hand flicked forward and gripped the neck of Parthenia, who was taken by surprise and pressed up against the wall.

"I am Ilithyia, God-Queen of the Sacred Grove, wife of Phanes, Chaos-King! I am Mother to you, child! Speak to me with disrespect again, act toward me irreverently once more, and I will disown you, cast you from the Grove! Through Gamelia I will proclaim to the People that you have been cursed by the Goddess! Any questions you raise about the past will be taken as the ravings of a spiteful madwoman! You will become an untouchable on the Plain! No man will have you! Not God-King nor ordinary mortal! Heed my warning, daughter!"

Genuine fear for both her status and her life at last took hold of Parthenia.

"Y...Yes...Yes, Mother," she choked. "Forgive me."

Ilithyia released her grip on the girl. The senior female took a moment, calming herself. She was not going to allow this situation to spiral out of control and into a blood feud. When she finally spoke it was in a soft voice, but not without sternness.

"I forgive you your trespass, Parthenia. See to Gamelia's injury. And only then see to your own bruises. Gamelia, you will find in your heart the will to forgive your sister's offenses against you. Both of you will pray to the Goddess that your recklessness this day has not seeded you with babies, and that your husbands to be will not inspect your maidenheads.

"Now then. Your father will be waking soon. There is no need to speak of this to him and distract him from his crucial tasks. This matter is ours alone. And it is now ended. Is that clear, my daughters?"

Both girls nodded obediently.

"Very well. Remember that tomorrow is the Dance of Sowing. You both must bring only your loving spirit to the fields if the wheat is to grow

tall and strong come spring. This is your sacred duty, so put all ill will behind you. May the Dance direct the Life-Force into the furrows and away from your own unready wombs!”

“Yes, Mother,” the siblings replied in unison.

Her posture straightening with regal authority, the God-Queen left her children to themselves. As she made her way along the stone corridor back to the main chamber where her husband slept, Ilithyia considered her offspring. Although Parthenia’s behavior toward her sister and mother had been unacceptable, the elder child did reveal strength and cunning, which the wife of Phanes grudgingly admired. That strength, united with Gamelia’s compassion, could serve both young women well against life’s challenges in times to come, if, that is, they did not destroy each other first.

The twenty-six year old chanted silently within herself, “Please, O Earth Mother, from whom all things spring, I beg you, do not poison the hearts of my daughters. If you must take vengeance for my failure to bring forth more healthy children, punish me alone, for I alone deserve it. But if my bloodline is to continue, give me a sign, O Goddess, for my waiting for these many years for your judgment has driven me near to madness!”

She stepped into the main chamber and looked upon Phanes, who was still sprawled out on his pillows.

“Spare my husband’s life another night, O Mother,” she prayed, “and may tomorrow’s daytime sleep, unlike today, bring me uninterrupted peace.”

In the girls’ room, Parthenia reluctantly picked up the rag and began to clean off the rest of the blood from Gamelia’s face. As her mother instructed, the little sister did her best to smile kindly upon the person who had stolen her Sky God lover and punched her in the nose. But strict obedience to Ilithyia, rather than the fullest love for Parthenia, was all Gamelia could muster at the moment.

“You don’t mourn our stillborn sisters, do you, Parthenia. They’re just pawns in some game of power to you,” Gamelia quietly observed. She was trying to understand the other’s motives, but did not want to ignite any more outbursts of anger.

Parthenia said nothing in response, and there was no warmth in her silence.

“Would you mourn for me, Parthenia?”

“Of course I would mourn for you, stupid,” the thirteen year old answered impatiently. And this was an honest answer. In spite of her

annoyance with Gamelia, Parthenia knew that, after all was said and done, her naive sibling meant well.

Gamelia said earnestly, "I would mourn for you, Parthenia. I forgive you. For everything. Even for trying to hurt Mother's feelings. I know you really would never do anything to hurt our family. Would you?"

"No. I wouldn't," the elder grunted.

"Can you forgive me for telling Mother about the Sky God?"

Parthenia's lips formed a wry, almost mocking smile. She said, "You mean, about the boy."

