*The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.*

 *Genesis 6:4*

Prologue

Persia, 2500 B.C.

Water.

The direction of ceaseless dripping was unclear, but its patterned echo and dampness enveloped them. The sound was secretive somehow in a moisture-starved land where water was prized more than gold.

It chilled her.

Nalini clung tighter to the warm, reassuring hand of her mother. She had learned at an early age the only safe place to seek salvation and unconditional love. Wrinkling her nose and opening her mouth she tried not to breathe in the earthy, long-buried smell of the subterranean passage. Even with her mother’s sure grip, bravery was difficult. Why had they come to this strange place? The sense of urgency disturbed her as seemingly unconcerned with her daughter’s reluctance, the queen moved swiftly through the sinister labyrinth of tunnels.

It grew cooler as they moved further into the underground passageway. Louder, too, as drips trickled into steady flows. An odd environment indeed for a desert. Nalini shivered.

She hurried.

Small for her age, at seven she seemed always to be running to keep up with those around her. Impatience overcoming caution, she strained to see past the flicker of her mother’s torch. Shadows elongated, sharpening like monstrous teeth where jagged walls slivered the light. Shades of darkness loomed ever closer, so oppressive they felt like they might reach out and devour the flame, leaving mother and child at their mercy.

Absorbed in the imaginative threat, she didn’t notice her mother’s abrupt stillness and halted mere inches from her sandal-clad heels.

“Here, Nalini. Do you see?” her mother asked, raising her hand to illuminate a painted mural.

Nalini took a step back and let her gaze scan the rock-face as she studied the figures a moment. “Who are they?” she whispered, as if speaking too loudly would awaken the strange shapes to her presence. “Are they real, or is this a story, like the one you tell me about Gilgamesh?”

“This is the story of you and me, Nalini. It’s a history of our people, of our heritage.”

“Tell me about our people, mother,” she begged, her irrepressible curiosity making her forget her earlier fears.

The queen knelt, drawing Nalini against her side. “Long ago, in ancient times so far in history most no longer remember,” her mother explained in the soothing singsong voice of a sage revealing the past, “our people came here from a place known as Nibiru.”

“Is it here in the picture?” Nalini asked, studying the designs and shapes on the wall before her. They resembled the sky.

“Here.” Her mother pointed to a small circle among ten others of various sizes that surrounded a much larger circular object.

“Is this Rā?” Nalini guessed, pointing to the large globe in the center.

“Yes. Very good--”

“What are these swerving lines that look like snakes racing up a ladder?”

“The seed of life. From the woman came the seed of life that was crossed with the mortals by *Those Who Came Before*.”

“What are mortals?”

“They were the ones who were here when *Those Who Came Before* arrived from the stars. They crossed the seed from their royal bloodline and then duplicated the new mixed people so they could have helpers in their new home.”

“I think I understand, Mother. We are royal. Father is a king, so now they help us.”

“Yes. But you must never forget, Nalini, that the people who help us have part of us in them as well.” Her mother leaned closer and her lavender gaze stared solemnly into Nalini’s. The wavering flame reflected off the near-sapphire highlights in her mother’s ebony hair. It made the smooth paleness of her skin appear ghostly in the darkness. Shifting shadows made eyes so like Nalini’s own look larger and almost frightened. “It is very, very important that you never forget,” she added slowly, stressing each word to emphasize the seriousness of her message.

Nalini understood that her mother wanted her to be kind and treat the people who helped them with respect. She returned her hand from its exploration of the cold wall to the haven of her mother’s warm palm. “Father doesn’t like helper people very much, does he, mother? Do you think it’s because they are not like us?”

“Who can say?” her mother said in the not-an-answer way Nalini had come to realize meant an adult didn’t want her to know. Then, more directly, “Never speak of such things to Set. Ever. You must not tell him you were here, or what you know.”

After an apprehensive search of the shadows, her mother turned and rushed them back the way in which they had come, practically dragging Nalini behind her as if fearing her mention of Set would make him suddenly appear.

“Mother, I can’t keep up,” Nalini protested.

“You must, child. He will be looking for us.”

Nalini ran, then. The first thing she remembered knowing was that they must never, ever make her father angry. For some reason she was not yet sure of, what her mother had showed her today was very important, too. She would never let herself forget. After all, her mother had risked making her father angry to teach her this lesson.

It must be important.

*So the Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.”*

*Genesis 6: 7*

Chapter One

*Why was it always so damn hot whenever he was sent to kill someone?*

At least it seemed that way to Luc. The heavy humidity matched his foul mood. It was sweltering and sticky even for D.C. in August. He dug a finger into the collar of his shirt and tugged. The air felt gritty, heavy with pollution and other less tangible remnants of a power base for the largest economy on the planet.

It was the kind of evening bound to produce high crime stats in tomorrow’s news. Sensationalized stories, perhaps his, would trump summer closeout sales and free concerts in Lincoln Square.

His gaze scanned the sooty windows for nosey vagrants or addicts. Those in better neighborhoods sat in their controlled airflow high-rises listening to newscasters warn about a dangerously ignored and ever-growing population of disillusioned has-beens and wannabes whose fired-up tempers couldn’t be cooled with tax breaks that never reached the sweaty tenements where they looked for lost hope in the bottom of a bottle or the end of a needle. What Luc saw was the inevitable decay of yet another civilization.

Which is why he didn’t plan to linger in this back alley. Luc sighed softly, increasingly weary of the unending violence and secrecy.

A final survey confirmed empty brick-framed rows of darkened windows. Despite the filth, they still shimmered with obscured reflections of rising moonlight that might camouflage an unwary onlooker. Habit and a nagging whisper of something not quite right tightened his shoulders expectantly, and Luc again scanned the panes for a hint of rumpled curtain or a partially revealed face leaning curiously toward the glass.

*No witnesses.*

*\* \* \* \* \**

She knew he couldn't see her crouched in the shadow of the dumpster behind him. Yet as if his instincts screamed danger, he spun around and looked straight at her with a fierce, predatory stare. The hairs on the back of her neck tingled. He took a step forward and then stopped and shrugged the tenseness from his shoulders. She took a deep, slow breath and relaxed her own.

\* \* \* \* \*

Instead of approaching the dumpster, Luc reassured himself that a mere ten feet separated him from the sedan he had parked near the rear exit. It was situated to the left of a dangerously neglected fire stairwell. He doubted the rust-welded tiers could still descend but no one lurked in the shadow of the landings and nothing blocked his path to the car. Yet something still made him pause.

*Something’s wrong. Where’s the danger? Relax. I need to sense my surroundings. Deep breath. Yes. Better.*

Premonition snapped his attention back to the alley. A near-undetectable footfall sounded behind him. As he spun around, a man lunged out of the shadows.

The man's fist, gloved in one-hundred degree weather, approached his face. Tilting his head aside, Luc barely avoided the blow. He stepped into the attacker’s momentum. His own knuckles smashed into the man’s stomach. The impact was reduced by what Luc assumed must be Kevlar. A quick turn. His arm flexed around the bulky, unprotected throat of his assailant. The brute was taller and outweighed him. Two-hundred and forty, maybe fifty pounds, plunged backward and shoved against his chest, repeatedly, the goal to break Luc's grip. Struggling to retain his hold, Luc almost missed the weapon.

*Shit.*

The man’s arm slashed downward. When the assailant’s hand came within reach, Luc snatched hold. He levered the blade it held forward, away from his own mid-section. A jerk of his wrist sent the thrust upward.

A burning sensation was followed by a spreading dampness. It was then he realized he’d been nicked. His shirt stuck to his side.

Extreme physical training and centuries of experience guided Luc’s self defense. Reactive adrenaline added force to his actions. The long, surgical quality hunting weapon pushed through the assassin’s body armor and into the man’s chest. The knife skipped off a rib. Judging by the gurgling sound, it found a lung before protruding from his back. Luc relaxed his taut muscles.

It hit him then, full-strength. The scent of life flowing into death. Tantalizing. *Delicious.* Pulling at his senses. Hypnotic in its power. His spine stiffened and he froze.

*What’s wrong with me? Why am I having this reaction again? It’s getting more frequent, at least half-a-dozen times now.*

He clutched his side and fought to regain control as he released the body.

