

Si'Wren of the Patriarchs

Roland Cheney

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by Roland Cheney
To my wife, Jacquelyn.

Author's Remarks

The story of Si'Wren was culled out of a veritable treasure trove of hundreds of little clay tablets which were found sealed and submerged for over 4,000 years in stone jars. The jars were brought up from their place of discovery on the floor of the Persian Gulf, where they had lain half-buried under successive layers of sediment for over four millennia, by an internationally renowned team of archaeologists, oceanographers, and professional deep sea divers.

Although few realized the true significance of the find at the time, it was to be recognized later as a momentous event on that fateful day when the very first stone jar was actually removed safely intact from the bottom of the sea by a crude, squealing, grease and rust encrusted loading crane, to be hoisted free after so many centuries and set at long-last on the heaving deck of the aging expedition ship.

Monetary funding for the expedition was so short at times that the only affordable ship permanently on duty throughout the entire venture was an extremely dilapidated and barnacle-festooned vessel of third-world registry. No doubt many of the people involved viewed it as a minor miracle that the near-constant threat of mechanical breakdown did not endanger the success of the mission proper.

But the mechanics and engineers worked more than a few miracles of their own when catastrophe loomed, as it did more than once, and their determination ultimately prevailed.

Safely deposited on dry land after having been lost and forgotten for almost all of recorded human history, the stone jars were finally opened to reveal, instead of wine or oil, the curious little clay tablets safely dry and cushioned in a packing medium of loose straw and uncombed wool. The clay tablets, finally exposed to the light of day after holding their secrets for so long, were gently removed from their stone keepers and carefully packed in crates to be secretly shipped to the back rooms of a major museum. There, it was hoped, they could be systematically catalogued, transcribed, and translated by the dedicated ministrations of a team of the foremost scholars of our time.

After careful and intensive study, the story was derived and adapted —by express and exclusive museum permission—by the author, who poured himself out in an exhaustive work upon this unspeakably priceless literary treasure, to such an extent that a state of chronic ill-health and increasingly strained and weakened eyesight had begun to set in toward the end of the project. Every effort was taken to achieve the highest possible standard of accuracy, integrity, and authenticity in highlighting every nuance of meaning from so obscure an original tongue.

The author has since recovered, and the story of Si'Wren is therefore presented now in modern literary form, which—it is hoped—will be found to have suffered but little from the inevitable abuses of such a distant cultural disparity and linguistically disjointed translation. The rigorous demand of a simple, honest, and straightforward retelling of the story of Si'Wren owes its true success, not so much to the tireless and unstinting efforts of the author, working with a bank of modern university supercomputers, but rather to the remarkable purity of Si'Wren herself, and the crude directness and honesty of the original telling.

Here, then, is the final result of so much work, such danger and heartbreak on the high seas, unrelenting secrecy, and endless scrutiny, the goal, the prize, priceless beyond all calculation, the translation of those ancient hieroglyphs so painstakingly stick-marked upon the unimpressive-looking little tablets; a story written in the softness of clay, and hardened to the rock of ages. It is a brittle, harsh tale of a tormented adolescent girl who lived out her tragically short life in a time of the greatest moral evil and physical beauty that the world has ever known, a story from the dawn of human history.

PRELUDE

She never knew Jesus, the Christ, the only begotten Son of God, by name, although He most assuredly knew her when He formed her in her mother's womb. His time was not yet come.

She was never to hear of the Tower of Babel, or of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and of Egypt and Moses, of Babylon or the Jews, the Roman Empire, the Cross, or any of the modern religions of the world. They were not yet.

She lived out her short life, and eventually died, about the time when mocking rumors were being widely spread abroad of a foolish old man called Noah, a wise old Patriarch who was rumored to have been directly

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commanded by no less a personage than the Almighty Himself to build an ark, a great wooden ship. This man, Noah, was given Divine instructions that he must waste no time, but work diligently to prepare a safe haven for his family and himself against a terrible day of judgement to be rained down upon a sinful world, a day when a wrathful God would bring forth a watery flood so deep as to utterly wipe out the unspeakable evils of an accursed race.

Many were amused at the rumors of Noah and his strange Invisible God. Whether the rumors of impending doom were true or not none could say, although there was none who would not readily agree that it was a world worthy enough of such punishment. It was a cruel, backward world, where "...every man did what was right in his own eyes...", sometimes for the better, but more often, for the worse. Much worse.

It was into such a world that the little slave girl, Si'Wren, was born...

Chapter One—Little Jars

The young girl sang softly to herself as she filled another container. Topping it off, she carefully stoppered the neck of the dainty clay vase and laid it to one side with the others.

An orphan prize of the conquests of the House of Rababull, she was small for her age, with long ebony hair nearly down to her waist in back, and perpetually of a rather plain appearance as a child, which safely hid her flowering beauty, unbeknownst to herself, from the lustful eyes of others.

She liked to hum and sing while she worked, although not too loudly, and was a painstaking, diligent servant. She had just finished filling nine of the little clay jars. They contained a medicinal salve comprised of rare aromatic resins and spices which were intended to be sold by an agent of Rababull, her master, in the market place at great profit.

Rababull kept many slaves, wives, and concubines, and had many sons and daughters. He was a strong, wealthy gentleman of noble birth, a titled land owner who wore much crude jewelry, together with the softest of furs and robes, and was always dressed in the finest wovens of red and purple.

He had long distinguished gray hair upon his head. His beard was elaborately curled every morning on a carefully heated rod of iron which was always cleaned and tested first with the judicious application of a wet thumb by his personal man servant, who kept it meticulously polished and free of rust with a dash of virgin olive oil and a cursory, daily polishing.

Rababull had hard, no-nonsense eyes and speech, and he always drove a hard bargain, whether it be something of as little consequence as the selling-off of an old slave or animal too advanced in years to be of proper use to him anymore, or the buying and selling of great tracts of land. He also saw to the scourging of slaves and the torture and questioning of thieves and miscreants, not infrequently even unto pain of death itself. Life could be cheap, depending on who you were, or who your father was.

Master Rababull was more than six hundred and fifty years old, although by the standards of the moderns, more than four thousand years in his future, he would have been described as an exceeding fit fifty-five. His life experience, like his age, was vast.

He was not afflicted by an old man's failings of the mind. He was missing no teeth, neither smitten by cavities. He was sound of stature. He was still keen of ear, and ate and drank as freely as any rash youth. He suffered no impairment of bone, limb, or mind, and had suffered no ailment since the day of his birth.

His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated, and he craved a good physical match or a hard bet as much as any man 500 years his junior.

It was morning, and Nelatha labored steadily beside Si'Wren. Nelatha had been originally sold into slavery at birth for the unfortunate offense of having been a firstborn female, and her first owner had been fond of tatoos and ritual scars, of which Nelatha had received many all over her body.

Nelatha was accustomed to making no little ado of her mere five years seniority over Si'Wren, though not in an unkindly way. Nelatha's limbs were tireless and unailing, for she was a large woman of short stature and powerful girth. The plenteous flesh of her upper arms rippled to an odd meter as she worked, grinding successful handfuls of spices and herbs in the stone pestle and mortise, to be portioned out into equal shares for each lot of balm.

The balm was made with fresh olive oil, pressed and drained out of a great wooden casement and ram located in the back yard of the compound. The ram was comprised of a flat, wheel-like lid, with many heavy stones laid on over the top of the lid by two powerful male slaves, crushing it down onto the open-topped barrel of olives. As

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the slaves piled on the stones, the progressively increasing weight of the ram steadily crushed out the fresh, strong-smelling olive oil which was drained through a bung hole at the casque's base.

This was a most pleasant time for Si'Wren, who, not having had any tatoos, not so much as one, applied anywhere on her body like Nelatha, and neither desiring any, yet greatly admired and envied Nelatha for her expert ability and wealth of worldly experience. Si'Wren always looked on with beaming countenance as the piles of freshly sorted and washed olives were slowly crushed down under the weight of so many heavy stones. She would watch the pooling olive oil in the collection bucket, diligent to pluck forth the bugs from the fresh pressing. Then the oil would be covered to settle out any remaining bits of dust, twigs, and dead insects.

Finally, the oil would be sieved through several layers of coarsely woven cheese cloth, to be stored in tall slender vases with narrow bottom ends into which the finest pollen grains and motes would eventually settle out during storage. She knew of no other method to obtain the olive oil, but this way worked quite well, and Si'Wren was faithful to obey all, and question nothing that she learned.

Pharmacopoeia was a noble trade to work in, and well-praised by all for a multitude of reasons, of which several might be mentioned.

Firstly, because of the wonderful, aromatic scents which lingered in the spice tent and were so soothing to mind and soul.

Secondly, because of constant skin contact with the salves, balms, and countless varieties of resins and floral concoctions used to make incense, which were prepared by her and Nelatha on an almost daily basis, which had a most beneficent effect, giving perpetual advantage to good health by virtue of being so frequently in direct contact with the ingredients.

There were but few drawbacks to the natural enjoyment of her work. The purgative herbs, for example, could be powerful and curiously disturbing to the bowels in their effects, and their dry powders sometimes drifted in the air in the confines of the spice tent, having a drastic effect upon her breathing passages and causing her to gasp, wheeze, and sneeze in a most extraordinary fashion sometimes.

But that was only because of their natural purging qualities, and she was soon over it with no harmful aftereffects. One of the herbs was poisonous to consume whole, whereas the oil of the seeds, pressed out in its own little separate bucket and ram and imbibed in small quantities, acted as a safe and effective purgative to the bowels.

Yet by and large, Pharmacopoeia was interesting and rewarding work, and was pleasant enough to do. Work in the spice tent forbade the intrusion of flies or bugs, and except for the sun-drying process, there must be no direct exposure to the natural elements, lest the product become spoiled.

A well-trained Pharmacopoeist was worth much money, and merited the perpetual good favors of the Master for all of his or her days. Praise for the worker would assure eventual success and praise for the work.

Compared to this, the backs of those working the harvest fields, the threshing floor, and other more common or menial tasks such as brick-making, invited the whip, because that could not impair the work nor harm the product, and would only increase the yield of bricks or harvest of grain.

Si'Wren was knowledgeable and proficient in almost every aspect and phase of the work of Pharmacopoeia. She was well tutored in how to recognize and gather fresh herbs on foraging expeditions with Nelatha in the wilds, under the protective guardianship of an armed male slave.

Whatever other herbs were not found locally could be purchased readily enough in the market place for a fair price. Even in this, Si'Wren was becoming skillful in identifying, grading, and haggling over the prices of herbs according to their several worth, and she had already gained much knowledge and experience in this.

But sometimes when at market, she still required the presence of one with a heavy beard and a deep voice, to help her strike a good bargain, for many of the traders were so proud and vain of their ability to make a profusion of crude marks on the tally slate, as 'proof' of their ability to 'read and write' as well as to cheat and connive, as to be unwilling to bargain in any manner except 'man to man', and could on occasion be outright fiendish in their unwillingness to permit a mere slave girl to get anything like a fair deal out of them.

Si'Wren did not mind. If her Master wanted something, he would see to it that she was afforded whatever means was required to get it, and send her out with some broken-nosed, one-eyed brawler of a slave with cauliflower ears, a total illiterate who was willing enough to trade 'look for look' in the market place, in order to back her up in the demeaning cut-throat little realm of the traders.

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Perhaps Si'Wren's most notable challenge of all, however, was her resolute refusal of becoming involved in any form of Sorcery, and a natural fear and reluctance of serving its horrible totems and mystic signs employed publicly with such pomp and ceremony. Besides this, as a female she was ineligible to rise to a very high rank in the priesthood anyways.

Few women rose to such positions of power. After all, it was a man's world. Where superior strength was needed, of what use was beauty? Woe to the man who became physically useless, in such a world.

And so, through no fault of her own, Si'Wren had already missed out on the basic qualifying factor in life of being born male, a crucial qualification if one was to become a true Master of Pharmacopoeia. But she had always shunned, in heart and deed, the vile pursuits of being a Sorcerer, and secretly regarded it as no great loss in her young life.

Neither did Habrunt, the sage Slavemaster, take part in any Sorceries himself, ceremonial or other, and from what she saw, Si'Wren indirectly perceived a like sentiment in Habrunt to her own. She had never seen him so much as partake of such dark activities, even when she saw him off by himself at such and such a time as he felt mostly unobserved by others.

Habrunt was an exceeding strong man, and his true age was a mystery to all. He had a naturally weathered face, with deep, dark, friendly eyes, which held a slight but perpetual squint, as if he were ever vigilant against the many evils of an uncertain life. Si'Wren basically entrusted herself body and soul to Habrunt's unassuming tutelage in the many curiosities of the world, as if nothing could be more natural.

Habrunt was a formidable man. His tireless, muscular physique was battle-scarred, but although she knew him to be a fearless man, she had never seen him actually fight anyone. He had no tatoos. His dark hair, like his beard, was slightly wavy, and like his face, very pleasing to behold in the eyes of young Si'Wren, and he kept his hair cropped to a proper shoulder length, but no longer than that, as befitted his low station in life, for he was but a slave himself. Habrunt was greater in stature and strength than Master Rababull, but unlike that other, he was no idle boaster and displayed no jewelry upon his nearly naked person.

Although only a slave, Slavemaster Habrunt ranked second in importance in the House of Rababull after only the Master himself. The cast of Habrunt's eyes was of a dutiful mein, but his normally pleasant, preoccupied expression as he looked after his many responsibilities, could become hard and unyielding at a moment's notice, even piercing by aspect, such as when he was wont to evaluate a slave even unto his very soul with a mere look. For this, and other, less notable reasons, all of the slaves under Habrunt's fair-minded authority held him in regard of great fear and respect, and because the mark of Habrunt was so universally the mark of excellence throughout the House and its surrounds, he received much praise from Master Rababull for all that he did.

Such widely-held acclaim for Slavemaster Habrunt, the chief agent of Master Rababull, was in no small part maintained by his sage words of advice, characteristically brief, unerring, and straight to the point, and by the certain knowledge in every servant's mind that if one failed at the fore to heed mere words from Slavemaster Habrunt, one must harken at the last to the whip of Master Rababull.

For Master Rababull always kept a large, blood-encrusted bull whip ready to hand for his most grievous personal judgements, when the real punishments must be meted out.

The two girls, Nelatha and Si'Wren, being naturally shy and industrious, counted themselves privileged to work together in the shelter of the spice tent. The tent of animal skins was located well off to one side in the large front courtyard of the House of Rababull, which was surrounded on all sides by a high stone wall.

The Master's holdings consisted of but a very small portion of the Emperor's kingdom, yet they were large tracts of land nevertheless. They were located on a broad fertile valley plain covered by dense scattered forest and jungle. Across this plain, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flowed and converged together into one. This dry land, this lush fertile plain, would one day be known to all mankind as a large body of salt water, named the Persian Gulf.

The wide tent was open at both ends and shielded by thin gauze veils to keep out flying insects, and preserve the salves and other herbal preparations. Infestation by insects could cause the finest ointment to give forth a stinking savor, and invoke the certain displeasure of the Master. The tent was also equipped with extra flaps so that it could be closed up at night or during the day when it became too misty.

L'acoci, an old slave woman of the House, spoke once of seeing the colors of a virgin's garments, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet, as a banded scimitar slash in the heavens, a colored arch, a wound in a darkened

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noonday sky misty enough that it wetted her upturned face and garments, and obscured her vision most strangely.

None had ever heard of such foolishness, and all, even Si'Wren, had laughed her to scorn. Colors in the sky? L'acoci was deluded. No one had ever heard of such a preposterous thing, and the very suggestion was flatly impossible.

A heavy dew came out of the ground every night and often in the day, and caused all life to flourish. But as Si'Wren well knew from unfortunate firsthand experience, such enshrouding mists could cause rare herbs and spices, if they were left exposed, to quickly turn stale, causing Master Rababull much displeasure.

To guard against such calamity, the tent was equipped to afford proper shelter from the clammy, clinging mists, which could arise on a moment's notice and transform the torches in men's hands into pale blobs of moon glow, like spirits at large upon the land.

Within the sheltering confines of the tent, Si'Wren counted herself a cherished and defended slave, safe within the walls of her Master's House, where strange men could not ogle or frighten her. For savage, rogue men walking in the lusts of their wicked hearts went out at all times of day or night, seeking human prey, upon whom they might work their unspeakable evils, men who loudly proclaimed their honor before others, and yet were so wicked in their ways that no woman or child dared venture alone beyond the protection of some trusted strong man or tribe.

Sometimes a local sorcerer was rumored to have kidnapped an unsuspecting victim for occult and sacrificial purposes. Such men were oft upon the land by night, when swords slept in their owners' grasps, and brave men retired upon their racks behind the stoutest walls and doors they could manage. There was no law except the law of the pack. The only real law was right of might and sword and the dictates of powerful warlords and landowners, even unto the changeable whim of the Emperor himself. Against such, mere empty words were but as the ring of brass or a sounding cymbal, dumb bells all, and the clink of the condemned slave's heavy chains. Too often, the ring of a sword was the only proper answer.

The world was a place of much beauty, but even greater evil.

Si'Wren prayed oft in her bed at night, that she might one day be given in marriage to some strong and decent man. Was it not supposed to be one man and one wife, as had once been that great and mythical Patriarch Adam and his helpmeet, Eve? Eve first bore Cain, then Abel, and then after the sons of Cain were already abroad upon the land even unto the sixth generation, Eve bore Seth. Adam and Eve were, then, one husband and one wife in the beginning. Yet now, after fewer generations than the fingers on one's hands, men stole, bought, and murdered for as many wives and female slaves as cunning, sword, and gold could get.

A good husband, if Si'Wren should one day become so blessed as to find, could be both protector and benefactor to her. She was young, and still had her whole life ahead of her. A wise woman must overlook her man's faults, and stand beside him, even help lift him up when he might otherwise perish, and Si'Wren believed in the promise of the proverb that a faithful woman who served well might hope to find such a man, together with riches, happiness, and a houseful of many offspring.

Abruptly, as she worked, there came the crack of whips and the sound of curses, and Si'Wren looked up in momentary astonishment as a team of two big oxen straining against their yokes plodded slowly past the open end flap of her tent accompanied by several dirty-looking boys and driven by two brawny slaves who presently followed the beasts into view. Truly, Si'Wren observed meekly, a woman's place was under a man's protection, for what woman could match such men in the daily toil of such backbreaking labors as this?

The oxen were dragging a stone boat. A stone boat was no boat at all, but actually a great, wheelless, wooden sled or sledge used to transport big building stones from the rock quarry, or round stones from the harvest fields where they were unearthed by the plow, to be dragged as deadweight upon a platform made with two wooden skids, and transported across the dry land to the construction site for use in the making of more stone walls and buildings.

The young slave boys walked alongside the grating and squealing runners of the stone boat with goat skin bags, ready to provide grease or water to make sludge or mud under the runners, when the sled ground to a halt sometimes and must have something extra added to unstick it. The boys also carried straw brooms for the same purpose, as well as staffs to load and unload the sledge.

One of the young boys had suffered a massively crippled hand from the carelessness of his overseers when he was ordered to apply the grease and water and insert the end of a broom more closely beneath the runners. Such

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boys must reach in and work the water and grease and dirt together with their brooms and fingertips, because sometimes what was poured on would merely run off as quickly again without sinking in.

The older or more experienced boys could also employ the ends of their staffs for this purpose, but when a boy was especially young or new to the job and had never seen a stone boat before, it sometimes pleased the others who had the charge of such a green and inexperienced youth, to order him into the worst labors possible, and few other boys would give the temporary loan of their sticks and staffs, lest one of them suffer a similar ghastly fate. Si'Wren had once heard an agonizing episode of high-pitched screams that began so suddenly as to jolt her right down to the very pit of her stomach. The pitiful childish screams had gradually subsided into long dismaying moans that had continued long into the night, and thus had she known that something of the sort had happened, and she spent the night praying desperately on her bed for the sufferings of the hapless young victim.

The stones comprising this particular load, broken by the stone masons into crude blocks of two and three times the weight of a man, were for the Master's garden wall, which Si'Wren must pass by every day on her way to and from the spice tent. As the two sweating drivers were helped along by the boys, many looked on disinterestedly and more than a few openly laughed and mocked at the slowness of their progress.

One onlooker shouted gleeful insults, bringing on the inevitable vile curses from the aggravated drivers.

The men kept the oxen at their yokes with cursings and whippings, as they dragged the stone boat screeching over the exposed surfaces of rocks and stones in the ground and the wooden runners scraped over them with ear-splitting squealings. Si'Wren watched also as the team made their way slowly past the spice tent and beyond, to where the stone masons labored to build the new garden wall.

Si'Wren bowed her head a little, and shut her eyes gently as she softly sang a prayer for the physical safety of the young boys. She often sang prayers during her work, swaying gently to the rhythm of her own soft sweetly-uttered syllables. It was not merely a prayer she sang always, but sometimes rather, a long-favored tribal song, a song of old which kept alive the promise about the Garden of Heaven to which all good souls must surely one day go.

The day was warm and pleasant. It was the kind of day to lull one into a drifting somnambulance, inviting weary slaves to seize upon the unwatched moment now and then to pause, and wander freely with their eyes across the inner mind and the far skies, in spite of the ever-present risk of sudden discovery and displeasure by the Master.

Nelatha's sudden intake of air accompanied by a frightened gasp of startlement caused Si'Wren to cease abruptly from her labors and look up quickly.

Immediately Si'Wren shrank back in an involuntary motion as she beheld the terrifying sight of a hairy, muscled giant of a man, easily twice the height of any normal individual. The giant had six great fingers, like stout wooden pegs, on each hairy, enormous hand. Because of his size he appeared to be walking with exaggerated slowness, although the long strides with which he covered the ground took him across the level courtyard and up the front steps of the House of Rababull in a surprisingly short time.

His size was truly staggering to behold, and Si'Wren counted it her good fortune that he was already moving away from the tent entrance in such a way that she was not so much as glimpsed by him.

Such men, if they be men, could be unpredictably violent, and who could withstand such a one when he should happen to suddenly lose his temper? Although they were too big to ride horses, they could run on their long legs almost as swiftly as any horse, especially in a short sprint when attacking in a burst of speed. When they did ride, they were fond of more fitting steeds, such as elephants.

"Was he not terrible to behold?" Nelatha barely breathed, her voice a terrified series of gasped utterances.

"Aye, he is possessed!" Si'Wren agreed readily.

Indeed, he looked every bit of that.

Demon-possessed men had abnormal strength. How much the more so, such a one as this human tree?

With trembling fingers, Si'Wren carefully finished filling another tiny bottle and stoppered it carefully, checking to ensure that it could not possibly leak if accidentally tipped over or upended within some traveler's pouch.

"There," she said softly, still shivering in fear. "Ten bottles."

"So soon?" asked Nelatha, looking over her shoulder and double-checking Si'Wren's finger-count swiftly.

Si'Wren nodded. "I do good, aye?"

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Nelatha, sensing how frightened Si'Wren still was, smiled her approval, and leaned over to hug Si'Wren in a reassuring embrace.

“You keep up a good pace,” Nelatha agreed with evident satisfaction. “I am proud of you, Si'Wren.”

They were charged to labor without ceasing, but sometimes both girls would alike find themselves the free time to rest and watch others, for which neither girl was apt to criticize the other too unfairly.

Outsiders could not easily see into the tent, thereby to voice any complaint of idleness, for the veil screened the girls while they worked, keeping them safely out of view while they labored happily within its shadowy confines.

Even so, the two girls did try to be faithful and willing servants who would scarce conscience the deliberate wasting of their Master's valuable time and resources, and whose household they rightly considered themselves to be a part of. To be sure, they counted themselves but inferior members of the House, and yet, if not heirs, nevertheless exceeding fortunate to be the property of so great a one as Master Rababull.

This, then, was their fate and fortune, and it was good in their sight.

Master Rababull had never deliberately mistreated either of them, although he was known to deal harshly enough with rightly deserving wrongdoers or habitual slackers if they pushed their luck too far.

He had more than enough of those to preoccupy his attentions. According to the elder slaves, times were never so evil as now. Si'Wren wondered at this, being too young to say for herself. But she was inclined to agree with them.

The giant came out again, and made equally short work of his brief walk across the wide courtyard to the foundry. To the tune of many hammers, a group of talented artificers was busy at their labors there as they worked diligently to create numberless idols of stone, brass, silver, pearl, ivory, gold, wood, bone, and sparkling, mystically colored gemstones and jewels.

These skilled men worked together like tireless oxen under the unflinching eyes of the sweating, dirt-streaked Foundryman, the traditional Task Master of their Trade, and could readily produce any sort of cleverly carved and molded artifact, and an endless variety of molten and engraved idols and gods of all sizes, shapes, and descriptions. These were always sold or traded off at a handsome profit for Master Rababull, although some were given as gifts instead. The handiwork of the clever craftsmen went mostly, as did the wares of Si'Wren and Nelatha, to the market place in the nearby city of Emperor Euphrates, ruler over all the land.

Across the yard, the giant stood talking in a voice so deep that it was like the continuous lowing of a great talking ox. His huge, ugly face was like a terrible stone mask, and all men of ordinary stature were utterly dwarfed by him, and so afraid of him that they stood frozen in stark fear if he so much as but glanced in their direction momentarily.

“The gods of the giants are exceeding mighty!” breathed Si'Wren, keeping her voice low so as not to be overheard. To this Nelatha made no reply, but watched only, and kept her silence.

Because of the six-fingered giants, one could speak of another race. But the way of ordinary men, throughout the known world, was; one kind, one race, one speech, easily recognized and understood by all. This was the way it had always been and it would scarce have occurred to any to so much as question it.

Only two kinds of men might speak and not be understood; drunkards, and the possessed, and though foul be the reproaches and slurred speech of a drunkard, so much the worse be the abuses one risked in knowingly dealing with some possessed madman!

Giants, Si'Wren was told, were all possessed.

The two frightened girls stayed hidden, watching motionlessly in the spice tent as the giant stood like a temple god himself and conversed at great length with the Foundryman. They could not hear clearly what was said, but the giant gesticulated with his huge hands so much that it was interesting to watch and try to figure out.

He wanted an idol made. This much was plain to see. Verily, for that, he had come to the right place.

Si'Wren knew no Polynesians, Asians, Eurasians, or Mongolians. She knew no Amerinds northern or southern, no Hispanics, Negroids, or Pygmies. She knew no Caucasians, rain forest people, or Eskimos. She knew no people other than her own kind, for there was but one race of Man the world over.

Yet these unknown future races—with their diverse tongues yet to be born out of history—were hidden in the bloodline of Si'Wren's one world-wide race, one day to emerge, and then would come proud evil speeches of 'the purity of the race' with exclusive regard to individual strains, and a need to 'ethnic cleansing' and racial 'purges' of

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the 'mixed breeds'.

The human race, of which Si'Wren was but a single leaf, one lone, timid female, had spread abroad by a plethora of land bridges. There were many shallow seas and easily crossed land bridges in this, the world of Si'Wren, land which was but slightly above the level of the seas, with broad exposed continental shelves, vast coastal plains, and virgin, fertile land. Much territory was given over to swamp, tropical jungle, and dense forest.

Thus there was but one people in the world, medium-color, and more or less medium-dark of hair. To suggest that from the loins of a single man and his wife would one day spring forth all future races in their manifold colors and countless differences would have been a source of great astonishment to Si'Wren, could she but have known. One might as well harken unto the daffy old woman, L'acoci, and her crazy talk of colors in the sky, as to speak of many differing colors among the skins of men.

There was no other kind of human, except for the giants, and even these spoke the same language as the rest of the human race, in spite of their great difference in size. Even those with six fingers were not so different as all that. Yet in spite of the fact that there was only one race among men—which included the giants—there was hatred in almost every heart, wickedness such as to compound every evil, and deliberate mimicry of the savage wild beasts which roamed this wild primitive world so overflowing with such indescribable natural beauty.

Si'Wren reached for the water skin, and fumbled as her fingers plucked for it, and accidentally dropped it in the dirt. She reached down and picked it up, ignoring the rough coating of caked-on mud which clung to the bag as she raised it to her lips. The water ran freely out of the bag's horn spout, its mud coating wrinkling across the contracting, silken wet goat skin, giving rise to many miniature ridges.

When she had drunk her full, she heedlessly hung the depleted goat skin back on the stub of a knot-end on the tent pole upright, a small axe-hewn sapling. The half-dried mud clung to the goat skin in a curious pattern of broken and layered ridges that were partly crushed together wherever their broken edges collided and overran one-another as a result of the escape of water beneath the muddy leather, which Si'Wren had taken to quench her thirst.

The water skin forgotten, she rubbed her hands lightly to brush the coating of mud off her palms and turned to her work, while unheeded behind her, some of the water skin's encrusted mud crumbled and dropped to the ground behind her bare feet in little broken clods that contained the tiny seeds of plants, and the remains of a few dead insects.

Even as there was but one race of man, which included the giants and the six-fingered ones, there was also but one breed, likewise, of the dog.

Hardly a noble creature to look upon, the common camp dog was a different breed altogether from the huge and fearsome dire wolves that stood as tall as a man at the shoulder and roamed the farthest and deepest wilds in savage packs.

The dogs of men more resembled the small wild plains dogs.

Yet, like the wolves, which ran in packs, this hardy domesticated breed retained a strong pack instinct. It was used as a guard dog and camp scavenger, but could, like any wolf, become dangerous if starved too long or unduly provoked, as by the tauntings of foolish children.

Covertly watching the giant visitor, Si'Wren found it a relief not to be seen by him, unlike the unhappy Foundryman, who, normally considered by all to be no runt in his own right and anything but a coward, looked now equally as puny and scared as any small boy. He looked so scared that Si'Wren could not help but feel sorry for him. The giant was so tall that the Foundryman must needs tilt his head back and look almost straight up at the hairy visitor. What an ugly head, to behold against the majesty of the skies.

"Their gods may indeed be strong," said Nelatha, "but the fight is not always to the strong, nor the race to the swift, and I have heard speakings in my time, of an Invisible God."

Si'Wren was so distracted by observing the giant that she forgot herself and suddenly had to look at Nelatha and say foolishly, "Huh? Forgive me Nelatha, what did you say?"

Nelatha sighed patiently.

"I said, the gods of the Giants may seem exceeding fierce and large, and like themselves, false-hearted, but there is an Invisible God that I have heard of, who is strongest of all."

"Indeed?"

"Aye, and He is a loving, forgiving god. But," Nelatha said, her voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper,

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“the idol makers despise this Invisible God, because they cannot make any money selling idols of Him.”

Nelatha giggled, and Si'Wren smiled also.

It must be a joke, of course.

Si'Wren and Nelatha both loved to privily mock the moneymakers. The wheelers and dealers must provide their own fare, and were much obsessed with money-making schemes in the market place. They were shrewd cheats, long accustomed to swapping not only goods, but lies and lives, and often resorted to savage ambushes and bloodlettings after dark. There was ample reason to be fearful of the night. Hence, they deserved not only to be feared, but mocked on occasion.

Nelatha giggled because the artificers who made the idols always acted so godly and superior, and were so full of the greed of dogs but could never seem to suspect the similarity of themselves to such lowly creatures. It seemed to the two girls like Heaven's well-deserved gift of madness to such evil ones.

At least, that was Si'Wren's unspoken opinion. However, it would never do for a mere slave girl to be so blunt as to speak with such open foolishness. Si'Wren always guarded her thoughts. For as the wise men, who ever sat in the city gates, were fond of repeating so often and so well-deservedly, 'What is foolishly uttered in private, will surely be regretted openly in public'.

Wise counsel dictated that one such as Si'Wren must not criticize others more important than herself (which was virtually everybody), even if she saw cutthroats setting up their gods of greed under every green tree, with which to furnish themselves an imagined, perpetual divine approval of their moral filth and wickedness.

For the idol-makers, greediness begat holiness, and their chief deity was the god of gain. But Si'Wren could not help wondering whether such be gods at all. Hence, her sudden and immediate interest in Nelatha's words.

“How could a god be invisible?” asked Si'Wren. “How could one make proper obeisance to him? Which way would you bow?”

“Well,” Nelatha thought a minute, pausing in her work. Then she said, “Little one, when you close your eyes in prayer to the Master's family god, and then bow, tell me this; do you see him at the precise moment of bowing?”

“No, I do not,” said Si'Wren. “How interesting! I have never thought of that before. One can bow in any direction, then?”

“I think so,” said Nelatha, showing with her slowness of speech, that she was becoming very, very preoccupied about what had up until now been mere conversation to Si'Wren.

Si'Wren, noticing this sudden onset of seriousness on Nelatha's part, sought how to retreat from the imagined danger of causing any possible offense to Nelatha.

“There are many gods,” said Si'Wren quickly. “I am sure yours is just as good as anyone else's, in spite of the unfortunate fact that you cannot see him.”

“Not so,” said Nelatha flatly. “The Invisible God is the only true god. It is not so difficult if one cannot see him. Consider, Si'Wren, such a time as when you are suddenly frightened while lying in your bed after dark, when it is not possible to go to the House temple which the Master has built, therein to pray. Then, surely you must make prayers to the Master's god without seeing him.”

“Aye,” agreed Si'Wren, wondering at this, for, of a curiosity, she perceived strange new truths in Nelatha's words.

“Well, then,” Nelatha said simply, “that's all there is to it.”

“Pray tell; 'that is all there is to what?'” inquired an imperious and sultry female contralto, coming from almost directly behind their unguarded backs.

Both girls started like birds and together as one bent swiftly and automatically to their tasks as if bowing to one of the many idols of the House of Rababull with an instinctive zeal born of grievous prior experience. One must never be caught openly slacking, and the voice was that of Sorpiala, standing just at the opening of the tent flap.

Sorpiala, so slender and tall for her sex, with long glossy dark hair, and such lovely almond-shaped eyes, was a beautiful young slave woman greatly favored by Master Rababull. Like the Master, Sorpiala was not always so agreeable with the sometimes carelessly chosen words of others, unlike amiable Nelatha.

What made Si'Wren even more afraid, was that some of the others had been heard to remark of late on how beautiful Si'Wren was becoming. In fact, some said Si'Wren was even more beautiful now than cruel, proud

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Sorpiala.

It gave Si'Wren a scary feeling. In fact, sometimes a positively dreadful feeling. From the warnings Si'Wren had been privately given by others in the House, it was evident to all that Master Rababull had been making eyes at Si'Wren in the months since young Si'Wren had begun to physically blossom, and as was increasingly clear to all, had begun at long last upon the path of becoming transformed from a human reed into something a little more shapely, after the manner of all womankind.

Si'Wren somehow found herself becoming progressively more aware of such dire warnings by the older female slaves in the House, who seemed to feel that it would be Si'Wren's very life if Sorpiala should perceive Si'Wren as a threat to her domain.

But, being so young and innocent, and not able to fully comprehend the meaning of such dark speakings, Si'Wren could only shrug inwardly, knowing not how or what she might do to avoid such an unintended confrontation of fates. Lives should intertwine and complement, not strangle, one—another. And it seemed to her that sometimes now Si'Wren felt Master Rababull's eyes lingering inordinately long upon her, and could only feign not to notice, for she was utterly at a loss to know how to behave, even without the unconventional idea of some unguessable danger stemming out of Sorpiala's secretly harbored and uncontrolled upwellings of jealousy.

It was well—enough known to all, that syrupy sweet Sorpiala could without warning become subtle and vicious at the slightest perceived insult. For Sorpiala's lips were quick to smile, although her almond—shaped eyes had always betrayed an hardness, and Sorpiala could be unrelentingly vindictive about her jealousies, which were countless. Sorpiala had been the Master's favorite for as long as Si'Wren could remember. Cross up Sorpiala, and you could end up strapped to the nearest alter with a stone knife hovering in a pair of hairy fists over your chest.

There was no way of knowing how long Sorpiala had stood behind the two of them in deathly silence, listening at their backs while Nelatha and Si'Wren spoke foolishly, uttering what could all too easily become their own death warrants on a moment's notice, for appearing to so willfully and heedlessly forsake their proper duties.

Deep in her heart, Si'Wren had always held as deep a love, reverence, and respect for Sorpiala as if she were an elder sister, although they were unrelated by blood. An orphan, Si'Wren had no known siblings. As for the other slaves in the House, many were known to be the children of Master Rababull, for he was a man who had many wives, and the slave—offspring which he had sired might at least claim many half—brothers or half—sisters among their kin. Not being freeborn, this was anyhow counted an honor among those slaves who could boast of it, for it gave them many incidental advantages they might not otherwise enjoy in their low estate.

But Si'Wren had none to call blood kin. Not a soul.

Si'Wren had also been afraid of Sorpiala more recently, purely aside from the warnings of others, because of the queerest look Si'Wren thought she saw in Sorpiala's eyes now and again. It was an alarming expression, like a deep, searing mask of thinly—veiled hatred, the way that a surface layer of whitest ash masked the red glow of a fire living in a long—burning bed of coals while betraying no visible flame or spark on the surface.

Such confused goings—on both frightened and perplexed Si'Wren, and she was naturally at a loss how to respond, and so did nothing. What could she have done anyway?

Si'Wren had been given special warning by old L'acoci, and now also began to understand, dimly, that to a slave girl, any degree of beauty could be a terrible curse, if it brought the wrong kind of attention from the wrong kind of person. To a slave, especially a young girl such as Si'Wren, were not all others superior to herself? She was virtually at the mercy of whoever chose to molest her, for she did not even know how to run away or where to go.

Now, fearful in the presence of Sorpiala's ominous silence, Si'Wren kept her eyes downcast on her little jars, pretending with an agonized trembling and the barest amount of fumbling over everything she touched, to be utterly oblivious of anything out of the ordinary.

Unexpectedly, Sorpiala stepped forward to face Si'Wren and smiled tenderly from one side.

“Si'Wren, what is this? Did I not just have the good fortune to hear you talking about the Invisible God?” Sorpiala asked in the sweetest tone of voice. “How curious,” Sorpiala went on, “that I have never before noticed your belief in him, dear. Is He not wonderful?”

Si'Wren lifted up her eyes to Sorpiala in a shy smile. Of course she could trust Sorpiala! Who could dare to think otherwise?

“Aye, Sorpiala,” said Si'Wren, looking up and nodding readily and continuing to smile beamingly. “We were

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just talking about him. I have never before heard of a god so unusual that one could not even see him.”

But abruptly, as Si'Wren turned from smiling at Sorpiala in order to include Nelatha in the conversation, she was struck dumb with shock by the stark, thinly veiled terror in Nelatha's trapped-looking eyes. After betraying that one warning look to Si'Wren, Nelatha bent over her work and pretended not to be aware of anything around her, especially anything in the direction of Sorpiala.

Si'Wren looked back at Sorpiala again quickly, blinking rapidly in confusion.

“Fear not,” soothed Sorpiala, reaching to stroke Si'Wren's cheek gently with her fingertips. “I have heard of the Invisible God. Does he not watch over all the world and even ourselves at this very moment?”

“Aye,” Si'Wren nodded doubtfully, casting her round eyes from Sorpiala's curiously reassuring countenance, to Nelatha, who, looking sick at heart, seemed ready to die of fear on the very spot.

Si'Wren suddenly wished that Nelatha would stop worrying. Could Nelatha not see how loving and faithful Sorpiala was, both to them and to this Invisible God?

“Don't work too hard, Nelatha,” Sorpiala said, and then let out a funny little laugh. “Remember; the Invisible God is always watching every move, and hears every word. Bye-bye, girls.”

“Bye, Sorpiala,” said Si'Wren, smiling fondly.

But Nelatha did not return the farewell, and when Sorpiala was gone, Si'Wren stood motionless for a long time, as motionless as any dumb graven idol, as she struggled with some nameless, faceless inner turmoil in her effort to take proper stock of the situation.

Why was Nelatha so troubled, and so unwilling to so much as speak of it?

* * *

In the following days, Sorpiala seemed to harbor a special look of affection which she secretly displayed for Si'Wren's eyes only, whenever they chanced to meet. It gave Si'Wren the most deep-down, sisterly feeling for Sorpiala, and made her feel inexpressibly contented with life.

But with each passing day, Nelatha became if possible even more fearful, and finally, she would no longer so much as speak scarcely a word to Si'Wren or even acknowledge her presence with so much as a nod, causing Si'Wren much anguish when they worked together in the spice tent at their labors and causing her to long desperately for their former good times together.

Whenever Master Rababull would chance to pass by, he would nod and beam and smile at her, filling Si'Wren's day with consternation and no little dismay that she should feel so dumb about everything. Any simple slave girl might quite sensibly have experienced a right and proper bliss, even a contentment, at such attentions, but all Si'Wren felt was a terrible sense of foreboding.

Si'Wren occasionally saw Sorpiala standing in the shadows, frowning, but only once did Si'Wren chance to deliberately spy on Sorpiala, as she stood across the courtyard in the shadow of the House and stared down at an overripe fruit that had turned partly rotten. The fruit had already begun to dry up, and Si'Wren could see the shrunken, wrinkled, flattened side on which it had lain in the dirt, and the flies that scattered when Sorpiala shoed them away with a distracted frown.

It was uncharacteristic for Sorpiala to touch such filth with her hands, and Si'Wren could only wonder at what could have motivated one such as she to do such a thing. It fretted Si'Wren to see her elder sister in bondage grieving so over a mere rotting fruit. Were there not an hundred fresh ones, ripe for the taking, to replace the rotten one that seemed to concern Sorpiala so?

Si'Wren was fairly mystified at this.

Suddenly three of Sorpiala's female consorts approached, catching her off-guard with the offending fruit still held openly in her palm. Sorpiala seemed to give a sudden start at the appearance of the others, as if not expecting them and for some reason seemed uncharacteristically at a loss how to face them, although Si'Wren could not say why. There were many such slave girls under Sorpiala's personal power, who were virtually as answerable to Sorpiala as they were to Master Rababull himself.

Si'Wren watched in blank astonishment, secure behind her tent skirts, as the other three women made carefully orchestrated faces of sham sorrow over the fruit to Sorpiala's face, and then when they departed, delivered with equal skill and dispatch the most despicably reviling, hateful looks to Sorpiala behind her back.

Sorpiala's slave attendants were like flounders, fish that could not swim with a proper motion, that dwelt in the mire at the bottom of the sea, and looked strangely at one with the peculiar oddness of two eyes both wrongfully

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on one side only, but no eye on the other side. So that, wherever the flounder looked, it looked while concealing its other side, all the while appearing to be as falsely over-sincere as only a flounder could seem.

The following morning, Si'Wren found herself working in the spice tent beside a disturbingly quiet Nelatha. It was early enough that the morning mists still drifted thickly over the glistening outer walls and swirled wetly through the compound and softening and obscuring all form and substance.

Softly, Si'Wren sang a prayer to herself for a day filled with blessings from Heaven for all who lived in Master Rababull's House, respectfully beseeching various and sundry gods as she followed a tribal melody with the words of her prayer. Forgotten were her fears, for there remained only, from time to time, that distressing silence of Nelatha, which Si'Wren had been so vainly at odds to dispel with her cheerfulness.

She had never been so happy, working in the spice tent. Only now, she was aware of the fact that she did pray to unseen gods. Gods whose graven idols were not in her immediate, visible presence, just as Nelatha had scornfully pointed out earlier when still on speaking terms with her. This led Si'Wren to consider more seriously the strange Invisible God of whom Nelatha had initially spoken.

Nelatha still adamantly refused to speak of the Invisible God, in spite of the fact that Sorpiala clearly meant no harm, and stubbornly refused now to so much as say one word about this or practically anything else.

But Si'Wren could not stop herself from wondering about this strange Invisible God. For the whole idea was still very unclear to her. She was still so young, and the world so vast.

She supposed that the elders of every village must know all about this Invisible God, and imagined that they must surely understand why His image could not be somehow made visible by the contrivance of wooden or golden idols made with hands. Yet, she was fearful of going to any of them and asking.

The least of the elders of any of the villages round about, and those also that sat in the gates of the Emperor's city, was each and every one of them, from the highest to the very lowest in rank, a great civil dignitary. That was how Si'Wren had always viewed them.

Such great men should not be trifled with, especially by a mere girl, and might severely chastise Si'Wren for her boldness, and perhaps as well for her blatant ignorance of such matters. What if, in their anger, any of them was to complain to her Master Rababull and shame him openly for the stupidity of the foolish girl slave called Si'Wren? The more that even one of them should happen to laugh and make mention of it to him, the more Master Rababull would punish her, it seemed to Si'Wren. No, it was not worth such a risk, merely to ask such a curious and doubtful question.

"Nelatha, I have longed that I might speak with you once more about this curious Invisible God," Si'Wren finally said, eyes meekly downcast to her work. "Why has He given us eyes, and then made Himself invisible, that none might ever look upon His face? Is it because He is ashamed?"

Nelatha worked on, as if she had not heard.

"Why would God be ashamed?" Si'Wren whispered, as if to herself now.

Finally, Nelatha looked up with an expression of open impatience and exasperation.

"Only man is ashamed," Nelatha said with quiet assurance, at long last overcoming her reluctance of speaking of the Invisible One again. "Not God. Foolish Si'Wren, you must try your best to live a sinless life. Do good, and shun evil! Does not the wisdom of our folk lore teach us that Adam, and Eve his wife, saw God openly and spoke to Him freely and often, before they were both cast out of the Garden of Heaven for one sin? No wonder He never shows His face! And does this not also teach us that there is but one God?"

"It is curious," Si'Wren agreed, "that Adam and Eve should have been created by only one god, when all men say there be many gods. Of a truth, I have never considered it before. How can this be?"

"There is but one God," said Nelatha, "and in this life, no one may see God and live. For all are sinful. Sin, before God, burns like charcoal in a fire. But you will see Him on high some day, if you go to Paradise after you die."

"You mean; if I have lived a good life?" Si'Wren said.

"Aye," nodded Nelatha, "that too. More, it will be to your good and everlasting fortune if you have had good inside your heart, which like Him is unseen, and not just in your outward behavior. Then you will surely rejoice to see Him in all of His eternal glory. Aye, you shall stand before the living God for all eternity, and live, and not die."

Chapter Two—A Most Curious Invisible God

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“Ho so!” breathed Si'Wren with mounting satisfaction, as she kept her voice cautiously low. “One day I will see Him, then. But, why can we not worship images of Him now? Will He not be pleased?”

Nelatha looked around this time, checking wearily over her shoulder before answering, “Sister, if I make an image from dust, so...”

Nelatha took up the water skin and hunkered down into a squatting position, then took up a clump of loose dirt in her fist, and carefully dispensed a little water into her partly opened hand. She put the water skin aside, and worked the moistened handful of dirt with utmost care, making it into a rounded, flattened lump of dark mud. Then with her fingertip she poked three times, and made it into a crude face having two round eyes and a round mouth.

“Behold,” Nelatha said gravely, as she held forth in her hand the small, round, flattened visage of an idol made out of mud, “a child's plaything. Pretend that you are a child, Si'Wren, and that this is the doll face you made of Habrunt. As long as Habrunt is not here, you may talk freely to this as much as you like. But when the real Habrunt comes, why talk to dumb clay? Now, unlike Habrunt, who comes and goes, if the Invisible God knows all and sees all, and is so all-knowing that nothing escapes His knowledge, why should you speak to a mere fruitless idol about getting a man, or of many babies, a house, health, and wealth? Why speak to that which sees and hears not, of avoiding meeting savage men or beasts without a strong swordsman to shield and protect you? Why ask that which is itself made of the barren earth, of gaining good crops without needless sweat, thistle, thorn, or pestilence?”

Nelatha waited, watching closely. But Si'Wren only regarded the idol in Nelatha's palm in open perplexity.

“I... I do not know,” Si'Wren stammered uncertainly. She stared at the clump of mud, which had already sagged and cracked a little in Nelatha's upturned palm. Si'Wren somehow felt the wrongness of it, although she could not say why.

“Well?” Nelatha demanded of Si'Wren. “Is there yet no understanding in your stony heart?”

But Si'Wren could only stare at her blankly.

Nelatha propped her fists on her ample hips and frowned crossly at Si'Wren.

“Speak, foolish one.”

“Forgive me, Nelatha. I do not understand this,” Si'Wren pleaded, with an apologetic expression. “Why did you not pray directly to the Invisible God?...”

Si'Wren's voice trailed away.

Then understanding struck like a thunderbolt, as Si'Wren suddenly perceived the futility of all graven images in the presence of a real God, even an invisible one.

“Ooh!” she said. “Now I see!”

“Aye! Ohh!” Nelatha mocked Si'Wren imitatively, as her eyes and mouth becoming like wide round circles, to match Si'Wren's expression, which in turn exactly resembled the little round-eyed mud face.

“Si'Wren, if the Invisible God is all-seeing, why should you speak to the dirt which was formerly between your toes, when you can pray directly to He who made the whole world instead? Why bow to idols, which neither see nor hear? The real wonder is why you who are made of dust, are as dense as a rock. Who needs a stone idol, with you around? Stupid, ignorant, half-witted slave that you are sometimes, I can only marvel at how fittingly you were born to such low estate, for your thick-headedness. But that can be cured, and without the use of the rod, or such herbs as these. I may speak of mysteries, Si'Wren, but at least I do not speak falsely. I only faithfully repeat that which the old woman L'acoci taught me in secret, and it must not be repeated, on your life!”

“I swear, Nelatha,” Si'Wren eagerly reassured her, “I shall not breathe a word to anyone!”

“Enough for now, then,” Nelatha said, in satisfaction. “We will talk again later.”

With that, both girls returned to their labors, but now Si'Wren had a new wonder to marvel over. Why, ever again, should she worship a graven image?

The next day was just a little chilly throughout the early hours, and Si'Wren wore a coarsely woven dried grass shawl that was no longer green, but a faded, mottled gray.

Early in the morning swirl of drifting mists, the two girls worked together in silence, safely observing the many inhabitants of the House of Rababull perform their morning routines from an unobserved vantage point. It was as if they, too, were invisible behind the gauzy insect veils stretched across the open tent flap at one end, and it gave Si'Wren much to think about.

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Others could be watched or glimpsed briefly as they led the horses from the stables, to brush them, and check their hooves and remove the stinking clots from them with blunt points, and so on, while another group could be observed at length as they filed out to spend the day laboring in the Master's vineyards and grain fields.

They also watched the familiar faces of the womenfolk of the House of Rababull, lifelong slaves every one. Each had her bundle of soiled clothing, and many bore their babies suspended from forehead slings draped down across their backs, and as the women walked past in the direction of the back of the compound, many were accompanied by a number of tiny, naked toddlers. The womenfolk, some of whom were accompanied as well by elder daughters, were taking their bundles of wash out through the two tall narrow rear gates of the walled compound, to the nearby stream where they would pound and slap the soiled garments on the rocks whilst wailing together as one the old, long-familiar tribal ditties.

Si'Wren's memories of such were too vague and distant, to recall her own mother and father. For she was an orphan from earliest memory, a slave taken or sold out of her own mother's arms too long ago to have any recollection of it.

But she was not entirely alone. Did not the House of Master Rababull claim and feed and protect her just like any family member, albeit one of the very lowest possible rank?

As a mere slave, was she not more privileged than the richest of beggars who dwelt in their so-called glorious 'freedom' amongst the flies and dogs and dung of beasts without number, and who called out incessantly as they begged by the wayside in the filth and scum, and despaired of their very lives? They who had freedom and family had it worse than Si'Wren, as they waited and begged and cowered, not knowing whether it be for a shred of food or the bruising end of a staff in the dirty gutters and tilting hovels of the Emperor's numberless narrow city streets and alleyways.

Still, Si'Wren could not help thinking that the washer women had it best of all. To sing, and slap wet rags, and raise babies, and cook. Was this not bliss?