The twelve year old bowed her head in embarrassment, acknowledging her self-delusion.

"Yes," Gamelia said. "The boy. Can you forgive me for telling Mother?"

Parthenia shrugged.

"I suppose...Yes, Gamelia. I forgive you. Happy now?"

Gamelia wanted to believe her older sister, but the resentful eyes of Parthenia proclaimed that what had begun this day was not ended.

TEN

In the beginning there was Chaos. The Abyss. Without form. Without boundary. The absence of time and space. Neither now nor then. Neither here nor there. No light, no dark. No good, no evil. Neither female nor male. Lifeless. Deathless. Without consciousness. Without intent. Chaos. The Void. Nothing.

And from nothing, something. Only that which is extraordinary could arise from the boundless, bottomless chasm. The Goddess. The first form. The beginning of now and here. Beyond light and dark. Above good and evil. The Sacred Female. Aware. Willful. Alive, and with the knowledge of life, the knowledge of death.

I am! cried the Goddess.

I have begun,

And because I have a beginning, I am not infinite,

And because I am finite, I must end,

And because I must end, I fear,

And because I fear, I need comfort,

And because I need comfort, I need companionship,

And because I need companionship, I am lonely.

But no one else emerged from the timeless void.

I will create life from my very being, so that I may not be lonely.

And so the Goddess rent Herself asunder.

This was the First Sacrifice.

She divided Her parts, light from dark, up from down, moist from dry, cold from hot, smooth from rough, hard from soft, heavy things from weightless things.

But good and evil, love and hate, female and male, these things remained undivided. All else was split and placed in opposition.

From Her shattered self came all the forms of the world. Land surrounded by World Sea, beneath day sky and night sky. Tree and Wave. Cloud and Sun. Star and Moon.

Yet She remained the Goddess. One of Her faces, Eros, the Great

Weaver, used yet another of Her creations, the World Snake, Sajat Krulk, as a Cosmic Thread. Sajat Krulk wound its way through all the world's forms, linking them, binding them about the Female Essence like a belt about the Goddess' waist. It was all the Goddess' Garden. Life grew here. The subordinate gods of Ocean and Heaven. The spirits of Soil and Stone and Water and Wind and Fire. The muses of Rainbow and Birdsong and Laughter and Rage and Tears. All creatures of claw and wing and fang and fin. Each individual creature possessing female and male features, incapable of bringing forth offspring. These living things, ethereal and material, great and small, were all mortal, and were without the prospect of a succeeding generation. They were all the forms of the divided Goddess. Herself Her own children.

It was the First Virgin Birth.

Now I am Earth Mother. No longer am I lonely. My parts are my children, my companions. They comfort me and assuage my fears. Still I know that I am finite. Unlike Chaos, I have boundaries. I had a beginning, therefore I have an end. I was born, therefore I must die, as must all my children, with no generations succeeding them. Even I, the Goddess, cannot escape death. What am I to do?

And then the Goddess smiled.

Yes, I will die, but I will be eternally reborn.

And so the Great Mother separated out the Male in all kinds of creatures. And there was love and lust and writhing and birth and death and rebirth unending. Thus was the Goddess mortal, yet immortal. Thus was She young within Her old age. Thus was She forever renewed.

Now I will bring forth a creature who will sing my praises, and whose passion for life will reflect my own.

So the Goddess made the People. From Her own moist soil did She grow them. For a long while the People scratched and scraped out their survival as all other animals did. Both predator and prey were the People for countless generations. Then the Goddess saw that the People had little time for singing Her praises and celebrating the passion of life.

I will bring forth the tall grains from my Garden. No longer will the People be hunted or hunter. They will work the land, but they will also dance. They will sing the song of sowing and flowering and reaping and sowing again, which is also the song of writhing and birth and death and writhing and rebirth.

And the Goddess looked upon the People and their dance of life and was pleased.

But after all this bringing forth, all this giving, the Goddess grew tired and needed sustenance.