*I can’t let the family find out about this, at least not until I figure out what it is.*

It occurred to him as he sprinted toward the car that he should have used the dumpster across the alley with social appropriateness, putting the trash who'd tried to kill him in its rightful place. But there was no time for delicacy. As the would-be killer’s head hit the pavement with an unpleasant thud, Luc’s hand was already jerking open the driver’s side door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nalini’s appreciative gaze shifted across the wide breadth of shoulders, and lowered to admire the cut of her target’s highly tailored trousers. His legs were moving quickly, but she could still tell from their length that he was at least six-foot-five. Though lean, even covered in silk there was a sinewy tautness in those movements that hinted of well-honed muscle. She’d been following him for only a dozen hours, but already she had determined that he was much more of a threat than her arrogant brothers had suggested. When he turned to again survey the alley, she pressed herself against the filthy green metal and slid backward a few more inches until she could no longer see him.

Once the car sped forward, Nalini stepped from seclusion and leaned down to examine the fresh corpse. Her head tilted in concentration. She could smell the coppery aroma of blood that spread across his shirt where it had oozed from the confines of the Kevlar. Why had Ljluka Vargas bent toward the frontal wound, if only for a split second? He seemed entranced, almost as though the blood drew him against his will, like a hungry animal.

“Oh, he’s dangerous, all right. Deadly so,” Nalini muttered, as she turned to flee.

\* \* \* \* \*

As he settled into the sedan, Luc unbuttoned his shirt and viewed his injury. The bleeding had already stopped. He jerked the arm rest compartment open. The small box held what he sought. It took only a moment for him to apply an adhesive bandage to the small cut on his side, just under his ribcage. He closed his shirt, buttoned his jacket and just before he steered the expensively-harnessed horsepower out of the alley glanced in the rear-view mirror.

His attention held.

She was glorious. A vision of beauty and grace.

Where had she come from?

The image lasted only a split-second as he sped away, but he would never forget the haunting impression she made upon him. Flowing fabric of gossamer spun gold caressed sleek, bronze limbs. Her fluid movements caused her layered skirts to float around her like a whispered rumor. The mirage rippled between his fallen victim and the corroded dumpster, as stimulating as any fleeting fantasy, and just as inaccessible. Then she was gone. He shook off his brief enchantment with a cold dash of reason. There wasn't enough time to look for her now--though he would have liked to see her face.

*Ah, I’m too much like father used to be, letting my mind possess whatever pleases my eyes.* Was the lissom apparition the presence he’d detected earlier? *Could the Usurper’s minions be onto me so soon?* Letting out his breath, he sighed. *Back to business.*

His brow creased with concentration as he braked behind a city bus. A small group of twenty-something males filed out and loudly made their way toward what was, judging by the edgy music that drifted out as a couple exited, a local singles club.

In that moment’s pause, his thoughts returned to the alley and the nagging feeling that the attack on him was a warning of more to come. He reviewed his movements. The sophisticated head of the subcommittee leaving the dingy hotel room, followed by the fulfillment of the first stage of his mission--insuring the Usurper’s minion would be permanently unavailable for future covert meetings with the quick flash of his blade. Then he’d gone out through the back alley where he encountered the would-be assassin. Judging from the shot-filled knuckles of the law enforcement-type glove the thug was wearing, he’d been no ordinary flunky.

*So why attack me after the fact ? I already carried out the hit. They never tried to prevent it. Revenge then?*

From every angle, Luc arrived at the same conclusion, that the two events were completely unrelated. Either way, going back now just wasn’t an option. It wasn’t protocol. The mission came first.

The mission always came first.

A faint buzz sounded in his right ear. He reached up to tap the receiver. Amusement tugged at the corners of his mouth as Kirin’s melodic voice teased him back to his present task. He was quick to reassure her.

“Just a momentary delay, nothing to concern yourself about.”

“Oh, but I’m always concerned about you, Luc. Always,” she responded playfully, using the affectionate nickname she’d christened him with when they were children. His given name, Ljluka, took too long to say, she’d assured him. He could imagine the teasing sparkle in his sister’s emerald eyes.

“How long?” she questioned, her clipped, more professional tone alerting him that someone had joined her.

*Finish it and return*, commanded a voice used to instant obedience.

This message was transmitted without benefit of the earpiece. His mother needed only to think its delivery for him to receive it as if he were now standing in the room with them, rather than weaving in and out of late-night traffic. He was just a few cars back from one of several dark limousines ahead of him as he approached Pennsylvania Avenue.

*Of course*, he responded in like manner. He didn’t bother signing off with Kirin. He knew she had disconnected even before the soft click sounded in his ear.

Pulling out his diplomatic identification, he extended it through the open window and waited for the guard to validate it.

The young Marine handed it back, saying, “Thank you. Have a nice evening, sir.”

Electronics hummed while black wrought-iron gates swung open and an electrical impulse activated retractable bollards that receded into the asphalt before he was once again moving toward the limo now parked behind the White House.

Luc noticed without reaction the meaty secret service agent standing in the lee side shadow of an evergreen. Geared completely in black, starting with his seam-busting tight black t-shirt, Mr. White House Special Ops was packaged for delivery with Kevlar and Velcro, carrying some seriously fun party favors with plenty of popping power. Much had changed since 9-11—yet another reason his mother had no intention of letting up any time soon. She would never rest until the Usurper was destroyed.

The updated Rambo wannabe never moved, but even though all he could possibly see was another vehicle with tinted glass, his alert stare followed Luc’s corporate- rented BMW until it rounded the curve in the driveway.

Pulling to a stop, Luc left the keys in the ignition and stepped onto the walkway. Careful to ensure his jacket was buttoned to hide his bloodstained shirt, he lifted his arms to shoulder-height, suppressing a grimace as the action caused a slight twinge in his side. A waiting agent swept his frame with a slow-beeping wand before signaling him toward yet another agent waiting to escort him to his destination.

Moments later he entered a high-ceilinged office filled with Chippendale period pieces and glanced across the room at the gray-haired, middle-aged cabinet member he had been sent to persuade. Shock, quickly masked, appeared in the man’s watery blue eyes before he sprang up rather quickly for such an out of shape Boomer. Luc distrusted him on sight. The calculating gleam in the man’s eyes disgusted him.

The door swung shut with a soft clack, the agent having remained in the outer office. “I-I was expecting someone else. Forgive me. No one . . . no one said they were sending you. I thought that--” He was already around the desk, motioning toward a more intimate grouping of furniture in the far corner.

The long-cherished gift from Kirin, the modified cufflink that bore the owl, symbol of his name, exquisitely carved in Etruscan gold had been slipped into Luc’s jacket pocket. The cuff of his light blue silk shirt was pushed up just far enough to reveal the tattoo on his forearm. The cabinet member recognized the flaming sphere illuminating the cross within--the symbol identifying him as a member of the Illuminati’s inner circle.

Luc moved forward with distaste. “I won’t be here that long,” he said softly, extending his hand.

The man gasped, but dutifully put his right hand out to be engulfed and squeezed within Luc’s larger, firmer grip. Secret handshakes were supposedly only rumors, but in this case it confirmed Luc’s superior status.

“As you can see for yourself,” Luc continued more forcefully, “I am the message.” He leaned down, closer, until he could smell the vile stench of stale cigar smoke emanating from the man. Directing the full force of his ice-blue stare at the man, he added, “The cohort from your earlier meeting this evening won’t have any objections if you wish to reconsider doing as you were instructed, I assure you. Don’t forget that not so long ago others had to be reminded of what it means to be humbled. Not even the moneylenders are above our reach. We have toppled civilizations.”

“I-I understand. I will call the committee together at once.”

Luc straightened and flexed his shoulders. The man’s pale face lost whatever color remained.

“It will be done. I swear it.”

Desperation squeezed beads of sweat from the man’s forehead. Luc grimaced and dropped the soggy hand. Without another word, he turned and left the room.

After he washed his hands, Luc had one more mission--somewhat more personal--to attend to before he flew back to Rome.

*Even now no comparison can be made*

*With him and any other conqueror;*

*Before him the whole world once quaked with dread.*

*Chivalry’s and magnanimity’s flower,*

*Fortune made him the sole heir of her honour,*

*And only wine or women could abate*

*His great designs and ambitious endeavour,*

*So like a lion’s was his fighting spirit.*

*Chaucer, The Monk’s Tale*

Chapter Two

 The stewardess stored the carefully wrapped gift box he'd handed her. It was not the gift Luc was watching, however. More enticing than the package were Sophia’s well-formed curves as she bent to her task. Reluctantly, and with self-discipline, he redirected his thoughts to the purpose of his personal mission, the delicate crystal orchid he had obtained for his sister’s name day—no, birthday. He would have to get used to buying presents now that Kirin had decided she liked colorfully wrapped gifts to celebrate her birth. The gift would never make up for the desecration of his sister’s favorite flower, but at least she would know he cared.