As she remained thus lost in her contemplations over her work, Nelatha turned slowly to face Si'Wren and made as if to speak. Sensing Nelatha's hesitation, Si'Wren paused in her work also, waiting and watching respectfully.

At this, Nelatha reached up and took the water skin bag from its hook. She tilted down the spout, made from the leg-end of a dumb brute beast, and carefully poured some clear water into an unglazed, shallow clay bowl.

Then Nelatha said, not to Si'Wren, but to Si'Wren's reflection in the shimmering watery surface, "Look, Si'Wren! Open your eyes, and behold Wisdom! Do you not see my reflection in the water, more perfect a likeness than that of any polished shield in the Master's armory? Behold how the clear water is almost totally invisible, and yet can you not see my perfect likeness in it, just like a waking vision? The Invisible God is so, and sees us in like fashion. We do see Him indirectly, Si'Wren, just as we see each other in the water's reflection. For does not all Creation reflect His glory?"

Si'Wren nodded, blinking and smiling timidly as she leaned close beside her beloved slave sister and replied eagerly to Nelatha's watery reflection in the clay bowl, "Aye, Nelatha, it is good to pray to the water, yes?"

"No!" Nelatha slapped Si'Wren's hands away irritably, mystifying a crestfallen Si'Wren, whose weeping brown eyes immediately betrayed her shock and confusion.

"Stop looking at me like that. I have no sympathy for fools. Or do you expect me to admire you for your skillfulness with tears? You bow to the ground before Him, yes! But remember; He is in Heaven! Si'Wren, the Invisible One created all things, but He looks down from on high, and sees all things, and has set before us a life of good mixed with bad to see which we might choose, day after day, all of our lives. He sees our hearts, and searches them always, for there he finds the treasure of our souls, and desires to know what we hide there, or whether it be good or whether it be evil."

"Oh, forgive me, Nelatha!" breathed Si'Wren. "It is so difficult to understand this Invisible God. Do even evil things, like scorpions and vipers, show His glory?"

"Don't be silly!" Nelatha said. "Of course not. Well, perhaps they do show His awful terribleness somehow. Of that, I know little. Ugh! How could you even think of such a question?"

Nelatha reached down, and drew with her fingertip in the dirt, a brawny, disembodied male arm extending from a cloud, and holding a thunderbolt.

"Observe," declared Nelatha with hushed emphasis, "the hand of God, from a puff of cloud, and does not fog

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wet the skin?"

Si'Wren stared, her eyes fastened upon the scene before her.

Nelatha regarded Si'Wren. "What think you?"

Si'Wren stepped back and bowed, and said, "I am overwhelmed, and must think greatly upon what you have said and shown me."

"Aye!" Nelatha whispered. "But tell no one, on your life!"

Nelatha raised her eyebrows significantly, and finally turned away with a satisfied nod, to return to her perpetual labor of grinding herb into powder with pestle and mortar.

* * *

Late the next afternoon, a stranger called from without the compound gate, and the guard answered, and it was breathlessly announced by a runner boy that a caravan was waiting to enter. There was a concerted rush by whoever could free themselves from their duties to go and see, and as the gates were thrown open they beheld the sight of a long line of human porters, with oxen, and riders upon camels and burros, all standing idle.

Master Rababull appeared quickly, and more than a few watched fearfully to see if he would lash out at anybody for recklessly opening the gates too soon to the strangers, or contrariwise, for not opening them quickly enough to show his proper hospitality to important visitors. But when his fierce countenance broke out into a toothy welcoming grin, it was sufficient reassurance to all that the good times had come again, and a celebration would no doubt soon be in the making.

The camels were all heavily laden with trade goods, and teams of stout oxen stood patiently in front of great two-wheeled carts, accompanied by attendants almost without number.

Under heavy guard entered also a troupe of exotic, half-veiled, half-naked courtesans accoutered in their virgin colors and finery (hence their perpetual jesting and self-mockery, for they be no virgins), seated each upon her own soft-looking little burro. Many fierce guards accompanied the line of travellers, wielding shining swords and broad hide-covered shields.

With the gates swung wide, the caravan began its long drawn-out entry into the great inner walled compound of the House of Rababull, accompanied by the loudly proclaimed boastings and pronouncements of the noble Camel Master's crier, and thereby setting up such a din as to put all the House astir. It seemed that everyone had stopped to watch, and all work fell idle as more and more paused and came to gawk.

Master Rababull had girded himself in his finest robes and was by now in a thoroughly good humor as he marched hither and yon across the front courtyard, puffed up with unabashed conceit as his servants voiced loud and shamelessly their praise and admiration for both the Master and his important visitors.

In a seemingly endless procession, the caravan paraded with stately dignity through the front gates in a grand display of riches and home-spun glory. As the long line of great beasts continued to enter the great courtyard in sedate single file, they halted one-by-one and stood waiting patiently for their handlers to unload them.

Strapped securely upon their backs were bulging, tightly bound oilskins and pungent, coarse burr-lap wrapped bundles of herbs, spices, and rare woods with which to make the finest idols, furniture, and fixtures, as well as priceless swatches of the most extraordinary block-printed cloth, and gourds of rare, hard-to-obtain dyes—especially scarlet and purple—and a cornucopia's horn of other riches.

Before he finally left in a few days for other lands, the Trade Master would leave behind his entire treasure trove, having exchanged all for the finest works of Master Rababull's clever craftsmen. The beasts would be heavily laden with countless intricately graven idols adorned with gold, silver, copper, ivory, ebony, black—and red-striped woods, and other rare woods, and gem stones with which to make crudely faceted jewels for their eyes. The precious stones and metals with which the idols were adorned were dug out of Rababull's secret underground gem mines, the precise location of which, under heavy guard within his own lands, was a closely guarded secret known only to Rababull himself and the captives who slaved in the mines.

Now, Master Rababull and Slavemaster Habrunt were everywhere, weaving a web of commands to the servants as everything was seen to.

First, the Camel Master and his entourage must be courteously escorted to the bath house by servants, who would bathe and minister to their every whim, and other servants would follow along with baskets of culinary delights and wine from tall, slender clay vases.

When they were finished with their bath, Master Rababull would hold a huge feast, as was his general custom.

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He would be sure to invite numerous friends, many of them business associates from in and around the Emperor's city, each with his many fat wives and even more numerous, wickedly spoiled offspring.

Si'Wren watched as one of the caravan travellers shyly approached the Camel Master. The other turned and, before the petitioner had been afforded adequate time to voice his request, nodded his immediate approval as if being reminded of something that he had already been informed of by the meekly beseeching one at an earlier time, no doubt a petition granted during the long journey on the overland trade route.

The Camel Master clapped a reassuring hand on the timid underling's bare right shoulder, whereupon both walked across to Master Rababull and bowed low, to which he courteously bowed also. Woe to any, to whom Master Rababull should ever bow and later become offended by. They would then find that there was a price for such courtesy which was beyond their ability to repay, should their lack of good manners touch upon his ireful eyes.

But for today, it seemed that Master Rababull could see no wrong. His smile easily set the men to working with greater dedication and zeal than any whip. It was known that the whip ever shadowed the smile of Master Rababull. The larger the smile, the longer the shadow cast by the ever-present whip at his side.

While the Camel Master stood near him, looking on and nodding his encouragement, the supplicant began talking animatedly and fearfully to Master Rababull and gesticulating into his own opened mouth, with many repeated dips of the head in impromptu gestures of respect, and making praying motions with his hands beseechingly to Rababull, as he displayed the most genuine and grievous expressions of personal torment.

The man had a toothache.

Rababull showed impatience at first, but then seemed to think better of the man's plight, and peered somewhat distractedly into the unfortunate's mouth. After he had indulged the other with various expressions, by turns, of critical appraisal, agreement, and sympathy, he gave the nod and granted off-handed approval to the man's immediate treatment, as he turned to Habrunt and gave instructions.

Habrunt bowed low when he had heard all, and turned to one of several runner boys who were standing by and sent him out the front gates at a jog. The boy had no doubt been sent to go and call upon Rababull's favorite Physician from the city.

Rababull would probably pay outright for cost of this man's treatment as a gesture of personal favor to the Camel Master, whose successful arrival from across vast and dangerous lands heralded the advent of huge new profits to be made in the market places of the nearby city, and Rababull could well afford to be magnanimous with such riches now seen to be quite safely and literally in his hands.

It was Rababull who had paid for this trading expedition in the first place. Si'Wren remembered it's original departure two years ago as an event of momentous significance and great portent. One never knew whether any of the caravan's members, or the Master's money, might be seen again.

Si'Wren continued working, but paused often to watch as the unloading of the camel train continued, with teams of men laboring tirelessly to transfer the goods into the heavily fortified and well-guarded store rooms behind the stables, on the far side of the courtyard.

Suddenly one of Rababull's slaves came running from the back gate of the compound, which opened out onto the path to the nearby grain fields. The new arrival ran over and abruptly seized another slave by the shoulders and began arguing rather vehemently as he shook the smaller, terrified man in furious anger.

Habrunt stepped over and thrust himself bodily straight into the midst of the exchange, immediately taking charge.

“Aiy!” exclaimed Nelatha, shaking her head fearfully. “What a time to come looking for trouble!”

“You said it!” Si'Wren agreed readily, with a frown. “But those two have always been close friends! I wonder what it's all about?”

An argument like that at a time like this was not a good idea, because the only possible winner would be the Master. Rababull could easily become angry at both for acting like spoiled children in front of the newcomers, causing him to be disgraced in front of them, as well as spoiling his own good humor.

But Master Rababull had not even noticed yet, so there was still a chance of settling the matter before it got too far out of hand. He was too busy taking care of the caravan's needs, and a wise Habrunt was determined that it stay that way.

But the argument, surprisingly, heated up again, with the one slave persisting in his accusations and waving

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his arms even more wildly—if it were possible—than before. Obviously not caring who heard him, he kept imitating the motion of hitting himself in the eye, and then shaking his fist at the other slave.

Then Habrunt, with a visible sense of renewed urgency in his entire manner and physical posture, sent another runner boy scurrying across the yard. The boy quickly returned with Prut, one of Rababull's biggest and most trusted slaves.

Nelatha and Si'Wren, still keeping up a pretense of labor as they watched unseen within the veil of their tent, exchanged dire, fearful looks.

Prut was a powerful man, and whenever he was called in to help take charge of a situation, it usually meant grief to whoever Prut was put after. Prut could lift two times his own weight over his own head, maybe even more, and although not a giant, he was certainly big enough by ordinary standards.

A stone-faced Prut listened to Habrunt's instructions, and then turned and tromped over to a large group of boys who had gathered to help unload the caravan, and as soon as he had relayed Habrunt's instructions, the boys all fanned out searching in all possible hiding places and out-of-the-way corners.

Habrunt, meanwhile, had gone off to the fields, perhaps to go looking for himself. Whatever it was, it was no small matter. He soon came back carrying the agonized, writhing figure of a small boy in his arms, followed by a small crowd of openly angry women and other children.

One-half of the boy's face was covered with blood, emanating from one of his squinting eyes.

This time the interruption did not go unnoticed, and while the distracted workmen finished unloading the caravan, with many a turn of the head, the team of boys that Prut had organized had worked their way through the courtyard and outlying structures as they called anxiously to and fro to one-another, and rapidly expanded the territory of their searches. Others ran out both the front and rear gates and could be heard out in the fields, shouting to one another as they went about poking and beating at the bushes with long sticks.

Finally the hue and cry went up from a number of them, and a concerted chase ensued. Presently, they returned through the rear gates with two of the biggest boys half-walking and half-dragging a lone struggling boy, holding the unwilling youngster firmly by the upper arms and hair to keep him from getting away again.

Habrunt came over and stood listening to them all arguing, and finally raised his finger and pointed at Prut with a terse word to stand guard while he turned and marched with an ominously slow, deliberate reluctance across the courtyard towards Master Rababull. A sense of dread fell upon the entire assembly, and gradually all fell silent, watching as Habrunt resolutely approached Master Rababull.

Up until now, Rababull had been deliberately ignoring the whole fiasco. But when Habrunt finally stepped up to him and bowed low, he turned to listen, still grandly smiling, and after a few barely whispered words from the bowed face of Habrunt, Master Rababull quickly turned, and his smile froze into an expressionless, unreadable, and somehow all-the-more terrifying mask.

Master Rababull was, after all, many hundreds of years old, the better part of a thousand, in fact, and no man's fool. He knew men, and he knew how to deal in kind for kind, and had survived the most evil schemes that men could throw at him by managing to anticipate them sufficiently in advance whilst devising even more evil ones in return.

Together, Master and Slavemaster returned to the silent crowd that had gathered around the two boys, and all of the women, except one old grandmother, fell away like chaff before the wind. The one woman, whose name was Breeka, stood her ground, though old and stooped, and her face was as a gargoyle's, very terrible and unmoving, as if naturally grown from some dark and twisted tree bole.

If Master Rababull's years exceeded six hundred, and his wit be steeped in the tap root of the ungood, this old crone was the very epitome of evil and practically a great-grandmother to him by comparison, with the crime of the hour engendering within her shrunken breast a fearless, savage desire for revenge.

Si'Wren felt cold, numbing fear. Something big was up. Something evil. She knew everyone there. Only the very newest additions to the House of Rababull did she not know by name as well as by face. She watched with dire feelings and the gravest of misgivings as Rababull examined the injured boy who lay moaning and writhing in the arms of his weeping mother.

Then he turned and questioned the two slaves who had argued, each of them the father of one of the two boys around whom the entire matter was centered.

The boy who had previously hidden himself was a known trouble-maker. He was a bully of the worst sort,

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always picking on others smaller than himself. Si'Wren had never known what to think of him, except to steer clear at every opportunity, for she knew that all too soon, he would be a man and whereas now was only a pest, would then be dangerous to her and the other women. The unruly boy had been disciplined before many times, invariably as much for his actual excesses as for his spiteful and miserable attitude.

Rababull finally took the little trouble-maker by the arm and frog-marched him over to the injured boy. He said something to Habrunt, who responded by holding up the injured boy's head so all could see the ruined eye socket.

Si'Wren felt an agonized pang of sympathetic grief for the injured child. She knew him well, and he had always been so harmless and gentle. Now, the boy's left eye was gone and only an emptily staring, bloody cavity remained where his innocent soul had once looked out on the world. Only his good right eye remained, and that one, coupled with his occasional shrieks, betrayed his continuing agony.

Again, Nelatha and Si'Wren exchanged knowing, fearful looks. Rababull suddenly ordered several men to seize and hold the little bully's father immobile before him as all looked on to see what would happen next.

As Rababull questioned the father of the offending boy, the man, scared witless, jerked his head back anxiously, and replied loudly and emphatically in the negative.

Then he looked at his own boy and nodded his head as he gabbled out his protest of the suggested judgement through lips black-stained from his secret addiction to some foul intoxicating substance, and Si'Wren could easily read the gesture.

Not me—him!...

The father was clearly expressing his opinion that whatever punishment was merited, although it had been charged directly to him as penalty for his own boy's misbehavior, he clearly preferred the boy to suffer for his own wrongdoing.

The boy's voice rose to a hopeless wail as Rababull himself stepped forward without a word and seized the youth, and made a brief motion over the youngster's face with his hands. The boy let out a series of guttural screams, and then, his work done as a Judge, Master Rababull turned and walked back to his unloading without another glance, but he left behind a screaming boy who had been a bully once too often, with his crime to be paid for this time in blood. Both boys now had but one eye.

An eye for an eye.

The suddenly animated crowd turned away with a shared look of satisfaction at the outcome. Did not every free man do that which was right in his own eyes, and his neighbor also, whether it be good or whether it be evil, and the slaves too when they could get away with it?

Even the fathers, both of them, approved. Better a disciplined boy with one good eye remaining, than a criminal offspring with two evil ones. Perhaps the little rascal would not be so much trouble to them in future. If not, there were cases where the other eye had eventually been put out also, rendering the blinded evildoer a more or less harmless beggar for the rest of his miserable life.

Si'Wren thought on this with all of her might. The ignominy of it. The injustice. But what was justice? What, but that which Master Rababull saw fit to declare so?

She had not been alive too long, especially compared to the hundreds of years of her Master, but the boy who had been in the wrong was obviously too young by far to merit such grievous punishment. For one of so tender years, there were always other ways. The good boy could have been set free for the sake of his lost eye, for instance, and the bad boy who had put his eye out could have been taken to the front gate, the better to watch with his two good eyes, the other go free. To Si'Wren's mind, that would have been a perfectly fair and reasonable punishment.

Except that Master Rababull would have lost a valuable slave in the process. The old idol gods whom Si'Wren had known all her life would no doubt have strongly approved of Master Rababull's harsh decision. Would the Invisible God have approved also?

What a question. Si'Wren thought on this, but in the end, she could only reflect that she could not bring herself to agree with Master Rababull's harsh decision. Perhaps in time, she might gain a better idea. It was certainly a question to nag at one's conscience.

Soon enough, as Nelatha had expected, Habrunt sent a runner boy over to the spice tent as Si'Wren and Nelatha watched silently. The runner boy stood before Nelatha and breathlessly announced that he needed fresh

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salve for the injured eyes of both boys.

Si'Wren could still hear the tormented screams of the boy who had been punished. He was in agony now not only for his eye, but for the unlove and lack of sympathy from those around him. The other boy, his smaller victim, was moaning constantly from his unrelenting agony.

Nelatha turned to Si'Wren and repeated the request, and Si'Wren hastened to fetch what the boy requested, a salve made from a specially combined mixture of herbs which could help ensure that neither boy died from infection and also alleviate much of the suffering they must endure.

While he waited for Si'Wren to give him the salve, the runner boy, whose name was Gafa, spoke glibly to Si'Wren and Nelatha of the boys' fathers requesting that the Physician might see their sons, and of Rababull hesitating at first, but finally relenting.

Human life was cheap, and Rababull's reluctance stemmed from the fact that he already owned both men and their families, which left them nothing further to offer him. Whatever they might promise, was it not already his?

Did they not already owe him their daily labors for the rest of their lives anyway, before any of this happened? If both boys eventually died of their infections, could not Master Rababull's human property breed more children for less than the cost of the Physician's fee?

But, to further his own glory and honor among men, Rababull had finally approved this thing, that others might call him gracious. Anyway, the Physician was already coming for the man with a toothache who had arrived with the caravan, so Rababull could readily afford to kill several birds with one stone.

Si'Wren already had some salve in a jar that had been prepared only a few days ago. She brought this out, gave it a fresh stirring up, and measured some out into a little clay bottle, which she gave to Gafa.

"See that you do not drop it," she instructed little Gafa, using her most good-natured tone of voice to remove any sting from her admonition. "You are fast, Gafa, but enough boys have been punished today and I do not want to see you punished too."

"I promise I will not, Si'Wren," he smiled timidly and nodded. He bowed low in preemptory fashion and hurried off in a rush.

Si'Wren watched him in chagrin, knowing that he could easily stumble, but also that he was invariably expected by those in charge of his duties to do all things as if he could run like the wind.

Several days old was better than fresh, because the herbs would have had time to suffuse, whereas, if she had immediately prepared something from the raw materials, it would not have had time to steep and cure properly. In Si'Wren's world, that which was fresh and new was not necessarily that which was best.

Si'Wren heard a gentle swish of the tent veil behind her, and turning, smiled as she watched Sorpiala enter in all her finery. Sorpiala was holding something close to her breast, an object as long as her forearm, folded up in a swatch of natural burlap. The undyed cloth was the color of cow's milk. It was apparently a rather heavy burden from the way she moved, as she approached Si'Wren and Nelatha and sought to unfold the cover to show it to them both. Within was an exquisitely carved jade goddess with sapphire eyes, still enshrouded in several layers of semi-translucent, gauzy veils.

She started to hand it to Si'Wren, then hesitated, and seemed to make a sudden decision as she turned sharply at the last and held it out in a most abrupt fashion to Nelatha instead, saying, "My arms grow weary; hold this for a moment will you, Nelatha?"

What happened next was over almost in the blink of an eye, but frozen forever in the mind of Si'Wren.

The goddess seemed to be almost in Nelatha's outstretched hands, when somehow Sorpiala's retracted hands seemed to catch at the gauze and jerk it back, and as it fell, Nelatha was left clutching only the loose edges of the silken folds.

With a dull clunk the goddess thumped heavily on the hard dirt surface of the tent floor and broke clean in half. Si'Wren thought she had seen it already coming apart into two halves in mid-air, but that was absurd. Why would Sorpiala bring a broken idol to show them? Anyway, Si'Wren had not seen it clearly and could not truly be sure.

"Oh, forgive me, Sorpiala!" Nelatha wailed as she stared, eyes wide in abject terror, at Sorpiala.

"What? Oh, it was only a mistake," said Sorpiala, already trying to console Nelatha.

She turned and smiled brief reassurance at Si'Wren also, to show that offense had been neither perceived nor taken.

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Si'Wren blinked, and, remembering her manners, bowed low, uttering quickly, "I am most grieved, Sorpiala," in a formal utterance of deepest consolation which gesture alone seemed appropriate to such an unhappy event.

"No, it is nothing," Sorpiala said, bending down and picking up the two broken halves herself to gather up in the folds of the gauze and burlap again. "Do not worry."

She turned as if about to go, and then paused and looked directly at Si'Wren.

"Si'Wren, you know, I am not so sure that a goddess which can be dropped and broken is anything worth believing in. Do you suppose some time, you could tell me about your Invisible God?"

Si'Wren, caught off guard, smiled hurriedly.

"Why, certainly, Sorpiala," she said. She nodded her head and bowed in a gesture of respect. "I would be most honored."

"Very well, then, since you seem to know all about it..." Sorpiala said mysteriously, and bowed in perfunctory fashion. Then before Si'Wren could say a word, Sorpiala turned and stepped out still clutching broken goddess wrapped in burlap.

Si'Wren turned away and looked at Nelatha, who was bent over her work again, grinding and grinding with anxious energy. Nelatha's eyes looked terrified and miserable.

"Do not worry, Nelatha," said Si'Wren. "Did she not say it was an accident?" But Nelatha did not say so much as a word to Si'Wren.

After staring at Nelatha a moment longer, Si'Wren finally turned away, feeling glum, and began to busy herself grinding a new batch of herbs with the stone mortar and pestle.

Preparations for the caravan feast had already begun. Many of the Master's fattest livestock were being shepherded into the compound by their handlers to be slaughtered. Big iron cauldrons had been put on to boil, for scalding the hides to scrape off the hair. Knives were sharpened for killing, bleeding, and skinning the animals. By tonight, all things would be ready for the big feast. But Si'Wren refused to eat any of the meat, for it was a strange and barbaric new custom.

Si'Wren watched Master Rababull as he marched to and fro in the wide courtyard, ordering men about and personally seeing to every detail. The magnificent curls of his long locks swayed rhythmically across his powerful back and shoulders, while his coarse dangling beard stood out more stiffly.

Master Rababull was older by far than what might have been Si'Wren's personal preference, but he was nevertheless a powerful and wealthy man. She secretly hoped that another, younger man might choose her one day soon. Many men already had their eyes on her; this she could not help but notice. She had dreams of a large family with many children and in-laws, but not, hopefully, as just the umpteenth wife of some fat old curser.

Master Rababull, Si'Wren knew, already had many wives, and she was wise enough in spite of her youth to realize that it would be no fun spending the remainder of one's life in direct competition with an army of female rivals for so much as the merest bit of time now and then with one's own husband.

Si'Wren watched Master Rababull turn to make his way across the wide courtyard yet again in long hurried strides. Always so serious, even about the business of his many pleasures, such as now with the anticipated celebration.

As Si'Wren watched incuriously, Master Rababull stopped abruptly mid-way across the courtyard as he was interrupted respectfully but unexpectedly by yet another slave, who approached rapidly and bowed low, clearly needing advice or authority in the furtherance of something.

After the incident with the two boys who had each lost an eye, Master Rababull was not in the best of moods. Clearly impatient, he stood frowning distractedly as he heard the man out.

Si'Wren looked beyond, musing that Master Rababull had been headed towards the huge, sprawling, open-air mansion which was the actual House of Rababull, with its many rooms and beautiful central garden with a stone fountain that was surrounded on all sides by a wide border of smooth paving stones.

There, cushions were being laid out so that all of the guests would be well taken care of when they arrived. He must be sure there was enough of everything for everybody, and that included floor cushions. None must have any visible stains or dirt marks on them. Otherwise, some guest might be insulted.

When it came to fixed seating, invariably the master of the house himself must unerringly decide in advance who should sit closest to himself, and who sat on whose right hand, even unto those who must sit progressively farther and farther from his own seat of honor. It was a daunting task to so order the hierarchy of the ranks of

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gluttony, that none should be insulted by a lower seat than they properly deserved. Greater men than Rababull had literally lost their heads in sudden revenge at the sword hands of their former guests for not paying greater attention to the exacting particulars of such a seemingly insignificant detail as the proper seating of all guests according to favor, rank, or privilege. The absence of one important guest, or unanticipated arrival of another, was always sure to throw everything into a bewildering chaos of renewed choices over who must come before who.

To avoid this, Master Rababull chose to let almost the entire house be used to party in, while he refused to call any seat his own but wandered about seeing to everyone else's comforts or pleasures, so that there should be no one spot that could be called better than any other. An offended brother was more difficult to win back than many cities, but Master Rababull was already so old and he was no doubt well schooled in such matters.

Rababull finished his impromptu consultation, and the anxious slave, having obtained his Master's decision, stepped back with a low bow and hurried off.

Then as Rababull turned to continue across the courtyard toward the House, Si'Wren watched as graceful Sorpiala hailed Master Rababull in her musical voice and pulled him aside with what he obviously regarded as yet another unwanted distraction. And as Si'Wren looked on unseen from the spice tent, Sorpiala unwrapped the broken goddess and revealed it to Master Rababull, talking in a low but animated voice.

Wise Sorpiala, who could always be so proper at even the worst of times. There she was, soothing a time-conscious Master Rababull's undoubtedly offended wrath over the expensive, broken goddess. Such a large piece of jade was surely worth a king's ransom. Si'Wren found it somewhat amazing the way Sorpiala could resort to her unrivaled feminine charms to soothe the Master's outrage so confidently. Sorpiala was clearly greatest in favor with Master Rababull over all other women in his Household.

Si'Wren looked down at her little clay vase as she carefully filled it, momentarily distracted. For herself, she would never behave like that. A proper woman must be modest in all ways possible.

Then Si'Wren paused and looked up again to further observe Sorpiala and the Master, and started in shock as she suddenly realized that Master Rababull was glaring fiercely in her direction, as if he could see through the screening veil of the tent with the eyes of a wrathful god.

Oh no! What could be wrong?! Please, Si'Wren begged her own heart, oh please let Sorpiala's charms soothe Rababull's off-endedness. Let no punishment befall her for the sake of the broken goddess.

Suddenly Rababull broke away from Sorpiala and began marching straight for the spice tent like an avenging destroyer.

Si'Wren looked over at Nelatha, whose head was bent industriously over her work. Nelatha did not even realize yet that Master Rababull was almost upon them both. Si'Wren had just enough time to see Sorpiala scurrying away on swift, dainty little footsteps, leaving the broken goddess in two pieces on the ground as she made fast her escape—with a smirk on her face.

Si'Wren's voice froze in her throat as she felt terror. Master Rababull's face looked so terrible and angry! She was too scared to warn Nelatha, too confused to think of what to say!

Master Rababull did not bother to come around to the back of the tent where it was most expedient to enter. He simply stepped up to the front of it, seized the flaps in both fists, and jerked savagely, ripping them apart.

Nelatha let out a terrified little 'Eeek!' as he stepped in and loomed hugely over her, his trunk-like legs sending mortar, pestle, and all crashing noisily in a dust heap. Master Rababull reached down and dug his clawed fingers into Nelatha's long tangled locks like talons of steel and with a single lifting motion of one bulging arm he twisted his rippling torso and heaved upwards as he jerked Nelatha bodily to stand before him. Then with his other arm he reached out and seized Si'Wren's hair and yanked her painfully before him also.

Standing over them with eyes glaring like lightning and a voice like thunder, Rababull looked fiercely from one terrified girl to the other as he shouted, "I was told a tale of a wicked slave who threw down one of my goddesses, and broke her to pieces, Nelatha!"

But Nelatha, utterly speechless, could only shrink back helplessly from that terrible stare.

Obtaining no response from Nelatha, Master Rababull turned his awful look onto a quailing Si'Wren and snarled down at her, "And another was heard to speak praises of the Forbidden One, the Invisible God!"

He held both paralyzed girls in his iron grip for a long, moment of dreadful silence. Around her, Si'Wren realized that all the compound had heard Master Rababull's furious voice and involuntarily stopped what they were doing to watch. Then Master Rababull turned himself around with both girls still helplessly in tow and

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dragged them physically from the tent by their hair.

“Habrunt!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “Habrunt!”

Habrunt came running with two boys trailing close behind him as they struggled to keep up on their skinny little legs. As he approached he slowed to a stop and immediately knelt down on one knee and clasped his fist rigidly across his chest to signify his immediate readiness to obey Master Rababull, come what may. That he had already taken in the plight of Si'Wren seemed inevitable, but he betrayed no sign of it.

The two runner boys finally caught up and, terrified by the mask of rage on Master Rababull's features, immediately threw themselves face-first flat in the dirt and lay trembling as they fearfully hid their eyes.

“I come at thy bidding, oh master,” Habrunt intoned in his deepest and most servile do-or-die manner.

Master Rababull stared at Habrunt deliberately for a long moment, before speaking.

“Slavemaster, I have found corruption, in the spice tent, of all places,” said Rababull. His allusion to the spice tent was especially ironic, as spices were commonly used to cure infections in the living, and to embalm the dead to delay the onset of corruption and rotteness as long as possible. Of course, only those who could pay were so embalmed. Most could not afford it.

Speaking as to the earth, Habrunt declared emphatically, “Speak, Lord, and it shall be my will!”

“My prize green goddess has been broken. For this crime, let Nelatha be slain,” said Rababull.

Nelatha's eyes closed as she keened silently in helpless terror.

“And let this little one—” Master Rababull's voice faltered, so strong and so deep were his feelings for her.

“Let this foolish one who spoke so rashly against her Master's gods, never speak again, only—let her live.”

With that, he hurled both girls to fall prostrate before his kneeling, perplexed Slavemaster.

“Master,” Habrunt protested, “perhaps, with sufficient time for reproof and correction—”

“You will carry out my commands immediately or you will be next!” said Master Rababull harshly.

“I hear and obey, Master,” intoned Habrunt, clasping his right fist hard across his chest again as he bowed low in formal acknowledgement.

Screeching hysterically, Nelatha helplessly protested her innocence, as Si'Wren remained trembling, too shaken to speak.

Habrunt straightened himself up to full stature, and looked stoically upon the two prostrate girls, his stiffened legs like the trunks of oaks. Nelatha clutched desperately at his ankles as she continued to beg for mercy, but his wooden face seemed not to hear her pleadings.

Speaking as if to no one in particular, in a voice as that of one already dead, he thrust out his right arm empty-handed, and commanded loudly, “Fetch me a sword!”

Both boys, too scared to think, ran at once into the House. Their squeaky voices could be heard begging desperately for a sword, any sword. Si'Wren heard the laughter of some guest, an early arrival, as he commented upon the humor of sacrificing a human being instead of a mere animal to commemorate the beginning of the feast. Moments later, both boys reappeared flying down the front steps and came running at breakneck speed across the courtyard in returning to a motionlessly waiting Habrunt, his right arm still stiffly outheld, open-handed.

While all of this was happening, an increasing number of onlookers had stopped to watch, with the late-comers asking others in hushed voices what was going on. Upon hearing, each cast by turns horrified looks of revulsion, disgust, and loathing for Si'Wren and Nelatha, together with shock, disbelief, and horror at the two pieces of the broken jade statue, still lying where they had been cast aside by an enraged Master Rababull. There was no danger of the valuable pieces of jade being stolen; to touch the broken jade now would mean certain death. No one was bold enough to say anything directly to Habrunt or the two hapless girls.

Some of those watching displayed a certain sickening delight at the sight of a motionlessly waiting Habrunt and the two prostrate girls kneeling with faces downcast in the dust at his feet.

As the two runner boys dashed across the courtyard to return with the swords to Habrunt, more people came out of the House to stand at the head of the front steps to see what had occasioned their unusual mission.

“Master, here are two swords,” one of his runner boys gasped, nearly out of breath as they both bowed low and held the shining blades out to Habrunt. But he stood a moment, staring down at the dirt before him, as if he had not heard.

“One will do,” Habrunt said finally, as he looked up, and reached for one of the shining blades.

With the sword in his fist he stood looking down at Nelatha and she suddenly paused in her terrified protests,

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looking up at him with tear-streaked cheeks as she searched his face with glazed eyes, mutely imploring him to do or say something to save her.

But Habrunt's countenance was terrible to look upon, so stone-faced and determined was he now.

"Pray, Nelatha," he said only, too afraid of Master Rababull to risk more open defiance of either his Master or any temple god.

Nelatha nodded again, jerkily, and bowed her head.

Then, as Nelatha prayed in a series of hysterically rising whispers, Habrunt slowly raised the sword high into the air in front of a numbed Si'Wren, held it trembling in his great fist, and then brought it down in a mercifully swift flashing arc.

Nelatha's prayers were suddenly cut short, and a collection of gasps was heard from the watching crowd. Habrunt held out the sword behind him without looking, and the visibly shaking runner boy took it back, dripping with Nelatha's blood.

Habrunt's eyes, shot through with grief and an inconsolable look of self-condemnation and awfulness of purpose, looked upon Nelatha's slain body momentarily. He was no longer Habrunt the kind Slavemaster, to whom one might look when trouble raised its ugly head, but had become an unwilling angel of death instead.

Habrunt finally turned to Si'Wren, who knelt still before him, utterly speechless and motionless. Looking dazed, she gazed long upon the bloody corpse of once-cheerful Nelatha, divided in half at the neck, like the broken jade goddess.

Master Rababull, who was still watching, had said let her never speak again, but live. What could that possibly mean? thought Si'Wren.

Habrunt reached down and almost lovingly slid his trembling, work-roughened fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck with his left hand. As Habrunt tilted Si'Wren's head back her face was lifted up and her tear-streaked cheeks were revealed beneath eyes looking ever-trustingly up into his, in absolute surrender to his will, signifying that she had not the slightest thought of resisting her fate.

But Habrunt could not do what was commanded of him, and hesitated. There were any number of alternatives, all contrary to Master Rababull's wishes and hence instantly fatal, but he had a sword.

He could do much with a sword...

Suddenly a third runner boy suddenly came hurrying past them both and bowed in perfunctory manner as he quickly announced a breathlessly gasped utterance to Rababull.

"Master, the great Physician is here!"

As Si'Wren lifted up her eyes slowly, her soul quailed at the sight of Habrunt's upraised fist, yet still she stared submissively into his tormented eyes, showing that never would she strive against nor resist he to whom she looked up as to a light in the spiritual darkness for all of her life however brief. If Habrunt could but know it, Si'Wren trusted him even more than she ever did Master Rababull or any living human being.

Then, Habrunt lowered his right fist slowly, as well as his head, although his left fist remained clenched tightly immobile in Si'Wren's crush of locks.

"Master, may I speak?" said Habrunt to the ground, as he maintained his steady grip upon the unresisting girl whose eyes his own had no strength to meet.

"Speak!" commanded Rababull impatiently. He was barely able to contain himself in his rage and impatience to get it over with.

Habrunt hesitated further, and dared not look up at his Master as he spoke.

"Most gracious and noble Master, was not this one greatly in thy favor before?" pled Habrunt.

He was taking a terrible risk, to speak so boldly of Master Rababull's former personal fondness for Si'Wren. Master Rababull had but to say the word, and the remains of Habrunt could end up in the dirt beside Nelatha.

"What is it?" said Master Rababull, somewhat irritably now, rather than in a full rage. It seemed Habrunt had struck his mark with the unerring accuracy of a master archer, as usual.

"Master, I am but a coarse and brutal man, and thou alone art high and noble and altogether good. Invisible Gods deserve invisible praise, from invisible voices. If it be your pleasure, let this little one show with what purity of purpose she might have served her foolish Invisible God, by swearing a vow never to speak instead. The more she speaks, the more her Invisible God may be viewed as false."

There was a moment of silence, as Master Rababull thought on this.

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“Well spoken, Slavemaster,” Master Rababull finally said, his voice almost back to normal, almost relieved, in fact. “Let her never speak—forever! If she speak but once, let all bear witness to the falsehood of her Invisible God by the falseness of her broken vow, and her life be forfeit! Let her so swear!”

Habrunt had not bargained for this! But what could he do? What was determined now was not as vile as what had been declared before, hence, was not enough justification to turn his sword in furious rebellion against the House of Rababull.

Grief-stricken, he lowered his eyes to Si'Wren, and said resolutely, “Little one, do you swear by your God never to say one word for the rest of your days, so long as you shall live and breathe and have life in you, and to suffer death to yourself and dishonor to your Invisible God if you should ever fail to do so?”

Si'Wren realized that here was the chance, not only to redeem herself but her newfound Invisible God as well.

“I swear it,” Si'Wren said.

“She has so sworn, Master,” Habrunt immediately declared to Master Rababull.

“Let it be so,” rasped Master Rababull. “A fitting conclusion to the matter.”

At that moment, Master Rababull's attention was diverted as he was approached by the Camel Master. His face remained stern and obnoxious to look upon, which unintended visage of evil, coupled with the sight of several slaves carrying away the remains of Nelatha, and the sight of all the spilled blood in the dust, made the all-observant Camel Master extraordinarily nervous, although he tried rather desperately not to show it and failed miserably.

The Camel Master spoke briefly to Master Rababull about something, and when he had politely heard out the man, Master Rababull turned to Habrunt.

“Go to now, Slavemaster, and take this silent one with you,” said Master Rababull. “The good Physician must not be kept waiting, for he will have need of her herbal skills.”

As Habrunt listened to the footsteps of Master Rababull and the obsequiously over-attentive Camel Master receding across the dusty courtyard, he let out a sigh, sickened by what he had done, and by his own feelings on the matter.

Harsh, unforgiving punishment must ever hang over Si'Wren's head now, all because of a broken piece of green rock! Would that Si'Wren was but stone herself, that she might suffer nothing further. How she trembled so.

He took Si'Wren gently by the hand, indicating that she should rise to her feet.

“I am sorry, little one,” he rumbled in a low voice when she had risen to stand upright beside him, speaking so quietly to her that the other slaves still watching could not discern his words. “Return with me now to the spice tent and bring what you need, quickly! If any should tempt you to speak, hold your silence, on your life!”

Si'Wren nodded mutely, waiting for him to lead the way.

Habrunt regarded her a moment, his face unreadable. Then he composed himself, and in a quiet, firm voice, said, “Come.”

He scattered the onlookers, the gleeful and the merely curious alike, with a wrathful look, and walked Si'Wren to the wrecked spice tent to help shield her from their otherwise ruinous persecutions. At what had once been the spice tent Si'Wren trembled at the sight of the damage. Not only was the tent ruined. Priceless herbs and salves had been scattered and spilled. The powders of many different sun-dried and painstakingly ground-up plants had been intermingled in the dirt, and the bugs were already starting to get into things.

Such was the measure of her Master Rababull's outrage, that he cared so little for the damage to the spice tent, his own property, in the course of executing his punishments. The thought of this, and of the severed body of Nelatha, made Si'Wren afraid to even think of ever facing her master again, and the fear that possessed her now stifled any desire to speak, on top of the fact that she had already sworn an oath not to talk anyways.

“Take what you need,” Habrunt said, his face grim. “Hurry!”

His words brought her out of her momentary confusion, and Si'Wren worked quickly to sort out only that which was needful. Perhaps she could come back and clean up the rest of the mess later.

When she was ready, she turned and dipped her head in a little nod as a signal to Habrunt.

Without a word, he turned and led the way. He took her across the big open compound near to the place where the long caravan of heavily laden beasts stood chewing their cud along one high stone wall, just inside the front gates of the sprawling compound.

He proceeded with Si'Wren still in tow, her small hand engulfed in his huge one as he approached to where a

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large number of onlookers was gathered idly around some unseen activity, and as he approached the outskirts of the crowd he barked commandingly, "Step aside!" and "Make way there!"

So speaking, Habrunt shouldered through their midst. When he reached the center of the crowd, he stood with Si'Wren before the old Physician, who was already busy at his work with the man with a toothache from the caravan.

Onlookers were conversing with one another in hushed voices from a respectful distance, still too fearful to speak directly to Habrunt or his young prisoner. When a slave met such a fate as Nelatha's, it was dangerous to risk even the slightest unintentional aggravation. Better to let well enough alone. None dared say so much as a single word to grim-looking Habrunt or the timid one he escorted.

Nelatha was dead. Habrunt, supremely miserable, hid his grief and pretended to ignore them all. When he looked once into Si'Wren's eyes, he found only continued fear and bewilderment. Well, he had at least done her this little kindness, and spared her the dread of her original sentence. Perhaps she did not, even now, realize what had been pronounced upon her head, before he interceded so recklessly.

That he had actually succeeded in sparing Si'Wren life and limb from punishment was beyond his wildest expectations, but now she must forever remain in constant danger of forgetting herself and speaking out of turn for the rest of her life. Had he really helped her, or only prolonged her suffering, before the final, inescapable, damning judgement? Why could he not have thought of a better alternative for Si'Wren?

"Your pardon, great Physician," he said, boldly stepping forward.

"Aye, what is it?" the white-bearded old Healer asked with a wry and good-natured impatience, scarcely bothering to look up from his work.

Many bystanders and well-wishers were already there, looking curiously on at his work as they stood idly by in whispering attendance at every hand.

"She has brought you the herbs you requested," said Habrunt.

"Good!" the Physician said, studying his patient critically. "Not a moment too soon."

The Physician took advantage of Habrunt's momentary distraction to set his mind afresh upon his work, for he was in a crucial part of the operation, and the patient would never be so ready as he was at that very moment.

Already in position, he reached in carefully, and clenched down, and seemed to set himself, and with a nod to those helping him to hold tightly onto the patient, he pulled hard with a pair of crude iron pliers or tongs, and yanked out a stinking, rotten, bloody molar from the jaw of the patient, whose gopher hole of a mouth emitted an agonized outcry. There ensued a veritable chorus of gasps and utterances from the crowd.

"There!" the Physician patted the shoulder of the sufferer, as expressions of relief could be heard from the onlookers on all sides. "Now, if I may have the herbs I was promised?"

The Physician turned to look directly at Habrunt.

Habrunt looked down at Si'Wren, and said, "Attend, little one!" in a mild pretense at impatience.

Taking her cue, Si'Wren raised her eyebrows quickly and nodded as she stepped forward and bowed wordlessly, holding out to the old doctor the proffered items which she had brought.

"Ah yes," said the Physician, nodding as he sniffed and tasted the various samples with evident satisfaction. "Whoever prepared these has done well!"

He turned and said to the dental patient, "You must rinse with this tea of borage leaf, or the grass that the cattle eat if you run out too soon. Perhaps also, a little dandelion. Blend it with a pinch of this barberry herb," he held out in his weathered palm a small leather pouch noosed at the neck with a cord of dried gut which Si'Wren had furnished him, "and flush the socket faithfully for seven days. It will stop the pain and bleeding almost immediately, and you will suffer little or no infection."

Besides the herbs he was dispensing, the verbal prescription which the sage Physician had just uttered was known to stop bleeding, and the anesthetic effect of mere words was already well-known to mothers the world over in the eternal pooh-poohing of their childrens' many little wounds of life.

The man from the caravan tried to grin and nod and bow his agonized thanks all at the same time while moving respectfully backwards to go and do as instructed. The other caravaners gathered close around him to escort him carefully away. One held up a wine flask, making obvious his intention to get his comrade drunk, which would afford obvious immediate relief but no doubt add to his later miseries when he should awaken with a biting hangover the next day.

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Seizing the opportunity, Habrunt leaned conspiratorially close, and when the Physician inclined his ear Habrunt whispered so low that none could hear what was said.

As he listened, the Physician's expression became, by turns, first shocked, then angry, and finally—resigned and infinitely saddened.

He turned his head once, to look critically at the two one-eyed boys waiting on the sidelines. If he felt anything, it no longer showed on his wise old face as he studied their identical physical maladies. Finally, he nodded, turning away from a still-whispering Habrunt and cutting off the other in mid-sentence.

He was an iron-willed, dutiful man who knew how to do what must be done when called upon to make decisions. It was not his business to judge the Master of this House if he, too, did what he saw fit. But he sighed, a heavy, tired gesture, as if all the evils of the world were a weight upon his shoulders alone.

Out of a vague sense of fairness, he decided to examine the smaller boy first, the gentle one who had been innocently victimized, while saving the bully, on Habrunt's judicious advice, until second.

The Physician called for the two boys with their missing single eyes to be brought to him. Then, while Si'Wren watched with passionate sympathy, the Physician prepared to go to work on them.

“Eh—” the Physician hesitated, nodding indistinctly in the direction of the two injured boys, “—which one did you say first?”

Habrunt made an end of niceties and reached forth an arm, simultaneously barring the one while favoring the other with one and the same gesture.

“Ah!” the Physician nodded.

The guilty boy tearfully begged to be helped first or at least at the same time, but was firmly commanded by his own father to wait his proper turn.

Waiting patiently until after the interruption was settled, the Physician beckoned gently to the innocent, smiling in a fatherly fashion.

“Come, child,” he beckoned with a kindly nod of his wise old head.

The little boy hesitated, and Habrunt nodded encouragingly.

“Trust him,” Habrunt advised the boy in a quiet but stern tone of voice. “He is a great Physician, who has been paid much money and come a long ways to treat you. You must obey his commands without question.”

Still somewhat fearfully, but more obediently now, the boy stepped forward and, at a slight gesture from the Physician, stood motionless before him.

“Face this way,” he smiled, crinkling his eyes. Then he said, “Now that way.” He regarded the boy with just a suggestion of teasing admonition, and said, “Hold still now.”

“That's it,” the physician smiled and nodded his approval again encouragingly, as he inspected carefully. “Aye, I see.”

The boy fairly trembled all over, and Si'Wren watched with the others, mourning the suffering of both boys and temporarily forgetting her own miseries.

The Physician had turned to rummaging in his kit bag, and now he pulled out a beautiful unglazed clay jar with dark-colored berry stains all over the rim and sides. The jar was stoppered with a cracked and discolored wooden cork.

It seemed only right and proper to the old Physician that the noble-born Master Rababull, no doubt put on the spot at times by the mischief of those beneath him, should be the proper court of final recourse, and in the Physician's view of things, what must be done must be done. Too bad about the gentle boy's suffering, but right was right, and the bully had received his just recompense.

“No, that's not it,” he said, frowning as he sniffed at the contents.

Although the Physician might secretly have wished for a fairer and less vindictive world, he could but observe that well had the gods fated Rababull to be Master.

Could even one of his servants have inflicted such drastic punishment, and have done it so impartially and without undue hesitation, as he had just done? The Physician sagely reflected that another could not have done it at all. Perhaps instead, the other fellow would have become too emotionally involved and done too much.

Or a man of more timid nature might have betrayed cowardice and chosen to talk it off haughtily and do nothing at all, thereby engendering a smoldering spirit of outrage and rebellion in his own subjects. If the master could not settle the matter to the adequate satisfaction of all, who could?

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But there was more to it than that. What Master Rababull had done was to make all fear him, and justly so. It was no doubt a telling reason as to why the man was still alive after so many hundreds of years in such a deceitful and vicious world.

Anyway, why question what was obviously the will of the gods? Even most fools knew better than to do that. He rummaged around some more in the bag.

“Ah!”

He pulled out a soft leather pouch as large as his gnarled hand, and measured some powder out into his palm. He looked up at the boy, seeming to estimate his diminutive size and stature visually, and then poured out a good deal more, peering down and studying the exactness of the amount with a frown as he openly took the time to gage it's weight against that of the young boy.

“A little wine is needful,” he said, raising his hoary, bewhiskered old head and looking around vaguely at no one in particular.

At the sight of the Physician waiting patiently with the powder already measured out into his sweaty palm and ready to be administered, Habrunt turned to one of his boys and clapped his hands sharply with a terse nod.

“Do not keep the great Physician waiting!” he admonished sternly. “Get white wine if you can, or red if you must.”

“Aye, Master Habrunt!”

The boy raced off at a dead run, presently to return staggering under the weight of one of the flasks meant for the party-goers.

The Physician took a small cup from his purse, dropped in the powder, and Habrunt assisted directly by taking over from the boy and pouring in the clear, fragrant fruit of the vine. Si'Wren watched as the powder was commingled to the stained brim with the crystal clear liquid, for the boy had brought white wine.

Then, in front of the trembling boy, the Physician solemnly uttered a few gravely-spoken nonsense syllables, and passed his free hand before him as he gazed deep into his one good eye, and put the cup into his grasp.

“Drink!” he smiled encouragingly, crinkling his eyes again in the most engaging and kindly manner, although it screwed up his whole face into a mass of hairy wrinkles. “Drink every drop, and praise the gods. It is all you have to do.”

The boy took it, held it up, and then began to drink. It was—in Si'Wren's knowledgeable estimation—possessed of an almost intolerably bitter taste, but the fine white wine would no doubt commute the bitterness with it's rare ethers. The boy gasped for air, and declared bluntly, “It burns in my stomach!”

“Finish it,” Habrunt urged firmly.

“Hut!” said the Physician, stopping the boy before he could obey.

The Physician took the cup from the boy, swirled it's contents expertly to stir up the remaining powder from the bottom, and reached it up to the child's lips as he soothingly breathed the words, “Drink quickly now!”

The boy gulped down the rest.

“Now—sit,” the Physician said, taking the cup from the boy's hands.

Obediently, the child tried to sit down, and would have fallen clear over backwards had his mother not anxiously enveloped him in her arms and ample bosom as she crouched quickly behind him.

In a shy, soft voice, the boy exclaimed breathlessly, “It's bitter!”

“Aye, it is, isn't it?” the Physician nodded. Then, staring deep into the boy's one good eye, the Physician said, “Look, deep, into my eyes...”

The boy seemed to fall into a swoon.

Without another word, the Physician took over from the boy's mother, and laid the unconscious boy out flat on the ground and began immediately to treat his ruined eye socket.

Habrunt quietly oversaw everything that the Physician was doing for as long as he could, the better to assist if needed, but as Slavemaster, he had many duties, and presently he was called away by a runner boy with yet another message from Master Rababull. Habrunt was a man of many responsibilities.

Before going, he turned to Si'Wren and leaned close to whisper into her ear, “Fear not, only keep silence lest any watching should find occasion to bring an accusation against you. If any should do so, true or not, remain silent and abide until I return, when I shall make judgement upon them.”

Then he turned and marched away without so much as a backward glance.

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Si'Wren watched him go for a moment, and then feigned utter unconcern for her Slavemaster as she resorted to watching the Physician again. None must realize how desperately she looked to Habrunt or cared for him now. For he had not only saved her life but had won her trust, and somewhere in all this was bound up her heart and soul as well. This she was anxious that none should learn of and mock.

At long last, finishing with his ministrations to the first boy's missing eye, the weary old Physician turned finally to the bad boy who had lost his own eye as punishment.

Eventually the Physician was done, and both boys were given over to the care of their mothers, and Si'Wren, having no mother or father, bowed low to the Physician after being dismissed by him, and decided to return to the ruined spice tent.

By this time the sun had just dropped below the horizon, and it was fast turning to dusk. The first of the party-goers had already arrived, and the celebration was already beginning.

Arriving at the spice tent, she stared at the unbelievable destruction and felt tears stream down her cheeks. Master Rababull had been virtually a god to her! She had worshipped the very ground he had walked on.