I hunger. Let the People feed me in return for the tall grain that grows from my womb. As I have given them that which I hold most dear, my very body, let them sacrifice to me that which they hold most dear. I care not that they are kind or cruel to one another. Whether they build or destroy matters not to me, for the Dance takes many forms. So long as they writhe and deliver unto me new generations, be they peaceful or warlike, and satisfy my hunger, then I will feed them. For what is good or evil to the Mother of all things? Let the People consider right and wrong for themselves, and mete out rewards and punishments to one another as they will. I will reward and punish only in accordance to my satiated hunger.

Then the Goddess said, *I will bring forth a great eating bowl in which the People and I will exchange our gifts and feast.*

And it was so. The sides of the bowl were great mountains. The Othrys range to the south. The Ossa range to the east. The Olympos range to the north. The Pindos range to the west. Each evening the sun would die, snuffed out upon the snowy peaks of Pindos, but not before the Sky God's fiery breath sent the melted snow flowing down to the bottom of the bowl. Thus was born the River of Life, rushing eastward, dividing the flat bottom into north and south. Eastward rushing even to the parted slopes of the Sunrise Gate, the womb of the reborn sun. Flowing eastward still, pushing apart the peaks of Ossa and Olympos, creating the Inland Pass, racing headlong to the vast unknown waters that lay beyond the Great Bowl of Feasting.

The River of Life and the rains of the Sky God united to bring forth the tall grains. On the north and south of the great river did the tall grains grow. The People feasted and in repayment to the Great Earth Mother, sacrificed some of their children and animals. Thus was the Goddess satisfied. She smiled upon the Feasting Bowl and its flat bottom.

And the Goddess called the flat bottom, the Plain.

Now on the lowest plateau of the emerald foothills rolling beneath mighty Olympos, an underground spring issued forth from the Mother. Its water was the Goddess' lifeblood, and it collected in a small depression in the ground, forming a pond, before spilling out and down the slope in a shallow brook southward to join the River of Life, and in doing so further sustained the Plain. The spring was the Navel of the entire world, and its underground current was the birth cord connecting the world to the Womb of the Earth Mother. For the People of the Plain, this subterranean birth cord was not the product of some idle dream, but real. Around the magic spring, this divine fountain, unceasingly pulsing with each beat of the deep heart of the Goddess, there grew a Grove of trees of olive and pine.

And in the center of the Grove, a solitary oak, towering and in thickness greater than any other tree known to the People.

One storm swept night, when the Earth Mother and Sky Father writhed in quake and thunder, the lightning seed of Male Essence touched the giant oak and split its trunk. The tree's newly forked body spread skyward and wide like the legs of a receptive and craving woman. And from this oaken womb was born the child of Sky and Earth, the Mistletoe, snake of the yellow leaf, vine of the white berry, clinging to the trunk, forever hovering between the ground and heaven, touching neither, but with their power combined. A morning mist fixed in eternal transformation, never quite dew, never quite cloud. The Golden Bough continually Becoming. An unending twilight. Both day and night. Both life and death.

Any mortal bold enough to enter the Sacred Grove, step across the magic spring-fed pond, and pull a sprig of Mistletoe from the split oak, would be directly touched by the Earth Mother, and become the living embodiment of the world's elemental power. The first person to do so, beyond the mists of memory, was a woman, who became the first God-Queen. But this personification of the Sacred Female needed protection, as did the Grove itself, and so she chose a lover to be her guardian. In time this nightly sentinel came to be thought of as God-King. Whosoever killed this Defender of the Golden Bough in mortal combat took possession of the undying spirit of the Realm of the Mistletoe and, like the God-Queen, was referred to by the People of the Plain as an immortal.

Henceforth, the divine wife and husband reflected the health of the Bowl of Feasting. When those who dwelled within the Sacred Grove were robust, the Goddess Herself was strong and the crops of the fields grew tall and the People prospered. But when sickness or age or barrenness overtook the Queen and King, the Earth Mother was weakened by their unworthiness and the land was struck with flood or drought or plague and the People suffered, forcing the immortal female and male spirits of the Grove to seek new, fresh bodies in which to dwell. As the generations passed, it became the God-King's duty to protect the Navel of the World not only from unfit challengers, but from unworthy God-Queens as well, and so he gained over his spouse, the power of the sword. If the Queen of the Split Oak tried to avoid her death by killing her husband, she would succeed only in leaving the Sacred Grove defenseless, thereby betraying the People and insuring her own demise.