He still remembered how her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she watched the news report that announced the extinction discovered by some university botanists. With each loss, she had cautioned them, came a greater chance that her research would never be completed. Research that could determine their very survival.

Their brother, Andrew, had used his influence with several environmental groups to pressure the Peruvian government. They had declared the ancient ruins a no fly zone. It should help, though it would have been easier to mask even the ancient ruins from public scrutiny. Their mother left the ruins visible now as a distraction to keep prying eyes from discovering their true secrets, far underground in Kirin's laboratory.

This gift was Luc’s attempt to cheer Kirin, though he knew she wouldn’t be truly happy until she was back in the Amazon with her plants and experiments—but none of them could predict when their mother would complete her business in Rome and let them all return home to Peru.

Until then, Rome was their temporary residence.

He flipped the lever and leaned back, stretching out as comfortably as a six-foot-four man could on an airplane. Even a private jet owned by the Vatican had its limitations. The pilot had informed him that they were not cleared to take off for a few more moments, so he settled back to wait.

“Your package looked fragile so I stowed it in the insulated cupboard, cushioned in blankets. Would you care for a drink, Don Vargas?”

“Please, I really do prefer it when you call me Luc. I’ll have a bottle of water, Sophia.” He could feel the tension packed into his shoulders already preparing to leave. “Is Valmont going to be ready for me after we take off?” he inquired.

“He’s getting the massage table set up now.” Sophia, in her light-gray skirt suit, as sleek, efficient, and unobtrusive as her service, already held a water bottle capped with an inverted glass in her right hand. She flipped the small tray next to his recliner up with her left hand. As she set down the glass and poured, he smiled his thanks, careful to keep his eyes on hers as she bent across his lap.

He got the distinct impression she brought her ample chest to his face level on purpose rather than by accident. Either way, it prompted him to close his eyes, dismissing her. She affirmed his suspicion of flirtation when he felt her gaze linger on him before she turned, sighed softly, and walked back to the galley. She was an asset to their organization, and he intended for her to remain just that. As usual, he would remain casual and polite, but distant.

He felt a slight tug at his manhood just the same. Perhaps Andrew was right. He was too predictable. Sighing to himself, he decided it suited him fine in this instance.

*Stick to the plan. Hydration, a deep muscle relaxing massage and a mind refreshing nap. In that order. Yes, predictable. Predictable needs and predictable results—essential for someone with my lifestyle.*

\* \* \* \* \* \*

 It was still raining when Luc stepped off the plane and hustled down the steps. His driver reached to position the umbrella over his head and rushed to keep up as they covered the short distance to the waiting vehicle. *It was raining when I left. Was that only two days ago?*

“I thought the plan was not to draw attention.” He stooped to slide into the back of the limo.

 “We’re to rendezvous first, before you go to Vatican City,” Antonio responded. He closed the door and quickly moved to the front of the car, collapsing the umbrella.

 No one informed him that the others had failed to fulfill the preparations at the Vatican in his absence. The Usurper’s spies from his latest takeover attempt should have already been eliminated, conveniently dying in their sleep or by some other undetectable means. Luc tapped his earpiece to find out if that was the case.

“I have no idea,” Kirin stated, knowing before he spoke what his question was going to be. “But it’s Head B on steroids around here. Something’s definitely going on with Mother.”

 “Why didn’t I get a heads-up?”

 “Orders, Luc. *Monitored* orders. You know that.” Her tone dropped, and he detected her indignation that he would question her loyalty.

 “Of course. That’s not what I meant, Kirin,” he assured her quickly. “Where’s An-“

 “I don’t know that, either. Apparently I don’t *need* to know. He’s on a private mission—something personal and top secret, I gather.”

 That explained why he’d been unable to reach his brother from the plane. “Can you at least tell me if everything has been handled in Vatican City?”

 “Yes. The last one reported back over an hour ago. The Orac— I mean, the Holy Father will probably be expecting you."

 The tension that Valmont had worked for an hour to loosen with an in-flight massage crept back into Luc’s shoulders. Unlike his sister, he didn’t like surprises as a rule—hazard of the trade. Antonio took the Via Aurelia exit from the Grand *Raccordo Anulare*. “Do you know who I’m meeting?”

 “You know as much as I do,” Kirin assured him, exasperation clear in her uncharacteristically harsh tone. She didn’t like that her research work frequently left her in the dark about the intricacies of the financial and political work her brothers carried out for the family. Insatiable curiosity made her an excellent scientist, but sometimes a meddlesome sister.

 “Okay, thanks. See you when I get back.”

The car whizzed past the *Piazza degli Eroi* so fast he wondered why the pigeons pecking around the square didn’t take to the air in fright. He now knew where Antonio was headed, if not why there was so much urgency.

 They pulled alongside the curb in front of a small Bistro situated within a refurbished stone building that looked as if it could have occupied the same spot in the narrow lane since the Romans rode around in chariots instead of smart cars. Luc waved Antonio and his stalking umbrella aside and said, “Don’t forget to take the package I left in the back seat to my room with the rest of the luggage. And be careful with it.” Then he dashed toward the entrance.

The door opened before he reached it. Andrew filled the space it vacated, tailored, as usual, from his quick-slicked hair to his special order loafers. He had on black pants, deceptively casual, a blue polo-style shirt a shade lighter than his eyes—which he knew because Kirin had told him when she gave him an identical shirt--and an intricately stitched black leather jacket. He wondered at his brother’s attire. Andrew usually spent his days in custom designer suits when in Rome on business. He looked up about six inches to gauge the seriousness of Andrew’s expression.

His brother moved his hand to carelessly push a dark tuft of hair from his forehead and said, “Took you long enough.” Then he snatched Luc into a one-armed hug. He pulled him along into the dim interior toward the back of the eatery and continued, “Welcome home, little brother. It’s good to see you’re still in one piece.”

“Yes, including all my favorites,” Luc quipped, laughing at their inside joke.

“Every little tidbit helps. Maybe you could try to make Sabina happy. She’s been delightfully demanding lately.” Andrew dropped his arm and moved ahead, the narrow aisle necessitating their single-file progression through the crowded yet somehow inviting table arrangement. The table tops were adorned with bottles filled with olive oil and the predictable flickering candle-topped empty wine bottle, complete with a variety of past dripping layers. The longevity of their possession made the eatery feel as much a home to the brothers as anywhere else they spent time.

“Surely you’re not complaining,” Luc said, feigning shock. He knew the high esteem with which Andrew held his current mistress and sometimes wondered how his brother would tell her goodbye when he inevitably didn’t age and Sabina began to notice.

Andrew turned back, white teeth gleaming.

“Judging by the grin on your face, I gather I’d better give her a couple days to recover first,” Luc countered, calling his bluff.

“You wish,” Andrew chuckled.

“Hey, it was your idea,” Luc teased.

“I think you’d better give your friend Magdalena a call, if she’s still talking to you.”

“You’re right. I should,” Luc admitted. “I do owe her a call.”

*How did I forget before leaving for America? Business always gets in the way. I could use a pleasant diversion. It’s been far too long. Maybe that’s what’s been wrong with me lately.* He’d call Maggie later that night, he decided.

His more flexible and casual relationship with Magdalena and previous, but equally independent women like her, kept his life a little less complicated, though sometimes through the centuries he had wished for the benefits of a more intimate relationship. It was an occupational hazard he had begun to resent.

“Listen, I really do need to talk to you about something,” Andrew said, sobering. He motioned toward a table in the back, within easy access to the kitchen and cellar stairs. The establishment was closed so no other patrons would have intruded, but they never took any chances. A dozen or so of his brother’s men waited respectfully at tables, guarding the front of the restaurant.

“Good,” Luc said, pouring a glass of wine from the carafe on the table. “It’s about time someone told me what’s going on. Kirin’s as cranky as mother gets whenever anyone mentions *his* name.”

“Yes, I know. She’s left a dozen messages on my phone. She even called to leave a message with Sabina.”

Luc threw back his head and laughed, relaxing in his brother’s company and the familiar surroundings. Only their little sister was audacious enough to call and leave a message with her brother’s lover. He took a drink and waited to hear the real reason for all the secrecy.

“Did you encounter any problems in D.C.?”

“Just the usual.” No need to mention the little nick he’d gotten. It had healed without trace within an hour.

“Are you sure? You didn’t see anyone hanging around, get the sense of being followed?”

Luc turned the wine glass in his hand, remembering a pair of long, shapely legs, bared momentarily to the upper thigh. “Yes, there was a woman.”

“I knew it. She disappeared about the time you left and she just returned.”

“Who is she?” Luc leaned forward. “What’s this about?”