Fog drifted through the courtyard, transforming the torches in their fixed stanchions on the nearby walls, into glowing orbs like spirits, or like the moon above. Aye, the spirit of the moon was upon the land tonight, the spirit of madness. Gloomily, Si'Wren reflected that the celebrants were to be spared the sight of the slain young woman's body. Of course! That would spoil their fun. Such must never be even dreamed of. Si'Wren wiped ineffectually at her tears, smearing her wet cheeks. What should she do?

She stared at the wreckage of the spice tent, and wondered helplessly if she was expected to spend the entire night if necessary cleaning it up. No one had said anything about what was to be expected of her now. Should she abandon her work, or what?

Close by, she suddenly heard extremes of laughter. Abruptly she turned from the wrecked tent and walked toward the rear gate. When she arrived, she found it guarded by two brawny slaves standing beneath the torches of the closed and barred gate. They ignored her contemptuously, no doubt having already been informed of her evil belief in the Invisible God, and of her complicity in the destruction of the priceless green jade goddess.

She turned and walked back through the grounds toward the front, turning aside into the shadows whenever possible to avoid meeting others. The smells of cooking food came to her, and she realized that she had already missed her supper as hunger gnawed at her insides.

At the front gate, as she had anticipated, the guards were admitting the celebrants, under Slavemaster Habrunt's watchful eye. Habrunt seemed too busy to notice her. Did he, too, secretly despise her now? Si'Wren held back, until the guards were preoccupied with the arrival of yet another dignitary and his extended family, and when the attention of all seemed temporarily diverted, she walked forward quickly and slipped out of the front gates and into the wide path.

She turned sharply, and walked away from the direction of the nearby city, into the gathering darkness of the wilds. Cold fog enveloped her, and in what seemed like no time at all the torch light behind her was swallowed up in the swirling mists.

She walked on, oblivious of her surroundings, looking neither to the rear nor to the right or left. What did it matter if some foul beast should leap out and seize her in its jaws? It would be a blessed fate, compared to what she must face if she should return to the House of Rababull now.

She heard something behind her, and looking around anxiously, thought she saw a large shadow, as that of a man, following her, too far back to make it out for sure. Si'Wren's heart began pounding fearfully as she stared, eyes widening in fear.

Abruptly she turned, and began to walk quickly, looking for some place to turn off the road and hide. When she glanced back again, the figure was gone. Slowing, she stopped and stared behind her again, to see if it had been her imagination. Then her ears pricked, as she thought she heard the distant scrape of a sandal on the path.

She turned and began walking swiftly away from the House of Rababull, deeper and deeper into the night. Whenever she looked back, she saw and heard nothing. Was someone there?

"Hello?" she called out, looking back again.

But there was no answer.

Still staring behind her as she began to walk away, Si'Wren suddenly blundered straight into a tree, and screamed as two of the tree's branches seized hold of her.

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She struggled helplessly as she was held in a vise-like grip by a laughing young man, whose alcohol-laden breath caused her to choke and gag.

Another man, as brawny as the first, towered above her.

"I've caught me a night spirit!" laughed the man, holding onto her tenaciously.

"Make her give you a wish before you let her go," jested the second.

"She'll give us more than that, and no one the wiser," said the first in an evil, crafty tone of voice.

Si'Wren jerked instinctively to free herself from her attacker, and found her diminutive physical power to be as nothing compared to his godlike strength.

He spun her around, and she bit him in the hand.

"Ouch! You filthy whore!"

He slapped her, a stunning backhand to the cheek, and she felt her head jerked backward by the blow. The young man's foul spittle-laden breath assailed her, together with the stink of his alcoholic excesses.

"Help me!" Si'Wren shouted, knowing she was too far from the front gates to be heard now.

Her captor laughed, enjoying her fear.

Then she screamed out in hopelessness and despair, "Habrunt!!!"

"She calls her Slavemaster," said the one, gripping her tightly. "He favors her. You're going to die for sure, pretty one, after we've had our way with you."

"Oh God, please help me!!" Si'Wren screamed like a lost soul, sensing her doom upon her as supreme fear overcame her and she crumpled, sagging nervelessly in the man's irresistible grasp.

"Shut up!" he gritted tightly, striking her a series of stunning blows across the face delivered alternately with the open palm and the bony back of his hand.

"Aye, she must die alright," said the second. "Her very identity must be hid, lest Rababull's Slavemaster should find out. Hurry and let us be done quickly with her, before someone else comes along!"

"Wise words—spoken too late to do you any good!" suddenly declared a deep voice.

Si'Wren whirled her head around, and watched disbelieving as out of the shadows of the mists stepped the shadowy and indistinct figure of a powerfully built man with a golden bronze sword gleaming in his hand.

"Habrunt!" Si'Wren shrieked desperately as, reeling from the blows, she struggled anew and stared.

"We've got swords!" the first young man declared nervously and self-importantly, "and our fathers are high-born. You're a slave! You better run along home, before we decide to report you to your master."

Habrunt said nothing.

"The girl is not half as willing as the others," the second one said offensively.

"Aye, she's worthless, like you," the first one laughed contemptuously. "Here, see for yourself!" Still gripping Si'Wren by the upper arms, he suddenly flung her forward in the direction of Habrunt, so violently that she stumbled and fell to her knees before him.

"We didn't want her anyways," the second chipped in, emboldened by Habrunt's continued silence. "She's far too ugly."

Habrunt stepped forward until he had come just past Si'Wren's kneeling figure, with her head still downcast in shame, and then he halted again, standing protectively between Si'Wren and her two tormentors now.

"What is she to you, anyways?" said the first young man. He was already growing nervous because of Habrunt's refusal to reply. "Here," the young man said, dipping into his money satchel, "I'll pay you for her; twenty, no, thirty pieces of silver! You can keep her in the bargain. What's the matter with you? My money's as good as anyone else's! Go on, take it!"

Habrunt took another menacing step forward, as he slowly raised his gleaming sword.

"Take it!" the young man repeated, in a high voice. He waved his sword in the air in a series of menacing arcs, which Habrunt seemed not to notice. "Keep the girl and take all of it! What do you want of us?!"

"Aye! Leave us out of it! You'll be sorry for this! Our fathers—"

Habrunt's sword abruptly flashed in the night in a swift series of arcs, to the accompaniment of a succession of metallic clangs followed by several meaty whacks and the cut-off screams of the two young men.

There was no more sound for a moment, except for the sliding of a sword blade on the clothing of they who had been destroyed. Then she heard the sound of footsteps, as Habrunt turned back to her. In his right hand was the money pouch that had been offered to him, and in his other was his sword. He switched hands, and hurled the

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money pouch into the night. Far off the trail, Si'Wren heard the distant clink of the money when it landed. Their swords quickly followed, and Si'Wren heard the swish of grass as they landed unseen in the darkness.

She remained kneeling in despair, waiting for Habrunt to pronounce judgement upon her. Now what was to become of her, for her broken vow of silence?

Then she felt his hands touch her shoulders, so gently that the fear with which she was shaken was transformed into surprise and numbed disbelief.

"Little one," said Habrunt, his voice heavy but full of compassion. "Are you alright?"

"Oh Habrunt," Si'Wren lamented, her voice a whimper. "I have betrayed my vow of silence to the Invisible God! I am worthless, and now I shall be punished by the Master!"

But Habrunt knelt down beside her, and shook his head slowly.

"Not so," he said. "Come."

He helped her rise to her feet, and began leading her back towards the House compound.

"But I did!" she persisted, leaning on him for support as she walked, for she seemed to be hurt worse than she had first supposed. "In the very confession of my sin, I betray my vow of silence, my sworn oath given before the Invisible God, to you and Master Rababull!"

"Then stop talking," Habrunt said mildly, still leading her confidently through the night, as the moon cast its glow through the swirling mists.

"How can you say that?" Si'Wren said. Then she blurted out, "Have you no sense of right and wrong?"

"I am as good a keeper of the law as any," said Habrunt.

"Aye, and you slew those two evil men, who would have taken me upon their lusts, and cast me aside afterward as lifelessly as you have done unto them instead."

"Because they struck you without cause," Habrunt replied. "And also, lest they betray the truth of your broken vow of silence."

To Si'Wren, Habrunt's second remark seemed an astonishing thing to say.

"Then—" she hesitated in confusion, "you shall be as guilty as I! You must not do this thing."

"It is already done. If not for my foolishness, you had not taken such a vow in the first place."

"But—I did vow."

"Aye. Tell me this, little one; who shall speak of it when we return, seeing how you have taken this vow of silence?"

"I—" This time, Si'Wren could not think of what to say, so perplexing and marvelous were his words.

"Aye," Habrunt assented. "I am as guilty as you. But am I not Slavemaster of the House of Rababull? My word is final. Not even Master Rababull can overturn my decision, for behold, I have covered the sins of yourself, that by my own guilt you may be counted innocent before all. Who then shall gainsay me in this? The Invisible God? Aye, and may He ever be the right and true judge of all, more so than even the high and mighty noble Master Rababull. Methinks the Invisible One shall but praise me in the justice of what has transpired tonight."

Si'Wren listened mystified to all of this, and when she had heard all, she found that Habrunt's strange words eased her conscience, having such an effect upon her that she found herself wishing to be loosed from Master Rababull and bound to Habrunt instead. But to imagine such was rank foolishness, for Habrunt and all that he had or ever would have; did they not already belong to Master Rababull? One might as well wish for the moon.

Still reeling from the blows she had received, Si'Wren planted a misstep in his path as she staggered into Habrunt, and would have fallen if he had not caught her.

Without the slightest sign of visible effort, Habrunt dipped down and scooped her up into his arms, cradling her tenderly as he looked down into her beaten face.

His anger was gone now, and he was thinking about what must be said when he returned with her to the compound. Since he was not a talkative man in the first place, it would not seem out of character if he said nothing at all and let others do all the talking amongst themselves. That way, they could freely invent their own explanations to their hearts' content and might even think of a better answer than he could.

The two young men would be missed, but those who went a wandering so drunkenly into the wilds of the land as if to a fool's paradise would be said by many to deserve the sorry fate they had so evidently brought upon themselves. Even knowing the truth, Habrunt could readily agree to this.

He had checked them out when they had left earlier of their own accord, taking two of the travelling harlots

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from the caravan with them as playthings. Habrunt had thought poorly of the midnight excursion even then, before he had the slightest inkling that it was to eventually involve Si'Wren. However, the two young men were freeborn and of age, and it would have been rank insubordination for Habrunt to have uttered the slightest contradiction to their plans.

It was when Si'Wren had slipped out, that he had commanded a nearby guard to take over, so he could follow her.

An expert tracker, Habrunt had been alert enough to notice the trail signs and discovered the two hapless slave girls which the two young men had taken with them, a short distance from the gates. There in the dark, by the colorless light of a full moon obscured by heavy night mists, Habrunt had located the remains of the two unfortunate harlots from the caravan.

He almost wished he hadn't, because of what he found.

The women had evidently been abused and mistreated most evilly, as by devils, and then murdered and discarded like playthings to be tossed into the bushes by the wayside. For Habrunt, the manner of their deaths was even now something to live on in his nightmares.

Since their money and the valuable swords they had brought were unlikely to be found and would be noticed to be missing, the deaths of the two young men could easily be credited to bandits. Habrunt held his own sword awkwardly as he cradled Si'Wren in his arms.

It was his own absence, and the badly beaten physical condition of Si'Wren, which must somehow endure the gainsayings of others, and which concerned him the most now. Let them talk on, and wonder, and dream but once of a fitting explanation according to their own dim lights, and by their own mouths would they deceive themselves.

Chapter Three—The Light of God

When Si'Wren opened her eyes, she realized that it was night time. She lay on a low wooden sleeping rack, and before her was the cobblestone fire pit, the yellow flames of which warmed and illuminated the slave quarters, a long low bungalow of rough-hewn cypress beams.

Deliriously, she half-raised her aching head and took in her surroundings. She realized, looking unsteadily around in the semi-darkness, that she was alone, and she could hear the distant sounds of celebration emanating from the Master's House.

Her head was swimming and there was a terrible pain in it.

The lilting sing-song sounds of the musicians drifted across the compound and teased at her ears, lulling her somnambulantly to the accompaniment of the rhythmic chi-chi-ching-ching of finger cymbals, and the reedy reeee-eeee-eeee-ree-ree-rooo-rooo-roo-oooooooooooo of the wood pipes.

Shame filled her soul as she remembered the death of Nelatha, and the terrible danger that had befallen her later after dark, when she had narrowly escaped after wandering foolishly out into the wilds all alone when Habrunt had come suddenly and unexpectedly to rescue her from the evil ministrations of the two evil men he had slain.

But for Habrunt she would surely have suffered a terrible fate at their hands.

Now, only now, did Si'Wren fully and truly understand what Habrunt had risked to slay the sons of the noblemen in favor of one so lowly as she. Should Master Rababull ever find out the truth, his vengeance upon both herself and Habrunt would be fearsome and terrible.

At thought of this, Si'Wren's remorse was compounded ten-fold by the bitter memories of the many fond smiles and cheery looks which Master Rababull had so often bestowed upon her from earliest memory.

Habrunt had shown his concern for her safety this night, but the memory of earlier, when she had seen his terrible face and felt of his iron grip in her hair, doing his utmost to convince Master Rababull that he had not the slightest concern for Si'Wren's life, would not leave her now, and tears streaked her cheeks as she shut her eyes in silent anguish.

Downwind from the House, she could smell the wonderful scents of the Master's best ceremonial incense mingled with the pungence of tobacco, the tang of wine, and the huge feast with its jasmine tea, roasted melons stuffed with baked vegetables and breadstuffs, sweet seed cakes, sugar-spices, candies, and honeyed foods.

Her head was woozy from the beating. Her bruised face seemed numb to the touch, wherever she chanced to touch be it ever so delicately. Raising her fingertips to her puffed lips, she felt a dried crust of blood all around her

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nose and mouth and down the side of her upper lip, chin, and throat. The inside of her mouth felt scummy. She had an uncontrollable thirst, but found nothing to drink.

Then, a noise and a dark silhouette at the entrance to the bungalow caused her to look up in unconscious renewed terror. She felt her eyes widen, and then she saw Habrunt standing there, his downcast countenance and the gleam of his bulging muscles appearing in the flickering uncertain firelight like an apparition as the curtain was drawn back by his large hand. In his other hand was a fire-hardened clay cup.

She sensed his eyes upon her, and looked up with the same open-faced showing of subservience and unthinking trust with which she had always looked to him before. Then her eyes fell, and she became as a downcast wretch, a hag before her time, weeping uncontrollably on the dirty cot before his compassionately kneeling figure.

Tears of shame fell from her closed eyelids, but she felt surprise as she felt Habrunt's strong hand placed gently upon her shoulder, and with his other hand, he held up the clay cup.

From the odor of it, she dimly perceived that it was simple herbal tea, and not a powerful potion such as she had delivered to the Physician earlier.

He placed it gently to her lips. From the feel of it's even warmth, she sensed that he had warmed it a little, though not enough to be too much for her. She let it's tasteless liquid slip through her feverish lips, and could not discern it, either as warmth nor coolness. It was neither sweet nor sour, and faintly but not unpleasantly bitter.

When she'd had a little, he removed the cup from her lips and set it down on the earthen floor, already forgotten in the dark shadows beneath the cot.

He remained frozen for a moment in the stillness of the deserted bungalow. She thought he must be angry at her, and deservedly so, but she saw no wrath in the quiet look of compassion with which he studied her. His eyes were steady and calm.

"Fear not, little one," said Habrunt, his voice a deep, soft reassurance to her. "No one shall pluck thee from my hand."

At this, her eyes lifted up to his in surprise, and she saw his forefinger raised vertically against his pursed lips, beneath cautiously furrowed masculine eyebrows, the universal gesture for silence and secret comradeship.

He leaned forward towards her, and bent down, and kissed her gently on the forehead.

Eyelids shutting reflexively, she tingled all over, from her aching head to her tiny feet, at the soft touch of his lips. She quivered all inside at the furriness of his thick beard, and the brush of his long wavy locks where they fell from beneath his leather headband against her numbed face.

He took out a clean cloth and formed it into a cup-shape in one hand, and poured out a little tea onto it, letting it soak in. Then, he carefully began ever so gently wiping away the congealed saliva and dried blood from her face, her lips, her chin, and her throat. After that, he untied a small clay bottle from his belt, refolded the dampened cloth to a clean side, and unstopped the little bottle to tilt it's mouth over the cloth, and applied some of it's contents thereon.

Again, he wiped her entire face and forehead, her throat, up around her ears, and across the back of her neck. His touch was gentle all over her head and neck, as he anointed the semi-conscious girl with a thin, soothing layer of purest olive oil.

He surveyed her face again, noting once more, with the same inner, grim satisfaction as before, that she had suffered no apparent lasting injury despite much swelling and bruises. He felt small solace in this, but as it was yet within his power, he would surely command whatever he might in her behalf.

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard approaching the entrance from outside, and she sensed him rise in the flickering shadows and step to one side of the door. There he stood tall and motionless before her, waiting for the footsteps to carry past. The approaching footsteps were accompanied by an admixture of slurred male and female voices, perhaps four people in all.

Their unseen progress could be followed by the changing aspects of the snatches and sudden outbursts of laughter to which they resorted in their senseless and continuous amusement at everything around them, including themselves.

The golden gleam of Habrunt's bronze sword flashed before Si'Wren's eyes, making her catch her breath in fear.

Some of their words could be indistinctly made out, and Habrunt realized that the men were from the nearby

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city, talking with pent-up anticipation of having a good time with a couple of lush young girls from the caravan, whom they were taking to a nearby garden gazebo, a flimsy trellis of bamboo, stone, and clinging green vines.

Habrunt scowled. Still more of Rababull's 'party favors', no doubt. Four had already died this night, besides Nelatha, and another savagely beaten. What would be the tally by dawn's light?

As their noisome prittle-prattle faded into the distance, Habrunt felt the danger pass. He turned away from Si'Wren, and stepped out into the night without another word, gone with such stealth that he slipped away as silently as he had come.

She shivered, beginning to tremble feverishly all over.

The music from the House rose to a faster and louder tempo as riotous laughter and the excited shrieks of women was accompanied by the generally raucous bellowing of many foolishly happy male voices. Then the voices died down a bit, and the music picked up a thumping tempo of heavy drum beats. The scent of the incense, exotic and strange, came to Si'Wren again, wafted through the drifting mists in the chill night air.

Chills racked her. The cold of night was at her back, and its embrace was beginning to seize her with shivers and cramps. But the flickering fire was before her still, accompanied by the emotional warmth of the memory of Habrunt's kiss upon her forehead.

She lifted herself up until she was propped on one elbow, and tried to ignore her chills as she basked in the velvety, mesmerizing warmth and stared long into the glowing fire pit. She had a fever, and was too full of wonder at the behavior of Habrunt to go back to sleep. In the background, the rhythmical chi-chi-ching and reedy reeee-reeeee-reeeee of the music lulled her senses, as her eyes became half-lidded.

Suddenly, as she watched the flickering flames, they began to change shape before her delirious eyes, and became—fiery dancing girls.

Eerily tall, the tireless shapes of the dancing girls pranced and danced and jumped and leaped to the distant music from Master Rababull's House. They shifted and changed positions with each other again and again and yet again, as around and around them jumped up the black shadows of demons, chasing the breathlessly fast fiery dancing girls.

The demons were fast, but the thin, leaping, fiery dancing girls were swifter than lightning, impossibly fast and elusive, so much so that the persistent demons could not catch even one of the fire girls, who kept disappearing miraculously out of their clutches and slipping through their clutching black claws as easily as a collection of brilliant feminine fire wraiths.

The yellow firelight flashed in brilliance from the eerily thin leaping flame figures, and suddenly, Si'Wren became one of them.

As they danced, she danced, and as they leaped, she leaped with them, in an entrancingly intricate pattern of leaps and prances, as the light of the Invisible God shined from within herself to light the way for her tiny dancing feet.

All around her the demons whirled and chased, ever seeking to carry her away from the others, and away from the holy light of the Invisible God, but she, like the fiery dancing girls, could not be caught by them for all of their efforts, for that Perfect Light was like a living fire within Si'Wren.

The smell of the fire's smoke reached her once, and she realized that the demons were tormented by the fiery light of the eerily beautiful dancing girls, for she smelled the smoke of their torment, and as she lay staring unblinkingly at the fire, she danced endlessly into the darkness of the night.

* * *

When she awoke again, it was to the morning sounds of the sleeping and hung-over alike, sighing and snoring all around her in the cypress bungalow, and to renewed thirst, chills, and constant tormented shivering from the pronounced effects of the fever.

There was an aching in her beaten head and face, and a curious, inexplicable emotional void in her soul where once her long-fervent love of her Master Rababull had long flourished eternal.

Soon the bungalow's occupants had all risen. Tired and hung over from all their revellings of the night before, they ignored her. It was Master Rababull's custom to get the slaves as drunk as they could possibly manage and exclusively on red wine, but not in the House with his honored guests, so that by their hangovers they might not desire the fancies of a freeman with quite the same vigor in times to come. Their lusts were gone from them now, and they all went through their daily preparations for a day's work in the Master's fields in a curious pinch-faced,

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silent expression of unaccustomed suffering, their heads aching miserably as they shuffled out without so much as a single solitary civil word from the lot of them.

None dared speak to Si'Wren, in spite of her worse suffering than theirs. What she had done was taboo. Selling idols was an important means to gaining much gold. What she had done was tantamount to the symbolic ruination of the very economy and foundation of the entire House of Rababull, and moreover, an overt rejection of the very gods themselves.

The unknown few that might have dared befriend her were no doubt too afraid of the others, and especially of Master Rababull himself. Had they even desired to do so, which she suspected none did, not a one dared show sympathy even by so much as the merest wink of an eye.

Si'Wren felt her heart and soul wrenched by the realization that because of what she stood guilty of she was henceforth to be counted by all others as an utter and complete outcast, a living abomination even amongst her own kind—lowly slaves all.

Many hated her, but dared not show that either, lest Slavemaster Habrunt should learn of it somehow and make his displeasure known to them instead. For that, Si'Wren was doubly-taboo. Besides all of this, she would not have dared to give the slightest verbal reply to any of them anyway.

She spent the day in a lethargic state of abject misery, feeling as if her head would split open from aching, an agony which she would have readily traded places with the slaves for their pains instead, as they went out suffering visibly and openly from being so obviously hung-over.

The old slave-woman, L'acoci, a toothless, gray-haired scarecrow of a crone, too old and decrepit to do much useful work out-of-doors anymore, had been instructed by Habrunt to make use of herself and be a nursemaid to Si'Wren. With a lifetime of experience to draw upon, L'acoci gave Si'Wren a tea poultice to sooth her bruises, and some rich broth skimmed from the vegetable stew to strengthen her.

Throughout the afternoon, Si'Wren continued to suffer from her beating and the fever. L'acoci was kept busy at the simmering stew pot for the sake of the other slaves. They were due to come in from the fields just as dusk dimmed into night, and the old crone did not appear to take especial notice of Si'Wren's physical distress.

But when Si'Wren finally began to moan in pain, at long last L'acoci deigned to hear her cries as the old hag came over to her and took her firmly by the shoulders, whispering urgently to her to be silent and lie still.

She could not. The rejection by Master Rababull, the slaying of Nelatha, the humiliation, and the beating all seemed increasingly overwhelming to her. Such torment and emotional anguish as she had never known filled her being, so real and so indomitable. She could not will it away. She could not face up to it. She could not escape it nor answer it.

Then, suddenly, Habrunt was there, momentarily putting aside his many responsibilities, kneeling beside her with a clay cup of herb tea in his large hand as his other hand gently supported her head.

He spoke to her soft words of comfort, and somehow the unwavering look in his eyes and the warmth of the beverage offered by his very own hand filled her with such a sense of reassurance that it seemed to suffuse her very soul with an awareness that without Habrunt, she should surely have known damnation.

After that, he came daily, sometimes in the morning and again in the late afternoon. That Habrunt grieved for her suffering was no secret, although what he ever thought of anything was purely his own affair. Moreover, he came boldly, openly, letting all see that he was Habrunt the Slavemaster, and the servant of but one man.

If the Master of the House was aware of any of this, yet did Habrunt brave the danger willingly enough, apparently heedless if Master Rababull should experience displeasure.

But Master Rababull, although fully aware of Habrunt's behavior because of the many tattletales he listened to, found it expedient to consider the matter settled, and his Slavemaster too useful to chastise for so light an infringement. Instead, Master Rababull pretended that it was so unimportant as to be beneath either his notice or his dignity. Had he not graciously spared Si'Wren's very life? Was she not then worthy to be restored meekly to a useful, if lower, status in the House, her social ostracism as a total outcast notwithstanding?

Master Rababull's only publicly announced edict, an iron one, was that Si'Wren must never again work in the spice tent. It was an honor she no longer deserved. Habrunt never openly showed the slightest affection to Si'Wren, but ministered to her with stoic mein. Whenever he came, he commanded the ever-present runner boys to wait outside. Then he would enter in and give her tea and broth at his own hand. When Si'Wren tried to whisper secretly to him once, his eyes widened in alarm and he immediately put his hand firmly over her mouth and shook

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his head and frowned in an urgent but barely perceptible negative.

Then after each visit, he would depart again after speaking scarcely a word, and that only to L'acoci.

In the face of such scandalous activity, none dared bring rebuke against Si'Wren before Master Rababull, lest they incur in turn the thinly veiled wrath of Habrunt in his official capacity as Slavemaster of the House. Habrunt was careful in all of this to make certain, with every opportunity, that all saw his total devotion and unfailing allegiance to Master Rababull.

Thus, mercifully, there were no complaints against Si'Wren, and she did not suffer nearly as much as she might otherwise have done.

* * *

Si'Wren chewed her food, as she pretended not to notice the other slaves filing out of doors to their day's labor in the fields. They in turn shunned her company, for she was the despised idol-breaker, in spite of the well-known fact that it had been Nelatha who had taken the actual blame for this.

For, unlike the one-eyed boy who had bullied his one-eyed victim, Si'Wren had committed no mere worldly crime. No, not she. Si'Wren had done much worse than that.

She had broken faith.

She had shown her belief in the Invisible God, the only forbidden deity in a world of visible and valuable idols. She was forever an outcast, the lowest of the low. She was different, evil, taboo.

Each of the two one-eyed boys was still permitted to speak and converse naturally with others. Not she. No, she was somehow subhuman to them now, and it was only fitting that she should never speak again, but be as some dumb animal instead.

Seeing this, she had abandoned the idea of ever trying, knowing it was useless.

* * *

Harvest time had come.

Slavemaster Habrunt was compelled to attend to his duties first and foremost, and so could not visit Si'Wren as frequently as he had done at the first. He had commanded L'acoci to care for Si'Wren with all diligence. No longer dared he come so often, lest the Master take notice and be moved to great displeasure, and perhaps in the end decree some worse punishment for Si'Wren to be rid of her once and for all.

L'acoci was under instructions to bring Habrunt word again when Si'Wren was feeling better, that he might come and personally escort her to her newly appointed place of labor. L'acoci had informed her that she would be working in the Master's fields; why else, adaged an observant L'acoci, would Si'Wren have been bedded down to recover from her injuries in the bungalow of the field laborers?

Until then, Habrunt had no further, legitimate excuse to come and seek after Si'Wren's welfare. How she longed to see his face again!

L'acoci was treating Si'Wren with borage and red clover blossom tea, together with dandelion, which was quite agreeable and most healing to her. Yesterday morning, L'acoci had smiled at her and announced that today Si'Wren might leave her sickbed at long last. Together with L'acoci, Si'Wren had gone to the stream where the women all gathered to wash clothes, to bathe and wash herself under L'acoci's fiercely protective guardianship, lest any of the other women or their children molest the wretched, defenseless outcast of a girl, so none dared.

Then, after she had first fed the other field slaves in the cypress bungalow their dinner, L'acoci had gone to tell Habrunt that night of the progress Si'Wren had been making in her recovery. L'acoci then returned and, with a twinkle in her eyes, informed Si'Wren of what she had done. Knowledge of this event had filled Si'Wren with such a perplexity as to what would become of her that she could hardly go to sleep that night. All she could think of was Habrunt and what he would say when he came for her in the morning.

Sure enough, as soon as Habrunt had a chance to make his morning rounds to see that the affairs of the Master's Household were all in order for the day and that the slaves were all well and truly at their duties, or that the inevitable one or two dropouts had given him sufficient excuse and been temporarily reassigned one way or another to easier work, he came personally for Si'Wren.

"Well, little one, are you ready?" Habrunt spoke to her in his deep, gentle voice, as he stood in the doorway with a stern look on his formidable features, and secretly gave her a quick wink. He folded his muscular, corded forearms across his hairy chest and presented an exceeding handsome figure with his long wavy locks held back by the plain leather headband, and his unadorned but carefully trimmed beard. He looked rugged and formidable,

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despite his beaming countenance.

Inwardly pleased at the way he had winked at her with no one else the wiser, Si'Wren bowed low, then rose to her full, diminutive stature and nodded to him in mute obedience.

“What good are words anyway, eh?” he said, in a not-unkindly fashion. “Come, then, little one.”

Habrunt's eyes sparkled as he regarded her, for when she had bowed, her dark hair, which hung nearly to the waist in back, had fallen gloriously across her shoulders in dark shining splendor.

He stepped outside, and held the tent flap considerately for her as he waited for her to follow.

Habrunt's countenance was like lightning, as his eyes which seemed ever to smile upon Si'Wren, somehow managed to appear so fierce unto all others as to strike terror into their hearts, be they of a spiteful mein or no, and all of this with but one and the same expression of his stony features.

When she was ready, he started out at a deliberately slow pace to enable her to keep up easily and follow dutifully close behind him. As they neared the fields, he could tell from glancing back at her once that, weakened from her long illness, she was already badly winded merely from the walk.

He brought her to Geth, the short, stout old Fieldmaster, Geth of balding head, all white of hair and long-fringed beard, with a wrinkled old face that had seen more summers in the fields than the rocks themselves, for all Si'Wren knew.

Across the windswept waves of undulating grain, interspersed with a few weeds and brush, the harvesters worked steadily, too far to clearly discern their bowed and sweaty faces.

Clasping hands, Habrunt greeted Geth with a man's greeting, and accepted the offer of a drink from the water skin. Si'Wren respectfully declined to do likewise.

After an habitual inquiry as to the progress of the harvest, Habrunt said to the old Fieldmaster, “This is Si'Wren, of the spice tent. She had the misfortune to be held accountable for the very stones that come from the ground as well as the herbs she was so skilled at grinding, and found wanting by the Master. She is sworn to a vow of silence, and now she is to become a field worker.”

Geth, as aware of events as anybody, nodded his shrewd understanding, frowning with a face like old leather.

“Always use more help during the harvest,” he said, characteristically sparse of words. One's very breath, so Si'Wren seemed to gather, was the better to be employed in more productive pursuits.

“Good,” said Habrunt. “See thou to it, and to her health as well. Methinks she was attacked by a madman during the last full moon and has been some time in the recovery. Now that she is nearly well again, the good Master would see some recompense at her own hand. She is still of tender years, and as yet infirm from her days of recovery. The House of Rababull would be greatly displeased, if she should be worked too hard, and fall ill again before full repayment has been made to the Master for her foolishness.”

Habrunt leaned forward significantly at this point, his menacing manner quite obvious.

“Do you get my meaning, Geth?”

Geth nodded, squinting to show that he was fully aware of Habrunt's true wishes and was of no mind to make bones to dry in the sun about it.

“Aye,” said Geth. He turned to Si'Wren with a wry look, appraising her carefully and noting her slack posture. “So she is ready for the harvest, is she? From the look of her, your pretty new field hand has many good years in her yet, but just between the two of us, Slavemaster, quite frankly; she looks tired out already.”

At this, Habrunt reached down and clenched his right hand around a fistful of grain stalks, and uprooted the clump up by the roots. Then he looked at old Geth pointedly.

“This little one is not half as tired as you shall become, if you do not plant your words as carefully as your crops. If I say she is ready, she is. Give her tools, water, and provender, and spare your heavy hand when your eye would mark her shortcomings. Put her over by herself, and keep a proper shepherd's watch on her. Any good shepherd boy knows his sheep by name. Behold, I have brought you Si'Wren! If she so much as lifts a finger to her work, tally the ledger for a full day's output and see that the others make it up to you, until she can carry her own. See also that there is peace kept in your fields, lest another mightier than thou shouldst come and replace you, the better to set all in proper order again.”

Habrunt stood immobile, a handful of grain still clenched tightly in his fist as he confronted old Geth with a hard look as the other quickly nodded.

Properly abashed, the Fieldmaster bowed low as he intoned, as ceremoniously as to the finest idol, “Thy

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words are gracious and learned, Slavemaster. All shall be as you have spoken.”

Habrunt kept his eyes hard upon Geth for a moment, and finally nodded, apparently satisfied.

“Good!” he said loudly and pointedly to Geth.

Then he raised his fistful of grain and regarded it with equal levity, before turning to Si'Wren. He held out the grain to her. Regarding it dumbly for a moment, Si'Wren saw him nod encouragement to her, and she took the clump of grain together with the clinging dirt and roots from his hand.

“Go with him, little one,” he said, in a soft and kindly voice. Then, turning suddenly on Geth, he tilted his head back and declared, “Geth, does she not come to you with grain already to hand? Take it, and be satisfied. Behold, I, Habrunt, Slavemaster of the House of Rababull, have spoken.”

This was intended purely and solely for Geth's wise old ears, and had been formally pronounced to show that Habrunt was in dire earnest, and would be greatly displeased if further contradicted.

Then he turned brusquely on his heel and strode off to go and make his rounds.

As Habrunt departed steadily through the gently waving fields, Geth hefted a large, ungainly scythe in one hand, and turned almost timidly to Si'Wren.

“Come,” he said.

Si'Wren looked up with fearful eyes at his weathered old countenance.

Geth regarded her queerly, as if he had never seen her before, and then repeated more quietly to her, “Come girl,” this time with a more reassuring nod.

He crinkled his face in an unaccustomed smile, and tilted his head as he nodded unpracticed encouragement to her. For as Fieldmaster, he was accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed without question, and greatly unused was he to meting out such pampering as he had been gravely challenged by Habrunt to bestow so freely upon this shy one.

Meekly, she followed him in total silence.

“You must not be afraid,” Geth said, leading the way. She followed him over a low hillock to where a clump of trees grew at the edge of a nearby field. Beyond the knoll, a peaceful stream meandered through.

The low mound of the hill blocked from sight a direct view of the other field hands, and their view of the stream was also obstructed, neither could they see the place in the field where Geth had decided that Si'Wren might work alone and unmolested. That place being closer to the compound than the area where the other laborers were gathered, Si'Wren hoped that this would make her safer from attack by any of the countless roaming, rogue men of the land.

“Fear not. Am I not sworn to defend you?” reassured old Geth, with an unaccustomed grimace of a smile. “You will be perfectly safe here.”

Si'Wren stood silent, looking up at him as she awaited his instructions.

Geth had not brought her to this particular place by sheer happenstance. If he was to successfully accomplish what Habrunt had so gravely commanded, it would be easier if the other slaves did not have the opportunity to judge for themselves whether Si'Wren had produced a proper day's work in the fields or not. For Geth to permit them to see her harvest so little, regardless of her weakened physical state, would produce much griping in their ranks. This way, what they did not know would not matter to them.

Holding out to Si'Wren the large, heavy scythe, he bade her grasp it. She took hold of it, and could not help it when the heavy blade tilted down and banged on the ground after he let go. Then he stepped behind her and reached around from both sides, took her tiny hands in his gnarled old ones, and showed her the precise motion of how to swing it in a rhythmical motion that seemed to roll as naturally as the tips of the waving grain stalks, over and over again. Geth took her through it very slowly at first, then at a more normal pace with a smooth, repetitious motion that was very easy to follow once she got the proper swing of it.

Although his breath was close upon her from behind, Si'Wren felt no danger from such close contact with Geth, as he made no attempt whatsoever to corrupt his handling of her, but only wanted to show her how to reap. Geth's kindly old soul was visibly harmless, although his heart was evidently as tough as his gnarled fingers, easily hard enough to meet the world head-to-head on its own terms. But the memory of Habrunt's stern warnings left his behavior so impeccably holy as to rival the sanctity of the dumb idols themselves.

He was an expert reaper, and when he finally thought that she must have caught on properly to the idea, he released her. She wobbled, staggered, and tumbled down in a heap in the tall stalks of grain. Geth stood looking

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down at her in consternation for a moment, and then without so much as a by-your-leave, he bent down and scooped her up in his arms, and carried her to the shade of a nearby tree where he gently set her down.

She lay gasping for breath with an extremely drawn, exhausted look on her face.

“Well,” Geth said, a smile transforming his harsh features, “ye have heard what Slavemaster Habrunt commanded. A full day's work have I just had of you, and I shall tally the ledger so.”

Then, in a much lower voice, with a quick look around of his shifty eyes, he said to her further, “Sit. Eat; drink! Stay and rest under the shade of this blessed tree, while I go and get the proper measure due to your account from the unwilling labors of those slackers over yonder. Behold I, Geth, Fieldmaster of the House of Rababull, have also spoken.”

So saying, with a crinkle of his eyes at the wry wittiness of his own mock-pomposity, he held out to her a large coarse-woven drawstring pouch of food, which was his own portion and a full man's share at that, and when she had accepted it from him he smiled at her again and departed. She watched him cross the field with long sure strides which soon took him away across the low hillock until he was out of sight, as he went off to supervise the others.

She was so exhausted already! Must she swing this impossibly heavy scythe day-in and day-out for the rest of her life, as reward for her worship of the true Invisible God? The thought was a daunting one.

Careful not to spill any of the provender which Geth had given her, she unfolded and regarded it contemplatively. All must have food, and now he had none. Evidently, he knew where to get more for himself. Was he going to get his food by taking it from someone else, perhaps from the worst 'slackers' among them, and enjoy their additional grumbling at such added insult all the more while they unknowingly made up for her lack of production? If so, she could do nothing about it.

Suddenly, she started as his coarse voice called out unexpectedly across the field to her, “Si'Wren!”

Si'Wren looked up anxiously, as she saw his head and shoulders reappear over the top of the small hill, peering narrowly across the crest at her. Too weak to stand, she dipped her head once quickly to show her compliance, and regarded Geth attentively to see what he wanted.

“Have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? One thing more is needful, and then I shall leave you be for awhile. If you see any wild animal,” said Geth, “scream very loudly, and I will come with my field hands and their sharp sickles, and cut it in pieces.”

Eyes widening in sudden alarm, Si'Wren nodded quickly, and bowed low in acknowledgement. Suppose they did not come in time? Better to endure the insults of the others than that. And how should she dare to scream, seeing she had taken a vow of silence, lest she dishonor her Invisible God, and die for it too? Oh, would that he had not gone off and left her so all alone like this out in the open!

She made as if to wave him back, but Geth had already turned away again, and shyly she sat watching with deepest regret as the back of the friendly old Fieldmaster's bald white-fringed head slowly disappeared over the crest of the low hill.

Si'Wren sat under the shade tree in the midst of what little fallen grain Geth had harvested in showing her how to reap with the scythe, her eyes round with fear as she thought of all the great and truly savage beasts that were known to stalk this wild land. She stood and looked around fearfully, but all seemed quiet and peaceful enough. Several birds flitted across the field, and a pair of jet black ravens could be seen gliding in the distance.

Moving with slow, unsteady progress, she walked up the gentle slope to the top of the low hill. There, she craned her neck as she shifted her position several steps over, and found a slightly elevated place to stand, peering over the tops of the gently undulating field of grain at the others. Should she even dare to scream, would they arrive in time if a wild beast should suddenly try to savage her?

She turned her head, taking in the land on all sides, and decided that if she remained alert enough, perhaps she would have just enough time to flee and so thereby possibly safeguard her life, should anything try to come and get her.

Thinking better of it again, she found renewed appreciation for her compulsory separation from the others, the better to escape their sullen, silent persecutions. To be amidst them, and not work, would be to invoke their supreme contempt and irritation, and leave her feeling so low as to wish she were already dead, and that on top of her status as the lowest of the low for her reputation as an idol-breaker.

Si'Wren considered all, and felt renewed remorse at what terrible fate had befallen her. As long as she could

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remember, Si'Wren had always been a hard worker, and a willing one too. Just like Nelatha, whose comforting, characteristic voice she missed so desperately.

But now she was to be in constant fear for her life, alone in the world, and alone among men. All by herself now, she peered expressionlessly across the wild landscape, as the wind blew strands of dark hair across her eyes, and began weeping for fear and loneliness.

Her eyes, blurred by tears, swept the nearby foliage, seeking anything that moved. Was not a swift hunting beast's charge always a surprise to the victim? Who could resist such an advance? Or how could such a one as she manage to resist even so loathsome and demeaning a danger as the attack of a mere pack of scavenger dogs, with their many snapping jaws? What of the giant dire wolves, or the huge roaming bears, and fierce prowling wild cats, and other even more unspeakable monsters such as she might not even dream of? She remembered the trophies of the hunters, and such were the stuff of nightmares, and she found that her harvest field had become a place of terror.

She wiped at her tears, and looked down at the place where the sickle had fallen. She walked down the slope and stood over the ungainly reaper's scythe, fighting back the demons of the unknown. Finally, quelling her terrors somehow, she knitted her brow as she stooped to kneel down beside the scythe. Then, with exceeding care, she touched her finger lightly to the feather's edge of the blade in all of its wicked keenness. Sniffing and wiping ineffectually at her face with the back of her forearm, she examined the sharp scythe, and considered how pitiful and inept a fighter she must portray to any animal.

Was she not but a girl, scarcely one-fourth the size of a good fighting man and as nothing to one of the human giants? Could she make as ready use of whatever came to hand, or of her own muscles if necessary, to settle an argument as brave Habrunt might do? Thinking unhappily on all of this, she felt disconsolate to such a degree as never before in her short life. Turning from the heavy scythe, she decided to go and seek relief in the shade of the trees overhanging the dank and shadowy banks of the wide, peaceful stream.

The gurgling of the water over heavy stones partially blocking a narrows downstream was a pleasant sound to her ears. The backup of water from a beaver dam had created a wide pond in front of her.

As Si'Wren watched, a huge dragonfly, easily as large as both of her outstretched hands together, flitted fast and low over the glassy surface of the water. Out in the middle of the tranquil water was a beaver almost as large as herself, which could be glimpsed moving smoothly across the surface and leaving a thin wake of vee lines from the tip of its button nose.

She sat down on the grass, legs curled beneath her skirts, and stared unseeingly down at the surface of the pond where scooter bugs jinked across the placid water by rowing with their two long oars of legs. Green plant scum floated in the nearby bullrushes, where pussy willows, cattails, saw grass, and tall hollow reeds could be seen swaying as they rustled gently in the wind.

What she thought to have been a submerged rock came to life suddenly, startling her as a giant catfish half the size of the beaver moved sluggishly to deeper water in a swirl of disturbed sediment.

She did not realize at first that she had visitors. Not, that is, until a long double line of armed men became progressively visible as their leader emerged from a far clump of trees and led them on a forced march that took them steadily and silently through the field beyond the far banks.

As they began passing through the field of waving grain on the opposite side of the pond, she cowered instinctively and ducked down low behind a clump of bushes to watch anxiously as they came into view, marching briskly two-by-two, every one of them in perfect lock-step, moving silently as one with only the distant sound of their tromping sandals to mark their passage.

They carried swords or spears in their right hands, and on their left arms they had great heavy shields, and helmets on their heads. So many fierce-looking beards. She could tell that they were not soldiers of the Emperor of this land, or they would have had standard bearers, and other elaborate devices, including uniform hammer-beaten metal shields, all alike with the Emperor's great seal of the sun god embossed thereon.

Nevertheless, it was a formidable force, at least a hundred and fifty men-at-arms.

She remained in hiding, peering narrowly through the grass at the side of a gray boulder. The rock of the boulder was actually minutely white and black flecked with her eyes so close to it. Totally obscured from view, she watched them march past her position, as silent as the wind, and breathed a pent-up sigh of relief as their steadily marching ranks slowly disappeared from view across the far field, moving in an upstream direction.

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When they had gone, she looked anxiously in the direction whence they had come, watching to see if more might be forthcoming. When none was, she finally returned to where the food pouch had been left with the scythe, and realized how hungry she was.

None of those in Geth's charge, nor Geth himself, could have seen the men, for a series of other low hills blocked their direct view of the low-lying stream and what lay beyond. But it was no concern of Si'Wren's. She knew nothing of such matters, and was afraid to draw attention to herself anyways. How could she even tell them, seeing she had sworn an oath of silence?

So she merely tried to put it out of mind, although she continued to deliver many an anxious look both in the direction which the unknown warriors had come, and that in which they had gone.

She opened the burr-lap pouch which Geth had given her and found fresh coarse dark bread, and a musty smelling, whitish, oily goat cheese, with some dark shrivelled sun-dried fruits, and an ample provision of hard unshelled nuts. Realizing how famished she was, she ate some the provender, cracking the nuts with a small rock on a large flat boulder, and did not stop until it was all gone. Then she went to the beaver pond for a drink of water.

Everything took more energy than she was normally accustomed, and she had to stop and rest frequently. It had been a long time since she had eaten and exercised properly, and she grew faint too easily for her own liking but could do little for now except take what rest she could.

At the pond, she knelt down by the water's edge and brushed the thin skim-surface of dust and swirled parallel lines of bright green algae apart in order to cup her hands and bring some of the clear underlying liquid to her parched lips.

There she remained, and regarded the distant shore of the pond whence the soldiers had marched past, taking up more water in her cupped hands as needed.

Finally she arose and turned her head to take in her surroundings anew. But suddenly she froze at the totally unexpected sight of tall Sorpiala and her female slave servants, dressed in all their finery and waving irritably at the flies as they all approached along the stony path.

Si'Wren grimaced wryly to herself, although she would never have dared to do so openly where she could be seen, at the perceived justice of their plight under the persecutions of the flies and mosquitoes they openly swatted at. If one ate too many sweets and pastries, as they always did, one's sweat stank, as theirs did. Thus; no matter how frequent the bathing, hence cometh flies. Moreover, one's teeth soon rotted, after which one became fit to eat nothing but that which all babies ate, prechewed gruel, and no mother to do the chewing.

At first as they approached, she could see only the tops of their heads from over a slight ridge of the grassy hill's broad hummock. They were scanning variously about themselves with sharply turned heads and frowning faces.

As they worked their way closer, she was able to see more clearly their shoulders and upper arms, then their torsos and elbows, and finally their wrists, hands, and waists. Eventually, she could also see the uppermost parts of their legs sometimes, as they waded through the tall, coarse grasses of the uneven and unworkable parts of the hill. One stumbled and fell, to arise quickly afterward cursing with the most filthy and vile language, and none of the others so much as noticed the flood of curses or deigned to help their unfortunate companion to her feet.

As Si'Wren watched, slowly, like the dawning of a new day, she also began to remember. Suddenly, it all became clear to her, and suddenly it came over her all at once that she who now approached Si'Wren was none other than dear Sorpiala the once-trusted elder slave-sister, the very one whose privily-entreated words in the ears of Master Rababull were what had brought Nelatha to her death and Si'Wren to such a new and low estate.

Swept by dire apprehensions, Si'Wren sought about fearfully where to conceal herself, and was about to resort to ducking down in the tall grass, when suddenly one of Sorpiala's cohorts cried out oddly like some wild bird as she victoriously pointed out Si'Wren's location. Sorpiala and the others looked also, and immediately altered their course to intercept Si'Wren.

Caught flat-footed, Si'Wren quailed within herself as she stood stock still and waited hopelessly for them to draw near. Si'Wren felt overwhelmed by a dizzy, empty feeling of utter helplessness. She felt her heart pounding rapidly within her as she tried to calm herself, but in spite of this her breathing became even more tortuous and labored.

The women strolled over to her through the tall wild grasses commingled with the waving stalks of grain,

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chatting animatedly to one—another as they all stared boldly at her. This was their hour of victory, and they revelled openly in it, flattering themselves with a pretense of false—charity towards Si'Wren while beneath the surface, as with the pond earlier, could be seen, symbolically, the lurking, half—seen catfish of their muck—racking innermost thoughts.

“You know, I had heard that Si'Wren's face was all scarred up,” said one young woman.

“Curious,” said another, “she seems perfectly normal. You know, it must be like her personality. What's really wrong is invisible.”

“Aye, like her invisible god!” volunteered a third, gaining a laugh from all sides.

“Now girls,” admonished Sorpiala lightly, “if you can't say anything nice, just don't—say anything! Right, Si'Wren?”

Clearly to Si'Wren now, Sorpiala had harbored a secret and unreasonably jealous attitude toward her, since seeing all of the attention which Habrunt had so openly bestowed upon a recently convalescing Si'Wren. Sorpiala never cared a whit for Habrunt, but it vexed her no end that anyone should enjoy themselves so much. But now, behold, here was Si'Wren, defenseless!

Sorpiala stepped boldly in front of Si'Wren and said, “I'm sorry about before, Si'Wren. I must also apologize for the inconsiderate manner of my friends here. They do not mean to be so rude. Surely you of all people must understand. I mean, it's just that nobody has quite gotten over the shock of learning that your personal beliefs were so—different—from everyone else's.”

Si'Wren stood silent, surrounded by them all, and unable to reply.

“Well?” said Sorpiala. She stared full—face at Si'Wren. “You could at least nod or something when I speak.”

“Yeah, what's the matter?” said another, delivering Si'Wren a rude push from behind. “Are you deliberately trying to be insulting, or have you had all of your senses beaten out of you?”

Several girls giggled at this.

Someone else pushed her again, and she staggered and almost fell down.

Screeches of laughter ensued.

As Si'Wren turned her head to see who had pushed her, she was suddenly flung to the ground by a sharp push from Sorpiala herself.

“Look at me when I speak to you!” said Sorpiala angrily.

Lying helplessly at Sorpiala's feet, Si'Wren put one hand back unseeingly for support as she looked up at her, and felt her fingers touch the toes of the one who had first pushed her from behind.

“Ahh! Sorpiala, this—this idol—breaker has tried to trip me!”

Sorpiala confronted Si'Wren with an indignant, self—righteous stare. It was a hard, cold look of the most imperious hauteur.

“You don't say?!”

Glaring down at Si'Wren, Sorpiala said to the other woman, “It seems that Si'Wren has not gleaned enough trouble yet. Not content to break idols, she seeks to trip us and break our heads as well!”

Si'Wren lay in the grass, shaking her head in mute, pleading denial as she looked beseechingly up at them.

“The guilty are ever speechless, in the face of their accusers,” said another, with a self—righteous, knowing air.

“Come, girls!” said Sorpiala. She regarded Si'Wren contemptuously. “It is our proper duty to see that justice is speedily executed! Let us go and report this new outrage at once!”

“Aye,” and “At once!” agreed several others almost in unison.

As one, the group of women turned and hiked up the slope, away from edge of the pond where a trembling Si'Wren sat watching helplessly with tears in her eyes.

“You know, she never could talk clearly, even before,” said one indistinctly, as their figures disappeared over the rise.

The last thing Si'Wren heard from them was a sudden chorus of more of that awful, catty, girlish laughter. Then they were gone, leaving her in her torment and abject sense of total abandonment, in the very thrall of terror over what to expect next.

Eyes stung by salt tears, she averted her head abruptly from their departing voices, and found herself staring at the peaceful stream through blurred vision. Rising to her feet, she approached the water unsteadily.

She cleared the water again with a sweep of her hand, and dipped up some of it to wash her face.

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Kneeling there, she beheld herself in the water's reflection.