And so the Goddess, She who is Mother of All Things, watched over the long succession of rulers of the Sacred Grove, over their births

and deaths, their sturdiness and feebleness, and rewarded or punished the People of the Plain accordingly. But any such punishment was not an expression of Her righteous anger so much as the result of Her tumultuous nature. The People were convinced that the Goddess was calmed by the most recent God-Queen and God-King, Ilithyia and Phanes, and the common folk had thirteen years of abundant crops and healthy children to prove it. Also, the Earth Mother seemed to be satisfied with the various sacrifices made to Her. Often the sacrifices were Phanes' vanquished challengers. However, everyone who farmed the flatlands knew that while the Power dwelling within the Divine Domain was immortal, the individuals embodying that Power were just passing through. Even the nature of the Goddess Herself required that in order for Her to be reborn in spring, She had to die in winter. So it was with the God-Queen and God-King. Before the new seed could be sowed, the old stalks must be reaped.

The trading party, all thirty men and fifteen mules, was just about to emerge from the tree line atop a hill overlooking the Plain. Most prominent among the many articles carried by the group were the antlers of the giant stag. Two pack animals were needed to transport the enormous crown of bone, which had been removed all in one piece from the great beast's head, and which now stretched across a space more than twice the length of a man, from one mule to the other, binding the pair like a double yoke. The width of this arrangement slowed the mules' progress as their tenders sought space for them to pass between the trees. A wagon could have carried the antlers, but a wheeled platform would have posed even more problems on this often slanted and rough terrain.

After twelve days of trudging over the slippery slopes and through the thick woods of the Inland Pass, In-Shushinak was looking forward to breathing deep the open, sunlit air of the Plain. He had not enjoyed the closeness of the forest, the possibility of tripping over who knew what manner of plant or animal at any moment. Rather, the merchant-priest loved the unfiltered light and heat of the sun, the moving hole in the sky through which burned the power of the Almighty Father, whose guiding hand controlled all the forces of wind, rock and wave, and who judged the souls of His fallen children. The Sumerian thought of the limitless blue vault over the eastern desert in which he first heard God's Word twenty years before. But there was also the memory of the two childhood years he spent in Graia, and as the party approached the edge of the woods, a hint of the Plain's sweet and bracing aroma, a mysterious blend of pine and olive and grain and manure and much else undefined, rose to his nostrils. In-Shushinak had forgotten

how intoxicating that aroma could be. Without thinking twice, he spread his arms as he walked, and turned his serene face, eyes closed, heavenward. He did not pray, but simply basked in the vibrant, pristine air, and the intensifying smell of sweetness. It all felt wonderful on his skin and in his nose. A laugh almost escaped his mouth. Then, raising his eyelids slightly, he glanced aside to see Hypsistos smiling wryly at him. Somewhat embarrassed by his own exposed spontaneity, In-Shushinak quickly lowered his arms and straightened his woolen robe.

“I was praying, nothing more.”

“Yes, Mentor,” Hypsistos replied respectfully, and added, “Our skin is touched...” the very word “touched” conjuring the images of Parthenia and Gamelia in the youth’s mind, “...touched, by the Light of the Father.”

In-Shushinak sensed a distracted quality in the young man’s voice. In fact, Hypsistos had seemed pre-occupied since his return from his excursion yesterday, although he had insisted that nothing of note had happened while out scouting with the three foresters. Be that as it may, thought the elder easterner, there were more important matters at hand.

At last, the final trees slid past and behind them, and In-Shushinak, Hypsistos and their fellow traders stepped out onto the open hillcrest. The man from Ur swept his hand toward the landscape that lay before them.

“Behold!” he announced to his companions. “As I have promised! The Plain!”