Andrew met his gaze. His expression was now serious, reminding Luc that they could never fully let down their guard. “*She* knew. Mother knew and didn’t tell me. What did the woman look like? Let’s be sure we’re talking about the same female.”

“I only saw her for a moment. I felt her presence earlier, at the hotel. But it wasn’t until I had completed the first part of my mission that I caught a glimpse of her.” The image returned to tease him.

“Illusive little nymph, isn’t she?”

“An understatement.”

“Legs that go on forever. Spends a lot of time worshipping Rā.”

“Yes. And long hair. I think she has long, ebony hair. I didn’t get a good look at her face, but—“

“Oh, trust me, it’s worth spending a couple lazy afternoons memorizing. But what’s really striking about this woman is her eyes. I’ve never seen such lavender eyes. When the sunlight hits them they’re almost a dark periwinkle, not blue, definitely lavender. It’s startling.”

Luc watched his brother’s animated face.

*So the woman has that effect on all men, not just me. I wish I had seen her face.* “Sabina know about your latest infatuation?”

“I doubt she’d mind. I’ve been sent to kill our starry-eyed charmer. And I’m not supposed to mention her to either you or Kirin.”

“Why? If she’s following me then—“

“Exactly. Since she is following you, I can expect her to tail you to your meeting tonight. I think she knows we’re onto her, so she probably won’t be alone this time.”

“Let me guess. I should hold a hook in my mouth?”

Andrew chuckled. “No, little brother. I’m the hook. You’re the tidbit.”

Luc stood and shrugged out of his raincoat. He tossed it over the back of his chair with resignation. “Let’s get this over with,” he said, loosening his tie and pulling it off to shove it into the pocket of his suit jacket. “I need to complete my mission as well.”

Andrew glanced toward the front of the restaurant and nodded. Instantly the men who had appeared to be idly chatting rose as one, revealing that they had been alert and ready, covertly waiting for a signal.

They headed toward the cellar stairs. The catacombs would be the quickest route. It would also make it easier for them to clean up any messes they made along the way.

Luc ducked through an ancient stone archway, barely noting the faded religious symbols and mural remnants. They had played throughout these underground tunnels as children, back before the time of the Christian fugitives who defaced them.

“I’ll go ahead,” Luc said, turning toward his brother. “She’s bound to be waiting in a side chamber up ahead. That is if she, as you believe, figured out I’d be here.”

“Oh, she knows you’re coming through here. I made sure of that,” Andrew said. “I don’t know how much more conspicuous I could have been than sending Antonio to pick you up, and having him drive that behemoth vehicle down this narrow little side-street.”

Luc nodded his head in agreement. “She’s had enough of a head start. Can I at least find out why she’s following me before you kill her?”

Andrew shrugged. “Suit yourself. Just remember not to tell *her* I let you in on it.”

Luc strode ahead. The flashlight he’d grabbed from the entrance illuminated a wide enough angle to avoid low rock formations and sudden twists in the tunnel, but in the complete darkness within the bowels of the earth, shadows swallowed even the air in his wake. The thrill of danger exhilarated him. He felt much more the hunter than the bait. Moist air, ripe with the scent of micro bacteria, pollen and fungus gave way at last to the less offensive odor of dust, ancient and forgotten.

Like them.

He continued downward, further still, and then stopped. He sensed her again. Inhaling deeply, he shut his eyes to savor the scent. Having expected the encounter, his instincts were alert and searching. Bergamot and coriander, with just a hint of lily. She smelled incredible, like a pheromone massage oil.

*Damn, it seems a shame to kill her.*

He knew she was there, up ahead in the tunnel to the left, just past the reach of his flashlight. She was no doubt pressed against the cold, damp stone, waiting, wondering why he’d stopped. She must hate it in this dark tunnel, being used to desert sands beneath her feet, an arid breeze wafting across her face, upturned to accept the warm caress of Ra.

It dawned on him then that the human assassin had been a test, or perhaps an exhibition so she could gauge his fighting ability and style. What was she thinking? Even to a grown man he was a formidable opponent. She had others crouching behind her. Out in front, though, she was the one who planned to attack him. But why?

Deciding it was time to find out, he rushed forward and reached into the tunnel, grabbing her by the waist. He lifted her off her feet easily, and tossed her over his shoulder. Something flew out of her hands—something that sounded like a gun by the heavy thunk it made against the packed earth. He turned and fled, his firm hold pinioning her arms to her sides, though it failed to prevent her legs from thrashing. His grip tightened until she yelped in outrage.

After their initial confusion, her companions ran behind them in pursuit. He might not like being surprised, but he sure loved being the surprise. His laughter was genuine.

Hearing warfare behind him, he realized it was Andrew’s turn to have a little fun. This sort of fighting, the warrior-to-warrior combat, excited him. It was the subterfuge and deceit he hated, the assassination of an evil but physically vulnerable adversary.

He stopped. Unceremoniously, he dropped his cursing burden on the ground. She was up in an instant, pulling an unfriendly looking *shabriyyah* from a sheath strapped to her leg. Her stance proclaimed her a seasoned warrior. His admiration grew. Wearing jeans and a t-shirt this time, she was no less striking. The jeans snugged her trim figure and the tug of the shirt across her chest teased his senses. His first impression had been correct. His own chest tightened, and the reaction moved lower, to his groin.

Unconcerned with her aggressive pose, he raised his flashlight to look into her face. The vision blinked and angrily thrust her hand up to block the light, but not before he had seen her. His brother’s raving had not done her justice. He had never had such an immediate and powerful reaction to a woman.

“Hold on. We can fight in a minute. But first, tell me who you are.”

“Nalini,” she spat out. Her chest heaved with her resentment.

He noticed.

*Nalini, it means lovely in Sanskrit, a lotus flower.* It didn’t do her justice either. Though, he reminded himself, she did want to kill him. He had read that in her eyes clearly enough. And what beautiful eyes they were. His brother had been right about that. Anger caused sapphire flames to darken the unusual lavender irises.

“So why are you following me?” He pictured her more as the type men followed around, waiting for her smallest attention.

“I’m not following you. I’m tracking you, like the animal that you are.”

Said simply, matter of fact-like, as if it should have been obvious to him. That said, she rushed forward and sliced the air where he had been standing a moment before. He dodged and weaved, always dancing just out of reach of her blade. His opponent too kept moving, swiftly, with determination and cunning, countering both his trained and instinctive defenses. She round-kicked the flashlight out of his hand and it rolled on the ground, flipping shadows end over end on the stone walls as if they were dancing in a disco. Unfair he thought, and grinned. He was trying not to hurt her.

A rush of footfalls sounded behind him. Luc moved to get his back toward the wall and glanced to his left. It was all the distraction she needed. Nalini moved with him and sliced his chest open with a downward stroke. Watching her eyes in the diffused light from his fallen lamp, he realized she fully intended to catch his neck with her upward motion.

*She’s magnificent. Like a leopard closing in for the kill.*

Her next motion was stopped by Andrew. He jumped past Luc’s sagging body like the lethal beast she had accused his brother of being. “Babylonian whore!” he screamed. His arm came back and he ran her through with his dagger on the forward thrust.

*…Then I inquired of one of the angels, who went with me, and who showed me every secret thing, concerning this Son of man; who he was; whence he was; and why he accompanied the Ancient of days.*

*The Book of Enoch 46: 1*

Chapter Three

Luc’s surprise matched the look on Nalini’s face. As Andrew pulled his blade from her stomach, she clutched the place it had been and looked down. Then, she stumbled, dropped backward and crumpled into the ancient dust, and lay still.

“Always so dramatic,” Luc complained to his brother. He fought to keep his knees locked. Failing. He slid down until he sat upon the earth now stained with blood. His. Hers. The crimson stain on the front of her t-shirt expanded outward, and reminded him of one of those tie-dye shirts from which the strings had come loose. The small hands that rested upon her stomach did little to stem the flow. Innately, he noticed a ring that looked too large dominating her slender index finger.

“What a waste. What did you do that for, Andrew?”

Chest pumping adrenaline, eyes sparkling with bloodlust, Andrew turned to glare at him. “Don’t you mean, thank you?”

“I wasn’t done questioning her,” Luc objected. He clutched his chest. “Dammit! This hurts!”

“Stop complaining,” admonished Andrew, but the concerned look in his eyes as he bent down softened his gruff tone. He pressed his hand to Luc’s chest to slow the bleeding, and yelled into the darkness, “Bring me a medical bag!” Lifting his hand for a moment, he examined the wound. “It’s deep.”

Luc clenched his teeth together. “You don’t say.”