There, like a stranger, she beheld the oval face of a timid-looking girl of twelve years framed in long straight dark hair, an orphan who had never known her parents, whose beauty, unperceived to her own as-yet childish understanding, was as the beauty of the fruitful land itself, even as the stars at night, or the radiant moonglow at it's softest.

Staring down into the water's surface, she remembered Nelatha's admonition that Another's likeness could also be seen by reflection in water. That was to say, by inner reflection; only thus might one supposedly 'see' the unseeable One, the Invisible God.

She was already kneeling.

She bowed her head over the water, knowing now that it was but mere water, yet realizing that here was a vision to marvel at. Timorously, as her tears ran down her cheeks to fall and ripple it's surface, she prayed over the mirror-image of the heavenly realm to the Invisible God.

She did not know how long she remained there, praying incessant confused petitions to a long-forgotten Deity in a world hopelessly lost to every kind of evil, before she finally fell asleep by the water's edge.

The next thing she knew, Habrunt was kneeling over her and touching her shoulder. Startled, she gasped as she looked up into his eyes. Eyes that were uncharacteristically fierce and angry now—and fearful for some reason, too.

“You have been accused by Sorpiala and many witnesses,” Habrunt declared to her, “of attempting to harm one of their number!” Then he rose to his feet and cast about curiously, before raising his voice and shouting at her, “Si'Wren, can you not stay out of trouble just this once, your first day in the fields?!”

Si'Wren shook her head in mute denial, her look of hopelessness as of one who is utterly doomed to destruction, an enemy to be permanently removed from all civilized human society, as one hated and despised by all.

Habrunt reached down and took hold of her by the upper arm and pulled her bodily to her feet, although he did not jerk so roughly as to hurt her in the slightest.

“Come!” he commanded.

He marched her up the slope, his calloused hands holding tightly onto her as he marched Si'Wren up the grassy slope to the top of the rise. Si'Wren felt so weakened by fear that only his strong grip kept her from stumbling and falling.

The wind partially obscured her vision by casting her dark hair across her face, as she occasionally glimpsed the other field slaves pausing to gawk at the sight of their Slavemaster and his diminutive miscreant making their way to the top of the low hill.

Habrunt faced her and made certain that what must happen next would take place in the sight of all field workers, and declared loudly and formally, “Sorpiala has charged thee before the Master, and behold, thou hast been judged and found wanting. Now you shall learn what happens to those scoffers who dare to offend the House of Rababull!”

Habrunt let go of her suddenly, causing her to fall backwards into the heavy standing grain in such a way that she tumbled harmlessly into the tall stalks which made a gentle whispering sound as they cushioned her fall. Weeping, she lay looking up at him through tear-flooded eyes and the wisps of her own hair, from a bed of bent and broken stalks, entirely obscured from the view of those watching in the nearby fields.

Habrunt was already uncoiling a heavy bull whip, and there was a strange look of ferocity and despair on Habrunt's troubled features.

Shaking her head slowly in hopeless denial, Si'Wren raised her arms defenselessly and remained mute as he took hold of the whip by it's heavy pommel and shook it out behind him on the grassy knoll, snaking the long sinuous coils into a long scythe-like arc as he prepared to deliver the first stroke.

“Ten lashes!” he declared.

He tensed the bulging muscles of his right arm as he raised the braided leather pommel to shoulder height and brought it around once to round it out properly, and then hooked it in at the proper moment with all of his strength in a viciously aimed shot.

CRACK!! The whip banged like a thunderclap, the sonic boom echoing across the fields as a scream was ripped from Si'Wren's throat and a distant flock of surprised birds took suddenly to flight, darkening the sky with

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their panicked multitudes of beating wings.

Men and women who thought they too, had hated Si'Wren, felt sudden horror at the astonishing impact of the whip's bang upon their eardrums.

He brought back the whip behind him for the next stroke and rotated it around forward again, his bulging muscles gleaming with sweat.

CRACK!! The sound echoed across the land, sending gophers, rabbits, and other animals scurrying for their dens and holes in the ground.

CRACK!! Slave women in the fields began weeping.

Habrunt was visible to all as his tall figure towered above the waving grass on the hilltop.

Several of the men looked away, already feeling sick to their stomachs, while others watched with clenched jaws, remembering the way Master Rababull himself had put out the eye of the boy who had once been a bully, because Master Rababull's word was law.

CRACK!! An eye for an eye.

CRACK!! Back in the Master's compound, Sorpiala went on humming softly and pleasantly to herself as she heard the distant knell of doom, and full of gloating, she pretended to be oblivious to it's meaning in the presence of her totally silent, fearfully listening cohorts.

CRACK!!—CRACK!!—CRACK!!...

On and on, to the tenth and final lash.

Gasping for breath, his face, hair, and naked torso streaming with sweat, Habrunt held his hands low in the tall grass, and made sure that no one saw when he took a small leather pouch from the left side of his belt, swollen with animal blood, pinched it's contents upwards and drew the end of the whip through it several times to coat it. Then he also dipped the heads of a handful of long severed wheat stalks in the blood pouch and shook it over Si'Wren, spattering her skin liberally with the blood.

Then he knelt down in the tall grass so low as to be completely out of view from anyone watching, stooping close beside Si'Wren.

Still in shock, Si'Wren watched as he scooped up a handful of small pebbles and cupped his hand carefully as he poured them into the pouch. Without a word to her, he noosed the pouch and knotted it tightly so that it's contents might not chance to escape.

Then he rose to full stature and he stood over her, his face expressionless as he coiled the bloody whip and held it in a red-stained fist. Without so much as a backward glance at her, he turned on his heel and marched down the slope to the stream, where he cast the pouch far into the middle of the peaceful beaver pond. It hit with a small splash and sank. Because the pond was on the far side of the hill from the others and blocked them from view, none saw what he did.

Then, finished, Habrunt turned and marched off to make his regular rounds.

Up on the top of the hill, Si'Wren lay motionless in the grass, utterly bewildered.

Each time Habrunt had cracked the whip at her she had cringed involuntarily, only to hear as it banged harmlessly above her and spent it's fearsome energy upon the air before falling uselessly across her prostrate and quivering body.

After her first bloodcurdling scream, she had lain silent and only trembled uncontrollably each time at it's evil, snakelike touch, fearing that he had simply missed, and that surely the next delivery, or the next, should not fail to find it's mark. Of a truth, she was covered with the rain of fallen grain stems, cut by the whip as by the sharpest scythe, and her eardrums still rang from the deafening bang of the whipcrack so close to her head, but there was not a single scratch on her.

As soon as Habrunt had gone, Geth himself came scurrying as quickly as his bent frame could carry him up the opposite slope of the hill, with a group of field hands following fearfully behind him.

The fact that Geth the Fieldmaster had not so much as looked back at them with the usual admonishment to return to work only emboldened the other slaves to follow all the faster on his heels, the sooner to see to the poor girl's condition. Most whippings were conducted with punishment in mind, something to return the violator to useful duty. But what they had witnessed from afar was the virtual destruction of a human being, and they expected to find almost a slaughtered corpse, something more akin to the remains of a wild animal attack.

When they finally arrived on Geth's heels at the top of the grassy knoll, they found Si'Wren looking about her

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with a dazed expression, propped up on one hand in the soft grass with which she was sprinkled, totally unscathed.

“I see blood on her, but—the maid is unharmed!” cried one man in disbelief.

“There's blood in the grass!” cried another.

“It's a miracle!” cried a woman in a quivering voice as she sank to her knees and raised her hands to the sky. “Gods be praised!”

Old Geth surveyed the scene with a sage and skeptical eye, considering all as he shook his tired old head, looking down at the mysteriously unharmed girl. She had suffered so much already. What Slavemaster Habrunt had accomplished was good enough at the fore, but—where would it lead to in the end?

But finally he threw up his hands in the air and bowed low his hoary white-haired old head, as he cried out loudly with the others, “Ahh, what a miracle is done here, for with mine own eyes did I see the cruelly flayed flesh of this poor wretched girl, and her wounds all laid open like gaping mouths and the slitted bellies of so many gutted fish!”

“Aye,” cried out a stout middle-aged slave-woman, picking up on the pretense the better to seem a part of the miracle herself, although she could not have cared less if Si'Wren had lived or died. “The red flesh closed up again before my very eyes!”

Si'Wren, watching them all as if they were mad, found no difficulty in holding her peace in the face of such folly. Indeed, although she had always been upright and honest in all her dealings with others as to a fault, she could in all good conscience speak no evil thing this day, for she was sworn not even to speak anything at all for the rest of her life.

“Did you not feel the cruel whip against your flesh?” cried the stout woman to Si'Wren. Si'Wren stared at her wordlessly a moment, then nodded once, abruptly, with an expressionless, emphatic look. It was only the truth, for after every time the whip had banged above her head, it had fallen harmlessly upon her immediately afterwards.

Geth, momentarily unnoticed in all the excitement, studied Si'Wren a moment longer.

“Come!” Geth clapped his hands in stern, proprietary fashion. “Everyone; back to work! Have you all so soon forgotten your duties? To the fields, lest the Master see you so slack, and tempt the gods to work more such miracles on your backsides!”

At this, the foolish gawkers fled from their marvelling over Si'Wren and returned anxiously to their work in the fields.

* * *

Slavemaster Habrunt approached his Master Rababull and dropped to one knee as he bowed low, and clapped his right fist across his hairy chest.

“You called, oh Master.”

It was in the afternoon, and Master Rababull had heard strange tidings from the slave quarters.

He had sent for his Slavemaster to come to one of the most ominous places, the head of the wide, hand-hewn stone steps leading up the broad entrance of the House proper. It was where Master Rababull frequently met with those in whom he had found reason for some particularly odious displeasure, and the significance of this was not lost on Habrunt, who was at pains to look oblivious.

“Slavemaster,” said Master Rababull deliberately, “did I not command you to punish my servant Si'Wren for her reckless abuse of one of Sorpiala's noble slave-cohorts? What is this mad talk I hear about 'miracles'?”

Habrunt kept his head bowed, eyes locked on the stone steps as he replied in a low, and what he hoped would be a genuinely confused tone of voice, “I know not, Master Rababull. I only know that I fulfilled my Master's wish to punish the servant; ten lashes of the whip, which I laid upon her as commanded.”

“Interesting,” ruminated Master Rababull.

Not looking up, Habrunt found insufficient reason to respond to the informal remark of his Master.

“Look at me!” said Master Rababull, his voice sounding tighter.

Habrunt lifted his head without expression and regarded Master Rababull.

Behind Master Rababull was a blood-encrusted bull whip coiled on the flat top of a waist-high stone pedestal which stood beside the House entrance proper. The blood was the color of rusted steel, and the fearsome braided leather bull whip was never placed on the stone pedestal—nor left there for very long—unless it's owner had found

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some particular reason and intended to use it in very short order.

Master Rababull regarded his chief underling with a faint sneer and barked, “Swear to me Slavemaster that all you have spoken is truth and that my every command was obeyed to the fullest!”

“I, Habrunt, so swear it!”

Habrunt dared not say more. One must be utterly unshakable, and make no effort to justify one's self upon another's blind graces at such a time. Was he not entrusted with the charge of all the slaves of the House of Rababull? Should he then waste mere empty words with such self-justification as any common thief would not hesitate to do?

Master Rababull said nothing to this, but remained frowning silently for a long time. Suddenly he turned and clapped his hands, cocking his head in an imperious gesture and called, “Bring her in!”

Huge and powerful, Prut promptly emerged from the House, where he had obviously been waiting all of this time just out of sight. His big fist held Si'Wren's thin upper arm in an unshakable grip as he escorted her forward to stand in front of Master Rababull at the top of the front steps.

Others who happened to be going about their duties in the huge courtyard began to stop and stare, but said nothing lest they should suddenly become unwilling victims of Master Rababull's unpredictable wrath and irritation. Danger lurked. Let the slightest offense occur now, and it could mean certain death to the offender regardless of the reason, for here was every sign of a fearsome judgement already in the making.

Si'Wren stood before Master Rababull and Slavemaster Habrunt, eyes downcast as she waited for it all to begin again. The horrible pronouncements, the endless anguish, the shame and torment—this time with the promise of real punishment. In her heart, she was utterly defeated. There was no hope anymore. There was only Master Rababull's relentless, inescapable justice, and this time his word must surely spell her doom.

Master Rababull regarded her, and tossed an open-handed gesture to Prut that he might release Si'Wren's arm.

As one totally insensate to his immediate surroundings, Prut, his empty-looking eyes locked straight ahead, dutifully let go of Si'Wren's arm and remained standing on guard at her side.

Master Rababull walked around her, one slow step at a time, his spotted leopard-skin robes and purple garb trailing graciously behind him as he surveyed her untouched skin critically.

Most of the blood had been cleaned off her by now, and so far as Master Rababull could determine, no whip had touched the girl's skin, ever. Not so much as a single lash.

Completing his examination, he paused and stood looking scornfully and distrustfully at Habrunt, who was still kneeling.

“A miracle—in our very midst!” admired Master Rababull mockingly. He looked at Si'Wren as if the better to marvel, and back at Habrunt. “Praise the gods! Six hundred and seventy-eight years have I walked this earth, and many wonders have I seen, but never, ever, have I seen such a thing as this!”

Master Rababull turned his head toward Si'Wren again, but she was too afraid to meet his scornful look, and he surveyed her contemptuously before returning slitted eyes to Habrunt's bowed figure.

“To which of the gods shall I give thanks?” Master Rababull demanded rhetorically. “After all, seeing that my explicit orders were destined to be put at naught, I must hasten and make obeisance, that I might not displease the deities. What totem might I have offended, had my punishment been carried out? What must I do to show myself blameless before men and gods alike, in the face of this colossal supernatural marvel?”

Master Rababull paused, walking slowly from one end of the upper landing to the other, with a dead-silent Habrunt on the one hand on the steps, and Si'Wren with Prut looming beside her, on the other hand at the entrance to the House. Master Rababull's anger was obvious, but still in check, if only barely. Reaching the far end of the landing, he turned to look back at them both and remained ominously silent, during which interval Sorpiala and two of her maidservants peeked out whispering excitedly to one-another and then ducked their heads back before Master Rababull should deign to properly notice them.

For who knew what he might do at a time like this?

More onlookers had gathered in the courtyard to watch, knowing from past experience, that by now, Master Rababull would enjoy their audience more than their intrusion. It was too much of a spectacle for them to miss. This was real entertainment! Perhaps heads would even roll, as had happened with the still comparatively recent punishment of Nelatha. In fact this was even more fun than to throw stones from the stream banks at a drowning animal or person, another popular pastime.

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“Slavemaster, what I find here is a signal act of the gods which I, even I, Master of the House of Rababull, dare not contradict. What would my servants—my friends?!—think of it? In fact, should word be passed around, I must ask myself before I cast doubt on the authenticity of such a marvel, whether the Emperor himself might not be displeased to think of such religious insubordination on my part.”

Master Rababull paused again, as if regaining his breath before going on. He pretended to be unaware of the presence of Sorpiala, and as he looked out on the gathering crowd, there was a frown locked on his brow. Their word-of-mouth would hound him to his dying day if he made the wrong decision now.

He turned like a strutting peacock, and stared at Habrunt from the side as he went on, but Habrunt dared neither turn his head nor look up in acknowledgement as Master Rababull waxed eloquent.

“But still, in spite of my generosity and many past mercies upon such acts of stupidity and foolishness as I have witnessed in all of my days, I must ask myself the following question...”

Master Rababull stopped to look out across the courtyard of the great House of Rababull, and fairly glared at the trembling slaves who had gathered to watch.

“Come!” he commanded loudly. Hesitantly, a few shifted forward several steps, but not too close. Master Rababull repeated, “Come, and behold the handiwork of the gods! Come and see the foolishness of the mortals, for what man is there who can put at naught what the very gods have decreed?!”

The crowd watched with lurid interest. Many resented Habrunt his position. Perhaps here was a chance at long last to watch Habrunt be on the receiving end for a change, for clearly Master Rababull was vastly displeased.

Master Rababull turned to stand between Habrunt on the one hand, and Si'Wren on the other. Prut was a nonperson, seemed almost as invisible as the mythical Invisible God Himself, and would remain so until called upon to do whatever Master Rababull commanded of him.

“Look at me!!” Master Rababull shouted at Habrunt suddenly, and automatically Habrunt lifted his head and froze.

Master Rababull's eyes were like coals of fire, locked upon Habrunt's like those of an eagle upon it's four-legged prey.

In an unexpectedly mild tone of voice, Master Rababull went on, almost conversationally, “Slavemaster Habrunt, I must ask of you, my most noble and trusted servant; Which is the greater miracle? The cruel lash of the whip, which cuts through a young girl's flesh like a hot knife through lard, and leaves her very skin unharmed?...”

“Or...” Master Rababull turned to Si'Wren, “the dewy eyes of love, which but lightly touch upon the stony heart of a slave, and leave that worthless organ slashed to RIBBONS?!?!”

Habrunt, still kneeling, did not so much as dare to flinch nor venture the slightest response.

Master Rababull walked jerkily, haltingly, a step at a time, like a dusty, strutting cockbird preparing to fight and make love at one and the same time as he walked thusly down the stairs until he could step across behind Slavemaster Habrunt, and continued in this manner on around, climbing the steps again slowly, with agonizing slowness, to his original starting point where he halted and remained standing in front of a kneeling Habrunt at the top of the wide stone steps again.

Habrunt had not dared to move so much as his eyes during this malignant promenade.

Then without warning Master Rababull suddenly turned in a whirl and snatched up the blood-stained bull whip from the pedestal and gripped it by the pommel as he jerked his arm back and snaked it's slithery braids out behind him.

“I propose a test,” declared Master Rababull, “to see this miracle for myself. How much more is it my privilege and my delight as one noble-born to witness the repeat of such a miracle with my own eyes? I desire to know, and I have a right to know; was the miracle bestowed upon my loyal Slavemaster, the girl, or the whip?”

Still Habrunt dared not make a reply to this madman.

Master Rababull jerked his whip arm out behind him, turning his head in the direction of Si'Wren as if about to lash out at her, while watching cleverly out of the corner of his eye to see if Habrunt might betray himself.

Habrunt silently, invisibly clenched his right fist as he held it solidly across his chest, impotent to do the slightest thing to stop the Master, with Prut and any number of omnipresent slaves ready to mindlessly oppose him at a moment's notice, and no sword readily to hand.

Master Rababull froze, and lowered his whip hand, laughing with wicked indulgence.

“Not so, Slavemaster! Witness another miracle, the stayed hand of justice. The high price of her sale is needed

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to pay for the cost of the broken jade goddess. With her unsullied beauty, Si'Wren shall bring much money in the slave market, when I sell her myself to some wretched, stinking, foul-breathed old man with rotten teeth and many diseases, and gold coins for eyes.”

At this, Habrunt stifled his rage but still dared not so much as protest.

“Forsaking that, there remains but one way to appease my nagging curiosity,” declared Master Rababull with bitter sarcasm, “and may the gods strike me dead this very day if I have ruled unjustly...”

At long last, Master Rababull suddenly lashed out with his whip and brought it snapping around with expert timing, catching an unprepared Habrunt fully across the side of the head.

CRACK!!

Although he did not cry out, Habrunt's head jerked as the whip left a red gash across his head and he fell cowering across the stone steps with his forearms across his face, fearful of being blinded if he should be struck another blow like that one again.

“Aye!” triumphed Master Rababull. “The most memorable sound in the world, is the sound of the lightning bolt to be found at the end—“ CRACK!! ”—of a whip!” Master Rababull grunted, gasping from his exertion with the bull whip.

Blood welled from a slash where the whip had struck again, this time across Habrunt's back. The skin gaped in a long thin gash, with the matching white lines on both sides of a thin exposed fat layer just under the skin, and a shallow division into the deeper red of Habrunt's underlying back muscle.

CRACK!!—CRACK!!—CRACK!!...

Explosions echoed across the courtyard as the bystanders watched the physical destruction of the former Slavemaster of the House of Rababull.

Master Rababull proceeded to whip Habrunt mercilessly, again and again, and Habrunt tried in vain to bear up under it as he lay shielding his precious eyes with his arms until he finally collapsed into unconsciousness, lying limp and bloody across the stone steps.

Finally, Master Rababull laid off, gasping for air.

“Interesting,” he wheezed, wiping at the spittle in the corner of his mouth. “I see nothing miraculous! Prut, take him away and let that old hag L'acoci see to his wounds. When he is well, let him be sold also, beside his intended bride!”

A wild-haired and sweating Master Rababull turned callously on his heel, and as he staggered into the House past a silently weeping Si'Wren, he interrupted his stride and turned to shake the bloody whip in Si'Wren's face.

With every gesture, Master Rababull flecked Habrunt's blood on Si'Wren as he shouted, “He has paid your debt! Verily is he your betrothed, for he has paid also for your dowry with his blood and his rank, and shall partake of your ignominy as well when you are finally sold at the next auction, for he has entered into your own punishment! But even then he shall not have you! I will see to that!”

In a towering rage, Master Rababull hurled the whip down at Si'Wren's feet. It landed with a flat slapping sound and splattered red the paving stones, still loosely coiled like a serpent poised to strike.

Then without looking as he walked off into the House, Master Rababull said, “Take him away!”

Behind Master Rababull, Prut called briskly for several of his men to come and pick up Habrunt.

Si'Wren, unharmed, waited until Master Rababull had finally departed, and hastened to follow the bearers of Habrunt. She avoided the scornful jeers of the other slaves, who were still too fearful to do anything to her. When she arrived at the bungalow where they had taken him, Si'Wren mourned at the sight of Habrunt lying unconscious on his stomach upon the very same blood-stained litter which she had been given for a sleeping rack during her convalescence.

Habrunt's entire body was in ruins, covered in a maze of criss-crossed wounds and caked with blood both dried and oozing. If he did not die first before the night was out, he would still almost certainly be crippled for life from wounds like that, if only by the very number of them. The underlying muscle, and not the skin only, had been slashed innumerable times by the cruel bite of the bull whip.

“Come!” said old L'acoci, her wizened eyes beckoning to Si'Wren urgently. “We have only a little borage tea, such as this one treated you with before. It can work it's own miracles, but in his case, I fear—”

Ominously, she did not finish her sentence.

Si'Wren was determined to do her utmost to try to help old L'acoci, and set immediately to work as she began

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to gently bathe Habrunt's wounds with the simple herb tea, which was all she had since being banished from the spice tent. She began dipping it up into successive pads of old rag—weave pasted with lard, and layering it onto Habrunt's ravaged skin and flesh before finally wrapping him up in dandelion leaves and covering it over with a bandage of coarse burr lap.

* * *

Later that same day, a messenger came riding his horse at a full gallop through the front gates and sending stray chickens and goats scattering madly for their lives in all directions as he lurched his snorting horse to a stop directly before the front steps of the House.

He flew from his saddle before the foam-flecked charger had fully stopped and pounded up the steps two and three at a time at a dead run.

Rushing past the two startled guards at the entrance, he ran down the central corridor, filling the House with the strident echoes of his high-pitched voice as he shouted repeatedly, “Master Rababull! Master Rababull!”

Master Rababull was still in his private chambers.

The messenger arrived outside his door and shouted through the closed curtains that he had urgent news that dared not wait.

At this most uncouth of all possible intrusions, Master Rababull's personal valet pulled back the heavy drapes with a long-practiced, decorous slowness, and faced him with a disdainful and dangerously menacing look, whereupon the messenger declared again in a loud voice that he had a message of direst urgency for the Master's ears.

Finally, Master Rababull himself stepped forth in an imperious rage, deeply vexed at being thus disturbed on this of all possible days, for he had lost his Slavemaster and his most favored junior female slave all in one fell swoop, and the messenger promptly threw himself face-down on the floor directly at the Master's feet before shouting out his message.

“Sire, our water has been cut off!” announced the messenger. “The fields and indeed the entire House shall thirst for the merest drop ere the day is out if battle is not joined immediately!”

“What is this?!” asked Master Rababull, truly alarmed at such important news. “Speak quickly, slave! Who has done this thing?”

“It is Kadrug, who lives to the north and proclaims himself the anointed of the gods. He hath magnified himself greatly against the House of Rababull, and has sworn to slay by the edge of the sword whoever seeks to drink of the water without paying him tribute of gold and silver!”

“Impossible!”

As Master Rababull regarded him incredulously, the messenger sucked in more air, and went on breathlessly.

“Of a truth, sire! Kadrug has taken two hundred swordsmen, and they have slain the watchmen of the canal, and clogged the sluice gates with boulders, and diverted our water! He declares he will not let it out again until much money has been paid. The crops will all soon be dead and dried, but Kadrug has sworn this day that the House of Rababull shall henceforth have no more water until there is enough dammed up to utterly wash away all ere it is finally released again!”

“My croplands—dry?!” spluttered Master Rababull. “You mean—I have been cheated of my own water?”

Master Rababull turned to Prut, and hesitated. For all of his great size, the stupid oaf wasn't half the man that Habrunt was—or at least, had been. Now, too late, Habrunt was worthless, crippled for life by Master Rababull's own hand, just when he was needed the most, and now it looked like he had a real battle on his hands!

A fight for water rights. No deadlier contest could there possibly be than this. Kadrug promised first no water at all and then a flash flood, unless paid much gold and silver. And of course, it would not end with that. Unless he won this battle, he was as one already destroyed.

“Send for my sons!” commanded Master Rababull. “While they are coming, see that the war god is brought out and a human sacrifice prepared, and slay and burn two of my bullocks! Have the slaves assembled at the temple where I will make obeisance and pray for victory. Issue spears, swords, shields, whetstones, and bows, for today we march on Kadrug at the sluice gates!”

Prut clapped his right fist across his huge hairy chest and declared in a loud and perpetually hoarse voice to the wall behind Master Rababull, “I hear and obey, oh Master!”

Then Prut turned and ran out swiftly on his long hairy legs. As he departed beyond view, there came the

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sounds of heavy blows and shoutings as Prut knocked down several unfortunates who happened to be blocking his path.

Master Rababull felt his eyes go stark with fear. At a time like this, when he needed his best men, Habrunt was reduced to a beggar's status. If not for the lying schemes of Sorpiala...

But it was too late to look back now. There remained only Prut to help him. Stupid Prut! Everything about Prut was hairy. Master Rababull sometimes imagined that even the insides of Prut's entrails must be hairy.

Master Rababull turned fiercely on his personal valet as if about to attack the quivering coward.

"Fetch me my armor and weapons! Hurry, you fool!" he shouted urgently.

Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned to a frightened-looking, beautiful House slave girl, one of the pampered indoors concubines, and said to her, "Go and tell the kitchen crew to begin preparing full marching rations for every able-bodied male!"

"But—" she stammered helplessly, "but Master, how can I do this, seeing I am but a concubine?"

Pampered from birth, and taken from the same mold as Sorpiala and her kin, the foolish girl could not help but balk.

Wrathfully, Master Rababull took one step forward and backhanded the surprised woman to the floor with a single blow.

"I said move! My men cannot fight on empty stomachs, you wench!"

Sobbing, the woman held her hand to her bruised cheek as she scurried out of his reach and ran weeping to go and relay his orders to the kitchen staff.

Master Rababull nodded to himself in satisfaction.

With a slap mark like that on the face of a beauty like her, there would be no mockery in the kitchen when she arrived to give the orders. Whoever contradicted her would surely be boiled in oil. It had been done once before by Master Rababull, two hundred and eighty years ago, and he knew the cooks still spoke of it on occasion, when the day's work was done and they could at long last magnify themselves upon the young and impressionable with their idle words.

Moments later, Master Rababull could hear Prut's voice, shouting from the top of the stairs. Then a horn was blown repeatedly, with much force and vigor of the blower's lungs, urgently calling all slaves to a general assembly.

Would that women could fight, fumed Master Rababull, that he might double his fighting force! As well to wish that the stone idols should come to life! But he was pragmatic enough to realize that mere temple idols could not so much as move themselves, let alone that they should wield weapons.

When his personal body slave had arrayed him in his bronze and leather body armor, he turned and marched in haste for the temple. The war god did not have to move anyways, a contemptuous Master Rababull deliberately reminded himself. It only had to make his slaves move—to swing their swords and throw away their own precious lives in the face of any possible enemy, the better to save his own precious hide.

He watched as the temple priests prepared the shoulder litter, putting the solid ebony war god and trophy bones on the platform and brushing off the dust.

The temple was a miniature copy of the Emperor's, barely large enough to permit two or three priests to move about and conduct family ceremonials. The Emperor himself would not trouble himself to lend assistance, Master Rababull knew. To the Emperor, any fight amongst his subjects over what he would consider petty water rights was a mere squabble, too far beneath his dignity to so much as notice.

Indeed, Master Rababull reflected sourly, from the Emperor's point of view, a new landlord might be more successful with the harvest and produce greater taxes. Why waste the lives of the Royal Guard, over such? Master Rababull had seen it before, from the sidelines, as it were. That was how little the Emperor cared for his own, although it was seldom proclaimed in so many words.

The temple was built out of stone pillars on a raised mound of flat-topped, hard-beaten earth, a level berm six steps above the surrounding compound courtyard, with heavy carved cedar timbers for a roof. When it got too damp, they threw down coarse-woven grass mats to keep the mud down.

There weren't too many sources of building stones in the Persian Valley. Just an endless vista of fertile croplands to fight over, which was how he had acquired much of his own property, both human and otherwise.

The skulls surrounding the House war god on the litter were from the heads of past possessors and contenders

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for the land owned by Master Rababull. All of the skulls had their two front teeth knocked out and a hole punched through the center of the forehead.

When all was ready, Master Rababull was adorned with a ceremonial red and black robe and walked out in front of the litter, carrying his sword in his fist.

There were four priests out in front, the two foremost blowing war pipes, which were also used on New Year's ceremonies, and the two hindmost bearing smoking clay incense pots blackened by soot.

Sounding their pipes, the two priests in the lead started blowing hweee and hwaaa fanatically while the whole procession, with the acrid incense smoking putridly, marched from the assembly area behind the temple and worked their way slowly toward the temple proper.

Hweee–hwaaa, hweee–hwaaa, hweaeaea they sounded in unison, blowing continuously in a deafening discordance as they proceeded. The priests and their attendants were all shaven–headed and splattered with wet pitch black coal dust, scarlet red goat's blood, and white ashes from head to toes.

At the temple, a female baby lay squalling on the flat stone altar, while the baby's mother, a slave–woman, was held back by two temple attendants who held her by the wrists but allowed her to scream wildly for her baby.

Her outbursts were the unintentional focal point of the ceremony, signifying by her very real torments and anguished outcries, the ceremonially–expressed feelings and sentiments of the House of Rababull over the foreign danger to it's property holdings and, specifically in this case, it's water rights.

For where there was no water, there could be no life.

The temple drummers were already there, beating on huge drums that sent out a deep rolling beat that put the slaves into a zombie–like state of mind.

A state of mania, for war...

Too late, Master Rababull thought of having the baby thrown, alive, into a cauldron of boiling water. Such a sacrifice would signify his humility, a generous gift of the fruit of his human possessions. The boiling water would signify that it was his water, and his anger bound up in the water, an impressive liturgy to the war god.

No time now. Have to do it the old way.

The entire procession halted, and as the drumbeats rose in tempo to a heightened furor, shaking the very bones of all present as by the impending battle sounds of the hooves of war horses, Master Rababull stepped momentarily around to the fore, facing them all front and center in a grand entrance.

At the raising of both of Master Rababull's arms, the drums increased in a furious tempo, and when the arms dropped the sound of the drums abruptly ceased, although one witless soul kept beating a fraction of a second too long before realizing that he had overlooked the cut–off signal.

Master Rababull made the slightest turn of his head to see who it was, and marked the terrified fool for a thorough whipping later.

In the sudden silence, the terrified slave–woman could be heard weeping and begging desperately for the life of her daughter, as Master Rababull stood with his arms raised again like an eagle before the general assemblage.

Before him were all available members of the House of Rababull, men to the fore, women to the rear, children hindmost, and freeborn family members to the right.

The first row, signifying the first–line defense arm, was comprised of his many sons. It would be Master Rababull's long–awaited opportunity to have a few of the more ambitious of his offspring lead the battle charge and see them finished off before they could come home to glory and threaten his personal authority over all his holdings. Immediately after these, in the second row beginning on the right and trailing off to the left, stood male in–laws beholden unto him enough to show up or risk serious loss of status.

He surveyed their ranks, noting whoever was absent and deserving of punishment for it. There were a few. Punishing in–laws was a necessary thing, best done while the sword was still dripping red from the victory of a battle well–fought.

He made a mental note that a small war–party would have to be detailed to go take care of the drop–outs when he had finished off Kadrug's forces.

Old Maskron, one of his fathers–in–law, was there at the fore as usual. Maskron, a fierce, white–maned old scoundrel, always showed up with his dinged old bronze sword polished and gleaming like gold, and he was always asked to come forward to utter the closing prayers, shaking and waving his sword in the air in wild gesticulations of false bravado.

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Maskron was too old to fight, and too proud to stay away, so it was exceeding helpful, in saving face for both of them, to permit him this signal honor.

One distant cousin of the son of his sixth wife, whose name was Puffat and whose mother bore an illegitimate connection to the Emperor himself, stood with one armpit held up by a crutch, his broken and splinted right leg having recently been the source of much grief at the hands of the bonesetter.

The leg was beginning to turn green. If sorcery was of no avail, the young man was doomed either to lose the leg, or die in agony of the gain-green.

He was excused from battle, but there would be no time now to send for the Sorcerer and have a ceremonial procedure. Later, though, they would. Then, Puffat's leg could either be exorcised, or amputated and cauterized.

Master Rababull gave a brief announcement detailing Kadrug's activities to cut off their water, and called upon the entire House, all able-bodied males both bond and free, to fight.

A loud outcry rose up at this as everyone present, women and children too, screamed and howled for the death of Kadrug.

Satisfied, Master Rababull turned to the Chief Priest and commanded that the sacrifice should proceed.

Two priests held the squalling infant from both ends on the stone altar before the war god, one at her tiny feet, one at her little hands.

The infant's mother, insane with terror, shrieked her protests as the priest lifted up the ceremonial sword, much abused from previous impacts with the stone surface, and brought it down on the defenseless child's naked body.

The tiny voice was cut off.

“To war!” shouted Master Rababull.

“TO WAAAAR!!” howled the crowd, drowning out the hopeless sobbing of the baby's mother as she fell brokenly to the dirt when she was finally released.

Drowned out, also, were old Maskron's shouted invocations as he stood in front of them waving his flashing bronze sword.

In the back of the crowd, Si'Wren dropped her head in anguish, for had she not also screamed in the past for the death of their enemies when Master Rababull led the war cry for a neighbor's field? Had not little Si'Wren once prayed to that ugly physical thing to which other babies had been sacrificed in the past, and which the others even now still worshipped so blindly? Would that she might dare to speak and tell them what her heart had learned, reflected from its own inner pool, upon the graces of the Invisible God.

She, who alone might have spoken truth, stood silently amidst the screaming and drum beating as the shouting went on in a frenzy to kill the enemy. Master Rababull brought on renewed cheers as he mounted his stallion, a half-wild white-spotted gray beauty, and rode to the head of the long riotous formation of shouting men and neighing and stamping horses.

Behind him the drums thundered until the very air seemed to pulsate with the blood-lust, and in the midst of this Master Rababull suddenly raised his sword high in the air and held it up for a long moment as he whirled it around and around, and finally pointed it straight ahead of him in a sudden lunging motion.

“Onward—to the battle!” he cried.

“WHOO-RAH! WHOO-RAH!” chorused the marchers, and at this, the great crowd of men formed a disorganized marching column, many abreast, the men's hoarsened voices bellowing their war cries as they chanted in time to the marching drums and war pipes, over four hundred men-at-arms.

As the ragged formation tromped out the front gates and away down the road in the direction of the sluice gates, which were at the northwesternmost limits of Master Rababull's property holdings, their voices and figures dwindled with distance, and the screams of blood lust from the cripples, women, and children left behind gradually died out.

Si'Wren noticed the boy who had been punished earlier for putting another boy's eye out, by having one of his own put out, and suddenly realized with shock that his other eye had also been put out, and his nose broken. The second eye was so infected that the boy was staggering drunkenly in an extreme delirium. His mouth opened and a hoarse, plaintive croak emitted from the depths of a tortured soul.

Shaken to the core of her very soul, Si'Wren began to approach the boy, when his mother came walking from her left toward the boy. Si'Wren naturally held back, thinking how the mother must yearn upon her savagely

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punished child. But when the mother sought to walk past the boy without paying any attention to him, she happened to clear her throat involuntarily.

The sound was instantly recognized by the boy, who took a step in her direction and reached out to her with another croaking plea.

Instantly the mother, who was barefoot, stepped back and jerked herself clear just before the boy would have touched her. With a loathsome leer, the mother froze just out of reach, totally silent, watching her own son as he continued to stagger in the same direction he had initially chosen, until his own footsteps had carried him away from her.

Without a word, the mother turned on her heel and continued on her way but did not look back either at her bleating son, nor did she notice Si'Wren watching open-mouthed.

Eventually after they had almost all cleared out, all that could be heard was the broken, muffled sobbing of the woman whose daughter had been sacrificed.

Si'Wren watched as a couple of naive young slave-girls walked past the grieving mother and one of them cursed her for her lack of loyalty to the House of Rababull.

“Fool!” cried the girl. “What is your one daughter's life, to the loss of all our water? She has died for the glory of the House of Rababull! It was only a girl anyway! Why do you cry like that?!”

The girl and her friends walked on, puffed up with their borrowed sense of self-importance, all worked-up into a feverish blood-frenzy at the spectacle of yet another gory victory for the family name.

Si'Wren looked long upon the girls' departing backs, desiring to tell them the truth, to tell them all that it was they who were the fools, and to scold them for their senselessness. Then she noticed that one of them was an especially vengeful member of Sorpiala's inner clique, and fearfully, Si'Wren turned and faced away from them.

What could she have said to them, anyway?

Deeply disturbed by all that she had seen, and still pondering the madness of it, Si'Wren hesitantly approached the sobbing mother. How could she have been so blind as to embrace such evil before, to copy and mimic such horror?

What a curious thing it was, that it took an Invisible God to open the formerly blind eyes of a seeing person such as herself, to the evil that lay right under all their noses, and still none could see this but Si'Wren.

She knelt down beside the sobbing mother, but was immediately rebuffed by her.

“Get away from me, you filthy idol-breaker!” the woman screamed, wildly slapping Si'Wren off. “Get away!”

Shocked and mute, Si'Wren looked on numbly as the sobbing woman raised herself up and, stricken with grief, stumbled in a hysterical staggering traipse across the yard to fall down at the feet of a half-finished idol in the workshop, wailing desperately to it to bring back her daughter, or give her a son to replace the daughter who was lost.

Si'Wren knew that she had not broken the other idol, that dismembered thing of glistening green jade and jeweled eyes. It was Sorpiala who had cleverly broken the idol earlier, and only blamed it on poor Nelatha. But she also knew that it was beside the point who had broken it; idols—she now knew—deserved to be broken.

Anyways, it did not matter so much anymore. She was as guilty in their eyes as if she had. What mattered the most now, was that it was Sorpiala by whose evil machinations brave Habrunt, former Slavemaster, now lay a beaten and broken-spirited man on that blood-stained sleeping rack in the slave quarters.

Si'Wren turned away. She must go to him, and help wise old L'acoci tend to his wounds.

Chapter Four—Emperor Euphrates

Si'Wren turned away from the sobbing mother whose daughter had been sacrificed. The fact that she could do nothing for the poor woman left her with a twisting feeling in her gut. As she walked away, bitter tears stung her eyes as she began weeping hopelessly.

Si'Wren jerked suddenly as a flying pebble struck her on the cheek. Stunned, she looked up to see a group of dirt-streaked children gathered around. They had approached her so unexpectedly that she had been unaware of their presence.

As they jeered and threw more pebbles and small stones at her she put up her arms in self-defense, although a larger boy managed to cast some larger rocks that bruised her badly when they struck her shoulders and forearms.

When Si'Wren turned and fled, they chased her, calling vile names. They reviled her Invisible God, crying out, “Stone the idol-breaker!” and “Where is he?—I can't find him!”, mocking her as an outcast of the people, a

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scourge upon the land, and an enemy of the gods.

They followed her as she hastened to return to the cypress bungalow of the field-hands. She continued to shield herself from the stones by holding up her arms. At the door flap to the bungalow, she threw herself through the barrier tarp and ducked within, gasping for breath and weeping from her injuries as they danced without the bungalow, chanting evil rhymes against her.

They were too afraid to enter, until the brash older boy stepped inside with a large rock upheld to smite her with. Quick as a flash, L'acoci seized him by the hair and knocked his own rock against his own head with his own hand.

With a surprised scream the boy staggered and fell over backwards, then jumped up and ran bleeding out of the bungalow, at which point the mob of kids broke and ran. The din of their screams, added to the larger boy's outraged squeals of terror all rapidly diminished as they fled, scattered like a flock of magpies.

L'acoci ignored Si'Wren's weeping as she pushed into her hands a crude clay pot of herbal tea, a bowl of paste made from honey mixed with lard and clay and crumbled leaves and flowers, and a coarse, dirty, wadded-up old rag.

“Ah!” she exclaimed wordlessly, and blanched at her imagined 'error'. L'acoci looked long and meaningfully at Si'Wren, but said nothing and turned away finally without comment.

Feeling guilty about the monosyllabic utterance, although she had not truly spoken any word, Si'Wren, trembling in fear, stepped over to kneel carefully beside a stoically suffering Habrunt, her own concerns temporarily overlooked. Head still reeling from the blows, she forgot her bruises as she flinched at the renewed sight of his terrible injuries.

She changed the bandages polluted by the stink of corruption, and soothed on the paste L'acoci had made, before gently applying the layers of fresh tea-soaked replacement gauze over Habrunt's ruined flesh, exercising special care over the most fearsome gashes. Habrunt trembled in agony at this, but when he realized who she was, he somehow managed to hold still for it, although with much difficulty.

As she worked on Habrunt's terrible wounds, Si'Wren thought with great trepidation about possibly having violated her oath of silence again, but could not help wondering if she actually had or not. Of a truth, she had sworn never to actually speak again, but now it occurred to her that perhaps she might at least intonate. The idea was such as to be normally of no great import, but now seemed so great a revelation that she felt a sense of surprise out of all proportion. The simple fact was, she realized, that one did not need mere words to express one's feelings.

Si'Wren reflected upon this at length, and considered that although she might never again know the joy of singing, she could still hum her favorite melodies, and imagine the words in her mind or merely close her eyes and sway gently to the rhythm.

The thought of this seemed like a great consolation to her.

She began humming softly as she worked gently on Habrunt's wounds, filling the silent, deserted bungalow with the quiet, lovely mood of her melody.

Habrunt sighed, and seemed to relax a little. She noticed this, and felt that he was more than a little eased in his sufferings. So she continued humming, ever so softly.

Presently others began to arrive, a few at a time, all of them female slaves or their children.

With L'acoci hovering over the stew, no one dared bother Si'Wren, kneeling so close nearby.

The ravaged figure of brave Habrunt convalescing on the sleeping rack, fallen from favor, gave them equal pause. Until the day he died, Habrunt would never be the kind of man whom others might dare to mock openly or deal so lightly with.

But Si'Wren hummed more softly anyways, and more quietly, that others might not overhear so readily, to avoid giving them sufficient reason to take open notice of it and perhaps voice false objections out of a spirit of trouble-making. Presently, the others began murmuring amongst themselves over the anticipated victory, and Habrunt and his young nursemaid were ignored and forgotten.

Presently, L'acoci dipped up some stew into a clay bowl and gave it to Si'Wren.

“You must feed him as well as yourself,” said L'acoci, as she noticed Si'Wren holding the one bowl in puzzlement.

Si'Wren had clearly expected two bowls, one for herself and another for Habrunt. Hesitantly at first, she began

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alternating a portion for herself and another for Habrunt, using sea shells for scoops. Habrunt could not bear to move his tortured body, not so much as to lift a finger, but Si'Wren was more than willing to make up for this by helping him. Occasionally, she lifted a cup of water to his lips, and resorted to wiping his beard with the dampened hem of her skirt.

But then, noticing his worsening condition, she took up a rag and dipped it in tea and pressed it to his feverish brow to try to ease the torment that visibly shook his trembling, half-naked body with increasing vehemence.

Slowly, as Si'Wren endured the passing of the hours thus, evening fell and twilight was transformed into the blackness of night and the flicker of the cooking fire in its cobblestone pit in the cypress bungalow of the field slaves. A mist began to rise from the land, covering all with its creeping white vapors, obscuring everything under a drifting, gauzy white veil of dimly-cast moon-glow.

“Si'Wren,” whispered L'acoci, leaning close so that others in the bungalow might not overhear, “I would have a word with you.”

Si'Wren beheld the old woman, and waited respectfully.

“Si'Wren,” repeated L'acoci, her voice as whisper-dry as a pile of dried leaves as she bent close to Si'Wren's head and Si'Wren sensed the parched lips hovering close to her ear, “I have heard the stories of old, told of moon-madness, shared in the bungalows in times past. I saw when you yourself, as a tiny orphan girl new to the House of the Master, were told such horrible stories by the fireside when the slaves hid in fear of the full moon shining in the blackness of night, with tales told about how the moon drives men, and women, and even little children, to madness. And I see you now, watching over your brave Habrunt, as he lies in the delirium of pain and fever and torments upon his cot. Are you wondering if Habrunt might be in danger of the moon-madness?”

Si'Wren considered this momentarily, and then she shook her head, signalling her answer in the negative. Yes, she believed in moon-madness, but never had she questioned the power of Habrunt's might. She did not believe that a mighty and valiant one such as he would or could ever go moon-mad.

“Good,” whispered L'acoci. “Hear me, girl, and mark me no fool. There is no such thing as moon-madness. During the full moon, demons stalk the land, seeking to afflict weakened minds, that people might blame the moon, and call those so afflicted moon-mad, and thereby curse God's creation which He hath called good. For this reason, yes, we must beware the coming of the full moon, but not for its own sake, but for the madness and evil deception worked by unseen demonic powers, seeking to deceive us mere mortals into thinking that it comes from the full moon. But the full moon itself is nothing to worry about. Know this, girl, and know it well. Behind every evil act of man is the still more evil provocation of a horde of demonic and deceiving fallen powers, for the unseen demons ever lurk, and ever shall until the very end of time itself, seeking the souls of every man, woman, and child upon the face of this accursed soil we walk upon, and the demons are very real, and they are organized into an entire fallen kingdom of the damned, an army of intelligent evil spirits, dedicated to the overthrow of the Invisible God Himself.”

Si'Wren considered this, as she regarded Habrunt, and nodded that she understood.

Then L'acoci added, still whispering so faintly that it was as if Si'Wren's own inner consciousness had formed the words, “Si'Wren, far from the demons driving Habrunt mad, he drives them mad. They hate him for his righteousness and goodness.”

Then L'acoci was turning away, and Si'Wren realized that the conversation was over, and rejoiced that she had learned this new thing about demons. Now, they could no longer deceive her as before. She would never again fear the full moon, but only be on guard, in prayer, against the evil demons.

Sometime around midnight, Habrunt began to grow delirious from the fever, and she fell into a kind of stupor, sitting on a woven mat and leaning against his sleeping rack with her head leaning close to his, while the bare skin of her face and exposed extremities basked in the fireside glow.

Habrunt began to moan in his sleep from his intense sufferings, and Si'Wren began to hum a melody, so low and muted as to be inaudible to all but herself and Habrunt, and after a short time he stopped his pitiable lamentations for a little while.

In an exhausted somnambulance, Si'Wren lapsed into her slumbers as well, until his groanings woke her once more. Then she patted his forehead with the tea-soaked rag, and from her heart and soul arose in her throat soft compassionate intonations, so low that only his ears could hear her as she leaned close, hovering over him with tender eyes and a softened look.

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Something seemed to be bothering Habrunt in his sleep as he murmured to himself unintelligibly, but although Si'Wren tried her utmost she could not seem to make it out.

In the delirium of a feverish dream, Habrunt heard a voice calling sweetly in the jungle. It was the voice of some incomprehensible vision, a beauty, a paragon of virtue, a woman like unto no other such as he had ever seen in all of his unfathomable years.

He searched for her, sometimes walking, sometimes running a few steps, expecting any moment to break through the dense foliage of the lush greenery and glimpse the unearthly vision of her eternal spirit, ecstatically alive, wild, and free, as the mysterious woman with a voice like an angel roamed the deep jungle, seemingly heedless of its wild beasts and other horrors, entirely unharmed, and moreover, unaffected, as if it were her rightful kingdom and the savage beasts her royal subjects.

But every time he managed to brush the vines and fern fronds aside with a burly arm to reveal what was beyond with a sweep of his haunted eyes, he saw only a little brown wren bird, singing from a branch across the little thicket-like clearing.

He turned away, and again he heard her, like the calling of a siren, causing the steaming jungle to throb and tremble invisibly with the incredible sweetness and beauty of that trilling, passionately enthralling voice, piercing his soul like a javelin tipped at the point with the sap of some unknown, virulent love concoction.

Madly, he spun around and charged through the vines, their ropes and boughs whipping at his skin as he ignored the pain, calling desperately and chasing with hastened steps towards her swiftly moving shadow which could barely be glimpsed ahead, highlighted against the glimmerings of sunlight that sparkled like the beams of coruscating, living jewels before his eyes.

There she was! All sparkling bright shimmerings of brilliant golden yellow sunlight flashes. Through the mottled and rippled interplay of light and shadow patterns, he saw her silhouette against the sun, a living vision come to life amidst the dank dark kaleidoscope of jungle, blinding his eyes with her beauty!

He crashed wildly through, stopped to rub his eyes, and looked again, and, disappointed, saw yet again the plain little brown wren bird, there!, on a branch, so small, so insignificant, singing sweetly.

Where! Where was the woman who called to him?!!

He looked around, and staggered off, heartbroken and despairing.

Where was she?

He heard her again, far off, singing, calling like an eternal, winged Holy Angel of the Invisible God, and as he turned to go to her he felt his limbs whipped by the passing branches and weighing like lead, and he slowed helplessly, becoming tired, so deathly tired.

The siren, he thought feverishly, as he staggered and fell headlong, unable to catch himself.

Where was the siren?!!

“Si'Wren,” remanded wise old L'acoci in a hushed and quavering crone's voice as dry as dead leaves. “Si'Wren! Come to sleep now. Your brave Slavemaster will live.”

As she ceased her crooning, Si'Wren looked up at the withered countenance of old L'acoci by the light of the cooking fire coals with a tired, dreamy stare, and sighed in a heedless shrug. Then she turned her eyes softly back again, looking compassionately down upon her precious Habrunt, who had finally stopped his thrashing, and fallen into a deep slumber again.

Ageless Habrunt as half a man was yet even now all the more to her in his ruin, than any ten ordinary men in their youth and prime could possibly have boasted.

Si'Wren hummed softly to him, as he began his moaning and thrashing again, and she wondered what chaotic dreams passed through his sleeping mind.

So the long night passed.

* * *

The sweat-covered, dirt-streaked slave runner came at a quick jog through the compound front gates and sought first after the whereabouts of Slavemaster Habrunt.

He did not know yet that Habrunt, the former Slavemaster of the House of Rababull, had so recently been deposed and punished. He did not know that Habrunt was slated to be sold for next to nothing, as soon as his wounds were healed. The messenger would speak to no one else at first, and the others were too frightened by the former Slavemaster Habrunt's terrifying fate to even so much as speak of him to the runner.

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Not finding Habrunt, the runner ran straight up the front steps into the House, where Old Maskron quickly sprang to his feet and raised his bronze sword in a challenge to yield and declare himself.