A tapestry of sky and earth tones presented itself with a clarity that sang of pastoral beauty and power. At the top of this living mural, a herd of corpulent clouds grazed upon cerulean fields. The white, weightless creatures could have been elaborate carvings of sheep and goats and cows adorning a magnificent lyre, the strings of which were made of the shimmering rays of the midday sun. Below, the flatlands were composed of irregularly shaped squares and rectangles in hues of roan and ocher. These farm fields had been harvested months before and only recently plowed, awaiting now the scattered autumnal seed. But even before the countless particles of Male Essence penetrated the Great Mother, and the resulting newborn wheat and barley arose from Her womb, the soil itself radiated a golden aura that boldly heralded the life-force roiling in its depths, life yearning to be ruthlessly unleashed in spring.

For the Plain was not beautiful in a pretty or gentle way. Instead, it was harsh and raw, selfish and demanding. And fickle, like a thunderhead, at one moment enthralling the imagination with its shapes, and the next, blowing down houses and flooding fields. But if one worked the land with

all of one's sinew, and made the proper offerings to the Goddess, and was true to family and neighbors, one would be rewarded, not with wealth or power, but with a life well lived. This was the Way of the Plain. Those who plowed and sowed and reaped and threshed and shepherded on this windswept expanse could not afford to be a docile people, blindly accepting any command or advice, even if said instruction came from a goddess or a god, for although the deities were powerful and had to be respected and placated, they were not always wise, nor good. Thus, independent, creative thought and compassion toward one another's needs were the People's greatest tools to survival. Hypsistos had sensed this wild, proud quality in Parthenia and Gamelia, and wondered whether In-Shushinak was sensitive to it generally. Surely the merchant-priest, with his previous experience in Graia, would understand the People of the Plain better than his student. Or had yesterday's passionate encounter provided Hypsistos with insight more honest than that which might be derived from the Sumerian's religious fervor?

"So it wasn't just a boyhood dream," In-Shushinak was saying softly to himself, his eyes wide and bright. "It is everything I remember it to be, Hypsistos. And more! Who can doubt the One True God works miracles! Praise be to Him!"

But Hypsistos did not respond with the obligatory repetition of praise. He was captured heart and soul by the sight, the sweet smell of the Plain. A Grand Designer, living on the other side of the sky, was the farthest thing from the youth's mind. This beckoning place wasn't merely a creation of some distant Being, it was the Being itself. Hypsistos was bearing witness to a living god. The sense of vitality that had overwhelmed him when he first saw the Stag, and again when he gazed upon the wood nymphs Parthenia and Gamelia, swept through him now. He struggled to keep his very footing against the power of it. Now that he was here, how could he ever bring himself to leave the Plain, he wondered.

In-Shushinak turned to the acolyte.

"I can see you are moved as well, my son. Good. You will need to love the land and its people in order to enlighten them."

Hypsistos saw his teacher's lips move, but heard not the older man's voice, and simply nodded.

Unlike the shaven headed leader and his young ward, the other traders were less expressive of a spiritual appreciation and more so of the material opportunities the Plain might afford. Among the men could be heard utterances of the hope for greater rest and comfort than they had known during

their long journey so far, as well as the anticipation of profitable exchanges of goods.

Everyone was facing west, toward the Plain, and the hill upon which they stood was actually the high northern bank of the River of Life, which sped eastward a short climb below them and to their left. This bank, and the equally high southern one across the rushing waters, were the opposing slopes known to the People as the Sunrise Gate.

Slithering lazily from the Gate across the Plain, the River of Life was in most sections narrow enough to allow one to swim from one reed-lined bank to the other without much effort. Its current on the flatlands was leisurely, in contrast to its rapidity through the Inland Pass. Here and there along the river, a small ferry, holding perhaps five or six people, could be seen crossing the wider stretches. But nowhere did the water seem deeper than a few man-lengths. One could spot patches of the silver, smooth-stoned bottom glinting in the sunlight through the clear liquid. For all its importance to the People, this major river of Graia could not compare to the powerful Tigris and Euphrates of Sumer nor even the Jordan of Jericho.

“I see no irrigation channels stemming from the river,” Hypsistos said.