“I think she nicked bone,” Andrew added, apparently impressed.

“Admirable. Just another female going for the heart you claim I don’t have?”

“You whine like a mortal. Be thankful you’re not or you would be dead by now.”

Luc turned his head to study the prone form, made more visible by the battery operated floodlights being positioned on the ground around them. Bluish tints reflected off the spill of her hair where it obscured her face. She looked so small, suddenly, so regrettably vulnerable. Then he noticed something more, but kept quiet about it. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt a sudden protectiveness for her.

He saw Andrew glance at the woman and said, “Get me out of this smelly tomb,” to distract him. “It looks like you’re going to have to deliver the message to the Pontiff.”

Andrew grimaced with distaste, but stood up and motioned some men forward. “You’re going to owe me again, little brother.”

“Don’t I always?”

Snatching the bag one of his men offered, Andrew pulled out some supplies. A quick tug at Luc’s shirt revealed the gaping slice which he smeared with salve Kirin had prepared. Andrew then pressed on some butterfly bandages to hold the skin together and affixed a large adhesive bandage over the entire wound.

“Thanks,” Luc managed as his brother helped him to his feet. He gasped, despite himself, the pain near-crippling. Taking a cautious breath, he dropped his arm around Gianni’s neck. The shorter man gently helped him head back down the tunnel. “At least we hadn’t gone too far, eh?” Luc said, grinning at his brother’s most trusted servant.

“You always go too far, Don Vargas.”

Further conversation was made impossible by Luc’s tightly gripped jaw. He might be immortal, but that didn’t protect him from feeling the pain of his wounds until they healed. To ease his suffering, he focused on the fact that though this wound was severe, by tomorrow morning he would be as good as new. So too, he now believed, would the lovely vixen who had given him this discomfort.

*She has a lot to answer for. I’m going to take my time getting some answers.*

In the meantime, a string of profanity that contained favorites from ancient Egyptian, Sanskrit, Latin, Greek and even a few choice Italian words--more for the benefit of the feigned pious frown on Gianni’s face than himself--accompanied Luc over each bump in the path to the subterranean garage, through the elevator ride that took them further underground, to his quarters.

Here, at last, his weary companions lifted him to the bed. They shifted his weight to the plush cushions just as the door opened behind them. Upon seeing who entered, the men immediately let Luc go and bowed their heads respectfully.

“My queen,” Luc began in surprise, tilting his head and maintaining a tight hold on his chest as he started to rise from the bed.

“Lay down at once.” She made an impatient gesture for the rest of the room’s occupants to depart and walked to the side of his bed as they scattered. “Well, my son, I see your brother listens with only half an ear as usual. I shall-"

“It’s not Andrew’s fault, Mother,” he said softly. He seldom called her mother when in work mode and only did so now hoping to gain leniency for his brother.

“Let me see how badly you have damaged yourself,” she said, uncommon tenderness adding a gentle quality to her lyrical voice.

He settled back into the cushions and moved his hand away from the wound. Her touch was light and skilled as she slipped a thin blade she wore tucked into her sash beneath the crude battlefield dressing Andrew had applied. Intent on her task, he studied her face, so close to his own. It was not just a son’s pride that noted the flawless perfection of her skin drawn as youthfully as a twenty year olds across symmetrically pleasing bone structure. Feathery arched eyebrows, momentarily drawn together in concentration, framed expressive green eyes that were soft and approachable just now, but could become as cloudy as tourmaline when she wished to hide her thoughts, or as brilliant as priceless emeralds when she was amused or angry.

It was rather disconcerting at times to have the most beautiful mother in the universe, the woman from which all other beauty came and against which it was compared. She was a loving but somewhat temperamental mother who happened to be one of the first descendents of a royal bloodline so powerful they were once considered by mortals to be gods. Many still believed they were direct descendents. Was it any wonder she felt her word was law?

Whenever he questioned her about the first days, the days when his family openly ruled the world, his mother only smiled and refused to discuss such things. He wasn’t sure what to believe of *Those Who Came Before,* which is what they had always called their ancestors.

He only knew there was much left unsaid. One had only to look into his mother’s fathomless eyes to realize the vast knowledge she withheld. Which is why it took great effort on his part not to look away when she turned her head to gaze directly into his eyes. Even harder when she invaded his thoughts. Though mortals never detected her presence in their minds, he knew. And she knew he was aware of the quick intrusion.

Isis laughed, an indulgent maternal sound. Then she reached down and slid her hand across his chest, gently at first. As she repeated the movement, the pressure became more aggressive. She closed her eyes in deep concentration.

He tensed, expecting pain. Feeling none, he glanced down. She turned to pick up a cloth and dip it into the basin on the table beside the bed. The ragged edges of the wound had been smoothed down. She rung the excess water from the cloth and washed away the blood and medicinal salve. No trace of where the wound had been remained.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“I don’t want you to suffer, Ljluka. I have never wanted that. No matter what happens, you must always remember that I have only wanted for you to be happy, and safe.”

His face must have reflected his confusion, because she added, “Ah, my beloved Ljluka. You’ve always been the wisest of my children, but you still make some of the most regrettable mistakes.” She glanced away as if considering something and continued gently, “It’s not even your fault. But I’m not sure I can so easily save you from them all, my little owl. Come,” she said, extending her hand. “Tend to your tenacious sister before I banish her to the Underworld with your father. She will give me no peace until she sees you up and well.”

Luc stood and bowed his head, hands fisted, knuckles first to his forehead, then crossed wrists clasped against his now healed chest. Isis nodded her head in acknowledgement of his deep respect and glanced at his disheveled apparel, shaking her head at the blood and dirt encrusted on what was left of his shirt. “Go finish bathing and change into something more presentable first.” Looking pointedly at the remnants of his suit coat, which had been cut from his body by Gianni, she added, “something more pleasing to me.” She turned and moved toward the door, murmuring, “I know how you enjoy your bathing ritual. Just try not to linger too long, for your sister’s sake.”

No convincing was needed. The soiled clothing still on his body soon offended only the marble floor beside his bed. As he turned, naked, toward the bathing chamber, the doors to his suite burst open. “My lord, son of she who is fair as the moon and he who is more powerful than the blinding glory of the sun. He who-"

“Not now, Hassidim. It’s been a long day. I need to be cleansed of it.”

Ignoring--due to decades of practice--his servant’s concern exaggerated to melodrama at his master’s recent misfortunes, Luc followed him into the bathing chamber. Hassidim was painfully thin and a full eight inches shorter than Luc. Kirin had once commented that he was tightly wired for efficiency. Noting his current movements, Luc had to agree. The Arab busily pushed buttons and set out emollient cleansers that smelled of sandalwood and myrrh. His manservant then stacked the towel heater with thick linens and hurried out to remove all evidence of foul play from the outer chamber. Hassidim was one of the most efficient and loyal men Luc had ever employed, and he’d been with him for thirty years.

Grateful, even slightly amused, Luc stepped into the large granite enclosure and turned his head up appreciatively as a cloudburst of warm water descended from hundreds of spray holes in the ceiling. The experience was amplified by the sheets of patterned sprays that massaged his body at every angle from the walls. Luc raised his arms, slowly rotated, and sighed appreciatively. Now this, he had missed.

He was just rinsing the last of the soap from his hair when he heard, above the sound of the sprays, Kirin, in a heated debate with Hassidim. When it came to Luc’s comfort and care, Hassidim could be as relentless as an eagle protecting its nest. Sighing, this time in resignation, Luc reached out to press a button and the water slowed to a drizzle and then stopped. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he strode through the steam into the bed chamber and demanded, “Can’t I even wash the dust of the road from my body, Kirin?”

“You look clean enough to me. Now come on, I think this time mother is really going to kill him.”

“Is that all?” Luc raised his arms to allow Hassidim to toss the robe over his head. Once it reached his knees, with a quick tug he stepped out of the towel. “She didn’t seem angry any more when I last saw her.”

“Well that was before she discovered that that she wolf who tried to cut out your heart got away. She is throwing weapons at him!”

Luc suppressed his delight at the news that the little she wolf, as Kirin called her, had escaped. He stared pointedly at Kirin, and then barely waited for her to turn around before stepping into the low-rise underwear Hassidim handed him. He pulled them up and let the robe fall. A quick kick slid each foot into a waiting sandal, before he moved past Kirin toward the door, pushing his fingers through his damp hair.

“I knew her maternal side wouldn’t override her temper for long,” he muttered.

