

# The Black Bird's Call before Dark

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## Prologue

In the spring of 1994, as a result of a major earthquake, a tomb that was sealed and hidden 3,000 years ago was discovered in a cave. At the back of the cave that is located in the hills of the Western Galilee were found 200 hundred complete clay tablets, figurines of various gods, jewelry, numerous lamps and the fully intact skeleton of a woman dating according to the archeologists to the late bronze age, circa 1270-1230 BC.

An analysis of the remains revealed that the skeleton belongs to a Canaanite woman who, according to the tablets, was a princess and priestess that had formed a ritualistic cult at a similar time to the development of Judaism. A skeletal x-ray also uncovered that the woman was probably stoned to death.

The tablets, which were written in Cuneiform script, are the largest collection of written material left from the era and are written in Acadian, the official language of trade and correspondence at that time. The translation of these tablets into English reveal a unique memoir of a Canaanite woman living in a time of turmoil and radical transformation of faith, technology and Sovereignty: the appearance of monotheism, the discovery of metal technology and the invasion of those who are termed the "Sea people" into the cities of the great civilizations of the time: Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the local scene of Israel, the Hebrew tribes, storming from the desert in the south, conquered the Canaanite civilization, establishing a new kingdom. The memoir begins with her childhood in the kingdom of Hazor and ends with her return to society after a long period of seclusion.

Among those tablets were also several written by a second party named "Neo-Mi" who was possibly the youngest daughter of the deceased. These tablets were written after her death and were intended to preserve her legacy. They prove that this ancient woman had followers and if she would not have been killed, perhaps her faith would have flourished.

## The Qdesha Tablets

O hear me, lords of the future. Bear witness to the truth of my joy, my pleasure of being; let my story be carried like a hot desert wind to the farthest corners of the earth and beyond. I am Ita-Anu, priestess of Ashera, daughter of mighty Yavin, king of the legendary city Hazor. Listen to me so the memory of my people will not be lost under the heavy quilt of dust and time. I stand here under the blood red moon of Canaan. I will tell thee about the life of a humble servant of the one called "All-being" and her ordeals. I inscribe these words on these tablets, with the hope they will reach out into the future like a hand offering a precious jewel.

I see you lords through the clouds, peeking down at me standing here alone, and the passion in my heart only grows as I see how time unfolds; kingdoms rise, disintegrate, like rotting matter. I know you in your constant thirst for more, in your deafness to the mystery of it all. You are the sons and daughters of the Hebrews, who have stormed from the south, taking an oath before your one Jealous god to hunt down, burn and scatter the sacred temples, the beautiful gods and goddesses of Canaan. I am Ita and I shall not hide any more behind your masks of chastity and fake smiles of devotion. In my youth I was priestess of Ashera, lady of the sea, goddess of fertility, whose supple breasts and mane of hair arouse the wild heart of desire in all who dare to whisper her name. But as I have grown in years and wisdom, I have come to know All-being, the force that moves through all, the powerful current that molds us and drags us from birth to death. He has called upon me in my sleeping and waking moments, commanding me to speak his word. For too long have I hidden among the rocks on the shore, silent, waiting. Hear me now.

I was born on the third winter after the Egyptian troops came to Hazor. My brother had told me it rained heavily that winter and the crops were abundant. Large cargos of barley, wheat and olive oil were sent to the Pharaoh of Egypt and my father was awarded with many treasures for his contribution. As food was plenty, I was well fed by my wet nurse Annani who later continued to take care of me and my sister until we were grown. We lived an abundant life in the palace of Hazor; servants and slaves catered to all our needs. I believe I was a spoilt child; nothing was denied from me. If I did not receive what I wished, I would pout my lips and cry loudly until my wish was met.

But I was a lonely child. My mother, Uprishtim, was priestess to the moon god Inlil, a seer, and her blood was of the Raphaits, the legendary giants who roamed this earth in ancient times. She spent all her days at the temple, many times inhaling the smoke of the gods so she could rise to another realm, from which she brought news. She had foreseen the arrival of the Egyptians and that it was foolish to try to battle them.

I rarely saw her. Occasionally Annani would take me and my sister Nikal, who was born six springs before me, to meet her. My mother's chambers were a shrine in its own sake, all covered with wall paintings of the gods' adventures, dark crimson-dyed textiles and exuberant furnishings imported from the far shores of the world.

Once we were before her, my sister would walk to my mother rigidly and, following the prescribed code of conduct, she would kiss her reached-out hand, bowing her head, then walk back and sit on a cushion placed before my mother's throne. I remember as a very young child that I would not conform to this custom, and would jump into her lap, breathing in for a long moment her warm scent before Annani pulled me down. I think I was five when I understood my

place and I ceased to do that. I learned to enter quietly so as not to disrupt her clairvoyant's concentration and trouble her with trivialities such as a child's need.

On those occasions, Mother would always speak to us calmly, with a warm lucid voice, telling us stories of our gods. I would be mystified by them. I especially loved the story about Baal and his Goddess sister, Anath, whom I found to be so bold and brave. I dreamed of being like her when I grew up. Going out to fight with the men. Helping out my brother in battle.

My mother was the daughter of Rap'anu, the king of Babilani, a kingdom up in the north east. My father had won the respect of marrying her when he began to flourish in his commerce and export enterprises at a very early age. But like a jewel in his crown, she was to be admired and worshiped, not to be embraced in cold winter nights. I cannot fathom how the three of us – Shahar my older brother, my sister Nikal, and I – were conceived as my mother and father seemed as different to each other as day and night. While my father was a burly man of the world, who enjoyed food, wine and women in abundance, with his roaring laughter, my mother was a spiritual being, absorbed in the repetitive ceremonies for the gods; so often deeply immersed in her prophetic revelations, she could not even eat or drink.