“True,” In-Shushinak confirmed. “This river is not reliable enough in its ebbs and flows to sustain the number of farms that are on the Plain. In Graia, rivers quench thirst, but do not satiate hunger. The so-called River of Life cannot fulfill its own name without the help of much rain falling upon the fields.”

“I see, Mentor. So the farmers here pray to their Sky Father to bring the showers to their fields, as we pray to our Heavenly Father to rain down blessings upon us?”

An expression of mild irritation crossed the merchant-priest’s face.

“No, Hypsistos. The Sky Father here is simply one of many false gods. You are not to speak of that deity as you would speak of the One True God. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Mentor.”

The river narrowed into the distance, and the flatlands to the left and right, or south and north, of it were almost entirely covered with unevenly shaped rectangular fields, their rich soil soaked and softened by autumn rain and newly furrowed by the oxen and mule drawn plow. There and about the rectangles were separated by broad swaths of verdant grassland and extensive groves of olive trees.

In-Shushinak could almost taste the olive oil of the Plain on his

tongue. He remembered it to be of a flavor and texture superior to any he had known in his far travels. Indeed, olive oil was the greatest trading commodity the People had to offer.

Deeper into the tapestry, the River of Life became a single, meandering line disappearing as it approached a distant blue layer of haze on the western horizon. That thin blue layer was the Pindos mountain range, a month's walk, maybe less, from where the party stood on its high position. Between the Sunrise Gate and the foothills of the Pindos were sprinkled a number of loosely organized communities. In-Shushinak saw himself as a ten year old scribe, traveling with that earlier trading party. He remembered dutifully recording onto his clay tablet information about these collections of farms on the Plain, and doubted much had changed here since he was a boy. The communities weren't really towns or villages. There were no official leaders, no specified borders or developed roadways, nothing one would expect in the towns and cities of the eastern lands across the World Sea. Here on the flatlands there were simply centers of activity called clutches, each clutch inhabited by three hundred people or so, tied together by blood. And since farming on the Plain depended on rainfall rather than irrigation canals from the natural waterways, the clutches could be located far from the River of Life or any of its lesser tributaries. Only a few farms within any given clutch had fences defining their fields. Rarer still were stone fortifications, and these all but grass covered, proving that this land had been at peace for many years before that earlier trading company's visit. The child scribe had counted at least three hundred clutches on the Plain. So he estimated the People numbered around ninety thousand altogether. This amount was surpassed by the populations of the East. In-Shushinak's own city of Ur alone contained nearly ten thousand people, and Ur was only one of many great irrigation-fed cities on the Euphrates-Tigris rivers, not to mention the towns on the Jordan and in Anatolia.

The Sumerian moved his hand from the direction of the Pindos toward their left, southward, to an equally hazy mountain range.

"Mount Othrys and its attending peaks," In-Shushinak informed his acolyte.

Then the pointing fingers swung to the right, over the wide view of the Plain, above the River of Life and across the farms of the flatlands and stopped at the northern mountains, which were much closer than the western and southern ranges, only a few days walk from where they stood. Dominating this range were the peaks In-Shushinak had mentioned back when they were still on the coastline of Graia, before they entered the

Inland Pass, the great mountain believed by the People to be the second breast of the Earth Mother, where the Goddess and Her Sky God lover were forever united. Hypsistos did not need his mentor to identify these mighty heights for him.

“Mount Olympos!”

The youth spoke the words in an awed whisper.

Below its snow capped peaks, but above its foothills, an unbroken cushion of grey cloud stretched in front of the mountain, seemingly disconnecting Olympos from its earthly moorings and enabling it to hover between land and sky. Hypsistos sensed, rather than heard, thunder rumbling from the majestic floating island. The mountain was its own resounding declaration that there was in the world, magic beyond what the eye beheld, and power greater than that which the strongest king could muster.

“Olympos means ‘the Luminous One,’ according to the People. And so it is,” In-Shushinak said. “I do not believe I have seen a mountain more grand in all my travels. If the One True God ever chose a place to give me further commands beyond those He bestowed upon me in the desert of the East, surely that place would be Olympos. May it forever be His earthly throne.”