The gasping runner took in Old Maskron with a wild-eyed stare, and finally decided he could withhold his dire news no longer.

“Master Rababull is dead!” declared the breathless slave.

“Whaaaat?!” croaked Old Maskron, his eyes going senselessly round and wide.

The clatter of the sword rang loud on the stone steps, as Old Maskron reached out with both hands to seize the runner's tunic by the front to confront him bodily face-to-face and shook him as he howled, “You lie!!!”

“It is no lie!” the runner sobbed in a broken utterance. Then he went on, “Kadrug—giants!—they fell on us from all sides!”

He stopped suddenly, his lungs gasping audibly for air as he stood sniggering like a whipped boy in a torment of anguish, fear, and remorse at what he had seen.

“Master Rababull,” he moaned, “and all—of the rest of us...”

He fell silent, staring into emptiness as if at the terrifying aspect of unseen demons.

“Talk!” demanded Old Maskron finally, shaking the other again and infuriated at the runner's balking manner.

“A trap!!!” the slave wailed. “They are all—g—gug—dead!! Maskron!—what shall we do for I alone have escaped to tell you?!”

“Do?” croaked his interrogator. Old Maskron shook the weeping runner as he gripped him, staring him down for a long moment while his eyes took on a maddened look.

“Do?! You tell me this, and dare to ask of me, 'What shall we do?!’”

He shook the hapless runner again, a human god damning the dishonored vessel of calamitous news to all the imaginary hells of the soul, and violently cast him backwards as if the man had himself brought this dire fate upon the House of Rababull.

The runner fell backwards and hit the hard, hewn stones of the stairs full stretch against the back of his head, and lay sprawled backwards, head-downwards and facing sightlessly into the heavens on the unforgiving stone steps.

* * *

The fields stood empty. No slaves worked their softly undulating waves of ripening grain.

The water in the irrigation canals was already low and getting lower, the water ways steadily dropping down to unprecedented levels. The silent compound stood with its great gates closed tight shut and cross-barred through the heavy iron rungs. No confident soldiery patrolled its upper walkways. They were all dead.

At the top of the front steps of the House proper, no great Master stood confidently facing the world on its own terms as a favorite of the gods.

Master Rababull was dead.

Prut was dead. Geth the Fieldmaster was dead. All of their able-bodied male slaves were dead, their blood spilled in the fields surrounding the hotly contested sluice gates.

It was not a pretty sight, with the vultures already at work on what the corpse-strippers and ritual mutilators had left.

The compound was filled with quiet groups of motionless women, solemn-faced and terror-stricken. Their children clustered anxiously around them, some quiet, some crying, but none laughing. The few innocent toddlers who occasionally frolicked were quickly spanked into confounded wailing obedience, if not outright silence.

In the long and seemingly vacant cypress bungalow of the field slaves, one sang wordlessly, and almost inaudibly.

Close beside the cooking fire, Si'Wren, forbidden to form words, hummed and sang in sweet soft crooning sounds.

Keeping her voice low, she sat tirelessly beside the sleeping rack where Habrunt lay prostrate, hovering attentively over his tormented form and watching over him with tender devotion.

The others, preoccupied with vastly more important concerns now, could not be bothered to deal with Si'Wren anymore for her imagined blasphemies.

As one made ritually invisible, as well as silent, and an outcast for life, Si'Wren was lost in a world of her own. Clearly, she had eyes for no one but Habrunt. She saw nothing besides this mighty man who, laid low,

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remained on the rack and languished perpetually before her.

They had done this to him, and behold; they were now dead whereas he, Habrunt, still lived.

* * *

The compound's front gates boomed loudly as someone pounded at the door. In the drifting predawn mists of the interior yard, people cowered and watched from their doorways, peering fearfully across the compound, waiting for Old Maskron to go answer or at least send someone to see who it was.

Old Maskron finally came out to peer through the gray–white veil of dense fog with eyes reddened and pouched from lack of sleep and too many years of heavy drink and overmuch worry, his face a scowling mask.

At the side of Old Maskron, a nervous–looking, handsome young boy of perhaps ten appeared next, dressed in rich robes, his hair polled oddly in a manner which bespoke his noble birth.

Old Maskron clapped the boy on the back.

“Go! See!” Old Maskron growled the terse command.

The boy ran and climbed up the diagonal brace of one of the gates to peer out of a peephole. He was seen talking momentarily, then turned and ran back across the courtyard and up the House front steps.

“They are blood kin of the House of Rababull!” he proclaimed excitedly to Old Maskron.

“What? Impossible!” Old Maskron brandished his bronze sword as he made his arthritic way down the front steps.

With the keyed–up little Master at his side, white–haired Old Maskron wobbled and wheezed his way across the courtyard, his sandals scraping audibly in the dust of the dirt, while fearful eyes watched his slow progress to the gates from their ill–concealment on all quarters.

He arrived at the gates and peered out of the peephole.

Long seconds went past as he stood and talked with whoever was outside. He nodded occasionally several times, pausing to listen now and again, his hand idly fiddling with the sword.

Finally, he nodded approval as he turned and ordered several crippled slaves to open the gates. Limping, they reached for the cross bar. With a mighty heave, the heavy oaken cross bar slid sideways out of the iron rungs and into the receiver off to one side.

Old Maskron stepped back and self–importantly ordered them to open the gates with a show of bluster. With a series of ineffectual lurches, the crippled slaves put their backs into it, and slowly the big gates began to creak open.

Suddenly a spear lanced through the air, flying through the space between the opening gate doors, and struck Old Maskron in the chest, its iron point erupting in a welt of red from the backside of his spine as he collapsed with a single amazed croak of disbelief, dead before he struck the dirt.

In sheer terror, the boy screamed and turned to run. Halfway across the courtyard, he was struck down by a flight of arrows that zinged through the air and thunked sickeningly into his body and became inextricably embedded in his back, which he arched agonizingly even as he tumbled forward to hit the ground with an awful, nerveless slap and slid a half–step in the dust.

At this, the terrified shriekings and screamings of the women and other children suddenly filled the compound's surrounding buildings.

As the war party entered, their men marched quickly past the boy's crumpled figure. A huge half–breed giant fully seven feet tall thrust him through with a spear point and casually levered the honed steel blade out of the boy's body again as he marched past without even so much as breaking his stride.

They broke into all buildings and searched for any males of noble birth. There were none such, of course, except in the House proper.

These they brought out kicking and screaming, one by one, to the top of the front steps.

They were immediately confronted by a tall, fearsome–looking man who appeared to be the leader of the invaders and summarily thrust through with the sword and their lifeless bodies cast down the stone steps.

The more the dead were piled up, the more terrified the living became as they were dragged to the fore and arrived at the stark sight of the growing pile of bodies.

None were of fighting quality. Either too old or too young, they were nonetheless potential claimants or heirs to the Deed of the House of Rababull, and systematically eliminated.

The killing process only stopped when the executioners finally ran out of heirs.

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Then, the final prize, virile young Puffat was dragged out between two bedraggled but powerful-looking swordsmen, his gangrenous leg causing him much agony, making pathetic attempts to free himself and loudly protesting his innocence to whatever gods there be.

The snaggle-toothed, smiling executioner listened to him a moment, and then, still smiling, thrust him through with a sword and stepped back, jerking his weapon out of the victim as his body was released by his captors to plummet lifelessly down the blood-spattered steps where it eventually came to rest at the top of the heap of other victims.

There, others with spears were systematically thrusting through any who showed any signs of remaining life.

Technically, the invaders were no longer blood-kin to their victims, because they had murdered them all. This marvelous bit of genius had also portended a direct line of succession that now led straight to their leader, Conabar.

Now Conabar was chiefest blood-heir.

That was the object, that their leader might remain sole heir and possessor of the Deed to the House of Rababull and all of its holdings and slaves.

He might even move a marker stone or two and get a jump start on his new neighbors. Let them complain if they dared.

Conabar, a distant relation of Master Rababull, had sent word that he would come when called to battle against the common foe, but craftily delayed his coming and stayed home instead. Then he had sent out his scouts, and made his long-awaited move when opportunity presented itself upon the Master Rababull's untimely death. The power play was finally working out, because of his iron patience and the fickle turn of events.

In past times, it had been with much weariness and not a little conniving that Conabar had played up to the endless demands of Master Rababull's contemptuously-worded family obligations, while he had watched and learned and waited for over four hundred years for this singular opportunity to finally present itself.

Kadrug was still in possession of the sluice gates, but what was that to Conabar? He had his own House, and his own fields, to which might be added the holdings of Master Rababull. What could Kadrug do to him? Kadrug's men were spent, whereas Conabar's men were fresh and spoiling for the battle! All he needed to do now was to fight off Kadrug, or better yet, try to make an ally of him. Kadrug, with only the fields to bivouac his fighting forces, could not hold out forever against an entrenched, battle-hardened evil-doer like Conabar, who had the staying power of his riches to bribe others, and such vast holdings to sustain himself and his warriors.

"Long live Conabar!" yelled his men, the noise of their hollering and hooting voices deafening in the confines of the stockade.

Yea, thought Conabar to himself while his men cheered on, long live my ways and my word. Much blood must be spilled this day. But he knew he would live only so long as he kept his back to the wall and his wits about him, and his men remained loyal to him in his occasional absence and his nightly sleep. He would live as long as another like himself did not take similar advantage of him, as he had done to the former Master Rababull.

There was a sudden outcry of several of his men at the back gates. One of them came running and knelt before him on one knee to report that Rababull's many widows had escaped and were even now fleeing into the nearby city.

He scowled. They were to have been for him and his men, but now they might bring trouble instead. Too late now. The Emperor of the city would be too powerful to attack just to get back a few women, any of whom might easily be old enough to be his mother several times over.

With vile oaths and many despicable and filthy curses, and much spitting in the dirt, Conabar ordered the enslavement of all remaining women who were of noble birth and no longer virgin.

As for those women who were freeborn and had not yet known any man, they must be sorted through. The best would be his to keep or to sell off. His men could squabble over the rest.

There was even a tale told of a certain beautiful young slave girl who was an outcast even among her own kind, a redoubtable beauty whose flower of womanhood had only just begun to bud. A woman sworn never to speak for the remainder of her life. As soon as he could find the proper time to investigate this ridiculous old wives' tale, Conabar intended to go and find her.

A woman who was sworn never to talk back to any man, and was allegedly of such incomparable beauty; now there was a rare prize! As for the rumor of idol-breaking, that was a quandary to think about.

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But for some reason, they were having trouble locating her.

In the meantime, the men must be given free rein to make merry, lest they riot.

“Red wine!” Conabar called out. “I want the best!”

A warrior clapped his chest and went out to go slap a few slaves around, abusively demanding where the wine vats were, and the women readily granted him his every wish as they pleaded tearfully for their lives and the lives of their children.

The wine was quickly located, and Conabar savored his moment of victory as he thrust skyward the golden goblet of sparkling red wine, the very scent of which, penetrating and ethereal, made his head giddy with newfound power and glory.

Sloshing it's contents in a reckless gesture, Conabar waved his sword in the air and shouted, “Rababull be dead! Long live Conabar House!!”

“WHOO–RAH! WHOO–RAH!” shouted his men, crowding around on all sides as they routed the wine bearer for his plunder and brandished their weapons, toasting Conabar in a crash of armor.

The raucous cheering and noise-making grew to a deafening din in the compound.

* * *

Somewhere past the bungalow of the field slaves, beyond the back gate that let out into the fields behind the compound of the once and mighty House of Rababull who was no more, and yet beyond, out in the tall saw grasses and swaying bullrushes beside a peacefully meandering little stream, Si'Wren crouched low beside a collapsed Habrunt as she listened fearfully. In the distance, the madmen howled their anger and frustration at not finding her, and their mounting desperation at what Conabar would do to them for their failure to deliver one called Si'Wren into the hand of their master was driving them to extremes. They had already run old L'acoci through with a sword, for refusing to tell which way Si'Wren had gone.

Bent over in agony and unable to defend her now, the savagery of his punishments making him the very image of evil and degradation, a crippled Habrunt had counseled Si'Wren to flee, and against his protests found himself dragged along rather than be abandoned to the invaders. He had known what to do, but it was she who had actually accomplished their escape so narrowly in time.

Beside him, a heavily gasping Si'Wren felt deep fear. The way that the men who came searching had looked for Si'Wren, describing her so accurately, and the way her fellow slaves had named her so freely as she listened in the bushes nearby, had chilled her blood.

While the searchers ran off to look elsewhere, she had helped a crippled Habrunt to escape, fearful of being spotted at any moment. It was a relief to rest now, as she and Habrunt cowered together in the bullrushes by the stream.

Then, Habrunt said under his breath, as much an agonized groan as any recognizably human utterance, “The Emperor's Law is broken. If judgements are to be determined, we must go to the Emperor!”

He levered himself laboriously to his feet, and Si'Wren ducked under his shoulder to prop him up. As he indicated the direction of their flight, she helped him to get on his way with surprising strength for a girl her size.

Si'Wren refused to give up so easily. Yea, she only feared the others, but revered Habrunt, and whither he led she would surely follow.

* * *

“All bow!”

There was a general sound of the physical movements of many attendants and lawful petitioners as the masses bowed low to virtually scrape the floor with their noses. In addition to the Court Officers representing various royal functions, the riff-raff of the spectators' galleries looked on in gleeful anticipation, as sometimes the judgements could be quite severe.

Under the watchful eyes of the Palace Guard with their weapons at the ready, his Royal Majesty, singular ruler of the fertile gulf plain and self-proclaimed Anointed of the Gods, his Highness the Emperor Euphrates, father of many noble offspring and husband of countless wives, entered at a sedate pace accompanied by various officials and took with unfeigned boredom to the throne, his back against the stone wall and a pageant of armed guards in watchful attendance on either side. He was huge and gross of body, fleshy of face, hair and beard molded into one mass of shining streaming black streaked with gray. To look up at him from the floor at a time like this was to die.

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The proper doctrinal announcements were made by the Royal Crier, a tall thin reedy-looking fellow who could by now have pronounced them in his sleep without interrupting his own dreaming, and the great and terrible Emperor Euphrates was duly installed for the day.

The Public Hearings came first, during which he lounged on his amply padded stone throne and ate purple plums—a favorite delicacy; and gods have mercy upon the slave who dropped and stepped on so much as a single plum in the act of serving them—as he sat in state and heard out the wearisome, endless complaints of his subjects.

'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' was the customary rule, but men of means could get out of that if enough money was paid to satisfy their legal indebtedness to the Kingdom for whatever offenses.

One pair of contestants were given swords and, under the watchful eyes and ready lances of the Palace Guards, invited to fight it out on the spot in a bloody battle. In the end, both died of their wounds and their survivors fled the palace to grab what they could before the sacred arm of the Emperor's covetous priesthood could contrive a sufficient excuse to come and take it all.

* * *

By and large, Emperor Euphrates got around to hearing about the death of Master Rababull, and of the pleas for sanctuary by his many wailing widows and concubines.

According to their general testimony, it seemed that things had been happening at a drastically accelerated pace recently with respect to the affairs of the late Master Rababull, and it was not at all to their liking, these widows of Rababull's.

One named Conabar had taken over the House of Rababull, a blood relation. Conabar's friend was the savage outlaw warlord Kadrug, an enemy of the great Emperor Euphrates.

To this, Emperor Euphrates was characteristically unresponsive. To have enemies was nothing new, and more than a few had dined on a last supper of live coals for speaking the merest word against him.

The usual complaining went on. Conabar wanted to ravish their ailing old bodies. Conabar this. Conabar that. The wailing, the screaming, the emotional invectives presented quite a spectacle. When Emperor Euphrates had just about had enough of their nonsense and was almost ready to waggle a finger and have them all sent away as the pests that they were, he heard the name of Puffat, and at mention of this he abruptly held up his left hand to forestall the womens' chatter.

Raising his bushy eyebrows quizzically, Emperor Euphrates turned to his Chief Adviser, Borla, and held out his right hand to Borla like a peasant in the heat of barter.

"Puffat?" said Emperor Euphrates. "Where before have I heard the name of one called Puffat?"

For he knew he had heard it somewhere, at least once.

Borla, a tall, thin figure who invariably appeared in royal court wearing the darkest of robes, who was fond of keeping his haggard-looking head deeply and perpetually hooded, and who was not Royal Advisor for nothing, astutely put his long left index finger straight up beside the right nostril of his long, thin, protruding nose with a heavy frown, and sniffed not once but several times, somewhat noisily and theatrically. This was not done to insult Emperor Euphrates, but to further magnify His Majesty. Noses had much to do with majesty, as any proper emperor could tell you. It was Borla's formal thinking posture.

Finally, Borla nodded his head in satisfaction, and bowed peremptorily before looking up at his Emperor wisely.

"Puffat," rumbled Borla, who had a very deep voice, "is the offspring of a distant but honorable relation on your mother's sister's daughter's cousin's side, thrice—Ahem!; removed, in each instance."

"Ah! 'Thrice', you say? A most noble number," Emperor Euphrates agreed, raising his eyebrows and then frowning over the more meaningful possible aspects of this curious twist of fate.

"Quite so, your Majesty," agreed Borla dryly and noncommittally.

Emperor Euphrates turned to the widows and waved encouragement with an imploring motion of his right hand, using the common bartering gesture of the market place, and imploring them with a partially raised, cupped hand.

"Say on," said Emperor Euphrates, with a brief, commanding nod of royal encouragement.

One called Puffat, said three or four women, who all began to speak at once and in various overweening affectations and mannerisms—the dreary virtues of long-ago beauties, these—had been extremely sick and in pain beyond torment with the gain-green in his leg, when Kadrug had taken over the sluice gates, and slain Rababull

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with the edge of the sword when he valiantly went forth to battle.

Meanwhile, the women further alleged, Master Rababull's trusted blood-relation, Conabar, had crept to the House gates unawares and mercilessly slain Old Maskron when that unsuspecting worthy came and opened them.

Then the intruders, acting on their leader Conabar's orders, had promptly searched out and summarily executed all of Master Rababull's remaining children in a pathetic blood-bath.

At this, Emperor Euphrates had somewhat testily held up a forestalling hand, and after their gibber-gabber had died away, he said with a frown, "Eh, about one called Puffat..."

There was a moment of stunned silence, as the women seemed to take a moment to realize that any number of personal complaints would get them nowhere near as much sympathy as whatever they could conjure up about Puffat.

Then all at once the recriminations resumed, centered perfectly on the outrages suffered by one called Puffat.

One called Puffat, the women alleged, was seen crying out in extreme agony on account of the aggravated torments from his gain-green, as he was summarily dragged out and executed by no less a personage than Conabar himself, to eliminate him as a possible contender for the Headship of the House of Rababull.

As the perceptive widows watched him and played on his sympathies like shameless minstrels singing a love song for a handful of coppers, Emperor Euphrates, his eyes growing more fiery with their every word, slowly drew himself more vertically upright whilst sitting in his stone throne, and angrier still as he leaning successively still farther and farther forward until he seemed to ready to fall upon them all, until the widows finally began to quail at the sight of him and one by one, fell silent.

All but one old crone.

Oh yes! she declared, playing it for all she was worth. Old and useless, she would have death or glory, and cannily raised her cracking voice in shameless petition for the lost virtues of Puffat, a many-times thrice-removed relation of the Emperor!

Puffat suffered horribly before execution, declared she, with one squinted eye and one enlarged, red-rimed one in her woeful lamentations to an increasingly wrathful Emperor. Puffat's beautiful brown eyes were put out, wailed she. Puffat's big toes and thumbs were hacked off, gesticulated she, jerking at her own toes and thumbs with either bony hand and a rising croak of wheezing lungs and that unnerving, squinting stare.

Puffat's excruciatingly agonizing gangrenous leg was kicked repeatedly. Puffat this. Puffat that.

"Enough!!"

Emperor Euphrates finally slammed his fist down on the chair arm and jerked himself straight upright in his seat, towering over them all in a furious rage.

In the sudden silence, he glared down at the silent cluster of terrified widows.

"Borla!!" pronounced Emperor Euphrates, grating out his Chief Advisor's name.

"Hmm?" said Borla, somewhat jittery at the rank savagery of his Emperor's expression. But he was nothing, if not competent, and showed no further sign of his nervousness as he quickly recovered himself and fell smoothly into the litany of his accustomed royal pronouncements.

Borla turned to face the audience, and cleared his throat loudly.

"Ahem! His Majesty the Emperor Euphrates, is off-ended," said Borla as he turned significantly to Ampho, the Royal Crier.

"Eh? What was that?" asked the latter, starting upright as if he had been lost in a daze.

Ampho, the Royal Crier, beaked of nose and as thin as a reed, blinked in a rapid fluttering of his rheumy, myopic eyes as if he were suddenly roused out of a deep trance, and perked up his ears anew as he finally managed to take his eyes off the quacking old crone. He raised his bushy eyebrows and turned his hoary-haired and white-bearded countenance in an aside to Borla as he raised his bushy eyebrows alertly.

"Say again?" repeated Ampho.

The Royal Crier's occasional impudence was tolerated by Borla because he always managed to put on quite a show, and also because the Emperor Euphrates was so fond of the old ditherer, who was endeared to his majesty by virtue of having been old and gray-haired at such a time as his Imperial Majesty was still playing naked in the royal mud.

Betraying ill-concealed impatience, Borla repeated himself.

At this, Ampho, raised his voice and replied quickly with an air of self-importance and officiousness, "Ahem!

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As his Highness wishes!"

Then he raised and settled his shoulders bravely as he opened his mouth, screwed his eyes shut tightly, tilted his head back, and bawled loudly into the high vaulted stone ceiling, "All keep silence before the great Emperor Euphrates!"

A chorus of Court Officers immediately chanted, "All give ear and keep silence!"

In the sudden silence, the widows shifted their eyes nervously around the crowded court, fearful of the awesome power of the great Emperor Euphrates that so many should automatically kowtow to him with such unflinching ritual precision.

"Mark my words," said Emperor Euphrates. This was spoken for the benefit of the Royal Scribe, one called Ibi, who was also a man of great age like unto Ampho. Off to one side, aged Ibi promptly reached for his marking sticks, and impatiently signaled an apprentice to deliver a fresh clay tablet to him.

"One called Puffat," declared Emperor Euphrates, "has died an honorable death."

"Here ye all! One called Puffat..." Ampho cried out, howling Emperor Euphrates' pronouncements. When he had finished repeating the proclamation, he turned his head to his emperor and waited for the next royal pronouncement.

"One called Conabar," said Emperor Euphrates, "and one called Kadrug, both of whom doth magnify themselves against the Imperial throne and doth conspire unlawfully to slay his relations and diminish his blood line, shall appear before His Majesty, and their entrails shall be read to determine their guilt or innocence."

When Emperor Euphrates paused for breath, Ampho raised his voice and howled the decree loudly. Thus were pronounced both men's death sentences in typically indirect fashion.

Emperor Euphrates's claim to being a divinely appointed ruler and sorcerer depended most frequently and blatantly upon the habitual practice of killing off some victim for who-cares-what offence, and then ceremonially 'reading' the victim's entrails, invariably pronouncing that their guilt and worthiness of death by execution was clearly foretold there.

It was a most convincing and persuasive prophecy, in spite of its self-fulfilling nature, which others took especial note of in their earnest praises of their beloved Emperor for his great powers of divination, and also, his even greater powers of extinction.

It made him an Emperor to be feared beyond all reason in the eyes of his people. He was always 'right', and if someone was later found by delayed discovery of direct physical evidence to the contrary or some such nonsense to have been innocent of all charges, Emperor Euphrates had their entrails formally brought before him again—which were magically brought forth from the bowels of a living chicken—whereupon he typically reread them, and found the poor soul innocent.

What a truly miraculous display of the supernatural powers of royal divination.

He was always faithful to grant an immediate pardon.

Next, Emperor Euphrates said significantly, to Borla, "What is mine, is mine."

The meaning of this was long-rehearsed by so many repetitions gone before, that Borla knew exactly what Emperor Euphrates meant by it.

Borla bowed low, and straightening, turned to Ampho and pronounced dryly, "The Emperor giveth, and the Emperor taketh away. The former House of Rababull is to be seized from one called Conabar."

Ampho raised his nostrils to the rafters and howled with considerable vigor for one of such advanced years, "It pleases his Majesty the Emperor Euphrates that the House of Rababull, and all its bond persons, shall become the property of the Emperor, as compensation for the death of one called Puffat, the son of a distant and honorable relation!"

Deceased relations of the Emperor always "died honorably". If they could not be said to have "died honorably", they were first formally disowned, that their affairs might be judged the more harshly.

"Lastly," Emperor Euphrates finished, "a stipend is declared for the widows of one called Rababull." He gave the nod to Borla.

Borla braced himself with an ever-so-slight, momentary lift to his heels and shoulders, and said simply to Ampho, "His Majesty's mercies are everlasting; let the widows become street beggars."

"The widows of the House of Rababull," Ampho bawled appropriately, "have been granted royal permission to beg in the streets without molestation, provided they do not impede pedestrian traffic or interrupt the

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bar-gaining of the traders and honored thieves.”

In other words, they could beg if they kept their silence about it and managed to stick out their alms bowls in the paths of travellers whilst keeping out from underfoot of both man and beast.

After all, it was a great honor to be permitted to beg without offense.

The astonished and indignant widows of the House of Rababull, formerly of such self-serving pride and cruelty towards those pathetic and tormented slaves immediately under their harsh household rule, were herded from the court amidst the jeers and laughter of the throngs by the rude barks and gestures of the stern-faced Palace Guards.

Emperor Euphrates rose to his feet, whereupon Ampho immediately bawled out in a veritable falsetto screech, “All bow!”

This wasn't just good protocol. It was exceedingly difficult to throw a knife, shoot an arrow, or hurl a spear at Emperor Euphrates if one was bowing so low as not to be able to even look at him, or anything else for that matter, except the tiny section of floor being rubbed clean by the tip of one's prostrated nose.

By the same token, any who did not bow were immediately perceived by the watchful guards as the threat they very possibly were, and would immediately be thrust through with lances on the spot.

It was a very good and safe way to exit and enter. Kings and Emperors who were so foolish as to allow the crowds to cheer them on while they gloriously entered or exited ran the risk of being skewered in the process simply because it was so hard for a guard to pick out the one who had smuggled arms past the Royal Checker of Weapons and Headcoverings, both of which must be removed in the Emperor's presence anyways. It was too easy to let fly amidst the mass confusion of bodily movements of such agitated throngs.

This way, no one could move besides His Majesty the Emperor Euphrates himself. Thus, he was safer, because a man had to move before he could use a weapon, and if he tried he would instantly be picked out and dealt with soon enough to assure the Emperor a good long life.

* * *

But a spy warned Conabar, who abandoned the House of Rababull and immediately fled.

Kadrug, seeing that he had not nearly enough advantage of position or force of men to withstand Emperor Euphrates, wisely chose to retreat also and withdrew to the wilds.

Throughout the coming week, rumor had it that Kadrug and Conabar had sued one another for peace and pledged themselves in a blood oath to become allies against Emperor Euphrates, and it was avidly rumored that Kadrug had giants.

Emperor Euphrates had no giants.

* * *

Several days passed, during which time all property transfers were effected from the former House of Rababull to the royal treasury of Emperor Euphrates. The fate of the slave holdings of Master Rababull was of low priority, but they were finally got round to.

* * *

“Well, don't be frightened, step up!”

At the wizened old Court Officer's bidding, a reluctant Si'Wren, whose turn had finally come, stepped forward several awful, final steps to stand, eyes miserably downcast, before the great and terrible Emperor Euphrates.

“Your name, slave?” requested the court officer, a minor underling named Baschal.

Si'Wren, having made a vow to the Invisible God never to speak, remained silent.

If only Habrunt could be here to speak for her, but she had not seen him since being left here by him several days ago, and did not know what had become of him since. She knew him to be useless for work because of his injuries from the merciless whipping. Habrunt's last words had been to reassure her that in a world of such unsurpassing evils, only in the royal household would she be not mistreated, and that only there would she, without his strength to protect her, be safe. He said that she should not worry about him because he knew he would be given his freedom rather than unduly burden the food coffers of the slave quarters as an unprofitable cripple.

Si'Wren was grieved to hear Habrunt speak down on himself in this way. She would never call him useless or unprofitable, no matter what his condition. But unfortunately, it was not for her to decide, so she trusted Habrunt implicitly in everything he said. Si'Wren desperately yearned to see Habrunt, and missed him beyond all reason,

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but there was no one to turn to now.

“Well, speak up!” the man said gruffly to Si'Wren.

There ensued a momentous wait, perhaps a span of three or four breaths, while the great Emperor Euphrates grew increasingly impatient at first, and then, with a narrowing of his eyes, actually showed genuine interest in her. After all, this one was not only harmless, but an astonishing beauty. She could easily be excused of any number of imagined insults, and made to toe the line readily enough when final judgements were proclaimed.

But the girl—eyes downcast—remained stubbornly silent.

Frowning darkly, Borla finally stepped forward from his position of direct attendance on the Emperor's right hand, and motioned away Baschal with a little impatient flick of his fingers.

Gazing skeptically down upon her from within the deep folds of his hooded robe, Borla grimaced at her distastefully and said, as from a great height, “It seems this rebellious slave has lost her manners, Highness. Perhaps she should lose her life as well!”

At this, Si'Wren's eyes grew wide with fright and surprise, but still she said nothing.

Borla suddenly turned and said sharply to one of the Captains of the Palace Guard, “Give me a sword.”

The requested item was promptly produced by a guard, and handed over to Baschal, who promptly took it and handed it over in turn to the Chief Advisor to the Emperor.

“Now,” said Borla testily, with no small degree of impatience. “For the last time; what is thy name, girl?”

Si'Wren stood immobile as she regarded the edge of the gleaming sword which Borla held up just beneath her chin at the throat, and slowly shook her head.

“Very well,” said Borla, as he withdrew the sword and held it up for the death stroke. “His Majesty can be quite reasonable at times. You've obviously chosen to die for your insolence, and it is His pleasure to grant you your wish...”

“Withhold thy hand,” said Emperor Euphrates suddenly.

Borla hesitated, his arm tensed for the downswing, and regarded his Emperor in a look of self-evident deference.

“As you wish, Highness,” said Borla, as he bowed low and handed the sword back to the underling again.

“What is thy pleasure, Sire? Name it, and I shall not hesitate...”

“Bring her to me,” said Emperor Euphrates.

The Emperor's words echoed throughout the absolute, dead silence of the throne room as a thousand spectators looked on in shocked horror, and Si'Wren gasped involuntarily as Borla's heavy hand dropped firmly onto her slender shoulder, filling her pounding heart with sudden dread.

Escorted forward, Si'Wren kept her eyes dutifully lowered as she sought not to behold her Emperor, whom she had never ever seen before in her whole short life, let alone heard the remotest details of the daily existence of. She vaguely recalled her first, distant impression of his great bearded countenance, his fleshy features, and his eyes so full of overwhelming intelligence and power upon first entering the judgement hall.

As soon as Borla halted, Si'Wren stopped and stood utterly motionless beside him, eyes downcast as her great and terrible Lord leaned slightly forward on his throne. Borla kept his hand on her shoulder.

More curious than offended, Emperor Euphrates regarded the shy but stubborn slave girl as Borla looked on intently from within his hooded visage. Indeed, the whole court seemed to hold it's breath.

“Come here, child,” said Emperor Euphrates, as he wiggled an index finger to beckon her nearer.

In the midst of that frozen silence of so many disbelieving and incredulous faces, Si'Wren kept her eyes downcast and remained immobile.

“Come,” bid her Lord and Emperor again.

After another long hesitation, Si'Wren finally shuffled forward, a step at a time, while the fierce-looking Borla let his hand fall without impediment from her shoulder to slip away unnoticed.

Si'Wren stopped again, instinctively realizing that she had seen no one, throughout all earlier court proceedings, approach so close before, especially with such menacing guards looking on from all sides.

“Closer,” Emperor Euphrates commanded. “Why so shy? Let me get a good look at you. That's it. Now tell me, why do you not speak when commanded?”

Eyes downcast, Si'Wren shook her head, giving her answer to this and also clearly showing her ability to hear and understand quite plainly, and remained standing utterly silent and resolute before him.

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Emperor Euphrates peered narrowly at the stubborn girl.

“Do you not know that it is death to disobey your Emperor? Speak, I command you.”

But Si'Wren could not break her vow again, as she had done that terrible night when Habrunt came to rescue her. She must never speak again, no matter what, lest she dishonor her Invisible God.

Raising his eyebrows in frustration, Emperor Euphrates looked up at the throng and proclaimed, “Is this child a deaf and dumb mute? Is there any present who knows why this child refuses to obey her Emperor?”

Off to the left, one of Sorpiala's consorts stepped several quick steps forward and fell down prostrate on her face with the muffled cry, “Aye, Highness!”

“Ah,” nodded Emperor Euphrates approvingly. “What say you?”

“She is neither deaf, nor dumb, nor mute, but has been sworn to a vow of silence by her former master, on her very life, as fitting punishment for being a filthy idol-breaker!” declared the young woman, turning her head about quickly as she swept the royal court with her flashing eyes.

A general gasp of horror rose up from the crowd, with many individual exclamations of outright shock and disbelief.

“You so bear witness?” formally asked Emperor Euphrates.

“Aye!” the woman said with ill-disguised spite, looking up from the floor. She was obviously relishing the opportunity to inform everyone of the horrible crime and subsequent vow. “If the evil girl should speak but once in a lifetime, her disloyalty to her own vow shall constitute faithful witness against her and her forbidden god, the Invisible One, that they are both false, and she is to be immediately executed! So sward she herself in front of her former owner; one called Master Rababull.”

Emperor Euphrates digested this new bit of information in ruminative silence for a moment without showing the slightest sign of what his personal opinion might be of it.

“Very well,” said Emperor Euphrates finally. “It is most unusual, but a vow is a vow.”

Then, looking around the court, he said, “Who else bears witness?”

Sorpiala unthinkingly raised her hand and responded, “Aye!” as she stepped forth and—bowing low—remembered too late that it was dangerous to fool with the truth so, when her own consorts were so well aware that both Si'Wren and the other one, Nelatha, had actually been falsely accused by Sorpiala's own scheming manipulations. Let even one of her consorts be so much as threatened with the tiniest scratch, and Sorpiala's lies could be mercilessly exposed to save their own skins.

Well, it didn't really matter, did it? Sorpiala reassured herself silently. Was she not a past master of the connive, being just over one hundred years old, yet still in outward appearance seeming no more than a young woman just entering her prime?

“Two witnesses!” declared Emperor Euphrates formally. “Are there three?”

Sorpiala turned and gave the nod to another one of her most trusted consorts, who immediately and unthinkingly said “Aye!” and bowed low.

Emperor Euphrates nodded formally to the third witness, as he returned his eyes to the silent, fearful girl who stood before him without the slightest peep or murmur of protest against those testifying against her.

“There we have it,” said Emperor Euphrates conclusively. “Scribe, mark the names of the accusers for the record. We have three witnesses who say this girl is guilty of breaking idols. How say you?” said Emperor Euphrates, turning his head.

A heartsick Si'Wren, having remained motionless as each deadly 'Aye!' was pronounced, realized suddenly that Emperor Euphrates had spoken this time directly to herself, and her eyes grew wide as she stared back at him in fear.

“How say you, child? Hut!—”

Emperor Euphrates looked away and frowned impatiently at himself, remembering that she was sworn to silence and evidently would prefer to face the sword rather than to go back on her vow. A most remarkable girl, really.

Anticipating some unforeseen lack, Borla as Chief Advisor nonetheless wisely waited for Emperor Euphrates to correct himself.

Emperor Euphrates opened his mouth to begin again.

Then he shut his mouth, a veritable study in consternation, and looked up at the audience once more,

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automatically shifting his inscrutable gaze to Sorpiala, whom he instinctively perceived, wielded some sort of secret power of coercion over the other two witnesses.

“What is this child's name?” he asked Sorpiala.

“She is called, Si'Wren, Emperor,” responded Sorpiala elegantly.

“Ah!” Emperor Euphrates returned his intelligent eyes to confront Si'Wren face-to-face. “Stand closer, child,” and then, with a beckoning, drawing wave, “Come hither...”

Si'Wren approached the throne haltingly, until she stood so close as to be almost nose-to-nose when he finally leaned forward and murmured to her in an almost inaudible tone of voice that the other women could not overhear.

“Si'Wren,” said Emperor Euphrates gently, in a low, confiding tone, “do not fear. For I, myself, have destroyed many false idols, but you ought to obey your Emperor, and only indicate to myself, your Lord; are you an idol-breaker?”

Si'Wren took a moment to find an answer in a mindful of terrors, and shook her head once emphatically.

Negative!

Emperor Euphrates' eyes widened almost imperceptibly at this. Then, thinking further of it, he added, “Have you in fact sworn a vow of silence to the Forbidden One?”

With a pent-up sigh of weariness, defeat, and resignation to her doom, Si'Wren nodded in the affirmative this time. Then, she remembered that it was not a vow of absolute silence, but merely that she should not speak, so she added, lips pressed tightly shut, “Um-hmm.”

At this, Emperor Euphrates leaned back ever so slowly, and creased his eyebrows in a bushy frown as he thought this over until he had adequately perceived the precise nature of the vow as demonstrated and interpreted by the girl herself. For while she had not actually spoken, she had in fact made a noise.

A quandary! Pondering this mightily, he worried, for there was something about this whole case that was most distinct and unusual. What was it? He pondered this at length while the whole court waited and watched, scratching at his beard, and finally arrived at an understanding.

This young girl's open and forthright responses to his inquiries seemed too emboldened by the light of inner truth. Furthermore, she had remained utterly adamant in upholding her vow of silence in the face of certain death for disobeying so openly and blatantly his commands to speak, vow or no vow.

The other one, contrariwise, had an attitude.

That was it.

One called Sorpiala exhibited an attitude that was like the undeclared and unpunished crime of having stolen a three-day old fish, a crime whose very nature declared itself to all who happened to venture downwind of the evildoer. It was exactly like that; a stink in the discerning nostrils of the mighty and terrible Emperor Euphrates, whose mercy customarily extended to the tolerance of such attitudes, although it was his desire that only pure worship and obedience should ever be seen or demonstrated in his subjects. He tolerated their impious and disrespectful attitudes usually because ones such as Sorpiala simply did not realize how much their sage Emperor saw and forgave. Often they did not so much as realize that they even had attitudes with which to offend him.

For attitude was like human will, a contrary condition under the best of circumstances or at the best of times. But in his royal court, Emperor Euphrates viewed attitude as an innately unpardonable offense, and only rightly to be forgiven absenting any other lawful infractions. It was an offense against he whose majesty respected no person. It was an offense, moreover, against his very person, yea, he who was favored by the gods, and who favored or condemned, in turn, whoever it was his royal pleasure to favor or condemn.

Emperor Euphrates said quietly to Si'Wren, “Fear not, and see to it that henceforth you do not break your vow of silence, but only go and stand over there,” he indicated the right-hand, far edge of his royal dias, which was about ten steps distant, “and tarry there until I bid you draw neigh unto me again.”

He waited while Si'Wren backed uncertainly away to his right, and an ever astute Borla reached out carefully to halt and steady her when she would have backed clear off the edge of the raised dias and fallen flat.

“You, you, and you,” Emperor Euphrates bid the three women, “step two paces forward and remain where you are.”

Mystified, the three exchanged ill-concealed expressions of alarm as they complied with Emperor Euphrates' commands.

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“You,” Emperor Euphrates pointed out the third of Si'Wren's three accusers. “Come hither.”

He nodded and raised a forestalling hand to wave off the nearest guard, who had automatically raised a spear to point it at her as the slender woman stepped forward.

Abruptly, Borla suddenly thundered, “Silence!” as he spotted the first woman whispering to Sorpiala urgently and confidentially.

The woman let out a tiny, terrified “Eeep!” and gulped as she fell silent with anguished, desperate eyes. Sorpiala merely held her peace, and looked straight ahead in a penetrating look of ruthlessness, evidently determined to stand her ground and see this vile thing through to the bitter end, no matter what.

The woman initially called forth had also frozen at Borla's sudden bark to be silent, and Emperor Euphrates repeated his command that she approach the throne. Now she, the third-in-line of Si'Wren's accusers, who had not dared to volunteer herself, but only had spoken up at Sorpiala's initial bidding, hastened forward to fall flat at the very feet of Emperor Euphrates under the watchful eagle eyes of a dozen nearby guards, who automatically leaned ever so slightly forward on the staves of their upright spears in poised and menacing vigilance.

Emperor Euphrates leaned forward over the prostrate woman and could be seen whispering to her in a low indistinct voice, to which she answered fearfully now and again. Finally, he gave a little wave of the hand, temporarily dismissing her to the far left side of his royal dias.

She arose and stepped back, literally gasping for air in her newfound terror, for she instinctively realized what was coming and desperately yearned that she might not have accused Si'Wren in the first place.

“You,” Emperor Euphrates pointed out the second of Si'Wren's three accusers, “Come hither.”

Outwardly confident before all, Sorpiala smoothly and adroitly copied the first woman's awkward approaches and fell at Emperor Euphrates's feet. Another whispering conference ensued.

Finally, he dismissed her to his left, and did likewise with the last of Si'Wren's accusers, the one who had voluntarily and initially spoken first of her own free volition. When he had heard all, he dismissed her in like manner, and sat in silence.

Emperor Euphrates remained motionless for a long time and said nothing, staring straight ahead as if in a trance.

The entire assemblage of the court waited upon him, many of them quite familiar with this process from past experience. Others who were less experienced in the ways of the court, Si'Wren and her three accusers being numbered among these, experienced deep agitation as they also waited.

Finally, Emperor Euphrates blinked and seemed to come out of his trance as he heaved a sigh and seemed to nod to himself.

Then he turned his head and regarded Si'Wren's third accuser, the one whom he had questioned first.

“Tell me,” he commanded her. “What should be the punishment for such a one as remains silent when commanded to speak, and for the crime of idol-breaking?”

Utterly terrified, the woman's round eyes flicked to Si'Wren and back to her Emperor again, before finally blurting out, “Oh great and divine Emperor, it may be that I have erred most grievously, and that what she has done be no wrong thing at all, although it was also rumored that she was a believer in the Invisible God—if that be a crime. Perhaps—perhaps she should even be forgiven in case she has actually done nothing!”

At this, Sorpiala and the other woman suddenly exchanged conspiratorial looks, and Sorpiala fairly hissed her disapproval with an insucking of air.

Emperor Euphrates ignored the scandalous behavior as he regarded the woman directly being questioned. Then his eyes moved to Sorpiala.

“How say you?” he asked her. “What punishment would you prescribe for such an idol-breaker as stands accused before you?”

“Why—I do not know, Highness,” Sorpiala wheedled. “She has already been punished. Perhaps,” she dropped her eyes and barely suppressed a gloating smile, “might I but whisper in your ear—”

Dropping his eyes to grant a less than sincere approval, Emperor Euphrates nodded as he said, “Come forward, then.”

At this, Sorpiala—pridefully imagining herself as a strong contender to become the new queen of the kingdom of Emperor Euphrates, and Si'Wren as her first victim—readily tip-toed to the Emperor's side and leaned forward upon the upraised balls of both tiny feet.

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“Perhaps one called Si'Wren should suffer...” said Sorpiala dramatically, and leaning forward, she began to whisper at long length in his ear.

Sorpiala pronounced dire punishments, worse than anything she had ever seen or heard of anywhere in her hundred years upon the earth.

“Ah!” said Emperor Euphrates, nodding like a master thief who has joined hand-in-hand with a cunning new ally. “But this one has already been punished with a vow of silence under pain of death, has she not?”

“It was not enough, Highness!” said Sorpiala, her exotic almond eyes moving sideways as she pronounced her personal opinion upon the matter.

Emperor Euphrates nodded, and appeared exceeding thoughtful.

Sorpiala suppressed a look of triumph. Finally, she was at long last about to have the supremacy over Si'Wren, the little wretch!

Emperor Euphrates looked to the last woman, Si'Wren's initial accuser.

She spoke up before even being asked.

“Idol breakers should...”

Emperor Euphrates listened at length, taking no formal notice of her lack of proper respect in crudely omitting to use even one of his many glorious titles of formal address.

When she had finished speaking, Emperor Euphrates nodded, eyes heavily lidded in judicious contemplation. Finally he heaved a long, heavy sigh of resignation as he looked up and gave the nod to the Royal Crier.

Tall, thin Ampho, the Royal Crier, pointed his beaked nose straight in the air and opened his yawning mouth as he bawled loudly to the ceiling, “All keep silence before the great Emperor Euphrates!”

A chorus of court attendants' voices dutifully chanted, “All give ear and keep silence!”

Emperor Euphrates sighed. Ah, the grandeur of formalities! Who needed those foolish idols anyways? He'd broken one of the silly things himself once, right in front of everybody, and had the devil's own time talking himself out of it.

That had been only two hundred years ago, and he still winced every time he thought about it.

Even Borla had been temporarily at a loss what to advise. It simply was not a thing to be done, ever. You could deliberately destroy the idols of your enemies, but that was an entirely different proposition and not the same thing at all. This had been a stupid blunder, obvious to all.

Finally, on Borla's advice, he had called in the Royal Sorcerer, also known as the Fort Rune Tale Heir, since it was an inherited position. He was a filthy, huge, grossly obese individual of exceptionally obnoxious character who went by the unlikely moniker of Fadoo the Dread, and the obliging fellow was persuaded to conjure up a bit of hocus-pocus to make a bigger and better statue of the idol appear in a cloud of ashes and smoke, right where the old one had smashed.

Fadoo had done him one better, nearly breaking his own foot when he'd accidentally dropped the new statue on it in the process of letting it fall from its place of concealment beneath the voluminous skirts of his bulging belly, after poofing up a huge cloud of noxious, stinking smoke. No wonder the fellow always smelled so bad. It was rumored that he never bathed, either, and there was no need of chicken entrails to figure that out.

Fadoo had meant to stoop halfway into a squat and 'give birth' to the idol while the spectators' view of him was temporarily obstructed by smoke. At least the replacement idol had been provided with a nice cushion for its unexpected fall, and all of the moaning and groaning which Fadoo had suddenly exhibited had been a very mystical and convincing performance and well worth the ordeal, especially since it was Fadoo's foot and not the Emperor's.

Better yet, Fadoo had limped for such a long time afterwards that the Royal Sorcerer's hobbled gait had provided a convenient stigma with which to draw away any possibly adverse attention from Emperor Euphrates' blunder in breaking the original idol in the first place. It was all so simple; Fadoo's limp was a sign from the gods. So much for idols.

Emperor Euphrates finally looked up, and cleared his throat noisily.

“Because of the seriousness of the accusations, I, Emperor Euphrates, chosen of the gods, even I, shall now declare the outcome before all.”

He paused, and looked round upon all present. Ampho remained frozen, as if he were no more than a dumb idol himself. Borla was merely silent and watchful as always. Let them all watch and learn.

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Emperor Euphrates looked upon Si'Wren, and smiled as he inclined his head graciously.

“I have examined the soul of one called Si'Wren,” Emperor Euphrates declared, “and find no fault in her.” Surprised gasps arose on all sides.

Then, with a dire and accusing glare Emperor Euphrates looked to Si'Wren's three accusers and went on without further hesitation, “I have mercifully examined all three witnesses in great detail without the customary and usual questioning by torture, and have found none of them to be in agreement with each other in the slightest particulars.”

Si'Wren felt shock. She wasn't expecting him to say that!

But Si'Wren's three accusers were terror-stricken as Emperor Euphrates went on.

“Your punishments be upon your own heads!” he suddenly pronounced, finally declaring imperial judgement. Then he became as one made of stone, as he gave the nod to Borla.

“On your own heads...” Borla repeated, stepping forward in front of Si'Wren's three shocked accusers as he rubbed his hands together thoughtfully, for he had overhead everything.

The absolute silence, which had ruled for but a heartbeat, was shattered by wailing protests from Sorpiala and her one vengeful consort.

“Guards!” Borla commanded, taking proper charge of his duties, and not without a certain satisfaction, for he fully appreciated the virtually divine means by which Emperor Euphrates invariably seemed to discern truth where others—including Borla himself—invariably failed miserably.

He quickly barred the guards' access to little Si'Wren with an outstretched arm, while the guards, stupid oafs, laid off and left her alone, to go for her three terrified accusers instead.

“This one said, 'Let her be forgiven,’” said Borla, with a brief wave of summary dismissal. “Therefore, she is forgiven.”

“Oh thank you Sire!” gibbered the terrified woman, immediately falling down before him.

Borla ignored the prostrate woman grovelling before his feet, as he regarded the next one.

“This one said...”

As Borla repeated the proposed punishments of Sorpiala back at her, she shrieked, “NAAAAAAAAA!...” with a wide-eyed look of insane terror, backing away in a series of quick, shuffling half-steps and retreating blindly backwards into the ready hands of two burly guards approaching from behind her.

What Sorpiala had sentenced was too elaborate to be carried out in court, so the guards dragged her away, struggling and shrieking out a prolonged series of thin shrill screams, long and utterly soul-despairing. The bloodcurdling screams were partially obscured by her removal to the halls, but therefrom emerged the echoes of her departing wails, as of a living soul descending into the very pit of deepest, darkest hell itself.

“And now this one...” said Borla finally, extending his arm out to one side and holding out his hand without looking.

Hastily, the ceremonial arms-bearer stepped forward and planted Borla's sword in his hand. Like the late and unlamented Master Rababull, the ability to unflinchingly execute the harshest judgements was one of the most terrifying things about men like Borla. Si'Wren longed to beg Emperor Euphrates to have mercy upon her accusers, to forget their awful, unreasoning hatred, but could only remain utterly and eternally silent, lest she betray her vow.

While four separate burly guards kept an iron grip on her to immobilize her, the third one, screaming like one possessed, suffered her own intended punishments before the Emperor and all the general assemblage at the hand of Borla himself as Si'Wren shut her eyes and wished she could shut her ears also as she turned her head away and felt sick to her stomach.

Sorpiala's unmerciful consort fainted in the process of receiving her punishment, and was dragged away unconscious to the slave quarters, to be revived for the finishing of her intended punishments.

At last, Borla handed the bloody weapon back to the ceremonial arms-bearer.

Si'Wren and the woman who had ordained mercy stood beside one another throughout the entire ordeal of the punishments. On impulse, Si'Wren turned and hugged the woman, who embraced her desperately in return.

“What is to become of these, your Highness?” Borla inquired dutifully, bowing low even as he indicated Si'Wren and the other woman with an extended palm.

Emperor Euphrates, who had remained motionless and impassive before the excited crowd throughout the

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entire phase of the punishments, softened his gaze as he finally permitted himself to formally take notice of the two women again.

“One called Si'Wren,” said Emperor Euphrates, “fainted not in her hour of trial. I, even I, have not observed so great courage, as was found in this little one! Borla, you have been rightfully bested in Royal Court by this brilliant child.”

“A thousand pardons, Highness,” responded Borla.

He bowed low, and while Borla was bowing, he was unable to see Emperor Euphrates incline his great head as he smiled at Si'Wren merrily.

The girl's eyes flashed with momentary astonishment, as she remained in respectful attendance and stood awaiting his word, and Borla rose again to full stature with a grand flourish.

Borla continued observantly, “Of a truth, Highness, this mere babe in her innocence has scorned fearlessly the edge of the sword and bested Borla in all of his wisdom and power, even as his munificent Highness has declared. For verily do I perceive that she has indeed kept her vow honorably, a fact which your esteemed self has astutely discerned without the slightest hesitation, whereas worthless Borla himself had failed to understand, even after ample opportunity was afforded him to discover this with his own two eyes.”