*And I have found both freedom of loneliness*

 *and the safety from being understood,*

*for those who understand us*

*enslave something in us.*

*Kahlil Gibran, The Madman*

Chapter Four

 “Luc, say something. Try to reason with her,” urged Andrew from behind a large urn a museum would have had to excavate to obtain. He cursed as it shattered, the victim of his mother’s predictably good aim. Racing across the room, he ducked behind a marble pillar.

 “Mother, please,” Luc coaxed. “Thanks to your generosity and mercy I am fine. There is no permanent harm done.”

 “Yes, you see, he is fine,” agreed Andrew.

 Judging by the force of the stone splinters that pelted him from where the pillar deflected the arrow, it was not the right thing to say. “I swear to you, my queen. I killed the whore. With my own hands, I delivered a mortal blow.”

 “It’s true. She would have severed my head if not for Andrew’s quick intervention.”

 Ignoring Luc, Isis continued to vent her wrath on Andrew. “Did I not tell you to bring me that whore’s body? If you killed her as you say, where is her body?”

 “But why didn’t you tell Andrew she was an immortal?” Luc asked.

 That got her attention. He saw surprise at his knowledge before thick sooty lashes came down to veil her thoughts.

“Anubis! Gana, lal uridim,” she shouted in ancient Akkadian. Instantly Anubis, who she refused to call Andrew, responded.

They all knew the tone of her voice and what it meant when she yelled in the language of Mesopotamia. Her mood had just shifted from angry mother with a spoiled disobedient child to enraged queen whose servant had defied her. She seldom called her children names. Calling Andrew a dog meant he had acted in a beastly way, reacting rather than thinking.

Transformed as well, Andrew, their beloved sibling became Anubis, warrior, fearless general of his queen’s armies. *No, not now, Andrew.* The fearless look of a soldier facing death shone from his eyes. She would see it instantly, and admire it. But she would shift from Andrew’s mother to her general’s queen. Andrew must be stopped before his pride summoned his death.

Too late.

Andrew jumped from behind the pillar and supplicated himself before his queen, face down on the cold marble, arms extended away from his body, palms and forehead resting on the floor, offering himself over to her will.

*We must make her pause to think before she reacts.*

Luc and then Kirin flanked Andrew, though they kneeled, bending at the waist until their foreheads touched the ground. They pressed their palms to the floor. The ancient rituals still lingered in their family culture, the familiarity usually comforting in a modern world so changed. Now was not one of those times.

 Luc could feel her indecision. *It’s working.* The very air was charged with her rage. *Remember who lays before you, mother.* He knew she was having a difficult time exacting punishment when her children had so obediently bowed to her will. She stalked across the floor to stand before them. *Please. Forgive him. It was my fault. I distracted him.* Would telling her shift her anger to him instead of his brother? He managed to chance a quick look by turning his head slightly. It was not just anger he saw in her face. There was pain there, too, a deep regret.

*I must tell her.*

Her decision made, she thrust the entire contents of her hand into Andrew’s back just below his shoulder, all three or four arrows. They entered with enough force to chip the marble beneath him. Luc tensed at the sound of metal sparking on stone. It was as if she wanted Andrew to feel her pain, to realize what he had done by disobeying.

Andrew gasped, the substantial muscles in his shoulder and back convulsed involuntarily, but he managed to retain his subservient position, tensing his body in preparation for more blows, should they come.

 Luc’s own body, muscles still flexed to rise, quivered with his indecision. Andrew must have been working out with some of his warriors when she summoned him. He was wearing an Egyptian loincloth, his broad-shouldered back bare and vulnerable to her wrath. Anubis would not cry out, even if their mother killed him. It was he who had led legions. And he, too, was his mother’s son.

Blood flowed from the wounds freely, obscuring the crimson plumes of the phoenix rising in rebirth with the dawn. Luc’s back bore the same tattoo, a tribute to their great-grandfather, Rā, he who brought the first enlightenment, whose symbol was the sun—a sign of their heritage.

 “You know not the cost of your carelessness. What you have set in motion cannot be undone. One day you may regret your mistake more than I, my son.” Turning to look at Luc, she became still. Then she said quietly, “Ljluka, get your brother out of my sight before I follow my first instinct and disembowel him, slowly, each and every night until the full moon.”

 At this, Kirin reacted with her heart rather than her head. “No, no more, I beg of you,” she cried as she jumped up to assist Luc with their brother, tears running down her face.

 *I should have been the one to cry out in his defense. I will not fail him again.* Luc jumped up and reached down to his brother, ready to stand between him and any further danger.

Andrew shrugged him off. Again it was the warrior Anubis who pulled himself upright. He stepped from behind Luc and said softly, “Forgive me, my queen. I will not disappoint you again.” He gazed unflinchingly into her eyes. “Thank you for sparing your worthless son from greater shame.”

Isis responded with a slight nod of her head before turning to walk away. Andrew held his shoulders erect if somewhat stiffly as he walked toward the doors. Following closely behind him, Luc noted the look of terror in the eyes of the usually fearless guards as they hastily pulled back the heavy gold-plated doors to let them pass.

 Once in his brother’s chamber, Luc signaled for Kirin to get Gianni. As she left the room, Andrew turned his back and grabbed hold of the bed post. “Do it,” he instructed.

Luc obeyed. He pushed the arrows through far enough to grasp the heads. Taking care not to jar them further, he snapped off the metal ends. Then he wrapped his hands around the shafts, paused while Andrew sucked in a mouthful of air, and jerked. The only indication Andrew gave that he felt their reverse motion from his ravaged flesh was the quick rush of air returning from his lungs and the blood pressed out of his whitened fingertips where they clutched the bed post. Luc let his own clenched jaw relax.

Gianni entered, and Andrew ordered, defiantly “Return them to their rightful owner. Apologize for the damage.” Luc grabbed his waist and helped him to a stool. “It seems you are now returning that favor, little brother.”

“She regretted it at once, you know,” Luc said.

“I know.” Said simply, meaning volumes. Andrew closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Kirin stepped forward, opening a drawer in a tall armoire. Finding what she needed, she placed the medicines and bandages on the table and began to treat Andrew’s wounds. For once she was silent, respecting her brother’s need to heal his pride as well as his body.

Having finished, Kirin busied herself putting away the supplies, then seeing that her brothers were still silent but watching her expectantly, she slipped from the room.

“She’s pretty upset, I guess,” said Andrew, raising his eyes to look at his brother in the mirror on the wall in front of them.

“Yes. She feels deeply.”

“You’re not going to let it go, are you? I mean the woman.”

“No.”

“But what if you should, for all our sakes? You heard what she said. You saw how upset it made her.”

“She’s keeping something from me, Andrew. She’s hiding something big. Look what she did. Isis is afraid of something. I knew she was just trying to get me out of the country by sending me to America. Some flunky could have handled that mission. The man was a sniveling coward.”

Luc pulled his hand through his hair and met his brother’s gaze as he turned to look at him. “And then she sent my men to Giza? Why, Andrew? Father didn’t need them there with the number of Illuminati operatives we have in Cairo. I think she was trying to keep me away from that woman, perhaps thought the woman would think I was with my men. Why? Who is she? I need to know.” *I want to know her, in every sense.*

“What if it’s for your own good?” Andrew persisted.

“When have I ever done anything for my own good?”

*If she wasn’t good for him, it would be quite an adventure finding that out.*

“For mine then. Just wait for a while, until things cool down.”

Looking at his brother’s bandaged body, he nodded his head in agreement. “You’re probably right.” *She would still be around even centuries from now, if Isis didn’t get her hands on her. He would have to make sure she didn’t.*

They both turned toward the door as Gianni returned. “You are to pack,” he informed them. “Tomorrow the household returns home.” The brothers looked at each other knowingly, but said nothing.

\* \* \* \* \* \*

Snapping her fingers, Isis waved her arm, dismissing her handmaidens. The sound of soothing waters drifted down to them from where it flowed over the top of a high wall. From there they gently cascaded down a series of rippled crevices in the granite-walled chamber.

The pillars surrounded a large pool that received and heated the cascading waters. Isis stood poised at the top of the stairs leading into the pool. She turned to her solitary companion and said, “He is my son. My heart. Have you ever known me to treat him differently?” The last said more softly, but just as earnestly. “And his siblings, would they not give their lives for him, willingly? He and Anubis are as one; each breath one takes, the other exhales.”

Emerald eyes gleamed in the moonlight, artificially provided. A galaxy of stars, too, offered a sensual backdrop to gauzy linens blowing from marble pillars in an equally artificial evening breeze.

Her companion didn’t notice. “No, I do not doubt your love. Never that. I owe you a debt that cannot be repaid. But do you not see, too, how much I love him? Do you not see how I suffer each time I am with him, to see him look at me with affection rather than love?”