Hypsistos nodded in agreement, but the young man saw those massive white peaks not only as a holy place where the faithful might converse with God, but as the stomping grounds of the great Stag and the other animal spirits, who, after rising from the cave of his Shaman father, roamed free high above the earth, in a snowbound forest no hunter could possibly reach.

A lofty rendezvous for the Goddess and Her lover, the throne of God, the refuge of the Deer of deer. Olympos was mighty enough to be all three and more.

“Now look,” In-Shushinak was pointing again. “See those foothills beneath Olympos, that lowest plateau just above the Plain?”

“The step-like part with a wooded area?”

“Yes, Hypsistos. The People of the Plain call that the Sacred Grove. See the small campfire just within the Grove? It is an eternal flame, symbolic of an undying earth spirit, not unlike the unclean fires we have seen in other lands of false gods. A man and a woman live in that Grove. They are believed to be gods. Of course, you and I know better, but we cannot show the People the True Way of the One God unless we ourselves understand how they have gone astray.”

“The Sacred Grove...” Hypsistos muttered, remembering how Parthenia had introduced herself to him the day before. To his right, the

tree line stretched away to the north, toward Olympos, and then curved west, passing right behind the Grove. It was a distance either sister could have walked within a single morning.

“Could there be a family living there, Mentor?”

“There was when I visited here as a boy. The father, the so-called God-King, had to fight off challengers, who, if victorious, could keep or kill the God-Queen and her children. In fact, I recall an entire family being slaughtered. This is an abomination in the eye of God. If we are successful, the practice will be brought to an end.”

Hypsistos shuddered with the thought of Parthenia and Gamelia falling to the sword of an intruder. At the same time it had been his unmistakable impression, especially from Parthenia, that the sisters were accepting of this merciless tradition. The proud, free spirits in the faces of the two girls were clear in the seeker’s mind as he asked, “What if the People don’t want to end it?”

“Do not fear, my son,” In-Shushinak replied confidently. “No one can withstand the Will of the Father.”

“Why is that particular place....the Grove...sacred?”

“Something to do with an underground spring making the place the navel of the world.”

Hypsistos thought of the decorated, protruding navels of the two sisters he had encountered.

“I see. Is that not a small brook coming out of the Grove? Is it from the underground spring?”

“Yes, Hypsistos. See how it winds down the slope and runs along the flatland, between those fields, over there, and there, do you see, it joins the River of Life.”

“Yes, Mentor. There is a little footbridge over the brook.”

“The People believe the brook, like the Grove, is sacred, and must not be disturbed. So, even though one could easily step across the narrow stream, there is a bridge. It should be strong enough to support the pack animals. And wide enough for the two mules carrying the antlers.” After a moment, the merchant-priest added, “That corner of land formed by the brook meeting the river...In that corner is a clutch of farms.”

“I see it, Mentor.”

Upon surveying the farming community more closely, the youth noticed a row of objects which, from this distance, looked like small bricks, but in reality had to have been very large. There were three bricks aligned north to south on the side of the clutch closer to the travelers, and another

trio of the strange structures, similarly arranged on the clutch's far side.

"What are those...blocks, In-Shushinak?"

"Oh, a calendar or sorts."

"Calendar?"

"I will explain further once we are on the Plain below. Suffice it to say that the clutch you now behold is our primary destination, Hypsistos. If my old friends, Attis and Cybele, still live there, then that will be a hopeful sign from the Heavenly Father, and we may begin our good work with faith in our success."

Then In-Shushinak put one hand on his student's shoulder, his other hand touching the medallion hanging from the elder's neck. His boney fingers lightly traced the sun image engraved into the circular gold medal.

"But we must be patient, my son. Ours is the work of years, even generations. Though we may be sickened by their practices, we must not offend the People, but rather guide them like the children they are to maturity. And if they cannot be saved, if they are to be destroyed, then that is for God to decide, not for us, His humble servants."

Hypsistos bowed his head in obedience, but in truth was not as sure of his purpose here as he had been when the journey began in Anatolia months before.