This was true, which was why Emperor Euphrates was an emperor, and Borla only a chief advisor. However, a normally brief, succinct, and to-the-point Borla did know when to praise his Emperor with more than the usual flourish.

“And what say you, Borla, of the former Master of the House of Rababull?” prompted Emperor Euphrates.

“Rababull was a fool!” declared Borla succinctly.

“Verily, Borla,” intoned Emperor Euphrates.

“To have so punished a mere child, an underage girl who hath no breasts,” Borla went on. “Is it not harsh and unfatherly? Those of tender years are known for their perpetual blunders, short-sightedness, and pure love of rank foolishness. How easily might the girl rather have been corrected instead by any number of more suitable lesser punishments. Even for having broken a nobleman's idol, a proper ransom might have been paid to redeem her of her crime. I mean...”

Emperor Euphrates nodded approvingly, waiting for Borla to go on.

Borla cast about for the proper words, seeking to assuage the harshness of his legal status, seeing how obviously fond his Emperor Euphrates was of the girl.

“I mean...” Borla hesitated. “After all,” he shrugged innocuously, with an engaging show of teeth, “it could not have been a very powerful idol, for all of that, if it could not even prevent itself from being broken by a mere girl.”

“Customarily, the subject is sacrificed to the idol,” remarked Emperor Euphrates in round-about congruence, “and not the other way around. It is a powerful sign, is it not?”

“It is all of that, Highness,” Borla agreed, displaying more of his uncharacteristic crocodile grin.

Borla's grin faded, as his astute mind went on to other considerations.

“Now about the vow...?” Borla went on suggestively, and paused.

Emperor Euphrates shrugged.

“What of it?”

“Well, what is to be done with her, Highness?”

Emperor Euphrates paused for a long moment, while the entire court looked on. Then finally his look brightened.

“Let her become a Royal Scribe in my court,” said Emperor Euphrates.

“My Emperor,” protested Borla in confusion, “truly, forbidden to speak, your royal secrets shall indeed be safe with this fearless child, but if she can neither read nor write, of what use can she be?”

“Then have her trained, Borla!” said Emperor Euphrates.

“But—” Borla halted, trying to imagine all the difficulties of this impossible task.

Then his hooded figure bowed even lower, scraping neigh unto the floor.

“Behold thy servant Borla, who diligently seeks a right finish to all royal affairs! Thy judgements are Wisdom incarnate for I perceive that thou hast pronounced fitting judgement, as always.”

Borla turned, and gazed forbiddingly upon the remaining woman, Sorpiala's other consort, standing close

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beside Si'Wren.

“And—as for this one, Highness?” he inquired in a mercilessly flat tone of voice.

Shaking uncontrollably, the hopelessly terrified woman would not let go of Si'Wren. The woman, having already been spared punishment, still did not know what her ultimate fate might be and clung fearfully to Si'Wren, who steadfastly refused to push the woman away.

Emperor Euphrates, seeing this, said merely, “Oh, let her go free,” and waved her off with a disinterested nod of dismissal.

“The gods praise thee, merciful Emperor!” the woman gasped as she fell on the floor at his feet. Emperor Euphrates nodded patronizingly with a gratified look at the outcome of events. Then he raised his eyes to look beyond the prostrate woman, and gaze upon the surpassing beauty of Si'Wren, and his eyes fairly twinkled with doting joy.

Si'Wren smiled as she shut her eyes and bowed in meek formal obeisance to Emperor Euphrates.

Unbeknownst to all, she also gave silent, prayerful thanks to a most inscrutable, but eternally wise and most mysterious Invisible God.

Chapter Five—A horse.

“Si'Wren,” said old Ibi, “you have worked hard and diligently. I look forward with great pleasure to declaring you before all to be fully studied and prepared for your royal station, as formally commissioned by his Majesty the Emperor. When he hears of this, I have no doubt that you will be so appointed and given all due honors and tributes pertaining to the Order of Scribe.”

Si'Wren stood before Ibi with the flush of joy and accomplishment on her face.

After her momentous court debut four years ago as the stubborn young girl–slave whose lips Borla's own sword could not open, she had been escorted to what was to become her very own personal, private quarters in the same wing of the palace as the other royal officials. Since then, as an underling to virtually everyone but the slaves themselves, she had been introduced to general grooming and appearance standards acceptable to palace etiquette, and ways of acting and behaving that conformed suitably to court protocol, and had begun her long and arduous internship as an understudy of the great and illustrious Ibi himself.

During these four years, she had managed to develop a somewhat foggy understanding of 'delicate subjects' having to do with politically potent and sensitive issues which one must always try to heed in order to properly show 'manners'. In view of how little she knew, it appeared that she did not merely have her marks to learn, she also had to pick up on the royal ropes. Many doors, some good, some evil, would henceforth stand open to her, but she must choose which.

Seemingly from her first month at the palace, Si'Wren had begun to assume the mantle of womanhood. Now, at sixteen, she was beginning to take on some of the physical characteristics of an adult, although in stature she still appeared to be somewhat small compared to others born of the same year. She was developing a trim, athletic figure as a result of avoiding the many fattening and corrupting foods free for the taking as a palace resident, and was becoming more womanly of form now with each passing year.

She who had once bathed in the stream, now dipped herself in the magnificent public baths of the palace dignitaries. Indeed, her privileges were such that she could have indulged in many spoiling luxuries, although—except for a simple desire for natural purity and cleanliness—by and large she tended to shun the physically and morally polluting diversions.

Her early years living on the plain fare of the slaves, together with her experiences in the spice tent, had engendered in her a natural awareness of how the vices of the rich could lead directly to one's personal destruction. Having preferred from earliest memory not to adopt the superior airs and affectations of Sorpiala and her clique, who haughtily deemed themselves to be above their fellow beings, Si'Wren did not see fit to change her humble and unassuming ways as a Royal Officer of the Court.

In his endless daily instructional sessions with her, Ibi had developed a fierce vicarious pride in the proper and dutiful studies of Si'Wren, and developed a habit of grilling her relentlessly, so that the poor girl spent her days perpetually neigh unto exhaustion from unrelenting fatigue.

In view of these and other considerations, and especially for moral reasons, Si'Wren deliberately avoided the many royal orgies of banqueting, and worse, open to her, choosing instead to spend much time cloistered alone in her personal chambers, there to catch up on her work assignments and neglected slumbers unmolested. She still

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slept on a mat of rushes, by choice, whereas the others in the palace all preferred more luxurious accommodations such as straw or down mattresses. Si'Wren seemed to sleep so much the better that way, and yet, in spite of her efforts at getting sufficient physical rest, ever did she labor with the circles of learning under her eyes. Truly, much study was a weariness to the flesh. But she always worked hard at it, and she was a fast learner.

She always wondered what had happened to Habrunt, but in addition to her vow never to speak, she could not so much as write his name at first. No person ever volunteered any information about him to her. And why should anyone care, seeing they knew neither her nor this curious unknown stranger called Habrunt? In fact, she had not overheard even the most incidental of news about him, and grew especially wistful whenever she chanced to think on Habrunt, and prayed for his well-being every day.

As for false religion, Si'Wren was not formally required to attend the worship ceremonies for any of the temple gods, nor did she ever once volunteer to go. For, marvelously, the Emperor had exercised his absolute power over his domain by indulging himself in the most peculiar manner, by openly declaring that one called Si'Wren was free to worship her forbidden Invisible God if she so chose. This unheard-of privilege especially rankled certain others of the court, and was to them a particularly vile concern, although they dared not so much as hint at their displeasure to Si'Wren's face. For equally obvious was the inescapable fact that Si'Wren had found much favor in the eyes of Emperor Euphrates, and because of this Si'Wren's neglect of the temple idols must be overlooked.

And that was that.

Whether this was because Emperor Euphrates was so far removed from the desperation of life that he had no proper appreciation for the resultant undermining of the idol-maker's profit motive by such an endorsement, was hard to tell. Perhaps instead, Emperor Euphrates actually found something to marvel in, at the very idea of a speechless young woman silently worshipping an Invisible God.

In view of recent developments, no ranking official would have dared to compel an alleged idol-breaker, and a known favorite of the Emperor himself, to attend upon the ceremonies of the gods. Unknown to Si'Wren, the very subject was what those-in-the-know at the palace considered 'an especially delicate matter'. For to lead her into some deathly blunder of etiquette, and inadvertently besmirch her newfound dignity, to which were attributed not her own, but the highest of royal graces clearly imbued by Imperial decree, was virtually to besmirch the character of Emperor Euphrates himself, and who would be so stupid as to dare risk such an awful eventuality as that?

Si'Wren daily prostrated herself on a rush mat in her private quarters and gave thanks to the Invisible God in wordless praise of both him and his perpetual blessings. For she did feel blessed, richly blessed, to know the one true God in such an evil world of scowling idols.

Si'Wren's awareness was constantly filled with the wonders of the palace, beyond the impregnable walls and outer battlements of which, stretching far and wide, existed a savage land of perpetual misery. She had grown much in wisdom, and in native understanding of the frightfully wicked ways of the world, and found nothing but evil in a society to whom such idols were a perpetual source of deliberate and intentional foolishness.

But in seeking real spiritual truth, Si'Wren could only confess to herself in private that she still knew next to nothing of the Invisible God. Free to believe in the Invisible God, she had launched herself on an inner voyage of discovery through vast uncharted realms of the spiritual unknown. It was a deep and ongoing struggle to overcome unrelenting feelings that she was as lost as ever, with only her untutored conscience as her guide.

She could only try not to mimic the false worship she had been formerly taught for idols, trusting blindly that Holy God would not find some reason to be offended at her clumsy attempts to give obeisance to Him. She sought in her heart how best to worship, but at first could only bow low upon the woven rug in her private chamber, prostrating herself humbly before an imaginary, holy countenance which she believed to be all-seeing, and speak in her heart as if to an imaginary personality that surely must be all-hearing, but she could only wonder what he truly wanted.

Silently, Si'Wren humbly petitioned this invisible, nameless God that he might accept her uninstructed worship of him. She prayed that he would never forsake her. Sworn never to actually speak, she prayed to him in silence. Unable to actually see him, she often closed her eyes. Unable to imitate him, knowingly appease him, or observe anything he might desire, she begged him to pity her and merely accept the fact that she worshipped him, the Invisible One, the only true and living God.

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One thing she felt sure of. The worship of idols was an act of false, direst evil. Surely, without a doubt, the Invisible God desired true worship from her, and not evil idolatry. Si'Wren felt instinctively that in this must be found true virtue, and thought that she already had some misty idea of the proper difference between good and evil, but prayed for perpetual enlightenment in this.

That day, finished with her prayers, Si'Wren turned to an intricately woven basket on a carved wooden stand laden with ripe fruit, and began to consume some of it. Preoccupied, she absent-mindedly tilted her head this way and that as she ate thoughtfully. When she had finished eating, she sucked the pulp off her fingers, and set the beautiful basket back on its stand. Having nothing else to do for the moment, she looked around her quarters, inspecting everything anew, for she could not help but marvel all over again every time she reentered her own private domain at all the fine things which were for her personal use, and to be considered her permanent possessions.

Imagine, Si'Wren thought to herself, having one's very own private bed chamber. It was located in the administrative section, the part of the Imperial palace reserved for the living quarters of the numerous palace civil servants, and occupied one entire wing of the imposing, rough-hewn stone fortress which contained many similar fine rooms as this, each one more glorious than the next.

All around her, in the palace, and in her own private room, were countless royal delights. The stone walls were panelled in planks of rough hewn wood, and hung with crude but richly woven tapestries and curtains.

The floors were of flat stone slabs, not perfectly flat but naturally smooth and hence very slightly uneven, being arranged so as to make a level surface, and frequently covered by rugs. Such was the slab floor in her very own personal room.

She turned to a little round side table and paused to examine anew, a polished wooden carving of an ox, dark, smooth and gleaming. The beautifully carved ox was short-legged and stout, with stubby horns, the whole artistic style being deliberately simplistic, having a tendency to look like a series of arcs fitly joined together; the horns and front legs both being arcs that went from side to side, the arcs of the hind legs, belly, backbone, tail, and head being arcs from front to back. All arcs.

She looked around, her eyes roaming the room, and admired a decorative, single-handled water vase that was flat, wide, and round at the base and gracefully slender for the upper two-thirds. Propped on a small round table, the tall vase was artfully and tastefully colored in earthtone shadings of tans and browns. Beside it was a fired clay wash basin. On the basin were to be seen engraved pictographs of the sowers, reapers and gatherers of grains. It wasn't so much a collection of idols, as a picture-script, a visual record of the entire harvesting process, above which was depicted a simple circle with lines pointing from it, indicating the rays of the sun as a source of light, and not as a false idol god.

There was, she perceived, a deep, real difference between the symbolic meaning and morally acceptable symbolism presented in such hieroglyphs, or picture-carvings, as opposed to the rank evil of outright, false idolatry. The symbolic images of honest work seemed most right, proper, and inspiring, and not at all like the false worship of mere graven things as false gods.

Hence, she perceived that the pictograph of the harvest inscribed in the sides of the water basin bore less of the idolatrous, and more of the earmarks of honest record keeping and written language, which itself comprised her new profession, rather than of the evil mysticism of idols, depending, of course, on how one looked at it. Anything could be made to be idolatrous, but some things, like these pictographs, could be viewed as mere pictures, and as just another form of written communication. Dimly, Si'Wren sensed that she was onto something new and vastly different from anything she had ever conceived of in her mind before. A whole new way of looking at things, far beyond what the idol-makers of the House of Rababull had been engaged in doing. It was good to understand this, and she wondered greatly at the clever artist who had so faithfully decorated the water basin.

Turning to reach past the polished dark wooden ox, Si'Wren retrieved the vase. In a perfectly expressionless and somber mien, she poured water into the shallow basin, filling it almost to the rim, and paused to consider its reflection, seen by the light of a tall, narrow, decoratively barred siege window. One could easily understand that although water might reflect all things, the water was itself 'invisible' to the extent that one might see through it. Further, the water itself had no particular shape.

So might the Invisible God, she thought to herself, be seen in all things, and yet not be seen, even as one

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looked into the reflection of the water basin and by this marvelous result behold all mere physical things of the world. Yet one could no more touch the Invisible God than one could reach into the reflections in the water and touch them either. In spite of this, she could easily perceive what was real, and what was illusion. What great spiritual riches she had found in a bowl of water.

How could anyone possibly make an idol of the Invisible God? Why, one might as well try to make an idol of the wind itself, and did not God so breathe the very wind of life into the first man, the Patriarch Adam himself?

Adam and Eve had seen God, and talked with Him, when He came walking in the Garden of Eden, before they were cast out. Was not man said to be made in God's image, according to the ancient but discredited folklore and children's fables about Adam and Eve? Hence, the form of man must resemble the form of God, although man was but man, meaning mankind, which included womankind, and God was God. Nelatha had once said that if one went to Paradise, one would see God and live, a God Who walked, and talked, and could be seen, and Who was yet spirit.

Si'Wren was perplexed, and her thoughts ran to confusion. It was then that the very real wisdom of Nelatha, which had come from L'acoci, now betrayed its deeper truths, for Si'Wren remembered at the last that it was sufficient in Nelatha's understanding as a lowly ignorant slave girl, like Si'Wren herself, to compare the Invisible God to water, which one could see, and yet remained invisible. For could not one hold pure water in one's hand, and both see the water, and yet at one and the same time, see right through it? And water, she remembered, reflected all things faithfully. Thus might a righteous and holy God reflect all men's souls to them in the hereafter, rewarding the good with more good unto life, and the evil with more of their own evil unto eternal wailing and damnation.

Thoughtfully, she turned to the window, the frame of which was overgrown by clinging vines which stretched forth their profusion of white-streaked, green ivy leaves in every direction. Looking out, she saw a collection of dirty beggars sitting by the wayside in the street. They were the maimed, the blind, the diseased, always to be found among the countless throngs of city-goers and inhabitants.

She turned from the decoratively barred window and went back to the table, where she stood gazing down at the finely carved wooden ox. To the poor beggars, it would represent a fortune in coppers. She picked up the carved wooden ox, so dark, so smooth and lifelike, and returned to the ornate window. There, she paused for a long time, looking out on the beggars.

She already thought of the Invisible God as all-powerful by his very nature. But somehow she could not help imagining that surely he must desire at least a little agreement, some form of willful participation on her part, to better the lot of her fellow creatures.

Let the beggars sell the wooden ox, for money to buy food.

So saying to herself, she looked carefully, and tossed the wooden ox out through the ornamental bars past the green ivy vines.

It turned over slowly in the air and landed unbroken in a pile of dirty straw beside a group of filthy, crippled street beggars.

As Si'Wren stepped back into the shadows of her window sill, an outcry arose below in the narrow street. The anxious voices of the beggars could be heard talking animatedly about this perceived 'miracle'.

When at last Si'Wren dared to lean once more into the deeply recessed window sill for a peek, for the stone of the fortress wall was exceeding thick, her delight was turned to dismay.

They were worshipping it.

There they all were, kneeling and bowing to the dumb wooden ox! They had it propped up on the ground in front of them, off to one side out of the way of the busy foot traffic.

Shocked, she looked down upon them and stamped her little foot in mute frustration. They were impossible!

She opened her mouth, fervently wishing to call out to them and let them know the terrible error of what they were doing.

I threw it! she longed to say. But she had to shut her mouth again, and could only watch unhappily, with useless, tightly pursed lips and flashing, angry eyes.

So this was what she was up against. Remorse filled her soul, until she felt rent in twain by her anguish.

Why God? Si'Wren implored him, dropping in despair to her knees on the carpet. Why must I thus remain silent in this evil world so full of the praise of idols? Why God? Why?

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Her sorrow multiplied rapidly over what she had unwittingly done in the name of idolatry, until her eyes blurred over and the unhappy vision of the beggars happily bowing before their new ox-god became washed away in a sea of salt tears and she turned away from them in anguish.

Brokenly, she fell across her bed and sobbed herself to sleep.

* * *

The next day, Si'Wren was formally presented by Ibi to the court and officially assumed her new status as Court Scribe. Emperor Euphrates was exceedingly pleased, which would have made her all the more so by turns, were it not for her so recent experience with the polished wooden ox just the day before.

After she bowed low before him, he beckoned to her to sit on his right hand, several places removed. There were other, more important dignitaries who with all their robes and finery, considerably outranked her and sat closer to the Emperor. In fact, immediately to her right stood a royal palace guard, a rough-looking fellow, with his motionless back to the stones of the wall and a fearsome-looking spear in his big hands.

Seeing that the others were seated, she sat down also, and turned to stare curiously up at the guard standing beside her, but that other worthy only blinked in irritation and refused to look back at her or so much as acknowledge her presence.

Si'Wren dropped her eyes from the guard's aloof, stoic countenance, unaware that already many in the court room were covertly watching the newly appointed Royal Scribe with shifty, appraising looks, secretly wondering if she could be induced to sell out to them and at what price, in rank opposition to her Emperor's open claim to all her loyalties.

In contrast to the others' extravagance and finery in choice of raiment, Si'Wren had wisely followed Ibi's sage advice and foregone such vain nonsense in favor of a simple outfit consisting of pantaloons, blouse, long cape, and removable head covering, all loose in the folds but tight at the cuffs and waist, and all in starkest black.

By contrast, there was easily enough jewelry on all other royal dignitaries present to assure their inevitable drowning should one of them happen to accidentally fall into the moat.

Her hair was still the same length as always, almost to the waist in back. Sometimes, she kept it in a single long braid fastened at the end with a tiny black ribbon.

She took with her everywhere now her kit, consisting of the various tools and artifacts of her trade.

This consisted of two little wooden marking sticks kept in a black leather pouch, and a small honing stick of rough-surfaced lava rock from the stone masons quarter, for resharpening the marking sticks when the moist clay softened and distorted their tips. Actually, one had to set aside the dampened one to dry and use a dry one, and when the dampened one was dry, then to sharpen. She blinked ruefully at the memory of the day she had unknowingly tried to sharpen a dampened stick, and shredded it instead, thereby incurring the wrath of Ibi. How far she had advanced since that fateful day.

Also, she carried in her writing kit three thin soft clay tablets for writing on, housed in flat split-bamboo frames fitted with more bamboo strips to make a back support and allow for greater thinness, and a small fired clay bottle of water to soften the clay with the judicious sprinkle of a few added drops as needed.

These articles might be supplied in any desired quantity by the Emperor's slaves. However, she had been rigorously instructed by Ibi in all aspects of locating and gathering her own materials in the marketplace or—escorted by a pair of palace guards—out in the wild, until Ibi was satisfied that she knew as much about her profession as those who made her supplies.

She was becoming progressively more skilled in working with these raw materials, having learned how to manufacture them at her own hand out of fresh supplies, a technique she had mastered long ago using the herbs in the spice tent, with dear Nelatha. Momentary recollection of happier times with Nelatha caused Si'Wren to suddenly realize how truly long it had been, since those long-ago days.

She took her kit daily with her to the court and carried it openly before all, as an outward sign of the integrity and mastery of her trade, justly proud of the way her knowledge of its use and upkeep demonstrated to everyone that she rightly deserved her appointment to her office as Royal Scribe. Few could boast half as much, and although she was not the type to do so anyways, she felt herself to be beyond all need of boasting.

Ibi did all of the regular and customary record-keeping. Or rather, one of his shaven-headed underlings sat behind him and did it for him.

Si'Wren was there more than for show, to perfect herself as a studious worker before her Emperor Euphrates.

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She was Ibi's most beautiful, and indeed his only, female Scribe. It was a memorable day spent in service to the Emperor, and Si'Wren adapted readily and willingly to the routine.

Afterward when court was recessed for the day, Si'Wren was called to a private consultation with Ibi, who examined her in great detail and gave her further instruction in all that he felt needful pertaining to what she had seen that day.

So was her Royal routine established.

* * *

"If you'll just stand before me, Si'Wren..." said Ibi one day, mysteriously but calmly enough.

Ever obedient, Si'Wren complied and waited to see what was up.

Ibi turned and waved an arm to signal someone unseen just beyond her range of vision in the next room, and an exceeding rough-looking character stepped in. The newcomer, with as many fighting scars on his skin as any other might have had tatoos, was dressed in a leather skirt supported by wide, criss-crossed leather straps across his hairy chest and over the tops of his bulging, heavily muscled shoulders.

He had a leather thong across his dark, thick, unkempt hair, and sandals fastened by calf-straps like a soldier or professional sojourner. He carried a sword in his right hand, and the presence of dirt and grime on him was self-evident by the smell.

The newcomer entered and greeted Ibi formally, and—at Ibi's bidding—turned and looked upon Si'Wren with bold, appraising eyes that were unusually bony across the brows, while his blunt, step-ladder nose looked as if it had been broken and rebroken many times, and his ears had been boxed so many times they scarce resembled ears anymore. The newcomer was clearly not a man to be fooled with.

He also stank like an animal. His odor filled the room, but she was used to being around animals from having spent her earliest years as a slave, so that she really didn't mind that nearly so much as she might have, had she been noble-born instead. It just made him that much more imposing and disquieting to be around.

His face was hard and unflinching, and his eyes were openly appraising of everything he saw as if he were already preparing for the battle. She felt his eyes on her, sizing her up. Not that there was all that much of her to be sized up, she being so small for her age.

"You want to give spurs to this chicken?" the newcomer ventured, with an skeptical look that Si'Wren found somehow insulting.

"Aye," Ibi sighed with a studious nod of his haggard, hoary old head and long, flowing white mane. "Do what you can, Mearch. It is our Emperor's desire that she should learn to do more with horses than to look at them. I'm getting too old to ride along with his Majesty on the odd excursion, so a competent replacement has been wanting for some time. I have any number of young male understudies, but his majesty has taken a fancy to the girl. Anyway, you're to set her up with her own mount, and see that she learns how to handle herself on four legs as well as two."

Si'Wren's eyebrows quickly raised in astonished hope, disbelief, and anticipation.

For her—a horse?

"She is also to be given ivory marking sticks," Ibi remarked significantly, "and knows how to make proper use of them, too. You're looking at a lady of station. We're having them carved now."

"It's your show," Mearch shrugged. "I can give her no ivory, but we can definitely take care of the horse. If that will be all—"

Ibi paused, looking up at Mearch with a serious expression.

"No, that will not be all. I've seen your negligent attitude toward outfitting junior officers of the court in the past, and it was entirely too careless for my liking."

Ibi rose up off his seat suddenly and leaned forward, propping both bony arms firmly and authoritatively on the workbench as he regarded the other intently eye to eye, with a look of menace.

"Mearch, listen well. I was given an ill-mannered, ill-treated ruffian-girl straight from the slave fields, when she came to me. She was as fresh as the clay on the banks, and it was my job to train her up in all ways needful until she was found fit to present in court as a royal officer. I worked hard on polishing her coarse ways, and she has repaid my efforts beyond all expectation, which pleases me greatly as I do not relish the prospect of being made a public spectacle by having fools for underlings.

"Furthermore," Ibi went on, "she is still of tender years, and has taken a vow of silence for life, and I will not

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stand for her being given the customary business—as-usual rough handling at the coarsened hands of your cocky young studs. If she cannot speak, she cannot protest, but it would be a fatal mistake to think she is as easily intimidated as all that. The Emperor himself failed to get a word out of her, in spite of Borla's ready sword held close under her pretty little nose. I saw it myself, and it was most impressive.”

Whether it was Si'Wren's beauty or her fearlessness that he found so impressive, Ibi did not elaborate, although a fondly dotting Mearch seemed to have his own ideas already.

“She has since found favor in his Majesty's eyes,” Ibi went on dryly, with an acid look for Mearch's wayward eyes, “and gives better reports in fresh clay than others seem to manage out of so much bad breath! Am I getting through to you?”

Ibi held Mearch's eyes for a long, hard moment of utter silence, while Si'Wren stood self-consciously with eyes downcast, trying to appear as if the last thing on her mind was to get in anybody's way.

Mearch nodded with an off-handed ease of manner, avoiding Ibi's hard stare as he examined his dirty fingernails, which smelled as if they had horse hoof diggings under them, a distinct possibility.

“I will train her personally.”

“Mearch—”

Mearch dug at his fingernails momentarily, persisting almost to the point of disrespect, and finally looked up, to fully meet Ibi's jaundiced eyes again.

“What?” said Mearch.

“I'll stand for no nonsense!” said Ibi, making the bench clatter as he pounded it once with a bony fist for emphasis. “She's no plaything. I expect regular reports on her progress, and her personal safety will be on your head.”

“I hear and obey,” said Mearch, somewhat sarcastically, bowing obsequiously with a formal fist clap to the chest as he turned away, to the end result that he bowed to the side wall instead of to Ibi, who sniffed loudly in open disdain of either acknowledging or censuring such mockery.

Mearch stepped in front of Si'Wren, his massive arms hanging straight down at his sides as he towered over her. He stood there and stared down at her expressionlessly for a moment.

Si'Wren merely stood her ground, respectfully avoiding his eyes like any proper woman, but neither did she try to shrink back from him.

“She is young,” said Mearch, a remark which, in an age of penta-centurions, adult human beings of 200, 400, and even 700 or more years old, was no idle comment.

“She is that,” Ibi mused, staring idly past Mearch at the crudely hewn stones of the far wall. “Well, Master Royal Armorer? Will you get on with it?”

Abruptly, Mearch turned to Ibi and hesitated significantly, before saying to the old Scribe, “How much?”

Ibi stared blankly back at him a moment, until enraged comprehension filled his features.

“Forget it, Mearch,” Ibi rasped in a gravel voice fraught with caustic skepticism. “She's royal property, and if you so much as petition the Emperor for her hand, you'll find there are bureaucratic punishments against which you shall find no proper shield or defense. I have no intention of losing her services so soon after training her up. She is brilliant.”

“But—” Mearch faltered. “She would become my most favored wife, and I have but six now!”

“What you ask is unthinkable! She is not for sale and you are not to molest or entreat her in any disrespectful manner, or you'll be hacking your way out of a dungeon cell with your fingernails, if they're not pulled out by the roots first. Is that clear?”

“Aye,” said Mearch, looking back at Si'Wren with eyes which were curiously lacking in their customary boldness. “Such beauty.” There was another long pause. Then he said, “Me, I know weapons, but this one has slain me already.”

Nervously, Si'Wren avoided meeting his eyes. She was ready to listen and learn, but he was so fearsome to look upon that she found it difficult to face him. Besides, for a woman to meet a man's stare too openly was to appear wanton.

Yet, for some odd inexplicable reason, she somehow already felt agreeable to fierce Mearch's tutelage. He was fittingly warned by Ibi, and his treatment of her should not be too harsh. Although still very much unsure of him, Si'Wren fully expected him to behave himself, in view of Ibi's stern admonishments that she should remain safe

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from all harm or harassment in his care.

“Why has the Emperor not taken her for himself?” Mearch asked, in a disdainful and skeptical voice.

“His Majesty is fond of praise, whereas this one finds talk a bit too cheap for her liking, even to please an emperor. Anyway she has found special favor by virtue of her uncommon vow, and has shown iron resistance against breaking it in the face of honed steel. As Royal Scribe, she is sworn under oath to strictest secrecy and loyalty.”

“She'll never talk, eh? And what better way to keep the king's secrets? A great pity. But, seeing she shall never speak again, how did she swear her oath of loyalty to his Majesty?” Mearch asked smugly.

“She can give the nod, and that with a true heart, which is more than most so-called honest witnesses are called to testify with their lying lips. That will be all, then, I trust?”

“Aye,” Mearch said. “I get the idea. Even so, from what you have said of her, I still say one could not give in equal trade one's best stallion for such a woman. But I have a stallion, my best, that she may have, for to ride upon. Send her down to me at the stables in a week. No, better make it two weeks. My men only just caught this one particular horse recently, and I still have to break him in, if I can.”

“What are you saying? Do you mean, an unbroken, ungelded stallion?” Ibi asked in disbelief.

Mearch shrugged.

“He has already broken three of my best trainers' numbskull heads, but never—never!—have I seen such a fine creature,” he barely glanced at Si'Wren, and added, “or woman. But I, Mearch, can break him to ride without ruining his spirit. It takes much strength, courage, wisdom of the heart, and patience, and one dares never use too heavy a hand in the matter. Yet it is possible, I think, but only by me. That girl and that horse; they are the same. I feel it. It will be right. You will see.”

Mearch turned for the door.

“No harm will come to her,” he called over his shoulder on the way out.

Ibi studied the surface of his desk until Mearch was safely gone.

Then he glowered down at his withered old hands, and said, as if speaking in Mearch's presence instead of Si'Wren's, “It had better not, Mearch.”

* * *

Si'Wren sat at court every day, whether her Emperor appeared or no.

When Emperor Euphrates did not show, Borla usually heard the cases. Any problem which he did not feel himself adequately competent or suitably authorized to deal with, he literally bound the suspect over for Emperor Euphrates to dispose of later at his convenience.

Si'Wren learned the complex, elusive ebb and flow of court politics, the petty social concerns, the lawsuits, the drastic and petty religious differences, and a host of other lost causes.

For practice, she always had to record everything, even if one of Ibi's shaven-headed underlings was present making official copies. Si'Wren did not write it out word-for-word, which would clearly have been impossible, but only took down names, dates, and a few crucial details about any complaints or petitions.

Then, tiredly, she would retire to Ibi's quarter, and knock the clay filler from the frames, kneading the used clay with a little water until she had worked it soft and pliable again. Then she would prepare the boxes by refilling them and wiping their outside frames clean of dried-on clay dust and leaving them covered with moist cloth of flax weave. She would also set her dampened wooden marking sticks neatly laid out to one side to dry at day's end, and also saw to various other details of her daily chores. Finally, exhausted, she would retire and sleep soundly until the cock crew in the early predawn darkness to signal the start of a new day.

Upon arising and finishing with her toilet, she would take with her a set of dry sticks to sharpen with a small piece of honing stone, and lift the dampened linen from her restored clay tablets to find them looking fresh and soft with a dull smooth gleam when she took them up to bring along with her for the day.

Mearch appeared one time in Ibi's shop, equipped with a wooden staff. Advising her that he was still working on his assignment for her, the Master Armorer made crude knife marks on the rod with a stubby but wickedly sharp flaying knife as he measured her height, the length of her limbs, and some other proportions, accomplishing all with a swiftness and unconscious poise that betrayed long practice at this sort of thing.

“I shall go, and do, and then I will return, and then you will see,” he finally said. Then his face briefly illuminated with a cheery smile.

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Shyly, Si'Wren bowed, and smiled briefly in return. Although she had no desire to become his next wife, she found him to be well-mannered and likeable enough, in spite of his crudeness.

“Do not fear,” he said, all businesslike again. “When you come to the royal stables, I, even I, Mearch, Chief Armorer to the Emperor himself, will not suffer you to come to the slightest harm.”

Si'Wren slowly bowed low to him again.

Mearch grinned, and turned to go back to the stables.

* * *

Si'Wren continued to increase in knowledge and wisdom as she observed her astute Emperor in court, learning intuitively from the inevitable daily exercise of her mental faculties how to sift truth from lies, and how various evils and perplexing situations were to be properly adjudicated.

There were several ways that crimes were judged. One was by the severity of the crime itself. Another way was to judge the criminal by his or her own attitude and intentions. Equally important were the question of whether the suspect was high born and wealthy, or low born and bondable, or a beggar, or—most unfortunate of all, a mere penniless slave.

To Si'Wren, they were all human beings first and foremost, but she was no judge and could not voice an opinion regardless. However, she was well aware of the fact that high station was no proof of good character. In fact, there was very little to call good in any of the people she saw. They all seemed intent upon doing evil to their neighbors, and were only sorry to be caught, not for doing wrong.

* * *

One day, Si'Wren was finally given her new ivory marking sticks. They were beautiful, with different-shaped ends at the tips, for greater writing versatility, and she felt as if she had been given a gift from heaven.

Si'Wren was learning how to snatch up her marking sticks and write swiftly when called upon, mimicking her mentor Ibi and copying the flood of new words she heard by seeing what he wrote and duplicating it exactly in clay with the white ivory marking sticks. They were marvelous. The beautifully carved marking sticks did not grow soft from her almost ceaseless jabbing of the moist clay when at court, and never needed resharpener.

At the stables, where she went almost every day during her free time in the afternoons, she was learning to ride, but not on the horse Mearch had chosen for her. He refused even to tell her yet which one it was that he had chosen to be her personal mount. Mearch had chosen instead to pursue her training period on a gentle mare, to give her a chance to develop a proper background in horsemanship. Later, he began to put her on other horses, to give her a greater diversity of experience.

He had every horse in the stable to choose from, and only withheld the most unpredictable, hostile, or otherwise dangerous animals, which he would never change his mind about. He reserved those for his hardened men-at-arms, to be their battle mounts.

However, he did not fail to notice which one caught her eye most often. It was the one he had secretly chosen for her, a dark, lustrous, highly-spirited black stallion which the men were afraid to even think of riding. Mearch believed that the stallion, so wild and untamed, only needed to have its trust and cooperation gained, and to be given a chance to develop a sense of mutual trust and respect for its rider.

In her other rounds, although no man or woman in the palace went deliberately out of their way to show any special respect for her, Si'Wren was not actively persecuted. As Royal Scribe, her appearance anywhere in the palace might mean nothing but idle curiosity on her part as an inexperienced member of the palace staff, or it could be that she was acting in official capacity, and how were the others to know? To deliberately impede or interfere with her could mean death to an offender, if she were on official business. Thus none dared lay a hand upon her or bar her path for the slightest reason.

She got her share of incidental looks, though. Some accepted her, some despised her, some merely took a good look to see who she was and then left her alone.

Meanwhile, rumors flew like birds on the wing, telling of Kadrug and giants, Kadrug and Conabar, Kadrug and this, Kadrug and that, and so on and so forth.

Si'Wren watched Emperor Euphrates prostrate himself once in private prayer services to the sun god, beseeching deliverance from Kadrug and his giants. Emperor Euphrates seemed very worried, though she could not imagine why. His army certainly seemed large enough to handle any possible enemy, giants or no.

* * *

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One day, Mearch marched into Ibi's private chambers, and returned Si'Wren's polite bow and Ibi's imperious look with equal aplomb as he delivered to them both a careless greeting with a wordless wave of the hand.

Si'Wren's eyes were riveted upon Mearch's other arm, in the crook of which was tucked an oiled chamois skin wrapping, which was carefully folded and tied around something rather bulky.

Mearch had only come calling, in Si'Wren's rather short-lived experience, with a direct regard to the pursuit of her education with horses, and as she looked on with no small degree of excitement and anticipation, she suspected that today was to be the day she had been awaiting anxiously for so long.

"Si'Wren," Mearch beckoned, his face impassive.

Si'Wren had long since discovered that Mearch had a deep and subtle sense of pride and good will, in spite of his frankly ugly features. She felt curiously safe with him, as she still could not with so many others who never smiled at her, and had come over time to count Mearch as an unspoken ally, until it seemed that the less either he or she acknowledged it, the more each became aware of this secret bond of trust between them. Today, with his flashing eyes, he regarded her with a look of satisfaction and unvoiced promise, for he was, she suspected, come to fulfill his duty to Ibi on her behalf, and it evidently gave him great pleasure, though he dared not show it lest Ibi misunderstand his motives and give him another chewing out.

"Today, little one, you shall ride the horse I have promised," said Mearch. "Behold."

With a flourish, he flicked his razor sharp stone knife through the binding of thongs and swept aside the chamois skin, and revealed a stunning black leather harness and saddle, intricately trimmed with ivory and silver.

Si'Wren looked on with astonishment, as he held it out to her.

This, she reflected, clutching the riding gear with both hands and smelling the fine black leather, was for a horse. A horse of her own! She held the saddle as she smiled at Mearch, and shut her eyes momentarily in thanks to the Invisible God.

Chapter Six—Coming Out

The following year passed uneventfully, with Si'Wren on an endless course of private study and practical exercises both in and outside of court, during the course of which she found little time to think on other, less pressing concerns.

Emperor Euphrates declared one day that he had decided to review his kingdom and would greet his loyal subjects openly in the city streets, and so a date was set.

On the appointed holy day, the royal criers carried out the decree with much pomp and ceremony and fanfare. There was a large turnout of the citizenry in the narrow streets. Attendance from the palace was made up of a long procession of court officers, underlings, self-serving hangers-on, and peons of every station and calling in life. The display of royalty was to be immediately followed by a military parade.

It was a grand and wonderful procession.

There were the royal wives and concubines, Fatoo the Sorcerer, Borla the Royal Adviser, with many beautiful young girls to act as flower bearers and dancers.

There were the Captains of Fifty with their long lines of soldiers marching four-abreast with their shields, spears, swords, and bows carried openly in their hands, together with the lines of proud and haughty horse and camel soldiers riding two-abreast.

Long lines of filthy slaves in filthier rags, captured in war or sentenced for various crimes against His Majesty's Kingdom would also be forced to march in the parade, mercilessly chained together in long lines at their necks, and with their elbows tied tightly together behind their backs, and compelled to stagger with their heads bowed agonizingly.

A single-file of elephants bore close on the heels of the slaves, causing them to roll their eyes frequently in terror, lest any should stumble, or the riotous throng stampede the beasts and cause them to be trampled without warning.

Following after all of this was a loose-knit crowd of stragglers who had found any number of excuses to follow behind the royal procession.

Every manner of self-styled high-born and social climber showed up to be in the parade or at least be seen cheering it. They took great relish and delight in hurling garbage and dung as accurately as possible at the cringing slaves, who found it difficult to duck what was thrown at them.

There was much prestige involved in this sort of thing, and it was well worth the effort to participate with a

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great deal of obvious show and personal public visibility.

Natural intoxicants were not in short supply, nor red wine, nor coarse behaviors, nor physical altercations, but all such were to be seen at almost every hand, and in almost every direction one chose to look.

* * *

First came the horners, or conch-blowers, appointed by Ampho, Royal Crier at Court. By the time the whole procession got lined up and under way, there really was no need of criers, but it was all part of the act.

Then came the dancing girls, followed by bamboo woodwinds, and a line of steadily pounding drummers.

Then came the Royal Guards, all with long pikes or flashing swords in their grasp.

Then came the litter upon which Emperor Euphrates sat in royal splendor.

On the front of the royal litter stood a pair of live peacocks. A tame spider monkey rode in the Emperor's lap and skittered restlessly about, chattering animatedly on its braided tether leash.

The spider monkey made lewd faces at the crowds lining the streets, pleasing and entertaining them as they called loudly and repeatedly to the Emperor, "Peace! Peace!" and "Long live Emperor Euphrates!"

The royal litter was followed by a small flock of ostriches tended by several boys with switches. One boy had already had to be taken back on a litter for treatment by the Royal Physician. He had been kicked in the side of the head by one of the huge birds, but word had it that he seemed to be doing fairly well, and it was taken as a good omen that he had only been stunned and not killed instead.

Close behind the ostriches came Si'Wren, riding on her magnificent black stallion, which, not having been gelded, was, in the hands of any but Si'Wren, about as controllable as a wild cat on the scent of blood. The contrasting light as he constantly moved cast his black coat with a rippling purple-black sheen of dark hues.

Many called out as Si'Wren rode past them, and she rode aloofly, nodding to whoever seemed dignified enough to merit it, and infrequently waved back when others waved first. Clearly, many of her would-be admirers knew nothing of her scandalous reputation as an idol-breaker.

Bound by her oath of silence, she might as well have been one of those pathetic, pitiable lunatics who constantly drooled and were oftentimes possessed, and were either utterly as speechless as idiots, or spoke the language of the moon, isolated in the midst of all.

She knew that it was really demons which afflicted the minds of men, and not the moon. However, lunatic or no, she followed the calling of a different god, and felt as one moonstruck in broad daylight. It was an odd sensation which persisted steadfast, that somehow she no longer spoke, spiritually in her heart, the same language as they who worshipped wood and stone.

Her head elevated above the multitudes, Si'Wren pretended not to notice as more than a few openly ogled her. The tirelessly prancing black stallion was clearly of noble lineage, and had the lines of a thunderer and was blessed not only of classic lines but also of an inordinate swiftness which, with little Si'Wren on him, made the combination of horse and rider as swift as a rushing rapids and left the Emperor's horse-messengers perpetually envious.

Si'Wren's raiment consisted of a long-sleeved blouse and leggings, tiny slippers, and a riding cape. Every item was absolute, total jet black, and tight at the cuffs of wrists and ankles and at the waist, but free to ripple over her slender limbs in the sun and wind. Attached to her black saddle, chased with silver trim, were her official writing kit packed in wrapped punk moss in a saddlebag, and a few other items.

Upon Ibi's strict orders, she was forbidden to use berry juice to stain her lips, or make use of any other form of makeup, or any sort of adornment or jewelry, because it would have detracted from the appearance of royal dignity and absolute asceticism in her calling as Royal Scribe. It was bad enough, decried Ibi one day, that she was only a female. Worse, she was small even for her age and sex. On top of that, Si'Wren, born into a world of penta-centenarians, men and women of five hundred or more years of age, was, at a mere seventeen, so infernally young.

What was needful, said Ibi, was for her physical appearance and wardrobe to convey a sense of royal station. Instead of bearing the appearance of a junior scribe, she needed to carry about her some sort of outward dignity as a signal to all who observed her, of the terrible sense of majesty which her high station demanded. She desperately needed to personify somehow, with but her mere appearance, the fearsome aspect of sheer awe and awefulness of her high station in Imperial service to his highness, the Emperor Euphrates, said Ibi.

With that in mind, Ibi had exactly prescribed and appointed her formal court uniform, under strictest

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guidelines, and had put her totally in black to signify before all and sundry that she was no mere plaything, but a Royal Officer of the Court.

Never, said he, was she ever to appear in any other color. Else, how could she possibly expect to be taken seriously by her peers at court, not to mention the coarse and disrespectful public at large?

Her hair, he observed, must never be cut, neither broidered except according to his strict guidelines. When actually in court or appearing in public, she was to braid it in one or more long braids, which she had permission either to wear straight down the middle of her back, or coiled up in any one of several formal designs according to his precise dictates.

He forbade the artifice of vanity in any way, shape, or form, and no color was to be added to her face. She must not pluck her eyebrows—which were not that heavy anyway.

That she should only wear black was an agreeable but meaningless edict to Si'Wren at first, but she was beginning to understand. One must keep an unflinching eye to the practical business of court. Many unlettered buyers went to market to look upon the wares of the merchants like so many red-eyed judges, and they drove exceeding hard bargains. Such covetous types were everywhere, with a true talent for the sneer kept ever just below the surface of their gladdest smiles. Such sneers could be her undoing, Court Officer or no.

Without such unthinking respect on the part of others, how could she effectively conduct herself, how pursue her royal duties, if held in perpetual scorn by palace peers and the public? Without the unthinking esteem of the crowds, the common masses of peoples who thronged daily to the Emperor's court, how could Si'Wren face up to such coarse souls as would just as soon laugh in her face and make sport of her meager person?

It was one thing for the whores to mock a laughing soldier by parading around half-naked in his armor. No one took them seriously, and the soldiers enjoyed it.

But such was not to be the case for Si'Wren, declared Ibi sternly.

Si'Wren strove always to follow Ibi's orders, and as time passed she had learned to appreciate the shrewd wisdom of his directives, and in the end, Ibi's peculiar ways had somehow come to actually inspire her willing and enthusiastic devotion and loyalty, where before he had but only commanded it.

Si'Wren was appearing solo in public for the first time today. That was because Ibi had not been feeling well lately, and had remained back in his private palace chambers to try and rest. His body, he complained, could not 'get heat'. Si'Wren gave him a look of sympathy. She would be fine by herself.

And she was. Today the roaring crowds cheered her on with the rest of them as she paraded past. Behind her, a twin-column of murderous mounted camel soldiers, cut-throats all, brought up the rear and she felt quite safe in their immediate presence—in public at least. In private, she would not have permitted herself the extreme risk of being left alone in the same room with a single one of the filthy scum.

When they came to the outer walls of the city, Si'Wren was already engaged in turning repeatedly from one side to the other as she waved grandly at the noisome, chaotic sea of faces, and chanced to look down upon a cluster of elders, sitting in the city gates.

She smiled and gave the nod in cursory fashion from her perch high up on her prancing mount, and started to look away...

And looked back suddenly, for there in their midst, sitting by the wayside in the city gates and clothed in a robe of coarse burr-lap, was Habrunt!

Si'Wren's heart pounded like thunder as she abruptly pulled the reins suddenly, halting and wheeling her black steed as she turned him out of formation and walked the high-stepping stallion skittishly up in front of him. Then she adroitly slipped a leg over the top of the saddle and plummeted down with a sudden rush of air to alight on her feet and stand smiling impishly down at him with her little fists on her hips.

Habrunt peered narrowly at up her, and she bowed ceremoniously to him, an unprecedented gesture of respect from such an exalted member of the Emperor's royal court to a mere beggar, which caused no small commotion among the other elders sitting around them.

Habrunt's dull eyes grew slowly wide as he took her in disinterestedly at first, and suddenly stared at her in dumbstruck disbelief. All of a sudden, he was struggling with his walking stick to rise to his feet.

"Si'Wren!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Can it truly be you?"

Si'Wren nodded vigorously, and stood beaming cheerfully at him as Habrunt wrapped his burly arms around her with an inarticulate exclamation of joy, and suddenly Si'Wren found herself weeping, crying and laughing all

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at the same time, heedless to the sea of faces surrounding them cheering the Emperor in a continuous deafening roar.

Realizing that she had something she must show to him, she pulled free of his embrace and wiped quickly at her tears with one rippling silken black sleeve and turned to the black stallion.

As the stallion shook his dark head and long shaggy mane, and neighed and snorted loudly and lifted and clopped his hooves on the street with a series of heavy thuds, Si'Wren steadied him with her hands, and swung her arm back to sweep her flowing cape out of her way, and reached up to pull from one of her saddle bags the ivory cuneiform writing sticks, and a used clay tablet already covered with writing, in a bamboo frame.

Turning to Habrunt, she smiled her most radiant as she held these up for his appraisal.

“Aha!” said Habrunt, taking and examining everything carefully. “You—wrote this?”

Si'Wren nodded vigorously.

Habrunt could not seem to believe his own eyes, as he looked alternately at Si'Wren and her clay writing tablet.

“I see,” he said, and Si'Wren saw that his astonished eyes were full of surprise and incredulity. “I too, can read and write. Your scribner's style is well–practiced and most admirable! Of a truth, the Invisible God has worked a mighty work in your life! Because of your selfless example of faith before all, Si'Wren, I have been mightily uplifted in spirit, and inspired to speak the more boldly again of the Invisible God myself before all!”

Full of astonishment, Si'Wren stared up at him as her eyes lit up in round–eyed wonder, shocked to the roots by this startling and unexpected revelation.

“Now as for this writing,” said Habrunt, “this is most amazing. I know not what this surprising series of events may portend, Si'Wren, but verily is the Invisible God the Almighty. For look here who it is that I have with me.”

Habrunt turned, and Si'Wren looked down at an old, old man, who was totally ignoring the crowds as if they had all gone mad.

“Bassdag!” said Habrunt loudly.

The aged one, who was almost entirely bald–headed, stirred as if shaking himself out of a fitful slumber.

“Eh? Who is that?”

“How can you sleep at a time like this?” jested Habrunt. “It is the Royal Scribe of the Emperor, who rides in his procession, and has dismounted to pay us a visit!”

Habrunt kept his voice loud, to be heard over the river of noise from the tumultuous throngs that crowded them in at every hand.

“So you say, Habrunt,” scoffed the bowed and weary–looking old Bassdag. “Royal Scribe to the Emperor, eh? Well, where is the illiterate snob?”

Quickly, Si'Wren knelt down on both knees and dipped her head in a perfunctory bow before the ancient, as she smiled with a merry look to a proudly grinning Habrunt.

As she bowed low before old Bassdag, sensing her presence, he peered up at her.

“Your face is awfully girlish, young man,” said Bassdag. His speech was very slow and deeply pitched. “No beard yet?”

“That is because she is no man at all,” laughed Habrunt, “but a woman!”

At this astonishing revelation, Bassdag said nothing at first, but only lifted up his great old white–bearded countenance to stare at her disbelievingly.

A smiling Si'Wren peered narrowly back at Bassdag, whose eyes surveyed her critically from under snow–white bushy eyebrows, and she felt the power of his keen mind, especially in the sharpness and incisiveness of his voice.

“A girl?” said Bassdag.

Si'Wren kept smiling, but held her peace.

“Why do you mock her,” said Habrunt soberly, “seeing she has taken a vow to the Invisible God never to speak, on her life?”

“Eh?”

“I said,” Habrunt went on pointedly, “that one Si'Wren, who kneels before you now, is no empty–headed minstrel, or some plaything in the Emperor's harem, but a Royal Scribe in the palace court. She sits before kings.

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She prays to the Invisible God.”

Bassdag's keen, intelligent frown seemed to bore powerfully through Si'Wren to her very soul, when the aged man turned his eyes upon her again.

“Oh!” said Bassdag, with a quick raise of his eyebrows. He seemed to be genuinely impressed. “That changes everything.”

Then Bassdag rose with difficulty, using the assistance of a shepherd's crook and Habrunt's helping, steady hand.

“Come here, girl,” he said.

Timidly, Si'Wren took a step closer, and Bassdag reached up and took Si'Wren's slender forearm in his large and knobby old hand.

“This old man,” said Habrunt, “who is older than anyone I have ever met, invented—writing.”

Si'Wren stared up at the white-haired old face, and was awestruck.

“Aye,” said Bassdag, nodding in the affirmative. “Verily I thought I had created something with which to enrich men's souls. But since inventing it, much has happened to cause me to believe otherwise. Sometimes, I think it was all just a waste of time.”