“Recall that you do spend time with him. And he does love you, unlike the other.”

“Please don’t speak to me of the other, I beg of you.”

“I will try one last time. We return tomorrow, as I promised. Do you go with us?”

“No, I need to monitor another situation.”

“Yes, that is probably best.” Isis turned, dropped her robe and walked down the stairs into the warm waters of her bathing pool. She had some hard decisions to make.

*You ask me how I became a madman.*

*It happened thus: One day, long*

*before many gods were born,*

*I woke from a deep sleep and found all*

*my masks were stolen…*

*For the first time the sun*

*kissed my own naked face*

*and my soul was inflamed with love for*

*the sun, and I wanted my masks no more*

*Thus I became a madman…*

 *Kahlil Gibran, The Madman*

Chapter Five

Nalini shrugged off Utbah’s hand, shoved him over the seat, and ducked out the open door, taking the aircraft’s landing steps two at a time in her haste to rid herself of her brother, Typhon’s, deviant scouts. She was certainly not grateful that they’d dragged her bloody body back to that seedy hotel. And she had no intention of letting them escort her back to Typhon like a Christian being tenderized for the lions. Seeing the waiting horses, she sprinted to her impatient Arabian, Mahdi, and snatched the reins from the young Bedouin in charge of his care.

Back across the small secluded airstrip she noted Utbah, fist raised, cursing in frustration as he tripped down the steps and hurried in her direction. It was all the incentive she needed to vault onto Mahdi’s back.

All too soon she neared the palace. To those who didn’t know, the sand plain seemed to continue on undisturbed for miles. It wasn’t until she rode directly under the gateway, the gate having been opened for her by alert guards, that the palace transformed from a wavering dim mirage to a solid structure, the household of Set. She managed not to shudder as she returned home. Home. It seemed sacrilege when referring to the nightmare of her existence here. If not for her mother she wouldn’t have returned.

Nalini rode across the courtyard, jumped from Mahdi’s back and tossed the reins to the young stable boy who ran forward at her approach. “Take care to cool him down and brush him well, Kazim.” He nodded. The coin she tossed flipped head over tail until he caught it deftly, and smiled his gratitude. She did her best to shield him from the rampant abuse in the palace. It was all she could do for her childhood friend's son. Since her death, he had been living in the servant's quarters. He was clothed and well fed, but Nalini knew he was lonely. Later she would try to find time to play some games with him, and would encourage his sister, Nalini's handmaiden, to spend more time with him.

Pride carried her to the antechamber of Typhon’s suite. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of sending guards to drag her before him. He couldn’t be allowed to forget he was just her half-brother before Set put him in charge of this mission. The door ahead opened and Typhon’s right-hand conspirator, Sirius, motioned her inside.

Typhon ignored her and continued to watch an American news channel. She noticed that his usual flat top haircut had been modified to a brush cut. The effect of softening the harsh lines on the sides of his military-type styling created an even harsher impression, without the comic relief of the squared off sides. A realization that would appeal to him, even if it had not been his intent. He was handsome, like his father, though his features were more severe and he had his mother to thank for the fiery tint of his auburn hair.

His eyebrows were arched and well formed, but came closer to meeting in the middle than Set’s. Though aquiline, his nose was a bit longer, the nostrils more flared. His cheekbones were high and pronounced, which only emphasized the strong lines of his jaw. And the jaw line only hinted at the true inflexibility this focused and driven man had perfected. Nalini noted his desert camo uniform, and thrust her own chin up defiantly.

He increased the television volume, she realized, to get her attention. “In a surprise turnaround this morning, the Senate Subcommittee on International Trade and Finance has rejected the--” He flipped the channel and she heard, “Stocks of the conglomerate holdings associated with the International Banking giant TCI, Ltd. plummeted this morning when--”

“We were so close!” Typhon yelled. “Now everything we have been working toward the past two years has been ruined. We’ve had to eliminate key players to keep this tied up. They’ve opened an entire investigation into fraudulent money laundering and illegal off shore drilling. Now we’re going to have to bury that as well. The only ace we had left was The Vatican and the bitch’s Illuminati Mafia have undermined that. How could you,” he snapped, spinning around to spear her with his glare, “let that son of an Olympian whore get the best of you?”

Noting her stoic expression, he quickly covering the distance between them. “You had only to bring me his head or his heart, something vital. Once it was hidden away, even that slut couldn’t put him together again!”

“She has done so before,” Nalini reminded him.

His fist shot out with such force that even expecting it she couldn’t hold her balance. She regained her feet quickly, and refused to let him watch her raise a hand to her cheek to stop the flow of blood his ring had caused, even knowing the sight of it would excite him and make him want to hurt her more. There were worse things he could do, if she didn’t keep his mind off it--or if he finally dared to defy Set. So far she had been able to manipulate him in order to leave herself with at least that dignity.

“You will learn to control your insolence!” he bellowed, slapping her face with his open hand. Her body shifted with the force of her head’s reaction, but she managed to stay on her feet. He backhanded her for her trouble.

When would *he* learn she had no intention of kissing his ass? If only she dared to retaliate physically without ensuring she would never be allowed out of the harem again, never be allowed to act as a capable operative.

Frustrated with her emotionless endurance, Typhon grabbed her shoulders and shook her, screaming, “You arrogant little slut. Lower your eyes. I am the firstborn, and a male, your superior in every way!” The sleeve of her blouse tore. He looked down. His breathing rate increased between parted lips as he reached to twist his fingers around a handful of her blouse. She resisted then, unable to catch the quick flash of hatred that sparked straight from her soul.

He smiled triumphantly and yanked the entire front of her lightweight blouse from her body. Nalini grabbed for it, glanced at his face and froze. Disappointment tempered the open lust on his face. Attempting to get her to react again because fear and pain were his drugs of choice, he sneered, “I should have known you’d like it. You are your mother’s daughter.”

She saw her death then. Saw it and accepted it. Just as soon as she killed him, they would order it. Her mother would mourn, but she would get over it eventually. She reached down to pull the dagger from the sheath strapped to her leg, but a disturbance at the door stilled her motion.

“So, father was right. She’s back. He wants to see her,” Lucien stated, taking in her disheveled appearance. “I know some of those American women on the television dress in pretty trashy clothing, but did that really help you blend in?”

Typhon joined in his laughter.

Nalini crossed her arms over her chest and studied Lucien for a moment, wondering if he had the world’s best timing or knew what their brother had been about to do and purposely interrupted. What did it matter? She took full advantage of her salvation, and ran out the door toward the women’s quarters, their mocking laughter a hateful reminder of her precarious position in Set’s household. And that position had just become more untenable. Survival should not have been a synonym for home.

Set, as her father, dictated her enemies. That meant she was the sworn enemy of Osiris and Isis and the entire Vargas family. So why did their family seem more appealing than hers? The wounded one's brother, Anubis, he had come to his defense as if he truly loved him and would willingly die for him. Ljluka. She remembered his name now, and she remembered *him* all too well.

Her heart had slammed against her chest when she saw him, and not from the shock of familiarity. His startling blue eyes had fastened on her with such intensity she had to will herself to breath. Forcing her attention away from his hypnotic stare, she had noted that his hair was a little longer on top than most conventional businessmen. It had that overpriced geometric grooming that resulted in a sophisticated tousle women longed to run their fingers through. She bet his golden locks were never out of place no matter where each strand landed. He probably rarely combed it with anything but his fingers. And for a moment she had longed to do the same. Not that it mattered. She knew what men were like. He could be nothing more than a target to her.

But then there was his face. His features were finely sculpted, strong and masculine yet sensual, as if carved from marble by a master. However handsome, he could be ruthless, too. She knew. When he had thrown her over his shoulder she felt his muscles move across that broad expanse and realized he was enormously strong. Though he laughed with amusement at her expense, she never forgot that he could be brutal, frightening in a very serious no nonsense way.

As handsome as a god, and as intimidating.

Centuries of battle victories were evident in the easy confidence of his carriage. The training of a warrior was evident too in the stiff brace of his shoulders and the grim set of his jaw when she slashed open his chest. A lesser man would have cried out or immediately slumped to the ground in agony. He had looked faintly amused at her lethal tenacity, even as his ancient blood flowed down his chest and spilled onto the equally ancient dust at his feet.

It made her want to know more about him and his family.

According to her mother, his father Osiris had decided to step down from involvement in everyday commerce. Her mother had been unable or unwilling to discuss what exactly he was now involved with. In fact, Astarte seemed very reluctant to speak of Osiris at all.