The Sumerian squinted up at the midday sun.

"If we begin now we can reach the clutch before sundown."

"Should we not send a herald to announce the arrival of our party? We don't want to surprise them, do we?"

The man from Ur chuckled.

"Trust me, Hypsistos. They can see us standing here on this hillcrest. We are not the first trading party to visit the Plain. Besides, a herald might be taken as a lack of trust, rather than respect, on our part. No, we will approach the People demonstrating full confidence in their hospitality and thus honor them."

Now In-Shushinak raised his voice and addressed the rest of the company in sonorous tones.

"Companions! Hear me! We are about to descend this high bank to the flatlands. I fully trust you will treat the common folk here with the same courtesy you showed those who live on the coastline of Graia. I advise that you keep any weapons you are carrying, especially the bronze blades, sheathed and under cloak at all times. We want to make it clear to these people that our intentions are entirely peaceful."

Hypsistos did not understand.

“Why conceal the bronze blades especially, Mentor?”

“The process of combining copper and tin to make bronze is unknown to these people, Hypsistos. When I lived here as a child I learned that tin was rare in Graia. You didn’t see any metalsmith producing bronze in the coastline towns, did you? If the fisherfolk do not know the process, with their more frequent contact with traders, then the People of the Plain certainly do not. The only way they know of bronze at all is by the objects they obtain in trade.”

“Like the trade goods we have brought. Pots...cups...”

“Exactly. Remember that the possession of an object is not the possession of the knowledge required to make that object. If any among the flatlanders inquire as to how to produce bronze, we are all to feign ignorance, regardless of any actual knowledge of metalwork. Is that understood by everyone?”

“But why?”

The master looked at Hypsistos and sighed impatiently.

“The last thing we want to do is teach the People how to make weapons that are equal to our own, nor do we want to brandish blades that can be seen to easily damage or break any of their copper swords or axes. Some of the more aggressive among them might then seek to acquire our bronze blades, if not by trade, then by force. They might even try to torture us into revealing the secret of bronze. We must not give them a reason to fear or attack us.”

One of the foresters stepped forward.

“But it’s only autumn. The winter rains and spring floods may block the Inland Pass for many months...”

“Eight months, I estimate,” In-Shushinak interjected. “My captains on our ships on the coast of Graia are not expecting the party’s return until early summer. What of it, forester?”

“Well, priest, a man can get into a lot of trouble in eight months. We have the right to defend ourselves with good, solid bronze!”

The others loudly agreed and In-Shushinak held up his hands, bidding them to be calm.

“Yes, of course you do, my friends. But if there must be violence, let it be through no instigation on our part, and let any attacker be surprised by our superior weapons. Remember, comrades, you are outnumbered in this foreign land. Your bronze blades are your only advantage. Keep that advantage secret while you may.”

This argument seemed to pacify the others.

“Now, gather your belongings, fellow travelers,” instructed the trusted leader.

As the men did so, Hypsistos gestured to In-Shushinak to step aside for a word.

“Mentor, you did not tell them that you and I would not be returning through the Inland Pass with them.”

“I don’t want them to feel they are being abandoned, Hypsistos. Let them do what they do best as traders. After they have acquired their kegs of olive oil and other trinkets from these farmers, they will not care whether you and I accompany them on the journey back to the East.”

Hypsistos smiled in response to his mentor’s certainty that the youth would not want to return home with the other merchants. Strange, thought the acolyte. In-Shushinak was right about Hypsistos’ intention to stay on the Plain, but not for the reason the merchant-priest, in his spiritual zeal, supposed.

Then the Sumerian turned once again to his party and raised his arms.

“Follow me, my companions. It is time for us to meet the People of the Plain!”

With a bustle of activity, the group pushed forward down the slope, attended by the dust raising clop-clop of the mules, their sour cries complaining against the jostling calls and stick waving of their tenders, the grunts and curses of the pack laborers and slaves adding to the cacophony.

But In-Shushinak and Hypsistos were not distracted by this dissonance. Both were enraptured by the Plain’s heady aroma, which thickened with each step deeper into the ocean of sensation.