Then Bassdag, in a tired, quavering voice, went on, “Tell me, Habrunt. Is this one sincere soul all that remains in all the world, to follow after the one true God now, besides ourselves? Just one soul, and that but a youth and a mere girl? Hath God in truth sworn to love the whole world, but settled in the end upon only this one soul, but not the rest?”

Habrunt shrugged.

“I know not, old one,” he said, “but methinks you have spoken the truth in this.”

Bassdag stared owlshly at Habrunt, and seemed shaken by the admission.

The shrieks of many in the crowd suddenly increased wildly for no reason which Si'Wren could discern, the inherent madness of the outcries making her uneasy as she sought to ignore them and focus on Habrunt and his friend.

“Surely, Habrunt, these maddened, screaming multitudes, which surround us at every hand and froth madly at the mouth in the name of sanity; are they with their voices then to be counted more blessed than she in her silence?”

Bassdag squinted up at Si'Wren.

“Ye who can read and write, are the only remaining true believer besides ourselves, and on top of this, thou art sworn never to speak? This is a mystery! Look around you, girl! Look how they have forgotten! Aye, they have forgotten all, even unto their one true God who is the foundation of the world, and the judge of their very souls!”

Bassdag paused, and looked around, his eyes searching the souls of individual faces in the deafening throngs. Si'Wren felt insignificant compared to old Bassdag, because she was so much younger and less-imposing in appearance than he. His frowning, wrinkled countenance appeared all the more impressive and terrible for it's lack of a singular target to fasten upon because of his half-blindness.

Continually assaulting Si'Wren's ears were the screams of the crowds at every hand, as they loudly proclaimed their praises to the Emperor. The torrent of noise made it difficult for her to listen to the two men without craning her ear constantly.

Tilting his great white-haired old head to one side at her open young face, Bassdag said to her in a quavering voice, “Si'Wren, you must never, never stop serving the Almighty Lord God.”

“She does,” assured Habrunt confidently, “and she shall!”

“That is good!” said Bassdag, with a slow, ponderous nod of his tired head and stooped shoulders. “May the Almighty bless you, Si'Wren, and may your name be remembered forever in Heaven.”

He patted Si'Wren on the shoulder. Then, he let fall his arm, and awkwardly, lowered himself back down again with the use of his shepherd's crook and seemed not to see her anymore.

“You must come see me again,” Habrunt said to Si'Wren. “I am always to be found here, sitting with the elders in the gates of the city.”

Then, Habrunt's face became more serious as he put his hands gently upon both of her shoulders and looked down into her upturned, questing eyes.

“Si'Wren, I would speak quickly of a certain matter, before you go. We no longer have the Master Rababull to

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worry about. It is possible for us to hope of living to the Invisible God, and—to ourselves...”

Si'Wren studied him as if seeing him for the first time, marvelling at his strange manner of speech. But Habrunt was so involved in putting together his words that he was already going on, as if oblivious to the way she suddenly changed her expression from one of attentiveness to one of wonder while still looking up at him, her wide-open eyes fastened upon his so intently.

“I have convinced many of those whom you see here, these wise ones whose custom it is to sit in the gates of the city, that they must give up their blind idols and worship the true and living God,” said Habrunt.

“All,” Habrunt went on, “except Bassdag, who was already a true believer. But they would never listen to him, until I came along, and sat with them, and spoke of the same God. Then, when they saw that Bassdag and I were in agreement, each separate from the other, then they finally began to believe both of us. While I have not been entirely successful in convincing them all, I have managed to save some.

“It is you who inspires me, Si'Wren. I have never forgotten you Si'Wren. Si'Wren, listen to me! Should I be forced to—to continue without you a day longer, now that you are of proper age and we have found each other again, I—I mean—”

Si'Wren had been staring up at him with eyes full of amazement, and when he faltered, she blinked, and came to a full, sudden realization of what had been happening between herself and this beaten-down wreck of a man called Habrunt, who though he be of ordinary stature, had a heart that would dwarf a giant's.

Overwhelmed, she nodded earnestly up at him. She reached up with her writing implements still in her hands, to carefully wrap her slender arms around his whip-scarred neck and pull him down to her. He held her, half leaning on his stick, and trembling as he kissed her proudly on the forehead, and then, after gazing deep into her eyes, he kissed her again—ever so tenderly—upon the lips, a long, burning, unbroken contact, putting a lifetime of pent-up passion into one searing eternal moment. If broken in body, he was still yet noble in spirit. Then they broke apart, and stood looking long into each other's faces with a newfound understanding such as rendered all of Si'Wren's lifelong torments but a chaotic dream.

Habrunt held her in his strong, gentle hands and looked at her, really looked at her. He searched her eyes again, desperately seeking something, and finally, crinkled his own in a willing expression of deep inner rejoicing.

“Do not fail to come back to me, Si'Wren,” said Habrunt, becoming more serious. “If your heart has not cooled these many years apart from me, let no meddling soothsayer tell you that mine has done otherwise. Remember; if I do not hear from you soon, I shall come and petition the Emperor myself, and your own hand as Royal Scribe shall record it.”

Si'Wren, still looking straight into his eyes, did not move in the slightest degree, and her face became luminous and radiant as she finally nodded, her eyes utterly lost within his.

“Good!” Habrunt said heartily, grinning self-consciously in spite of himself, and showing to Si'Wren a totally different side to the man whom she had always known before as being perpetually so stoic, just, and reserved. “It is good, Si'Wren! As your husband, I shall exercise my right as a free man to redeem you from your vow of silence. But for now, I think the royal procession is about to leave you behind!”

Si'Wren started as she looked suddenly around at the receding lines of the procession, and then looked back at him with eyes that lived for promises to come, of a new world with Habrunt together with her, and of vast far-flung visions of new life and of laughter, and yet in her eyes she also showed the apprehension of eternal loss already looming, and of anguish beyond the torments of the utterly lost, lest there be the remotest possibility of more than this one final separation.

Yet as he had said, it was time to go. Just like Habrunt, to be always so dutiful!

She put her things back in her saddlebag, and then turned and reached up to embrace him quickly. He swept his arms around her again, and held her tight, and she longed for the moment never to end. Then Habrunt let go again, and turned to her horse, to hold out a helping hand to her. Habrunt's back might be weak, but he gripped the saddle for support and showed that he intended to help her up. Si'Wren flashed a quick smile at him, and dipped down and gave a little hop as she got the sole of one tiny foot into one of his large hands like a makeshift stepping stone, and as he curled his biceps and lifted her in this manner she eeled herself up in one smooth, perfectly timed motion and swung her leg over.

Remounted as lightly as a butterfly, she beamed down at Habrunt, and then looked up and swept the narrow,

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jam-packed street a fleeting glance. Then she flicked her reins and kicked her heels in lightly with a hand-slap on her horse's neck.

The black charger responded instantly, and surged forward in a hurtling motion of buried muscle as she cantered him down the narrow street past the noisome throngs. His hooves clomp-clopped the ground in a heavy rhythm as she caught up to her proper position in the royal procession and slowed to rejoin them again.

She could not stop herself breathing heavily as her heart continued to pound. The memory of his scent and the lingering sensation of his kisses had sent her blood to singing.

* * *

It was a grand procession. Every so often, Emperor Euphrates would cast a handful of gold coins to the crowds, and their cheering would be transformed to lunatic crescendos as the throngs dived together in a sudden concerted rush to get at the coveted coins.

There were people with grievous impairments and afflictions at every hand, and they were also caught up in the mad scramble for coins. Some of them were trampled shamelessly by those more able, who should have known not to be so abusive and unfair.

Si'Wren was aware of all this, yet, brushing tears from her eyes, she could not help looking back in the direction of Habrunt. But she could not pick him out now, although she knew he was still there, sitting with the elders in the gates of the city.

How her heart yearned to see him again—and soon!

Then her eyes noticed something, and she looked far to the rear of the long line of the procession. There, far behind her, she saw a boisterous crowd of evil men, bringing up the rear behind the long lines of battle-hardened camel soldiers.

What were they doing there, she wondered?

Just before they turned a corner to begin heading back into the city by another route, she heard a loud commotion, angry shouts and wild screams amidst the cheers, far back at the gates of the city. She turned in her saddle to look, but could not see what was happening, and dared not break ranks and turn her horse out of the procession again, lest she risk incurring the displeasure of Emperor Euphrates or some other senior dignitary.

Anxiously she craned her neck to see better, but it was no use, and she finally turned away again, for she must go on.

* * *

Scarcely had they returned to the palace, when word was passed around that a respected trader had come with important news for the Emperor's ears only. Such was his nobility and reputation with the Emperor that the sweating and dust-caked trader was escorted directly through by two armed guards to an inner chamber for an immediate private audience with his Majesty.

Soon after, Emperor Euphrates sent word that an emergency session was to be held in his private chambers, and, with Ibi lying ill, Si'Wren was called to attendance.

Anxiously, Si'Wren delivered her horse to the stables, and stopped by Ibi's workshop to retrieve fresh writing supplies. With a proper kit in hand, she hastened through the royal gardens and made her way through the crowded palace passages toward the meeting chamber. Around her as she approached the meeting, the palace dignitaries were still celebrating, for it had been declared a day of feasting, and the sounds of continual merrymaking were on every hand.

In a private chamber just large enough to hold them all, Si'Wren took her seat several positions to the right of the Emperor, and when all officers of high position had arrived, the wizened-looking old trader was invited to retell his story.

The sojourner began, and spoke at length.

It seemed there was a great prophet in a land far to the northwest, whose name was Noah. He was a Patriarch, and a man to be reckoned with, and all held his words in high esteem, although no one believed the prophecy he had been speaking imploringly to all of late. Noah, said the trader, was the son of Lamech, who was the son of Methuselah. These were all great Patriarchs of wide renown, individuals commonly known in their own time and country to be men of vast intellect and lofty pursuits.

This Noah, the trader continued, was no exception. Noah had begun building a vast ship, of a size well beyond the scope of any known shipwright of the day, out of gopher wood.

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Si'Wren duly recorded the name of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, and awaited further recording instructions or questions. People could be quite long-winded, and her writing capacity was rather limited by the relatively small size of the clay tablets, versus the set size of her cuneiform marking sticks. By Ibi's own oft-repeated instructions and judiciously worded admonitions, she knew that one must be frugal with one's free space on a clay tablet. One could only get just so much down on one slab.

Si'Wren must frequently sit at court, virtually unnoticed on the sidelines, for interminable periods as the great lords droned on and on, lulling her almost to sleep with sleepy blinked-back tears of utmost boredom. Only, all of a sudden, for some speaker to abruptly begin an unexpected, long string of names, all of them sons and fathers and in-laws of this or that important personage, and she must suddenly scramble to record all before they slipped from memory. She rarely slipped up, but it could be grueling at times.

Fortunately, only three generations had been mentioned this time; Noah, and his father and grandfather along with their common titles of Patriarch. That was easy.

As Si'Wren continued to follow the words of the trader, she noticed that Emperor Euphrates seemed to be unusually agitated by what was being said, and she could not help speculating distractedly on why this should be.

What seemed to scare Emperor Euphrates so badly, from what Si'Wren could garner, was that this great Patriarch called Noah wasn't just building another ship by the sea shore, for ordinary fishing or trading. Oh no, not this one called Noah. He was a different kettle of fish altogether, for he was working far from the sea shore, over by the forests where he would not have to haul his wood so far.

It was a little backwards, and in fact seemed outright senseless on the face of it. Customarily, as all knew, you must haul the wood to the seashore, and build beside the sea. Very close beside it, in fact. For, who could haul a finished ship? Even a rowing bark was carried upon its owner's back no further from the sea than absolutely necessary, which for such a one happened to be the grass-tufted dunes just beyond the line of the high water mark.

But as for Noah, the vessel which he was building was enormous, and was referred to as an ark. A great ark. It was so far from the sea that all peoples in the land round about him had begun to mock him for his foolishness.

According to the trader, this Noah was declaring openly to all who would listen, that he had a direct revelation from the one true God, the God of legendary Adam himself. Adam, who was rumored to have first pronounced the long outmoded and unpopular prohibition against any making of idols.

At this, everyone paused to turn and stare thoughtfully at Si'Wren, who froze and, after a momentary, unintentional confrontation with them all, dropped her eyes humbly and stared red-faced down at her clay tablet and ivory marking sticks. She suddenly wished her hair was not braided, that she might hide her face even partially from their eyes, behind its natural veil.

The trader paused and stared at her also, clearly wondering why they should all react in so peculiar a fashion, as to respond by singling out a mere Scribe, and a female at that, for such untimely scrutiny as this.

Then, without explanation, Emperor Euphrates bade him go on, and the trader forgot their odd reaction as he continued his tale.

The trader related that, according to the Patriarch Noah, God was going to send a great flood to judge the world. Water, declared the messenger, would actually rain in droplets from the sky in so great a quantity, and for so great a time, sufficient as to drown all the earth even unto the inundation of the tops of the highest mountain peaks, because of the perpetual wickedness of men.

At mention of this unheard-of 'rain of droplets', the room was filled with rank consternation and the openly expressed scoffing of more than a few of those high-born present, momentarily interrupting the apocalyptic narrative. But perceiving a disapproving frown from Emperor Euphrates, a stern-faced Borla silenced them all with a warning look and lifting of fingers upon a momentarily uptilted wrist at end of a black-enshrouded arm, and the trader finally went on.

This Patriarch Noah, said the trader, was calling upon all men to repent in sackcloth and ashes of their evil ways, before God's thinning patience should finally run out and his wrath bring this harsh judgement upon all their heads.

"This is indeed a far-fetched tale," mused a deeply frowning Borla in his customarily heavy, foreboding tone of voice. His head was bowed thoughtfully, with his hand to his chin, stroking his beard sagely.

"Humph! Mm, yes," Emperor Euphrates nodded, as he agreed readily enough with Borla's idle comment. "It

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has been fetched far alright; all the way from the land of Noah. But—how can one possibly determine what degree of truth there be in such a case?”

The question was asked of no one in particular, and there was no reply forthcoming.

Then Emperor Euphrates turned to Si'Wren, and said, “Well chosen were you, Si'Wren, of all possible souls, to be appointed Royal Scribe, against this day of judgement by your strange Invisible God, who regards all idols with such abomination, and whom this great prophet Noah also worships, even as you. Make a proper summary of our words, and so mark the record as befits all that you have heard. You may use one tablet.”

Si'Wren bowed low and quickly began to enter long, tiny lines of dainty hash markings with her ivory sticks.

When Emperor Euphrates told her she had one, two, three, or more tablets with which to record, he was usually giving her a pretty good idea of the scope of the spontaneous summarizing and editing which was expected of her.

One tablet, here, was significant because of the brevity and impact of the record called for. There were so few relevant details, anyway. It wasn't like a murderously complicated property boundary dispute, for instance. Or a tally of gifts to the Emperor, so many articles of gold, so many chalices of silver, so many horns of incense, and so on. Or worse yet, an Imperially granted Honor. For Honors, you had to get everybody's relations correct and in order, an exacting task which could take long and leave her hollow-eyed over such labors.

Borla moved to stand close behind her shoulder and watched silently as she made her marks.

She used to grow nervous when he did that, but she had since learned that all he desired was to make sure she put in all the truly relevant details, made no unnecessary errors, and left out that which was obviously unnecessary.

Under such impromptu tutelage from Borla, Si'Wren had soon learned what to put in, what to leave out, and how best to arrange it, working swiftly, neatly, and accurately. Now she unconsciously strove for greater excellence than ever before, as Emperor Euphrates questioned the trader further.

Halfway through, Emperor Euphrates paused and turned his head to regard Si'Wren's progress, and said, “Another tablet shall be wanting, Scribe.”

Si'Wren nodded as she quickly finished the first frame and picked up another, and bent to her writings, expertly marking the smooth clay. After that, there were a few more details to be recorded by Si'Wren, who paid diligent attention to whatever else Borla might see fit to prompt her to enter into the record.

The Royal Advisors, wise men all, and known to Si'Wren to be wicked beyond measure, conversed with their Emperor, occasionally directing pointed questions to the trader concerning various particulars, while she caused her ivory marking sticks to fairly fly over the smooth glistening clay of her tablet.

Unbidden, she finally pulled out a third clay tablet for the record, and none challenged her decision.

Listening anxiously to the story of Noah, the attitude of Emperor Euphrates and his Royal Advisers gradually changed from frightened alarm, to nervous mockery. By and by, the Royal Advisers became unanimous in advising their concerned Emperor to disbelieve this weary traveler's mad tale. Besides which, this so-called Prophet Noah didn't even have true religion. A single god who could not be seen, and the universal worship of idols spoken so openly against as a vile and divinely forbidden practice? The very idea!

But Emperor Euphrates would not be placated. He was very much afraid of the words of this prophet and his one Invisible God, this Patriarch called Noah.

Finally, Emperor Euphrates signalled straw-thin Ampho, the Royal Crier, who stuck his beaked nose into the air and closed his eyes as he sounded out, considerably less loudly than in open court, “All keep silence before the great Emperor Euphrates!”

“Mark my words,” said Emperor Euphrates, for the benefit of Si'Wren.

Si'Wren shifted to a fourth clay tablet and waited, her marking sticks poised to fly.

“One called Noah, a noble patriarch who has pronounced both prophecies and judgements before God,” said Emperor Euphrates, “shall be visited by Emperor Euphrates, and petitioned with all royal gifts and honors befitting his noble reputation, to determine if he is a true prophet of the God who hates idols, or a liar and mocker. I, Emperor Euphrates, have spoken.”

The nobles present all betrayed their unexpected surprise at this pronouncement, yet obediently gave the customary nod, but this they seemed to do a bit reluctantly, it appeared to Si'Wren.

Did they resent the idea of their Emperor risking his life thus, or did they, too, fear as their Emperor obviously

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did, the stunning revelation of this strange prophet and his industrious work upon an ark of such immense proportions?

An ark made so far from any body of water, intended for the day when a great flood such as no man had ever witnessed should cover the whole earth! Such a tale was frightful beyond all imagining.

Emperor Euphrates turned and said to Si'Wren, "Scribe; Ibi is not well. You will make immediate preparations to accompany me on a journey into the far land wherein dwells this Noah, to see what the truth of this matter may be."

Si'Wren nodded readily at this, and bowed low.

"Along the way," added Emperor Euphrates, "I would hear more from you about this strange Invisible God who so despises idols."

Si'Wren looked up at him in momentary confusion. If she had sworn a vow never to speak, how was she to do this?

But Emperor Euphrates waved an idle hand at her clay tablets and marking sticks with a nod.

Abruptly, Si'Wren flashed a look of understanding. How silly of her to forget, and she nodded and bowed hastily to show her acknowledgement.

The meeting having come to its conclusion, all bowed before Emperor Euphrates as he rose and went out. Then Borla dismissed them all after an announcement that an expedition was to be mounted and various individuals were to be expected to go, and the meeting was over.

As the murmur of astonished male voices went on around her, Si'Wren entered the date, with her personal 'signature', two short squiggles, one upright and one laid over. Lastly, she marked a quickly executed pictograph of a king's crown. It was an oft and well-practiced suffix, to signify that it was Emperor Euphrates's own decision, rather than that of an underling such as Borla.

* * *

That evening, as Si'Wren prepared herself for the long journey, on which Ibi could not come because of his extreme age and many infirmities, Si'Wren learned from her mentor of truly shocking news.

There had been a great commotion in the city gates, said Ibi, after the royal procession had passed by. A huge crowd of evil men had stormed through, and beaten off the elders of the city and taken over the gates. Many were killed.

Si'Wren's eyes grew large and serious at the hearing of this.

Then Ibi, still ailing and in a very weakened physical state, put a heavy hand on her shoulder, and said to Si'Wren, "Among the dead, little one, was one of great and noble reputation, called Habrunt."

Si'Wren stared up at Ibi, eyes disbelieving.

"Aye," said Ibi quietly, with a woeful, tired nod. "I knew of him, and of your love for him. When two such hearts as yours and Habrunt's beat so strongly for one another, even the deaf can hear that noble drum beat. It was said of him that while the elders all fled like cowards to save their own skins, Habrunt remained in spite of his injuries and rose up to his full former stature, and knocked down his first attacker with a staff of hard wood which the sword had failed to cut in twain despite repeated blows. So Habrunt prevailed against the first one with his staff, and then used the man's own sword to cut them down like tares before they finally surrounded him and slew him by their overwhelming numbers.

"Who could have preferred it any other way, least of all Habrunt himself?" Ibi went on. "Many grieve besides you, Si'Wren, for the memory of lost Habrunt. They say Habrunt stood his ground with none to help him, and sought valiantly to defend the aged one who invented writing, and who was slain together with him also. Yet his majesty the Emperor Euphrates, on being informed of this, washed his hands of the entire wretched matter and has chosen to do nothing whatsoever about it."

Si'Wren felt hot tears well up in her eyes, stinging them, and blurring her vision as she dropped her eyes from Ibi's, and stared numbly at the stones of the floor where the tears fell from her cheeks in an accumulated pattern of insignificant spatters.

So, that which she considered the greatest news of all, was no news at all to her Emperor.

She felt at her pouch, without looking, for her ivory marking sticks, and slowly drew them out with trembling fingers.

The great Emperor Euphrates was desirous that Si'Wren should instruct him, on this long journey, on the

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virtues of the Invisible God, a God who hated idols.

Bitterness filled her heart and soul, as Si'Wren clutched her beautiful ivory marking sticks with unseen fingers and hung her head in grief, staring blurrily down at the splashes of her tears like mythical 'raindrops' upon the dull smooth unevenness of the stones.

This strange Invisible God had suffered a speechless one to 'speak' through clay tablets, to an Emperor whose ears were perpetually deafened by the turbulent but illiterate praises of the crowds.

It was a hard-won 'miracle', her speechless literacy, considering the mortal sufferings she had endured under Ibi's sage tutelage to bring it to pass. For the sake of God, if not her past miseries, she would have a thing or two to inscribe for her Emperor's pleasure, along the way.

She would consult her own broken heart in the instruction of his stony one, that it should burn within him to hear more of the truth about the Invisible One, as Habrunt's once had.

This she must do. Let there be no mistake about it.

Chapter Seven—On The March

The expedition made good time for the first few days. A considerable body of men at arms was taken along to act as a bodyguard. Mearch, Royal Armorer, stayed behind to keep the city garrison.

They marched parallel to the river through the midst of the gulf plains for a good distance, and were able to travel with little danger through the fertile lush vegetation.

Eventually, they left behind the last outpost of the Emperor's domain, and it was with a lonely, forbidding feeling that Si'Wren watched the trader urged his camel forward at the head of the long column. From now on, he was to act as their only guide, and they were to put their trust in him, as he lead them into an unfamiliar and hostile world in which all men were to be automatically regarded as enemies until proven otherwise.

The trader had traversed the entire distance himself, and had kept a good record of his travels, which journal was employed now as their only hope of locating the legendary Patriarch Noah. However, chance encounters with various refugees fleeing in the opposite direction later in the day, brought out the news from several independent sources that a terrible war between two kings, rival brothers, had made their chosen route impassable.

Borla finally called a halt and a short conference was held. He looked deeply concerned, and for good reason. Although Si'Wren was called to attendance, she was not asked to make a record of it because it was felt that once they had decided which way to go, there would be no need of further mention of their predicament. Borla was reluctant to see the men caught up in some local squabble, and Emperor Euphrates readily agreed that it was better to keep the troops fresh and in high spirits, for they had a great journey ahead of them.

Hence, Si'Wren was able to learn firsthand of their deep-rooted fear, as the fateful decision was finally made to turn aside. It was something of an eye-opener for Si'Wren to learn that her mighty Emperor could possibly be afraid of anything to the point of actually avoiding a deliberate showdown, and taught her much about the immensity and hostility of the world.

She could not help but share their fear, when they finally concluded their impromptu conference of the leaders of the Captains of Fifty, and with false bravado, announced to the men their intention of striking out across-country into an uncharted domain, in a forced-march across a profligate wilderness in which both men and beasts were so savage that civilized souls did not venture forth unless they went in large, heavily armed groups and then only with good reason.

To Si'Wren, it was readily apparent that they would no longer know for certain how best to direct their path. The trader himself would only have the most vague idea of which meander to take at every fork. What with the unbelievable twisting of the various water courses and almost complete impassability of various forms of terrain they had encountered so far, their journey had become a maze at which the most intelligent and informed of them could only guess which way to turn. Even with experienced scouts sent ahead on horseback to search out their route, they were in a constant quandary over which way to go next.

After several days, their journey took them up out of the plains into the humid highlands of a continuous jungle in which plants and animals grew in a great profusion such as Si'Wren could not have believed possible had she not seen it with her own eyes.

Each evening, the Captains of Fifty posted their outwatches, and Emperor Euphrates summoned Si'Wren to him, and by the light of a bonfire would question her at length about the Invisible God. Si'Wren tried to instruct him as best she could using her clay tablets, portions of which she sometimes hastily backtracked and obliterated

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with the heel of her palm, to make way for better explanations. She hardly knew what to write but seemed to make sense enough to please his Majesty, if not herself.

For it was a bewildering contest in which the established deities stood linked rank upon rank against her Invisible God, and the thought of what the Patriarch Noah would have said weighed heavily upon her mind. As a result she was frequently plagued by hesitation and confusion as Emperor Euphrates waited patiently to read each reply from her, and Si'Wren was thankful that scornful Borla was not a participant.

But always, upon retiring to her tent each night after yet another long 'discussion' with her Emperor, Si'Wren was left feeling wrung dry. Then, surrounded by pitch darkness and the strange distant cries of unseen night creatures both great and small, she would pray fervently to Him in private, and finally slip away into sleep wondering yet again what sort of a God could have produced such a far-reaching creation in which man and beast alike so readily displayed such unbridled savagery and madness.

* * *

One night, as they sat encamped on a broad hilltop clearing, Si'Wren watched the thickening night mists roll over the land, swathing the jungles of the hills and valleys in a gauzy white shroud, and she considered at length what the Invisible God would have wanted her to communicate to her Emperor, if she could but guess rightly even one time what that might be.

But she was left, as before, with a wilderness of the soul like unto that surrounding them, in which the elusive refuge of Divine Truth seemed as remote as the tale of the Prophet Noah's mythical ark.

They were resting and warming themselves at fireside, having just finished the evening repast. She had extra clay tablets stacked beside her, with one in her lap, having just finished the dictations of Borla's notes about the day's journey into this strange land.

* * *

A little earlier, right after making camp, one of Emperor Euphrates's Captains of Fifty had approached and thrown himself down before Emperor Euphrates, to complain loudly to the dust under his nose that Si'Wren's beauty was exceeding distracting to the men because of the way they could not help watching her while she consumed her food. He also alleged she was coquettish in her manner and playing the flirt to his men. They could not bear it, he said, and had voiced numerous and bitter complaints to him about such an unconquerable distraction.

Further, he declared that they were justified in their protestations, for behold, were they not all under enforced celibacy because they could not bring along their accustomed camp prostitutes on the long forced march to Noah's land?

Si'Wren, of course, could say nothing in her own defense, but expected that her Emperor might, because he already knew that she was sworn to such higher callings as precluded by their very nature the rottenness of character necessary for her to act in the manner she stood accused of. It was simply beneath her dignity, not to mention her calling. Besides which, her suitably modest behavior did not seem to have displeased Emperor Euphrates or Borla in the past, and this was the first time she had ever heard of such complaints.

But after her Emperor had ordered the Captain to return to his men, to her chagrin, he had commanded Si'Wren that she should retire to her tent whenever eating.

To Si'Wren, it seemed ridiculous, but henceforth she knew that she must comply obediently without question.

* * *

Now, the memory of her indignity was put aside as Si'Wren sat before Emperor Euphrates and inscribed in her tablets her intuitions regarding the Invisible God.

Tonight she was attempting to explain, out of her own ignorance, with but her own trueness of conscience to guide her, that the Invisible God was not the same thing as his creation, the world, and also that, although he was also spirit, or 'wind', he also liked to compare himself in some ways, although not all ways, to water.

For instance, one might venture to 'see' the Invisible God by a most curious trick of the eye, as by the discovered reflection of one's face when looking into the still, motionless surface of any pond or wash basin of water, which was also, after a fashion, invisible. In the same manner that might one 'see' all things by looking obliquely at their reflection in the still water, so also was the Invisible God both 'seen' in his creation, as by reflection upon water, and yet not seen at all, since water was itself invisible.

Emperor Euphrates read this upon her clay tablet, and smiled as he held low before her eyes the mirrored

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surface of a golden goblet of red wine and suggested, "This also, yes?"

Si'Wren hesitated long and contemplatively, as he held it low before her eyes, so that she might study his grinning reflection in the deep red of the wine. God was spirit. Wine was a spirit drink. This perplexed her deeply, for she wished not to blaspheme. Finally, after thinking it over intently, she bowed low and agreed with a brief hesitant nod. Yes, she wrote, praying she would not offend Him; The Invisible God might be like wine.

Getting back to her basic belief that He was like water, she wrote further, begging the question; Who can make an idol to represent water? Water flows like a living thing, and can bear no set shape, and how shall the finest sculptor thus fashion copies of silver or gold to sell and get gain?

The happenstance mention of the Invisible God's remarkable immunity to the touch of filthy lucre, a truth conclusively established by the impossibility of selling idols of him, seemed to impress her Emperor beyond all measure. For he spent all of his days, dealing with the contests and affairs of men who all wanted it, and who were all, without exception, corrupted by it's touch.

Later, Emperor Euphrates sat staring out into the gathering dusk, and appeared deep in thought, as if much affected by what she had written.

Si'Wren had long since come to learn that even when one conversed with Emperor Euphrates, and seemed to have his entire, undivided attention, part of his mind was ever awander as he considered all things in his great kingdom. He had that look about him now. He had a marvelous mind, that seemed to find clarity where others might perceive only the sheer, blind face of an inner stone wall.

The advancing fog of eventide had already covered and obscured the lowlands, giving one the exalt sensation of looking down as from heaven itself upon all the world, and cloaking symbolically with the gathering darkness it's all-encompassing evils as with some inscrutable divine forbearance. A forbearance, Si'Wren reminded herself, which the foreboding ark of Noah bespoke to be nearly at an end, and which thenceforth would be turned to wrath.

She listened to the unseen cries of creatures in the jungle, while the fire crackled and snapped, warming her. Basking in it's heat, she felt lulled by the flickering flames.

"You are most obedient and dutiful," said Emperor Euphrates.

At this, Si'Wren looked up at him expectantly, waiting respectfully to see if he would say more.

"Must you always wear your hair up in such dreadful braids?" he went on. "You should let it out. You are a beautiful girl. You should display your beauty, for your Emperor's glory and enjoyment."

Si'Wren looked up at him in involuntary surprise, and when he smiled further encouragement, she bowed low, and raised herself again to full upright sitting posture.

After a moment's awkward hesitation, she dropped her eyes shyly as, unsmiling, she reached back with both hands, her countenance downcast in deep modesty, and self-consciously undid the tie that held her long braid secure at the end.

She played her fingers through her hair, unravelling it until it fell loosely across her shoulders and she was able to shake it out in a glossy reflective black that shone with red-orange highlights from the dancing flames.

Tired from the day's riding, she gazed again into the fire pit, feeling infinitely more relaxed by the loosening of her braid and secretly gnawing a corner of her lip in unconscious self-doubt. First she was instructed to eat in her tent so as not to unduly arouse the troops, and now—this. She did not know quite what to make of it.

"The Invisible God who hates idols," said Emperor Euphrates. He paused thoughtfully, before going on. "Is he not like unto this fire before us, a 'living fire', as it were?"

Si'Wren frowned at this new idea. Then, after a long hesitation, she finally wrote on her clay tablet, 'It is possible', and tilted the face of the tablet so the fire itself could illuminate it.

"Then, is not the Invisible God the same thing as our very own Sun God?" asked Emperor Euphrates quickly, as if pouncing on the winning point of a most cleverly-worded argument.

'Not so', wrote Si'Wren, without hesitation.

She showed this to Emperor Euphrates. Then she turned the tablet towards herself, and wrote further upon it. Finally, she turned it towards Emperor Euphrates again.

'The Invisible God,' Si'Wren had now written, 'in Whom, like water, all things are reflected, is the Creator of all things. But if He made all things, then He must be higher than all things or idols.'

"I see," said Emperor Euphrates, when he had read this. "Tell me, then, shall we see this Invisible God, when

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we die?"

Si'Wren thought at length, and finally, without writing anything more, turned her tablet to him and indicated, using her ivory writing stick as a pointer, her earlier line wherein she had written, 'It is possible'.

Emperor Euphrates regarded the line for a long moment, and finally, he said quietly, "So..."
He nodded thoughtfully to himself, and remained silent.

After a short time, during which interval he said nothing more, he retired to his tent for the night, while an honor guard of four spearmen stood outside of it's four corners in silent, constant vigilance.

Si'Wren was left sitting before the fire, staring down at her assortment of clay tablets as she thought intently about the true nature of the Invisible God.

For, besides the parable of a reflection in water, she did not truly know. There was so little to go on, certainly nothing written, whereas others had such magnificent idols of wood, ivory, noble metals, and fine gemstones crafted by the gifted hands of talented men. They also had their ceremonies, their priests, their temple servants. It was so easy for them to give an answer to any difficult question, and to reassure one—another that they were so right.

But as for Si'Wren and her Invisible God, she could only feel a deep, chasmic remorse that there was no one to ask, and she knew of no other living true believer in the whole wide world now, besides herself, and the Patriarch Noah, whom she knew not.

* * *

That night the clouds gathered thick and dark, and the very air itself seemed charged, and deathly still. It made the men grumble uneasily, fearing what monsters or insanities their imaginations might conjure.

All of a sudden, there was a blinding flash in the black night as a bolt of lightning struck the ground just outside the camp, it's searing brilliance accompanied by an ear-splitting CRRRRAACK!!! and an echoing thunder that rumbled across the darkened heavens.

Terrified, the entire camp scrambled for cover.

It was the beginning of a terrible lightning storm. Far into the night, coruscating bolts like living javelins of fire struck the ground again and again with their blinding stabs of jagged light. Si'Wren hid also, wondering as she cowered whether the Invisible God was angry with her for giving such clumsy explanations to the Emperor, or so pleased as to reinforce her mere clay words with divine, jaggedly brilliant writing sticks of his own.

One foot soldier could suddenly stand it no longer, and ran off screaming thin shrill cries into the darkness. He had just reached a little hilltop, a mere rise in the land, when—still shouting madly and hysterically—he was hit and blasted. His body lay in a heap, twisted and blackened, the clothes shredded.

Thunder rolled across the darkened land. The camels, horses, and other pack animals were already thoroughly spooked, and Borla gave orders that the precious, irreplaceable animals be given hands—on guarding throughout the night lest they break their tethers and run away.

But some of the watchmen refused to go out into the lightning—filled darkness of this strange and foreign land at first. Then a new form of thunder could be heard throughout the camp, the crack of whips as the Captains of Fifty drove their fearful watchmen out of their tents to go to their duty posts.

Si'Wren sat in her tent and fought hard not to cower or grovel before the storm, and would have passed the entire night in prayer to the Invisible God, had she not finally collapsed into an exhausted slumber filled with tormented dreams and terrible, awful visions.

* * *

With the coming of the dawn, the world seemed a saner place again. The sun rose, and the sky slowly brightened, and soon, except for a certain sullenness in some faces, the soldiers were about their appointed tasks almost as if nothing had happened. Si'Wren arose, and groomed her horse, and saw to his provender. Only after she had taken care of the glossy black stallion, whom she admired more than any horse in existence, did she think of her own needs.

"Am I not," Emperor Euphrates said over a sumptuous breakfast, as he sat gazing speculatively into the freshly faggoted flames of the morning cooking fire, "Emperor Euphrates, ordained of a God who rules even the lightning and sees fit occasionally to pass men through the burning mantle, even as he struck down one of my subjects this past night? And as Emperor, am I not able to do and command as I please, that I might order a child to be passed through the fire, the better to imitate and please this God?"

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Si'Wren's eyes grew large in shock and alarm as she paused in preparing her repast to look up at him suddenly. She was about to retire to her tent, but all thought of nourishment was forgotten as she shook her head vigorously in the negative. Then in response to his words she put aside her breakfast and rose to her feet. Resorting to her tent, she retrieved the clay tablet of the night before and emerged holding it by its bamboo-backed box frame.

'Not so', she wrote, and showed it to him.

Then, growing bolder, she turned it to herself, and underlined with exaggerated slowness this direct refutation, and turned it again to show him, regarding him eye to eye with a certain sense of somber gravity. She was not talking so much with words now, but with her entire physical posture for added emphasis.

He could have had her executed, for it was dangerously disloyal to contradict him like that, especially with any question having directly to do with the gods.

"Ah, so," said Emperor Euphrates, nodding. "Not to kill unnecessarily, I suppose, eh? But, of a truth, we all know that without shedding of blood, there can be no sacrifice. According to the old legends, was not Adam himself covered with an animal skin when he was banished from the Garden of Eden? Surely, if this Invisible God—"

He paused, looking obliquely past Si'Wren, as if searching for some clue of more than passing significance, the better to pursue his unusual chain of logic.

'To be merciful,' Si'Wren wrote, remaining carefully apropos of his own words. Then she added, 'Kindness is better than cruelty.'

"You think so? But does not even this depend upon the circumstances? Foolish men must be punished, and what the gods declare must be carried out. Do you not agree?"

Si'Wren hesitated, and felt a great upwelling of truth that would no longer be quelled. She paused with marking sticks held poised in stilled fingers above the moist clay, and then made her first markings in its smooth freshness. What she was about to write would be rank blasphemy, but she could no longer contain herself.

'The smith', Si'Wren wrote, 'labors hard in the coals, using tongs. He pounds his many gods with endless hammerings, working by the strength of his arms. He is mortal, for he hungers, and his strength fails, and if he drinks no water he soon grows faint, yet he has created his own gods, which if they truly lived, would be battered witless anyways from the noise of hammer and anvil, even as they are shaped to make them ready to sell.'

That seemed a fitting beginning.

Seeing she had her Emperor's complete and undivided attention, Si'Wren was emboldened to inscribe further, 'The craftsman measures with his eye, and marks with his forearm; he whittles pegs to pound into the holes he has made, and attaches a head and arms onto a graven block of wood, making block-heads to bow down to. He marks eyes, nose, and mouth with the dividers, and showers the ground with the unwanted kindling as he fashions the figure of a monster man, to stand in the nook by the front door and impress his visitors as they come in.'

Then, still dissatisfied, she took a deep breath, poised and motionless with her marking tools in her fingers, and finally set to work as she began to really spell it out, knowing she might not get another chance if she were to be executed for her troubles.

'He plants trees which are watered by the hind leg of his own dogs. Then he hews down the beautiful trees; cypress, oak, and ash.'

Running out of space, she laid the tablet before the Emperor and drew another to her, and as he read and watched in benumbed astonishment, she continued resolutely;

'Then shall his god warm him: for he will take the kindling and wood chips to make his own fire, wearing down his gnashing teeth on coarse stone grit bread baked with the coals made from the self-same trees, and bowing down to the termite nests hidden in the hearts of his gods.'

Si'Wren felt she was on the right track at last, after so many doubts in her own heart. Ever since the death of Nelatha, she'd had such doubts, but no more.

The ivory stick-ends moved to an enchanting, arrhythmic tempo as she marked on swiftly;

'He burns the cedar fleas of his god to begat roasted pig's flesh, and says, Aha!, I am warm, my god is a wood fire. He falls down before such and tearfully worships their acrid, stinking smoke, and licks dust, crying loudly, Spare me oh gods!'

Si'Wren thought of the wrath of Master Rababull, long-dead, and what he had done to poor defenseless

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Nelatha. Then she thought of the sudden fate of Sorpiala, and how one never knew when one's time might come.

Si'Wren sensed a great consternation in Emperor Euphrates, though she barely glimpsed him out of the corner of her eye as he continued to read her words as fast as she could write them.

Then, she finished her statement as her sticks worked almost in a blur;

'Shall I bow my living face down and eat of the dust that not only covers all things but also collects upon their dumb wooden heads?'

Si'Wren stopped and sighed, waiting, and expecting any moment for an avenging sword to be loudly and vehemently called for, that she be dispatched in no short order with the same gruesome fate such as Nelatha had suffered.

But all she heard was the heavy breathing of her mighty Emperor Euphrates, as he stared long at her clay words. She knew he was especially fond of her personal manner of marking the clay, her especially delicate but incisive 'writing style', which was as rare art to the old monarch, but she knew also, that this former fondness of his toward her would only serve to make him all the more angry, should he finally pass the boiling point in his outraged idolater's heart.

The pale morning fire danced and flickered, the flames hot and virtually invisible in the gathering light of day, and she remembered a delirious dream from that terrible, dark night immediately following her evil punishment by Master Rababull. Then, she had only imagined demons—or had she? Si'Wren considered silently, reflecting upon events in her mind. Were there not real demons round about them in the wilderness, following them by day like an invisible cloud of spirit gargoyles, and hemming them in by night, seeking the death of one such as she by the hand of some mad possessed sword-wielder should her Emperor but once command it?

"Truly, no mere idol-worshipper has ever spoken to me thus," Emperor Euphrates nodded wryly, as she perceived that even as he read her words, he was now thoroughly enjoying himself with the game of foolish girl and divine Emperor. But which would he honor; the 'false truth' of his idols, or the 'truth made foolishness' of her Invisible God? For, far too often, her words did seem foolish, even to herself.

Then he looked up in grudging acknowledgement, a mighty Emperor's honest tribute to a mere girl scribe's simple wisdom, and said;

"Si'Wren, oh my beautiful, literary one, I suppose if the same spiritual laws were applied by this Invisible God to all without exception, would it not be made obvious that God is no respecter of persons, and that even Emperor Euphrates himself is but one more humble subject before him?"

At this, Si'Wren, regarding her now-cooled wooden bowl of porridge, hesitated a long time. She felt deeply overawed, that she should be given such unprecedented favor in her Emperor's eyes as to blaspheme his gods so freely and treat them all as false. Perhaps he was only playing with her to mock her beliefs, before finally putting her out of her misery. Any conversation with the Emperor was a matter deserving of the most serious consideration, regardless of whether it be mere jest, or otherwise.

Si'Wren sipped a little water, and considered what to write next, whether to pursue the argument this way or that way. She did not want to seem to belittle her Emperor, even by his own example. She was no fulcrum of understanding. However, in her heart, she could only believe that mere idols were most difficult to obtain a verbal reply from, notwithstanding the obvious fact that the Invisible God had been equally silent to her throughout her entire short life.

It was hazard enough to agree with the willing self-criticism of the common man; how much more so that of one's own Emperor? But his questions were unusually persistent this time.

"Is it not truly so, little one?" Emperor Euphrates inquired, trying to give her encouragement. "See now; you have thrown down such a gauntlet as no master swordsman has ever dared to hurl, in valiant challenge to my gods and hence my own majesty and empire. Your marking sticks are mightier than their swords, and as Royal Scribe, surely you are not so afraid of what a few 'chicken scratches' in the clay on your part will reap. For if you would share thoughts of majesty worthy of your Emperor, you must consider that if you quit now like a coward, how shall such stillborn beliefs bring any hope of a harvest of reason, instead of the expected whirlwind?"

Si'Wren looked up at the dense, impenetrable foliage of the treetops covering a steep forested hillside nearby, and considered this at length. She finally lifted and poised her marking sticks over the soft clay, her fingers hovering as she prepared to reply further.

But just then Borla approached, and so Si'Wren merely bowed low to her Emperor and waited respectfully for

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Borla to speak.

Emperor Euphrates looked up at Borla and said to him without the slightest preamble, “Borla, is not even the great Emperor Euphrates a mere humble subject before God?”

Borla, put on the spot so directly, hesitated, and finally stammered fearfully, “My Emperor, you are ordained of the gods.”

“If God can ordain,” Emperor Euphrates persisted, ignoring the difference in their words, for Borla had said 'gods' whereas Emperor Euphrates had said 'God', “can he not unordain what he has already ordained?”

“God—is God!” said Borla, finally catching on to Emperor Euphrates's unusual, singular form of referring to divinity. He had never heard his Emperor refer to the gods in the singular like this, and seeing Si'Wren present with her tablets, instantly suspected the truth and seemed to shrink back visibly from Si'Wren's openly blasphemous notion of only one God.

“God—is,” said Emperor Euphrates, as if ruminating to himself.

An awkward silence ensued.

“Highness,” interrupted Borla finally, “if I may speak of important matters pertaining to the camp. I have made my morning rounds. A foraging party was sent out, and has just returned with unfortunate news. Two of the men in their group departed from the main party to go off on their own in search of better fare. They were surprised and set upon by a most fearsome-looking creature with great saber-teeth. Both of them perished. Utterly torn asunder. Unfortunately,” Borla concluded, “it seems that the hunters became the hunted, for their lack of vigilance.”

He went on, “Nevertheless, they were only seeking provisions for the camp, and I gave permission for an honorable burial to be made.”

“Ah, yes. Is not vigilance ever and anon, a most curiously wanting virtue?” pronounced Emperor Euphrates. “Well done, wise Borla.”

“The wisdom of your judgements exceeds that of all men, Highness,” Borla said in unthinking self-deprecation. “I also ordered a man to be executed, a foot soldier who vowed he had forsaken all other gods, in favor of the Invisible God who hates idols.”

Si'Wren jerked to her feet suddenly and stood before them both, her tormented eyes beseeching them disbelievingly that she had heard wrong this accursed man's words.

At this, Borla turned his head toward her as if not realizing quite why she had reacted so violently, whereas Emperor Euphrates merely observed her with inquisitively raised eyebrows and a certain unexpressive watchfulness.

Glancing away from Si'Wren, Borla inclined slightly to Emperor Euphrates with a thin smile of the very finest and most cultured cordiality, and said with an exaggerated mildness, “I only seek ever to do your will, Highness, but it seems another has perhaps—found fault?—”

Borla shifted his slyly conniving eyes innocuously back to Si'Wren's grieving, outraged countenance.

She stared up at him, having just finished a quick inscription, and held it up with no small measure of anger and impotence for him to read.

'Is the thing done?' read the newest line of her clay tablet.

For, above this, many wonderful messages about the Invisible God had been written for the Emperor's benefit.

“Ah!” said Borla, nodding peremptorily.

He held out his hand, and after a moment of confusion, Si'Wren placed the ivory writing sticks into his upturned palm.

Then, Borla insolently took her clay tablet, wrote mockingly upon it, and handed it back with a contemptuous flourish.

'It is finished,' read Borla's new line.

Si'Wren looked down at the tablet, eyes full of anguish, and reached to snatch one stick back from Borla to write quickly and far less perfectly, 'Where have they laid the body?'

Borla looked into her eyes with a serpent's wisdom as he nodded at this remark, and letting her hang onto the tablet, he merely inscribed the even more carelessly written reply, 'In yonder field.'

Then he waited with his arm half-raised, until she had finished reading this and looked up at him to see whence he pointed.

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He raised his arm a little further and aimed a bony finger across the camp beyond its far southern boundary, past which could be glimpsed a vast, sloping stretch of outlying fields, with the higher foothills to the right, and the far lowlands whence they had all come, somewhere beyond and to the left.

These were no level, cultivated fields, but were totally in the wilds, as was most of the world. They were riddled by a network of deep, almost impassable erosion gullies that were choked through their centers by dense clusters of bamboo and great interwoven hoops of enormously spiked, thorny vines, and bordered by dense copses of green trees interspersed by tall grass.

“You may go and do with the body as you please,” said Borla, half deprecatingly. “I know it is a difficult place to search, but you will find it in the nearest gully. I oversaw the entire unfortunate business myself.”

Borla turned to Emperor Euphrates, and continued, “As with all dishonorable deaths, the body was left exposed, and not buried.”

Angry tears in her eyes, Si'Wren stood there with the clay tablet in her right hand and stared up at Borla malevolently for a long, frozen moment.

“Highness,” Borla said mildly, “it would appear that the great flood has already arrived, if one would judge by this maid's cheeks. Perhaps the messenger's story was but a clever parable pertaining to such.”

Emperor Euphrates said nothing, and Si'Wren reflected that one's Emperor could do as he pleased, with none to dare speak against him. On the other hand, there appeared to be nothing to prevent her from going, either.

Mindful of what her unaccustomed task would entail, Si'Wren turned and gently laid the clay tablet with its marvelous truths, and terrible last inscriptions, just inside the entrance to her tent.

Inside, her fingers trembling with every move, she turned and retrieved a stone oil lamp and a sparking flint from her tent. As she did this, she realized that one thing more was needful, to accomplish what must be done.

She needed a tarp, and a woven blanket would not do. It must be something strong and durable enough to serve its purpose and not snag on the weeds or rip open, that the burial should be fittingly accomplished.

Looking up, her eyes fixed upon the leather door flap of her tent, suspended across the opening.

Setting down the stone oil lamp, she reached up to one upper end of it and tugged steadily while sawing at the thin strong threads of sinew with a knife, until she popped the corner loose.

Ignoring the disapproving and contemptuous look of Borla as he watched, and oblivious of the stares of the guards, and the Captains of Fifty who had accompanied Borla to receive their Orders of the Day, and the Emperor himself, Si'Wren reached up to the lone dangling corner of the tent flap for a fresh grip, and applied the knife to the binding threads of sinew as she pulled steadily at it, until it also came loose and dropped into her arms in a thin swirl of dried dust.

She folded the tent flap over and rolled up various items within it. Then she went out resolutely to her horse, and tied the bundle behind her saddle.

Then without so much as a backwards glance, she led the black stallion to a nearby rock, which she climbed, and mounted, and turned and galloped him across the compound toward the far perimeter of the camp, with many a warrior's lusting eyes looking on as she rode out of camp with the oil lamp in one hand.

Oil lamps were made for darkness. Plainly, seeing it was still but morning, the men watching her ride away were not a little curious as to her destination with a lamp at such an early hour.

* * *

When she found him, it was not yet as she had feared.

She quickly located the body by the sight of a large flock of vultures wheeling and circling overhead. Nearby, a cluster of hyenas was already sniffing around, still trying to find the body.

Hyenas, with their silly laugh and ugly, death's-head faces, could crush ox bones with their powerful jaws. They usually ran in packs, and she considered them—as did any decent folk—to be cowardly, dangerous, and disgusting animals.

But they had not quite succeeded in locating the body yet, and the man's motionless remains lay virtually unscathed, except for the mortal wounds from his execution at the orders of Borla. His lifeless body had been left lying face-down beside a series of downwards sloping, shaded stretches near a gently banked, zig-zag ravine that meandered through the broad field.

A wide ground covering of white-streaked, blue morning glory flowers interlaced throughout with green leaves, adorned the banks of the ravine, trumpeting silent praises to God. Their little green vines, with their

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countless green stepping–stone leaves were outstretched like a living carpet that extended away from her in an uneven boundary restricted to the shade in a series of wide, irregular patterns, patches, and grassy missed sections.

Farther from the ravine, tall sawtooth grass clumps fountained perpetual white floral sprays into the air from shooting star sticks in their centers. The clumps were surrounded by field grass interspersed with bare sand and gravel patches. The field stretched away from the banks of the crooked watercourse, in which the morning glories kept mostly to the sheltering canopy of overhanging tree boughs.

If his body had slid or rolled just a little farther beyond where it now lay, it would have gone down the side of the more steeply banked inner run of the ravine and continued into the bottom, which ditched down much more sharply into a pronounced drop–off.

The center of the ditch contained a profusion of spiked briars and berry brambles of a size such as to give pause to the most determined invader, and was undoubtedly rife with scorpions, spiders, flying stinging insects, huge venomous vipers, and other unguessable horrors, from which depths it would have been plainly hopeless for her to venture the recovery of the foot soldier's body again.