Having met two of the brothers, she was also curious about their other brother, Horus, who ran their Egyptian-based operations and a company named Orion that supposedly developed aerospace technology. Isis and the other Vargas sons had taken over their banking and financial interests. There was a daughter, too, a doctor or scientist. Nalini didn’t remember which.

She wondered why their family no longer lived together. Her family shared the same roof even though most of them hated each other. She glanced up as she approached the closest thing to a real loving family she had in her own life.

Arai stepped from the shadow of a pillar and threw his cloak around her shoulders. She tugged it closer, grateful, overlapping it in the front. His dark eyes shone like polished mahogany. It was difficult to tell what her mother’s bodyguard was thinking behind the somber depths, but they warmed reassuringly. A wide golden belt gleamed around his narrow waist, accentuating the chiseled stone-like muscles beneath his ribcage. It matched the tightly linked gold collar he wore that designated him a member of the royal family’s personal staff.

She offered a word of thanks. His gleaming teeth broke through the dark contours of his face, much like his white loincloth contrasted with the ebony of his belly. He fell into step beside her. Though he stared down at her, he remained silent. His continued silence allowed her time alone with her troubled thoughts, to review in her mind the information Lucien had shared with her when he prepared her for her mission. Isis had created the Vatican to shield her faction’s global involvement. But that was no surprise to her. For centuries, the organization that had once called its operatives the Knights Templar had secretly been referred to by those who knew or suspected its existence as the Illuminati. Nothing could be undeniably traced back to them, but much was attributed through rumor. Nalini wasn’t convinced her brothers had found out as much about them as they should have.

“They didn’t tell me all I needed,” she said.

Knowing immediately to what she referred, Arai replied, “They have little reason to wish you success on your first solo mission. It would make them look bad.”

“You don’t think they would purposely--”

“Do you?”

She wasn’t sure. It seemed illogical. Her failure would reflect badly on them, too. “All I had to do was take down Ljluka Vargas, Isis’ primary enforcer. He can’t be corrupted since he is her son, of course. It should have been simple. Ah, Arai, I failed miserably.” Clutching the robe around her, she crossed her arms over her chest. Sometimes the battles within her family made the ones outside seem simple, even unimportant.

“You may be given another opportunity,” was Arai’s consolation. He knew well the demons that haunted her.

“If only they’d given me a picture so I knew what he looked like before I went.”

Without probing for more details than she willingly offered, he responded, “They say he moves with the cunning of a jackal. They can’t even get a photo of him from security cameras. Always he turns his face aside or runs his hand across his features or through his hair, blocking the view of the cameras.”

Which meant, she realized, that he was constantly aware of his surroundings, knew where every camera was located, when it turned and on what it focused. “Well, I know what he looks like, now,” she said softly. She was determined to find out more about this complicated man. There had to be a way to make sense of it, and until then she was not going to share her knowledge of who he resembled with anyone. If only she knew how it was possible. If only she knew why she responded to him so strongly. Her only reaction should have been her initial one.

Shock.

Had the Vargas family broken their own golden rule and stolen DNA for their research?

“You are the only one who knows what he looks like now, so you are the logical choice to carry out the assassination,” Arai said, reassuring her that they still needed her help.

“Perhaps, but there will be retribution for my failure.” The chill Nalini felt had nothing to do with the temperature or her altered attire. She feared her future, because each new day was filled with uncertain survival and repeated trials.

Nalini's past was an even bigger mystery. Once as a child so young she barely remembered, her mother had shown her hieroglyphics and faded drawings on the side of stone walls depicting, she said, their heritage. She wondered again if some percentage of her DNA was human, and what part truly came from the ancestors her mother called *Those Who Came Before*. Surely if her blood line was as pure as Typhon claimed, she wouldn’t have failed. Something was wrong with her genetic makeup. Why else hadn’t she inherited her mother’s gift for seeing into the future? Why hadn’t she sensed the Vargas duplicity in the catacombs?

She glanced at Arai. Nalini knew she should be grateful to Lucien for sparing her from Typhon's rage. He had saved Arai’s life as well. But she knew Lucien's real mission had nothing to do with her. Saving her cost him nothing and didn't inconvenience him much, or she wouldn't be alive. She didn’t have to ask to know her mother had sent Arai to save her from Typhon. It was hardly the first time.

 “By the way, Arai, thank--”

 “No need, small warrior. I knew you didn’t need my help, but I saw no fault in accepting the blame for his demise in your stead should the need arise. Your mother would never survive your execution.”

 “So she didn’t send you?”

 The towering Nubian shrugged thick shoulders and looked down at her. “She was otherwise occupied.”

Nalini considered his words. If Astarte was busy, it had to involve Set. Her mother’s gift of sight was just another reason for Set’s continued obsession with his third wife. She looked up at Arai, who now refused to meet her eyes.

His evasiveness confirmed her fears. Set--known only as the Usurper to those in the enemy camp she’d discovered with much amusement--knew she had failed. He had obviously taken his displeasure out on her mother. Or, more accurately, she thought, biting her lip, her mother had somehow insured once again that he didn’t take it out on her daughter.

 Knowing what it cost her mother to constantly run interference usually encouraged Nalini to do as she was told without complaint. She had tried. Remembrance of her failure and its probable consequences sent barely dormant adrenaline surging once again and she ran down the corridor, bursting through the doors to the women’s quarters.

“Wait,” Arai cautioned. “Look to your appearance.”

She did look then, grimaced, and turned to take the corridor to the left of the antechamber. Making herself presentable for Set, which included getting her emotions under control again, would have to come first. Seeing into the future wasn’t necessary to know another ugly scene was about to take place. If she wasn’t so concerned about what Set would do to her mother, she would have turned around and run away.

Arai waited in the antechamber. Even Eunuchs rarely ventured further into the deeper recesses within. Nalini continued down the corridor, knowing she was watched by curious female onlookers, hidden from view by colorful, heavily embroidered draperies whose intricate details obscured the small slits which allowed the occupants of the cubical-riddled harem to observe without being seen.

Slipping into the small space allotted for her use whenever she was forced to spend time within the palace walls, she braced herself for her handmaiden’s hysterical reaction to her appearance. To her relief, Amea rushed forward, took Arai’s cloak without comment, tossed it onto the cushions and began the process of peeling her out of the dirty, travel worn clothing.

Once disrobed, Nalini motioned her aside and dipped her hands in the small basin of warm water on the stand against the wall—further indication that even Amea knew she had returned. She splashed water onto her face, reached to fill her hands with lather from a bar of her favorite lily, bergamot and coriander scented soap, and then scrubbed at the dirt and drying blood from her brother’s assault. Blotting her face dry on the towel Amea handed her, she picked up a small mirror to examine her face. A bluish bruise showed faintly beneath the remains of the cut on her cheekbone. By the time she saw her mother she hoped it would fade.

As usual, she rejected the kohl and henna Amea offered. She knew she was considered beautiful. She looked much like her mother and Astarte had once turned the head of Osiris as well as Set, according to Lucien who used to talk to Nalini like a real brother when she was a little girl. Beauty had proven to be an unwelcome blessing for both mother and daughter.

Choosing only to dip her fingertip into some emollient balm made from royal bee jelly, she soothed her parched lips. Amea shook her head, but had learned not to comment on Nalini’s refusal to use cosmetics. Instead she helped Nalini into an adaptation of the long, flowing layers favored by Bedouin women due to their overly modest body-masking qualities. Nalini wished she dared wear the headgear, a *rida’*, but she knew from past experience it would only make Set angrier.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her chin and retraced her steps down the long corridor. Arai and her own bodyguard, Rashid, waited for her as she left the women’s quarters. Rashid, a slightly shorter version of Arai, was assigned to her safety. He nodded his head in acknowledgement of her glance. His wide smile didn’t contrast as sharply within his face as Arai’s. His skin tone was lighter. The warm and genuine emotion, however, still reached his eyes. It welcomed her back without words.

Arai’s continued presence, she realized, could only mean her mother had already been summoned to the throne room. “Why are you not with my mother, Arai?” she asked, hoping he wouldn’t confirm what she suspected.

“I was sent away.”

Nalini wondered why Set would have banished Arai. Realization came almost instantly. She increased her pace as she moved from one corridor to the next. Knowing her mother had made the choice to be with Set to ensure her safety was a burden she did not take lightly. Her shoulders pulled back automatically as she came to a stop in the antechamber of the throne room. The guards, knowing she was expected, opened the doors. Arai remained banished by Set’s orders, but Rashid followed her inside.

To where her uncertain fate awaited.