But to her good fortune, the body had not gone too far, and the impromptu pall–bearers—his former comrades—at–arms—had not bothered to make a better effort of their thankless task.

Si'Wren knelt down beside an exposed rock, placing her little stone lamp upon it. Pouring carefully from a small oilskin pouch, she filled it with oil, taking care not to spill any. Then she took the flint out of a pouch, together with a little bit of punk, or fine, dried grass, and placed it beside the oil lamp, whereupon she contrived with several deft strikes of the flint and a series of expertly aimed sparks to start the punk to glowing with a single precious spark enmeshed deep within its crushed dry bosom, and blow gently upon it, and soon had a flame. With this in turn she lighted the oil lamp's pour spout.

Successful at last in doing this, she paused and somberly studied the lighted lamp with its pale flame wavering a little in the still morning air.

Abruptly she heard a noise, and looked behind her in alarm to see that the pack of hyenas she had passed while riding in, had already cut off her escape route and was preparing to close in on her. The stallion still stood his ground, but was already becoming spooked and would not be manageable for too much longer. A few of the hyenas were already trying to work up their nerve to make the initial charge.

Protectively, Si'Wren picked up the oil lamp and stepped forward between the pack of hyenas and her nervously neighing horse.

The black continued stamping his hooves and neighing loudly, rearing animatedly several times to show his readiness to defend himself from all comers. It appeared that he might decide either to attack or break and run at any moment if they continued to provoke him much longer. That must not happen, for to Si'Wren the stallion represented survival itself in a land like this.

She stopped and stood motionless, a puny figure of a wayfarer, with her silly little oil lamp in her hand. Lamps were used to dispel darkness, and to carry their blessed light into any place where evil might lurk, but here was evil in the day.

The biggest hyena finally made a run for her. She stood her ground until almost at the last, then with a deft side–step she shifted lightly to one side and swung the lamp out in a quick little semi–circle at the big scavenger.

Fire gouted from the lamp and engulfed the hyena. Immolated in living flames, the surprised beast spun around and ran madly across the field, squealing and howling shrilly as if demon–possessed and leaving a series of burning and smoldering green vegetation patches that smoked and roared and popped as they burned in the aftermath of its wayward wake. At its approach, the other hyenas broke and ran, the whites of their eyes rolling in maddened fear and squealing their weird frenzied laughter as they scattered mindlessly in all directions.

Si'Wren wrinkled her nose at the stink of the hyena's burning flesh and singed hoary hairs, watching the smoke from its still–flaming hide. The unity of the squealing pack had been thoroughly disrupted. After watching a moment longer, Si'Wren set down the little clay lamp on the rock, experiencing a grim sense of momentary relief. She had expected hot oil to come out, not fire. Next, she turned resolutely to the ravine.

It was a daunting task she had chosen, but she set herself to the job with a deep, shuddering sigh and stepped in, her mere presence sufficient to scare off any vulture that might have dared oppose her.

Behind her, the sounds of the scattered hyena pack could still be heard as they screamed for their lives, with the burned one screaming endlessly the loudest. The few visible remaining hyenas stood at a respectful distance

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and watched in great agitation, but none demonstrated the slightest tendency to challenge her authority a second time.

She stood over the ruined body of the executed foot soldier, eyes set to the task. With the scavengers safely backed off, she had a little more time in which to consider what to do next, and returned to the stallion and took a braided hemp rope from the saddle, and knotted one end through a leather pack strap.

Then she untied the tent flap, and took down her little sewing kit in a leathern bag, which consisted of a single thin bone needle, a collection of fine sinew strands, and a flint cutting stone too small to be called a knife, but more like a crude flaying tool.

Backing away from the blessedly stationary horse, which still neighed and stamped his hooves at the distant hyenas, Si'Wren began to uncoil the rope as she descended the broad, gently sloping shoulder of the ravine again. It was not too steep where the body lay, and she did not need to use the rope to keep her from losing her balance.

Nearing the body, which lay face-down, she waded ankle-deep through the white-streaked blue trumpet flowers and little round green leaves of the morning glories and positioned herself, before spreading out the tent flap with a quick shake and a sudden snapping motion to lay it out close beside the body. Because of the morning glories, the tent flap did not fall immediately flat, but suspended itself just above the ground, in a lumpy sheet that continued to settle gradually but more slowly after the initial crush.

After a brief, distracted visual once-over to make sure the flap was as well-positioned as she could get it, she bent over the man and endeavored to roll him over onto the expanse of the tent flap, so that he should come to rest lying squarely upon it face-up.

This she finally accomplished, although not without considerable difficulty.

Weeping now, she pretended that she could not see what she could not help but see and which only her tears could blur mercifully, which was the terrible ravages of his torment in the final stages before his death. She reached across to gently fold the two exposed edges of the tent flap together full-length, and over the crossed arms of the man's ruined body, covering all with the animal skin, and stopped suddenly to bend low over him, eyes blurred and sobbing quietly and hopelessly.

She remained this way for she knew not how long, unable to go on.

Then, realizing that she dared not delay lest some other fierce creature should happen to pass by and take notice of her activities, she endeavored to continue. Her fingers trembling and shaking with grief, she sewed together the two sides of the tent flap that met over his criss-crossed forearms and waist, creating a crude shroud for the man's body.

Somberly, she regarded the battered face within the shroud with a terrible sense of foreboding. She was no longer able to obtain spices so freely as she once might have done in the spice tent of Master Rababull, in order to properly prepare the body for burial. So in place of spices, she swept up a bunch of morning glories and gently laid them about his head, framing his battered face.

Finally, she sewed up the ends, covering all.

Blinking back her tears, she turned to one side and reached for the flint flaying tool, with which to cut off two short pieces of hemp rope, measuring carefully. Then, one end at a time, she gathered together the two ends of the shroud that extended one beyond the head and one beyond the feet, folding each one over and tying it shut in turn.

Lastly, she passed the loose end of the long tow rope, the other end of which was attached to her horse's saddle, under the folded and knotted end of the shroud, just above where the head of the man's body was. This way, she could draw him, without actually tying onto his body, which would have been too much like dragging a mere dead animal and a thoroughly dishonorable act.

Finished at last, she stood up suddenly, and then swayed giddily, almost physically overcome by everything for just a brief moment. Regaining her composure and sense of balance, she turned to her horse.

Standing beside him, she began backing him up slowly, moving together with him when he moved, his great clopping hooves stamping the earth mightily one at a time like the sound of a giant's hammers, as he backed away slowly until he progressively drew the rope taut. Continuing with him in this manner, Si'Wren encouraged him until he began to drag the shroud containing the lifeless man's body from the gentle slope of the wide, shallow ravine and up onto level turf. The shroud vaguely resembled the color and shape of a boat being dragged up a dried-grass beach from a shadowy blue-white and green sea of morning glories.

Although the land beyond the ravine was fairly smooth, it grieved her in no small measure to have to treat the

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foot soldier's mortal remains even so disrespectfully as this, but at least the tent flap could afford some small measure of protection.

Spying a steep upjutting hill of fractured rock nearby, the base of which consisted of jaggedly strewn loose shale and myriads of angular rock fragments, she worked her horse like a draft beast and drew the burden the remaining distance directly to its base, until it came to rest within the split of a rock, the split being just wide enough to admit the shroud, so that it was closely sheltered on both sides by the rock. There, she untied the tow rope from the saddle and shroud, although she left the shroud entirely closed up with its end-ties intact.

She looked up at the pinnacle of the tall hill, and then down at the field of broken rock around her. Much loose shale had fallen from the slope, affording her with plenty of raw material.

She began lugging the heaviest stones she could possibly move one at a time and building them up in successive layers in a protective barrier around the shrouded body. Finally, she stopped to look around, and realized that she was running out of the right-sized rocks. Dismayed, she realized that she was nearing the limit of her strength, and had not half-covered the body yet. What could she do?

The fact of the matter was, the rocks must not only be large enough to keep the hyenas and other large animals from digging through, but in spite of this, they must at the same time be small enough for her to be able to physically move them. What remained to her now were stones which were all either too large to lift, or too small to be of proper use to her. She was left in a quandary, for much work remained if the burial mound was to be properly constructed. The hyenas had gone, but they were sure to return after her departure. Then, as she looked up at the steep, uneven slope, she thought of a way that she might resolve her dilemma.

First she walked her horse a safe ways off, and stood him there.

She knew he would remain wherever she left him until she returned, and was extremely unlikely to simply run away. He was very loyal to her, because of the way she dealt with him, being consistently sensitive and gentle, but firm. Moreover, he had to be free to defend himself or flee for his life, if necessary. Left to himself temporarily like this, the most he might do would be to graze at successively farther locations, which was only natural.

Then she climbed the slope, and began picking out more of the right-size stones. These she dislodged, to send tumbling down near the body, one by one, where they landed and lay scattered, providing plenty of new material for the unfinished cairn.

Then, with the unintentional dislodging of an especially large boulder, she watched aghast as it rolled with a monumental grinding, banging, and crunching down the slope and quickly picked up speed and momentum.

As she watched it whacking and pounding its way downhill like a runaway battering ram, suddenly the entire slope below her gave way with a huge roar, sending up the billowing wave of an immense rising dust cloud as the slope below her began to disintegrate and collapse in a great tilting-over cascade of grinding and smashing rock.

Helpless to stop what she had unleashed, Si'Wren watched in fear and dismay as her horse neighed in terror and reared and galloped away. In the distance, thousands of frightened, fleeing pure white birds arose above the treetops to blacken the sky with their furiously beating wings and filled the air with the sounds of their distant squawking cries.

The short-lived avalanche seemed to be over almost as soon as it had begun. When all was still again, the towering, choking dust clouds took some time to clear. When she could finally see again, peering over the swirling dust clouds, she discovered that the collapse had utterly buried the body and all the ground round about it under an immense mass of broken shale and great flat broken slabs of slate, together with myriad smaller rocks.

She managed to climb carefully down without falling and hurting herself, and was even able to retrieve her horse. Loyal to her, he had only tried to run at first, but no more than a little ways off, after which he had stopped and turned, remaining curious enough to linger and watch.

However, he was understandably a bit more skittish and agitated than usual, and although she approached him without much difficulty, she had to resort to calming him by holding and stroking his head and breathing on his nostrils. He tossed his head frequently at first, swaying her bodily on her feet whole arm-lengths this way and that by the power of his head alone as she sought to hold on and calm him down. But she persisted, trusting him not to harm her, and when she had quieted him sufficiently, she finally took hold of his halter and walked him over beside the landslide.

One look had already informed her that no savage beast, no matter how enormous, would ever dig down

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through that mass of broken rock and great tilted slabs of flat slate to violate its sanctity.

She knelt there, and prayed to the Invisible God, beseeching him to welcome this lost soul into whatever comfort or rest he might be pleased to grant.

Fitly was she garbed in black, the better to meet this unforeseen hour.

She remained kneeling there throughout the entire morning, bowing often, weeping in fits and starts, as she pondered the events that had led her to grieve over this common foot soldier, whom she had never known. This, so soon after losing Habrunt.

This poor man had obviously secretly admired and imitated Si'Wren's beliefs, what little he could learn of her without arousing the suspicion of his comrades—at-arms, without her ever even knowing of it, and for only this, upon being finally discovered or found out somehow in the matter, he had been miserably and wretchedly set upon without her knowing of that either.

Now he lay buried under a monumental cairn of broken slate, the enormous flat slabs of irregularly-shaped rock heaped up over his mortal remains as by the hand of the Invisible God himself, never to know with what grief that she, who had once been his shining example, his supreme inspiration and witness before the Invisible God, or with what intense longing and remorse that she, the one whom he had adored from a distance, would eventually suffer as a result of his decision to follow her in her beliefs.

Never had he attempted to speak to Si'Wren, to impose himself upon her. He had evidently not so much as dreamed of taking it upon himself to actually approach her, she—Si'Wren—the silent, literate female scribe for whom he had no doubt secretly harbored such tender-hearted sentiments of closely shared spiritual beliefs that he must have felt at times as if his own soul were being rent asunder as he trespassed unsuspected upon such starkly forbidden spiritual territory.

She could only guess how he must have felt, seeing how he dared not presume himself upon her, lest any—including herself, for all he knew—should object with a most self-righteous, vainglorious, and presumptuous offendedness such as nearly all of humanity was so fond of imitating and out-doing one-another in feigning. Would that he had intruded, that she might have shown him otherwise!

Perhaps, he might even have ventured to court her as well, to which she would not have objected, but rejoiced. But he—a common foot soldier—had not so much as dared.

Certain others might have objected, if only out of spite, but not she. Moreover, could she not write? Was she not in a position to petition the very Emperor himself, personally, on any affair she deemed fit? Surely Emperor Euphrates would have given her to him, and kept both in his service lest he lose Si'Wren's valuable services as Royal Scribe.

Now, it was too late to tell this slain foot soldier how miserably she felt. Perhaps he, like Habrunt, could have redeemed her vow. Perhaps not. He undoubtedly could not read, and seeing she was sworn never to speak, their love would have been something to marvel at, even to themselves, all their days together.

How awful it now seemed, that now, he would never know that she should come so soon to mourn and lament him, with his body not yet even cold! That she should so soon bury him with her own fingers, and here remain weeping uncontrollably, her face buried in her hands, kneeling over his grave like the beloved wife of many years that she should have been.

Nay, more than a wife, a spiritual sister also.

Reflecting upon such an unfamiliar notion of spiritual kinship, Si'Wren, an orphan from her earliest recollection, bent down low again suddenly, before she could collapse from grief, and wept even more bitterly at her fate.

This man, whom she had never been privileged to meet face-to-face in life, lay now at the center of all her attentions, hopelessly beyond her reach. How she longed that she might but one single time, have revealed to him what his unintentional self-sacrifice meant to her. And now, with what grief she must regard his brave act and cruel fate, all merely for imitating her beliefs!

Who had he been? Would that she had been his wife! Seeing all would have known that she could not speak, and that he could neither read nor write, yet would they have remained but strangers to the world only, but never in each others' eyes.

To think how he had finally found what was, to himself and her alone, in this awful, accursed paradise, the true meaning of spiritual life. That he had found it through the notorious persecutions and back-bitings of others,

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preying viciously upon her nonidoltrous beliefs.

For others had hated her, she knew, and talked behind her back. It was by means of such spiteful, privily expressed hatred that the details of her God had been so published abroad as to eventually reach his ears. Others in their malice had spoken against Si'Wren for her beliefs, but in their restless evil had only served God's good.

This was how, she was certain, that this lone man, this common foot soldier, hearing of how evil she supposedly was, had dared to question that spirit of unthinking hatred, and eventually believed also, and paid the ultimate price for his beliefs while she had gone on about her own business, blissfully unaware of his peril while she in her lofty station had remained perfectly immune to all reproach.

This thought tore at her as nothing else. Now, she would suffer also, for the sake of his memory and what he had believed and suffered and died for. At least, she had made sure his cairn, that the largest of wild beasts might never violate the grave. That little, she could and had done for he who never knew her.

There was something between them now, spanning the spiritual chasm like a bridge of their two kindred souls. She would mourn him forever in the secret places of her heart. It was like gruel without milk and fruit which, if one consumed nothing else, would eventually lose its slight taste of bitterness and ground husks, and become at least indifferent to the palate. Nay, worse. For the rest of her life, she would mourn this stranger long after she had left behind this desolate far-away place, in which he must forever remain buried.

But henceforth she would feel closer to him in her heart, than to any living person or location. She could not forget the memory of this place, though she might never return.

She rose up finally, looking cautiously about her. It was evening. The thickening mists were rolling over the land, spilling their whiteness across the hills into unseen, hidden valleys. Such beauty—such emptiness. The gentle wind had a lonely, desolate sound.

The last of her tears had already dried, but she wept anew when she finally turned to remount her horse for the journey back to camp.

She rode back to the campfire burning in front of Emperor Euphrates' splendid tent, and near his tent was her own, where she halted and dismounted drearily. Merely going through the motions, she groomed down the stallion and staked him to a long tether rope so that he might graze, roll on his back, or do practically whatever he pleased with some measure of freedom.

Chapter Eight—Si'Wren Challenges Emperor Euphrates

Solemnly, Si'Wren dipped out her portion from the pot over the fire, pointedly ignoring the Emperor's personal bodyguards and everyone else around her. She retired to her personal tent to eat, and immediately remembered that she must first tie something over the entrance to replace the missing tent flap, or risk another complaint of coquetishness from a certain one of the Captains of Fifty. In mute observance of this she soon had a coarse-woven wool blanket tied up over the entrance. Later, she could get another animal hide from one of the camp skinnners.

The brave and fearless souls of the camp, mighty men of old, fearsome warriors all, must not have their valiant spirits inflamed with uncontrollable lust at the carnal sight of a mere maid consuming her food.

* * *

The next morning, she arose and stepped out of her tent, ducking past the makeshift blanket. Still as much asleep as awake, she squinted and blinked uncertainly in the morning light. Merely going through the motions, she made tea, and cleansed her eyes and face with it's clear amber fluid. Then she made gruel and mixed it with some fruit pulp and goat's milk.

After this, she surveyed her surroundings, struck by the uncultivated beauty and wild appearance of the land.

Somewhere in the dense nearby forest, she heard the scream of some fierce monster. The ferocity and bestiality of the sound chilled her blood and sent shivers up and down her spine even as a host of lesser animals took up a warning cry, broadcasting an alarm of the unseen predator's passage through their midst.

She could not identify the repeatedly screaming animal with anything from her memory, for she had never in her life heard such a terrible sound. Eventually, it began to move farther away from the camp, as it's terrible cries gradually diminished into the distance. For a long time, she could still occasionally hear it's banshee screams as it prowled somewhere beneath the high canopy of deep forest. Many of the soldiers, she noticed, seemed greatly discomfited by the savagery of the sound, clutching their weapons tightly as they looked anxiously in its direction.

Si'Wren could not help shivering again when she chanced to hear it one last time, far in the distance, through

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some quirk of the gentle wind across the uneven land. In spite of the undulations of the terrain, it had continued—day after day—to slope progressively upwards ahead of the expedition as the royal procession had made more or less steady progress to the northwest, marching ever deeper into the wilds.

Blocked by a series of steep ridges looming ever before them, the entire royal expedition had been encamped in the same place these past few days, while the scouts searched for a way to go on.

Hunting parties went out daily for provisions to restock their marching fare. Others found honey, and gathered fruits, berries, nuts, and roots, with armed guards always standing at the ready.

In camp, those assigned to the Chief Cook worked at preparing, drying, preserving, and packing away the food for the next portion of their long and uncertain journey.

* * *

“Today, we march,” said Borla, watching her closely as Si'Wren emerged from her tent with her empty wooden porridge bowl and set it down. Si'Wren was unaware of the way he watched her, and she had not bothered to braid her hair in the usual manner as was her custom, in accession to her Emperor's wishes of the night just past. Momentarily, Borla stared at her as if he had never seen a woman before in his entire life and could no longer control the direction of his eyes.

To this remark, Si'Wren nodded with a thoughtlessly off-handed look of such distraction and unconcern that she must have somehow greatly vexed Borla, for he suddenly rounded on her in what must have been a masterfully concealed fit of anger as he regarded her expressionlessly.

“Highness,” Borla bit off tersely, “of what can this doctrine of the Invisible God of our Junior Scribe consist of—but nothing; like himself! If her beliefs were to become adopted by others, it is possible that eventually all idols would be destroyed, much gain from the lucre of their sale lost, and their hearts turned to such nonsense as I cannot possibly imagine!”

Borla had his lips drawn back into a sneer now as his brow also became fretted into a terrible frown and he paused to await an answer.

When Emperor Euphrates made no immediately reply, Borla turned to survey Si'Wren boldly, and went on in an even more irritable and sarcastic vein;

“To follow such blind madness is tantamount to treason! Why, it would serve as well if we were to cast out all law and reason and let the people decide for themselves what laws to follow. Come to think of it, they do that enough already. Thou alone art law, oh mighty Emperor. Would thou give thy glory to another?”

He waited, and finally Emperor Euphrates shrugged.

“The girl is sworn to silence,” Emperor Euphrates replied. “How many can she possibly convert anyways, if she be thus bound by her own word to this god?”

Borla seemed to mull this over, but somehow failed to find enough honey in his Emperor's words to nullify the bitterness of his mounting irritation with Si'Wren's beliefs.

Si'Wren watched him implacably, but gave no sign of a response. Neither did she volunteer to hand over any of her writing tablets used earlier to explain the Invisible God to her Emperor.

“What are we to make of this Invisible God,” Borla went on in a biting, petulant tone of voice, “who permits himself to be worshipped, and preached to others, by a single, silent disciple sworn never to speak in a world deafened by the ceaseless praise of idols?”

This much was true, Si'Wren reflected. Silent was she, and silent would she remain.

As Borla went on, ranting over the stupidity of worshipping that which could only be seen through the eye of inner reasoning, Si'Wren thought of the Patriarch Noah, whom they were seeking, who apparently shared her beliefs in some measure, and in light of the fact that she must not speak, Si'Wren found herself reflecting upon the interesting truth which Borla had proposed and it's apparent absurdity.

How did one worship the unseeable? Sometimes the surest way Si'Wren had of knowing the Invisible God to be the true God was by reflecting upon how foolish it was to think of worshiping dumb idols. But perhaps there was another way to show Borla the truth.

Si'Wren reached for her water skin, poured out a little water into her cupped palm, and being mindful of Nelatha's long-ago remonstrance that the reflection of water held a suggestion of how one might manage to 'see' the unseeable Invisible God, she held it out to Borla, moving her arm until one of her eyes met his in the tiny reflection of cupped water in her hand.

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The very moment their two eyes met in the mirrored bit of outheld water, Borla's reflected eye flashed in alarm as he realized what she had done, and he started with an astonished grunt as if he had been cursed to within an inch of his life, and jerked his head back as if kicked by a horse.

“Agh!” he cried out. “What vile sorcery?!...”

Si'Wren quickly raised the cupped water to her lips as if she had only been drinking it, so as to avoid the risk of offending Emperor Euphrates with the possible idea that she had been casting an evil eye.

Emperor Euphrates seemed to be staring at Borla as if he had suddenly got a burr in his sandal or something, and Borla, unwilling to stoop so low as to risk being mocked over some empty accusation, said nothing. Then, as if thinking better of it, he negligently spat in the dirt at Si'Wren's feet as if she were not the deliberate but only the unintentional target, trading water for water and giving reply to her in such manner as befitted the imagined curse.

Si'Wren stepped back, afraid of political ruin should Borla find the right words to vent his anger upon her. One might as easily have glimpsed the reflection of the sun in any common lily pond, or even a mud puddle. It would only have shown forth all the more clearly, the beautiful symbolism of an Invisible God who created all things, and was above all things. Even the wind, which could be seen in the motion of the clouds and trees and in the waving fields of grain and prairie grass, was of a truth not seen at all. And when the wind blew, did not fire burn so much the more greatly?

Oh, that this supreme, Invisible God, who must be so like water, and fire, and even the wind itself, and who surely hated all stupid idols, might once show himself in all of His eternal glory!

Still Borla paused, no doubt bent upon her destruction for the imagined curse, or at least very real insult, which she had apparently inflicted upon him with a mere handful of water, but it was pointless for him to persecute her merely for so mundane an act as slaking her thirst.

Gaining no satisfaction in any of this, he said to her, “Scribe, thy services are needed. Hand me a tablet.”

Obediently, Si'Wren turned to her kit, and fetched out and handed over one of the requested objects to Borla.

Borla took the tablet, which consisted of smooth clay within a split-bamboo frame, and turned it this way and that as he examined it as if cherishing some holy relic in an almost reverent manner.

Then, with a look of perplexity, he turned it face-down and began shaking it vigorously. With a dull series of wet plops, the clay shook loose in a series of irregular pieces and tumbled out onto the ground. He continued shaking it and turning it this way and that and slapping it with his other hand, his dark locks and beard moving rhythmically with the effort until all of the clay had fallen out onto the ground.

Borla observed the empty frame in his hands.

“That's better,” said Borla. “No, better yet—” he gripped the frame with its intact backing tightly in one hand.

He made a fist with his other hand, and with a series of crude punches began knocking out the split-bamboo backing which normally supported the backside of the soft clay in its sturdy frame.

When all of the pieces of split-bamboo backing were broken loose and had fallen to the ground, he smiled at last, with a dry, irritated look in his eyes which only served to accentuate the haggard fierceness of his deeply lined face, and held up the empty frame to the light.

“Behold, the Invisible God!” declared Borla, as Emperor Euphrates looked on most interestedly, but without comment.

Emboldened by his Emperor's look of curiosity, Borla observed dryly, “Rather looks like an open door. Odd. Most such doors are located in temples, wherein idols are to be found.”

Then with a vengeful, jerking motion of his arms, Borla broke the empty frame into pieces, and handed them back to a silent Si'Wren with a curt but formal bow, as he eyed her contemptuously.

Si'Wren took the pieces in her hand, and stood looking back at him without expression.

“Well?” said Borla to her. “I see no thunderbolt.”

But Si'Wren made no reply. She was still grief-struck from the events of yesterday, and in spite of all, had never intended the slightest harm to Borla, even after what he had done. Perhaps the Invisible God was more wise than even she suspected, in permitting her to be subjected to such a vow of silence.

After all, what could she possibly have said to Borla? There was no fitting reply; not to him at least.

“I trust, Highness,” Borla said, “that the Invisible God can defend us in battle as fittingly as he is able to bury another in the grave. I am told by one of my Captains of Fifty that she brought down neigh unto half the hillside of yonder hillock, to the glory of her Invisible God no doubt, and all for the sake of merely giving an honorable

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burial to an avowed enemy of thy throne.”

Borla paused to look significantly over at Si'Wren, who had frozen with the pieces of her ruined clay frame still in one hand.

“Battle?” said Emperor Euphrates, his interest suddenly piqued.

“Aye, Highness,” said Borla. “I am told that campfires were spotted in the distance last night, down in the lowlands whence we came,” said Borla. “We are being followed. I regret to be the bearer of bad tidings, but wise counsel must bear in mind the possibility that it could be Kadrug.”

Si'Wren's ears pricked at this.

“Kadrug!” exclaimed Emperor Euphrates, looking greatly alarmed. “Following me?”

“Aye, and perhaps also—Conabar. It was rumored, you will recall, Highness, that they had sought to join forces.”

“A pact made in hell!” said Emperor Euphrates, as if it were a slanderous oath. “I gave orders that their entrails should be brought to me, that I might read of them.”

“...to their eternal regret,” suffixed Borla decorously, as he stood looking contemplatively across the vista of the lowlands they had already traversed so laboriously.

“Highness,” Borla went on, tugging thoughtfully at the fringes of his beard, “if we should run across them before eventide, it might very well become the expedient thing to do that one of my foot soldiers should inspect their entrails with a common sword, ere the day is done.”

Borla always kept his beard carefully trimmed a fraction shorter than Emperor Euphrates', out of a canny sense of deference. By this, and other, equally subtle devices, he was left free to maximize his own powers to the fullest possible extent, while at the same time seeming always, ever to be the scrupulously faithful servant and minutely lesser intellect. This flattered Emperor Euphrates in no small wise, a fact of which Borla was well aware, although he took utmost pains not to touch upon it in any false light or pretense.

“Aye!” Emperor Euphrates laughed harshly. “Quite enough ceremony for the occasion, I will grant!”

Emperor Euphrates turned then to Si'Wren, and said, “Scribe, you will study further, to show yourself approved, for I would hear more of this Invisible God.”

Si'Wren, marvelling at the open-handedness of her powerful rival, Borla, merely bowed to Emperor Euphrates in formal acknowledgement.

Then, in a more engaging tone of voice, Emperor Euphrates went on and said, “Almost, little Si'Wren...” he paused, looking at her wistfully, “...almost, you persuade me to believe in your remarkable Invisible God. Your arguments are—most entertaining.”

Si'Wren blinked, and hid her disappointment as she bowed again even lower this time.

As Emperor Euphrates turned away to discuss other matters with Borla and the Captains, Si'Wren looked down at the sticks of her ruined clay frame. The frame was, she could see, beyond saving. She dropped the pieces, and they fell in an irregular criss-cross upon the uneven pile of moist clay lumps, which she regarded for a long, silent moment.

She turned away without a word.

The whole camp was taking down equipment and packing it away as they broke camp for the day's journey. Borla's scouts had finally found a way ahead, through the thick foliage interspersed by broad grasslands, that led up into the mountains, and hopefully down through them again into the distant land of Noah.

Si'Wren inspected her horse's hooves one by one, cleaning and caring for them as she had been taught, while several men took down her tent and camp gear for her and stowed it away on a pack animal.

She always saw personally to the packing of her writing kit. She had a small stack of thin clay tablets in their bamboo frames, three of which went in a durable bamboo box in a saddle bag strapped on her mount, in order to have them ready for use on a moment's notice. Being Scribe was not a responsibility to be taken lightly.

While men and horses formed up into long columns, Si'Wren finished her own preparations and prepared to mount up. She had managed so far to be always ready before the others, lest they complain.

Borla was standing with several of his captains, as they discussed with him the anticipated route and possible obstacles that might be encountered today.

Emperor Euphrates sat on a pile of cushions in front of his tent, before which stood his royal camel bedecked and festooned with all the tassels and ornamentation of its kingly station.

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It was unbecoming that an Emperor should sit on his camel and wait while the common soldiers went about their occasionally lengthy preparations for the march. More fitting, rather, was it that they should all make ready, and then wait on their Emperor until he should mount and give the command to Borla for the day's march to commence. Borla, as was customary, would then loudly pass the word on down the chain-of-command through his Captains of Fifty, and the march would commence.

The order to begin the long grueling day's march should be coming through any time now.

Suddenly, above the general background noise of many voices coordinating their preparations to march, Si'Wren heard from across the camp a distant cry;

“Kaaaadruuuug!”

An icy chill coursed through her body as Si'Wren looked up anxiously, and Borla jerked up his hand savagely to cut off one of his Captains in mid-sentence.

“What was that?!” Borla asked sharply.

Everyone, including Emperor Euphrates, seemed to suddenly be listening, and the entire camp seemed to fall silent, their very ears itching to hear the more clearly that dread outcry again.

“Eeeeeahhhgh!”

Si'Wren's ears informed her of the shocking indication that someone must have just been brutally murdered, out a little past the screen of trees beyond the far end of camp. All the camp seemed bewildered.

Then the awful cry came again;

“Kadrug!” came the yell of a distant sentry, “and giants!”

Suddenly everyone seemed to be shouting at once. Si'Wren looked around and saw men falling back from the nearest line of trees, their ordered lines breaking up as men and horses fled under a flight of incoming arrows.

Si'Wren took a hesitant step backwards, and froze at the sound of much hoarse shouting from the other end of camp. She turned her head and searched the field, heart pounding, and through the tall grass appeared first speartips, then helmets, and then the heads and shoulders of hostile men advancing in line-abreast formation, swinging flashing bronze swords in ragged unison and driving back Borla's surprised soldiers in a staggering, disorderly retreat.

There came the unfamiliar call of a horn trumpet from yet another direction, and suddenly a troop of horse soldiers came thundering up the path whence Emperor Euphrates's expedition had come, the ground vibrating under uncountable hooves and cutting off their retreat as the invaders plowed recklessly through Borla's shouting and screaming rear-guard.

In mere seconds, all hope of organizing the men was lost, as they were left in a shambles by the concerted charge of the attackers. The clash of steel filled the dust-laden air, together with the desperate cries of the Emperor's men as they tried to rally themselves together against the ruthless attack.

“I see Conabar himself!” declared one of Borla's captains.

“Where?” demanded Borla.

“There, on a horse!” said the captain.

“Give me a spear!” said Borla.

The captain turned and yanked one out of the hands of the nearest guard and handed it over.

Seizing hold of the spear, Borla mounted his horse and began waving it over their heads as he sought to round up the Emperor's men and muster them into some kind of manageable defensive formation.

But it was too late.

“YAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!—” The challenging war cry rang out from a thousand throats as Kadrug's forces suddenly charged as one and drove the Emperor's forces backwards across the camp perimeter, mercilessly cutting down everyone and everything that stood in their path.

Si'Wren watched helplessly, cringing as she retreated step by step until she was abruptly brought up short against the heaving flanks of her black stallion. He stamped his hooves and neighed, for the thunder of hooves from the invader's horses was shaking the very earth itself.

Si'Wren had never been in any battle before and never expected to be caught in one, but she had worried about something like this happening ever since their departure for the land of Noah. Breathlessly she looked around, trying to make some sense out of the situation and decide upon the best move to make.

Abruptly she froze in stark terror as a giant fully twice the height of a normal man came striding out of the tall

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grass behind the Emperor's tent. He carried a shield the size of a cartwheel on one arm, and a spear like a well-pole in his other hand. No one else seemed to even notice him yet.

He walked forward as if in slow-motion, covering fully one-half of the intervening distance between himself and a terrified Si'Wren in two huge strides with his great spear and shield raised to the attack, and stood staring down at her as if trying to make up his mind whether to kill or capture her.

Si'Wren took a step back from her horse, and became paralyzed with fear.

All at once several of Emperor Euphrates' archers looked around, and reacted with blinding speed. One quickly nocked and loosed an arrow from close range, hitting the giant in the right thigh just above the plank-sized metal shin plate on his lower right leg.

“YAAAAAAWWWW!” he howled in a deep ox-bellow of a voice as he staggered in anger and pain.

Swiftly another archer drew and fired, hitting him in the neck. Finally, two more shots hit him in the chest when he let his guard down momentarily, and he let out another outraged yell.

Emperor Euphrates' personal guards finally turned and saw the giant then, and quickly fired their powerful bows, transfixing the staggering giant with several more arrows.

Seeing he had lost all hope of scattering them, the giant came forward in a berserk charge, ignoring his many injuries as he rushed the guards.

Behind his royal bodyguard cowered a fearful Emperor Euphrates with a useless curved and jeweled little dagger in one hand.

The charging giant's spear went through one of the guards, and the other was killed by a single blow of the giant's huge fist.

A brawny archer nocked an arrow, stepped forward, aimed, and fired from point-blank range at full draw, straight into the side of the giant's torso.

At this he let go of his victim and howled as he turned in a demonic rage, pivoting with huge arms outstretched while Si'Wren stood rooted to the spot. The giant stomped forward, towering over Si'Wren as he drew near and began reaching down for her, and as she stepped back involuntarily out of his reach he simply kept on falling headlong until he hit the ground with an earthshaking slam at Si'Wren's feet and lay still, his stubby fingers twitching several times. His great yellowed teeth gnashed reflexively and after a final wheeze he lay utterly motionless.

Si'Wren stood as one frozen, staring down at the dead giant, until she heard several of the archers yell in unison and she turned her head just in time to see a final charge upon the Emperor's tent. Across the camp, Si'Wren gasped at the sight of Borla's crumpled black form being trampled under the hooves of the enemy's rampaging horse soldiers.

Emperor Euphrates' foot soldiers were fleeing for their lives as the mounted foe chased them down and shot them in their backs or cut them mercilessly to ribbons with their bronze swords.

The archer standing beside Si'Wren nocked another arrow, drew, and fired high. Si'Wren watched his arrow sail forth and come down in the midst of the enemy, to penetrate the face of an upraised wicker shield and embed itself in the chest of a raider. The enemy soldier staggered backwards, fighting to maintain his balance with the arrow in his gut.

But too much else was happening for Si'Wren to watch the enemy soldier any further, and she searched wildly for any sign of resistance in the Emperor's men but could not find such.

Suddenly her upturned eyes spied an incoming flight of arrows, and she had barely time to blink before they began raining down. The arrows' whistling sounds filled the air, followed by the sounds of impacts and screams of the fallen all around her.

Thunk! Si'Wren staggered, and stared disbelievingly at the long feathered end of an arrow sticking out of her right shoulder.

Numb with shock, she half-turned, and saw Emperor Euphrates staring sightlessly at her from where he lay fallen, his fat body bristling with arrows. Her blood pounding in her ears, Si'Wren turned and staggered to her horse. Neighing loudly, the stallion reared up, and dropped down again, shaking his mane. He had, she saw, two arrows in his deeply corded neck muscles.

Si'Wren reached out for him as she stumbled forward and almost tumbled beneath his hooves, but fell against his forequarters instead and reached up to seize hold of the coarse black hair of his mane, and tried to pull herself

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up.

Lacking the necessary strength and coordination, she hung on, not daring to let go for any reason. Turning her head, she saw running enemy soldiers advancing through the camp, with none remaining to oppose them as the Emperor's archers broke ranks and fell back under the flashing bronze swords of the enemy.

Si'Wren reached up and slapped hard with the flat of one hand on the flank of her horse. At this, he finally bolted, jerking her bodily off her feet as she clutched desperately onto the lunging stallion's mane with the fingers of both hands.

She felt nothing when she heard the arrow in her shoulder snap off against the stallion's heaving flank. Her feet bounced once on the ground as the stallion lunged forward, and she dropped and bounced her feet again in a coordinated leap and sailed upwards with a sharp two-fisted pull on his black flowing mane, and she twisted her torso and legs upwards with the benefit of the transferred momentum and leverage.

Suddenly she was up and riding, with the black stallion's hooves pounding the earth in a thundering tempo as he carried her swiftly away and left all behind. Si'Wren was so small and light that her horse ran virtually unimpeded, whereas her pursuers were large men equipped with heavy weapons and armor, all of which was a respectable burden for their mounts.

Ignoring the stub-end of the arrow in her numbed shoulder, Si'Wren ducked her head down and dropped her eyes to the neck of her steed, hearing the steady blast of breath from his muzzle as the shafts of two embedded arrows vibrated in a rhythmic blur to the thunder of his galloping hooves.

Small rivulets of blood pulsed redly from the arrows as he maintained his breakneck gallop, and Si'Wren wondered at his unrelenting power in the face of such injuries as his hooves pounded, pounded, pounded the ground tirelessly with the wind whipping his black mane into her bowed face and stinging her eyes to wind tears.

He might be wounded, but her beautiful black was a fearless meteor. A horse could run itself to death for its master, but Si'Wren only wished to escape her pursuers. But what of the black's injuries?

Knowing she must soon stop or risk his death by overexertion, Si'Wren turned her head to look back and saw many attackers separating themselves from the battle to ride after her, and cold fear filled her soul. She looked ahead again just in time to avoid getting knocked off by a low-lying bough as she entered a copse of trees and quickly became hidden in their depths. There had been many men riding after her. Could she possibly outrun them all?

She had been ready to mount up when the attack came, and she could hear the sound of something slapping lightly and rhythmically on the back flanks of the black stallion, and remembered the pair of leather saddle bags containing her writing kit together with the clay tablets in their sturdy bamboo frames. Little good they would do her now, for no longer could she fight the Evil One with mere clay words, and the Emperor himself was past all saving.

She burst out of the far side of the trees and began to ride up a grassy knoll. The black stallion pounded up the rise and she drew back on the reins at the crest, slowing him to a halt at the top and looking back as she paused and listened to the distant pounding of hooves.

She watched with anxious eyes as they appeared out of the far line of trees below, and as they burst out into the open, the pursuit spied her almost immediately, and shouting wildly they swerved in unison, whipping their mounts in merciless pursuit of her.

She turned and cantered the black stallion down a momentary dip in the land, then urged him up the steeper ground to the next higher rise.

For a brief, fearful moment, she almost fell off her horse as he lurched up the opposite slope, but she clutched his shaggy black mane as she toppled suddenly forward against the back of his neck and hung on with all of her failing strength, slowly righting herself. Momentarily out of their line of sight, she could hear their distant shouts. Triumphant shouts, urging each other on.

Si'Wren raised her eyes and looked beyond to the vista of the distant lowlands, whence she had come so far with her Emperor. Then she dropped her eyes, and noticed for the first time that her dark mantle of hair, left unbraided, had been woven by the wind into a knotted mass of tangles like a black flame.

Seeing that her stallion was also wounded, she doubted if he could carry her for very much longer, and dreaded the prospect of falling into the hands of such men. But which way to turn? Then, despairing of what to do next, she seemed to hear a distant roaring.

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A waterfall.

The black stallion's muzzle and forequarters were flecked white with foam, and his neck was streaked with blood. His flanks were heaving from his exertions and injuries. Loathe to go on like this, she turned him and rode down another little dip and then up again to the next higher rise. She was ascending a rising series of gently rolling grassy steppes, interspersed by long wide strips of gently sloping meadows and successive narrow courses of green trees.

Then she came to the last rise, and slowed her horse again.

The muted, distant sound of the waterfall became an open roar as she pulled her horse abruptly to a dead halt barely in time, before she would have plunged over a steep drop-off.

The waterfall upstream descended in a streak of white from the crest above, arcing and fanning out majestically from a high ridge. At the waterfall's base shimmered a wide pool, whence emerged the continuation of the deep fast-flowing stream before her. The undercurrent sucked and churned violently as it passed immediately below her position.

After much hesitation, Si'Wren pulled gently on one of her reins, turning her steed upstream towards the waterfall, as she brought in her heels and pressed lightly against the black's heaving flanks, urging him forward along the edge of the bank, seeking some way to get safely down and across. But the closer she came to the waterfall, the higher and steeper became the bank along which she rode, and the more her mount labored. Already suffering from the arrows in his neck, he was drawing near to a state of total exhaustion.

Then behind her she heard the fresh shouts of her pursuers as they topped the final rise and began to fan out, cutting her off while they surrounded her in a half-circle.

They lusted upon her with evil stares, until the stub-end of the arrow in her chest was seen by several of them and indicated to the others with much arm-pointing. Then their looks were transformed to insolent, harsh contempt. What was her life to them anyways? The sight of her suffering engendered nothing but contempt in their looks. Loftily, they all kept back from her by a distance of several rods, with newcomers doing the same as they arrived, and forming a great semi-circle around her with both ends close to the river banks, effectively cutting off her escape.

Then their leader finally came cantering up into their midst on his speckled gray steed and lurched through their enclosing line to get a good look at her.

He paraded back and forth on his nervously prancing steed, displaying an aura of wickedness. One look into his heavily lidded, toadlike eyes, so lifeless and sickeningly dead, utterly convinced Si'Wren that this man's soul must surely have already died a long time ago while his body was yet alive.

Then she realized when he pulled at his reins, that he had six fingers on each hand. Surely this must be Kadrug, because if it were Conabar he would have had only five like his dead relation, the late Master Rababull.

It occurred to Si'Wren without even questioning it that Kadrug must be possessed, and she realized that in looking at the six-fingered one, she was looking also upon a combination of the personality of the possessor, a demon, and of the outward man, a vain soul, and she sensed that this great 'free' warrior was but a proud and unknowing slave, indwelt by hideous evil.

Now more than ever, Si'Wren found in this, even in the face of evil, a proof of the righteous, Invisible God. For she could easily see an unmistakable spiritual side to life, wherein evil and good, and all men's souls, truly dwelt. All life within the visible world, like a finger-drawing in the sand, could show only a muted portrayal of that spiritual side. Like sand, or dust, it must eventually be blown away at death, and give place to the true inner self, the spiritual identity, and there would be found in the hearts of men's souls, either the good and true bedrock, or just so much foul and polluted slippery sand.

Looking into the man's lizard eyes, Si'Wren perceived all of this in a flash, and shuddered. Surely, as Nelatha had said, it must be that all men must die and see the Invisible God someday when they finally came face-to-face with Him.

These were wicked men, lost souls living in sin. Men who forced their evil lusts upon all around themselves. But they would not have their way with her!

Feeling light-headed and drastically weak, she swayed slightly in the saddle as she turned her head and looked out fearfully over the steep dropoff. There was only swift water directly below her, at the outside shoulder of a natural crook in the river's meander.

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Directly below, the current ran fast and deep past the near-vertical base of the high bank where it descended almost straight down into the dark water. Just upstream from this was the beginning of the wide clear pool, into which the waterfall thundered in a continuous roar.

She was having considerable difficulty remaining upright in her saddle as she turned her mount away from the edge, and felt her head nod from an involuntary heaviness as she turned to look this way and that.

She realized that she must be quite a sight to them in her present condition, for her horse and her attire were all black, with the slick glistening red of a coating of blood upon the black stallion's muscular, corded neck beneath where the two arrows were embedded, and much blood also upon the front of her tunic where the stub-end of a broken arrow also protruded from her shoulder.

Scores of swords, bows, and spears were to be seen raised on every hand, but no arrows were nocked and no spearheads aimed her way, for she held no weapon herself and represented no threat to them or their leader Kadrug. Indeed, she could only regard herself as a natural target to them. Si'Wren resolved that she must not allow herself to be treated as just another conquest by this lunatic mob and their leader, Kadrug.

What if these, mad with lust, intended to take her?

Kadrug suddenly said loudly, "Who is this woman?"

Then, getting no answer but shrugs from the ranks surrounding them both in an irregular half-arc, he said directly to Si'Wren, "Woman, look at me!"

At this, Si'Wren lifted up her eyes, and regarded him eye to eye, well aware that the men surrounding both herself and Kadrug were no doubt prepared to commit any evil upon her person at the other's slightest word or nod.

"What is this child's fable I hear from those we captured, about a flood that is to destroy the whole world?"

To this, Si'Wren, by now in a state of complete and utter exhaustion, responded neither by word, sign, nor gesture, but only continued to regard him expressionlessly.

Becoming visibly more impatient, he repeated contemptuously to Si'Wren, "I said, What is this talk we hear from our captives of a great flood? Answer me!"

Still Si'Wren said nothing.

The great warrior fumed silently, and exhaled audibly before continuing.

"Just as I thought! Too cowardly to speak. The only flood I see," he gestured contemptuously at the red-stained figures of Si'Wren and her stallion, with his white-spattered and foam-flecked, blood-streaked forequarters, "is the blood of our enemies!"

He waited, and then added impatiently, "Well? What have you to say?"

Suffering increasingly from shock and exhaustion from her wound and the hard ride, Si'Wren's face remained unreadable, and her eyes seemed somehow not to see him at all, even as she regarded him steadily.

Suddenly Kadrug raised his spear and shook it menacingly in Si'Wren's direction. Si'Wren remained frozen, trembling greatly, and when he made a fierce, menacing expression of hideous anger, her eyes widened, but she still remained immobile.

Then, tilting his hoary head back in an imperious look of emboldened masculine hauteur, Kadrug lifted his reins and prodded his horse once with his heels, starting the animal slowly towards her.

At last, Si'Wren moved. Motivated by fear of capture—and worse, she jerked sharply back on her left rein and kicked smartly with her left heel into his still-heaving flank. The black exploded into action, pivoting around towards the unseen bank of the river as Si'Wren dug into his sides with her heels and reached back at the same time to strike her horse's rump a quick sharp slap.

The black neighed and surged powerfully beneath her like a living thing of fire and iron, surging toward the edge of the drop-off in a mighty lunge until the ground suddenly fell away beneath his pounding hooves and he had hurled them both far out into the air, high above the river, rider and horse caught in a terrible rush of the wind of their falling.

They both went down, both Si'Wren and her horse, plunging with a mighty impact and a great, arcing spray of white into the cold, swiftly flowing mountain waters. Si'Wren's submerged ears heard the roar of the waterfall, like a continuous, muted thunder in the rushing river waters, as the horse fought his way to the surface again.

The men all jumped down off their horses and rushed to the edge of the cliff and stared down at the surface of the river, but by the time they could look, the foam of impact had moved far out of bowshot downstream. The

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black was swimming steadily toward the opposite bank, but at first, the girl was nowhere to be seen.

Still clinging to his mane, Si'Wren finally raised her head from the water and gasped for air, and shook the water from her eyes to find the black swimming powerfully for the other bank even as the swift current swept them further downstream with every breath.

But he was not altogether tireless, and it seemed as if he might sink and go under at any moment. Still gripping his mane with one hand, Si'Wren reached back with the other and quickly untied the paired saddlebags containing her writing kit and clenched them in her free hand to lighten his load.

They were nearing the far shore, while far behind her she could hear a chorus of hoarse voices as the men howled in frustration.

A few shot arrows in her direction, but it was too far for good aim and their shafts did not come down at all close to her. They could no longer reach her, and none dared follow the path she had taken.

Si'Wren felt her grip on his mane slipping, and letting go involuntarily, she was dragged under by the weight of her waterlogged kit with its heavy clay tablets.

Underwater, she struggled to keep a tight grip on to her slippery leather saddlebags as the river swirled and tumbled her over and over.

Up on the cliff, Kadrug abruptly thrust his sword into the air and shouted in triumph, and as his men waved their flashing bronze swords in the air, a chorus of hoarse voices howled in victory.

Then their leader jeered his derision as he turned away abruptly, and after a final contemptuous look at the river from his followers, they all retreated from the precipice and returned to their horses.

Still deep underwater and unable to hang on any longer, with a curious roaring in her ears, Si'Wren finally resorted to more drastic means and let go of her writing kit, with its beautifully carved ivory writing sticks, and the precious clay tablets wherein was written everything she knew about her great, Invisible God Who was so much like water. Unburdened by the weight of her kit, she rose to burst at long last through the surface, gasping and straining for the life-giving air.

She quickly realized that she was so near to the far bank that, gasping heavily, she merely let herself drift in closer, and swam a few tired strokes to finally reach it on hands and knees. She dragged herself halfway out of the water and collapsed, and felt the stub-end of the arrow in her shoulder grate on a rock in the soft sloping bank. She rolled halfway over onto her side to avoid doing that again, and lay in the miry clay of the bank.

Clay. She had lost her writing kit, with all that she had written about the Invisible God, but all around her was clay, miry clay, enough clay to fill the whole world with tablets about the Invisible God. And then she realized that she still had every word she had ever preached to her Emperor, written in her heart.

Looking back upstream, she peered up at the far bank, high above the water, where her many pursuers and their leader were no longer visible.

Then she looked around unsteadily, and a little ways downstream on the same side of the river as herself, she saw the black stallion.

He was bogged down in the mud and reeds of a sheltered shallows, his head sagging ever lower as he gradually gave up his fight for life by successive stages, with weaker and weaker struggles. What a sadness, that such a magnificent creature should ever have to die!

Si'Wren turned her head and lifted up her eyes, and shifted her gaze over a little, to look up at the sky just beyond the waterfall, up into the shining white mists of its far-flung, billowing overspray.

And then she gasped, awestruck, for there in a perfectly stationary arc stretching across the billowing, towering plumes of white mist, she saw a multi-hued sweep of pure jeweled light, arrayed in the most beautiful translucent bow of vivid colors, red above, and purple beneath, with orange-yellow and blue-green streaked through the center of the miraculously motionless curved arc.

Gasping with increasing difficulty for air from her tortured lungs, and still gazing up into the white mists, Si'Wren stared, spellbound, as the bow of colors and the thundering roar of the waterfall slowly faded from her senses.

* * *

And Si'Wren died.

And these were all the years of her life, and she was but seventeen when she died. I, Ibi, have made proper record of it and shall now seal all away in a great stone jar, for a strange and unheard-of thing happens even as I

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write these words. Water, falling from the sky for almost a solid week! This miraculous thing have I beheld with mine own rheumy and tired old eyes that thought they had seen all that there was to see, and still it falls! The gods harken not unto the lamentations and sacrifices of men. The rivers, the lakes, and the very sea itself, all are tumultuous, swollen, and rising. Great fear has fallen upon all flesh, upon every man, woman, and child, and upon every beast, and fowl of the air, and lowly creeping thing alike. For the space of six days and six nights has this cursed divine waterfall descended from the heavens upon all the formerly dry land.

I go again to pray. Ye gods, why do ye not listen? Perhaps the great Invisible God of Si'Wren, the Holy One Who is like water, will hearken unto my prayers if the other gods will not, and surely tomorrow, on the seventh day, He will rest.

* * *

The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come.—Isaiah 57.

THE END