It seemed as though my father dreaded my mother's powers, and never had I seen him demand her company like he did with other women in his palace. Yet he did his best to cater to all her needs and wishes. Only once a month did he visit her dwellings, to fulfill the ceremonies of marriage between the moon god of the night skies, *Yareach* and *the goddess of orchids and oasis, Nikal*.

My mother lived in the moon god Inlil's temple like a goddess and she looked like one. Her long black hair enveloped her face like a cloud of night dusk, always smelling of carnation. In our

culture, one's hair was an expression of their blessedness of virility and sexuality by the gods, and my mother's hair was a fountain of life. My most vivid memories of her are during ceremonies when she stood at the shrine, her bare breasts shining from myrrh oil, a large snake of gold embracing her neck and her delicate face submerged in dedicated prayer at the altar. As a child I wasn't sure if she was human, especially when I listened to Annani's stories about her ancient ancestors who were the Rephaites, giants with unfathomable powers who had built the first great city with walls that had reached the sky and that no human could penetrate.

I do not have many memories of my mother in my early childhood, but I do remember one event distinctively. It was on the day of the full moon and my mother had decided to take me along to the sacred tree to make sacrifices and libations for a couple of city nobles who could not conceive a child. I was washed and dressed in my best clothes, a white dress printed with different ornaments and patterns in shades of red ochre, and I adorned the many bracelets I received as a gift from the Egyptian ambassador that clinked on my growing nine winter's wrist. The sun was setting as I walked out of the city walls with Annani holding my hand and the sky was colored red. We walked in silence, the steep slope leading to the huge Ficus tree that I was told lived since the world was conceived. It was the first time for me to come so near it, as I had always seen from afar, a somber lonely tree on top of the hill. As we reached it, I was struck by the sight of its immense branches and thick foliage which seemed enormous to my young eyes, full of secrets and ancient voices whispering from within its branches. I could sense its roots reaching into the depth of the earth under my feet, deeper than my imagination could go. I could feel the tree's wisdom, acquired by endless days passing by, reaching back thousands of years and I was struck by fear, fear of how deep time was, as though I was looking into a bottomless blue endless space, which was pulling me in with a promise that I could not comprehend. As the



darkness in the world around us grew, I felt isolated, hearing a deep female voice clearly calling my name. "Ita, Ita." "Who is that?" I asked, terrified, "O precious child, I am goddess Ashera, your true mother. I carried the seed which is you over numerous cycles and worlds until I decided to plant you in the womb of this woman who you call your mother. You carry many blessings and you will fulfill a destiny of great passion and wisdom. You must always seek me, and when you do, I will help you. Now be brave and live the pains of your childhood with humility and courage," so the voice said and then came such a deep silence that I could hear the blood roaring in my ears. Colors filled my vision, clouds of blue and pink and yellow and deep calm came over me. I knew for the first time in my life that I was not alone.

I did not notice when someone took hold of me and lifted me up. Then I was afraid as I thought the goddess was not with me anymore. I cried "mommy, mommy" and sensed someone wiping my tears and speaking to me from afar. As I opened my eyes I looked straight into my flesh and blood mother's eyes. "Ita, you must look at your fear as a flock of birds immigrating to the north in autumn; it will soon vanish," she said calmly. "I heard a voice mother, it was a good voice, the voice of the goddess Ashera," I confessed.

"Wonderful, I am very proud of you, Ita, because you have the gift. You can hear the gods speak," she said and patted my head, something she had never done before.

We stood close to the tree, so close I could smell its trunk and then mother took my hand and placed it on its coarse skin. "The goddess rests here too. That is why we hear her voices so strong when we come here," she smiled. "Wherever you see something growing into a huge plant, know that the goddess is there. It is a sign of a great life force at that place. It is good to come to these places and listen to her speak," said mother and I promised myself I will never forget this.

Then came several priests wearing golden masks, and two musicians holding a lyre and a flute entered the circle of light stemming from the torches around us. They bowed deeply before my mother and began reciting the sacred prayers. My mother, who seemed taller and more majestic than ever, whispered to me, "Ita, now pay attention, we will now give offerings to the goddess Ashera," she said as the priesthood disciples came forth with the sacrifices – two lambs, ten small hens, vases of wine and honey which they slaughtered before us, under the supervision of my mother, and then burned them on the altar whole.

My mother lit incense made of sage tied together into a bundle and then the musicians began playing a sweet melody on the lyre as I stood bewitched by my mother's singing in a low thick voice that reminded me of drinking warm wine with honey by the fire in winter. I did not want her to stop. "Oh goddess, may our sacrifices please you in your divine palace. I will not hide my sins from thee, only hope that in my actions you will find me agreeable to you. Goddess, you who plant seeds in married couples' womb and let children be born to their fathers, please forgive this couple, open this poor woman's gates, wife of this noble man, and let them have a child, fruit of your divine garden," she sang.

The couple approached her with lowered heads; lightly she placed her palms on both their heads, praying silently with eyes closed.

Suddenly the woman broke into tears. "Forgive me goddess," she wept, "for I have sinned to you, I have entered your shrine while I was in my menstruation cycle, polluting your sacred ground, oh please forgive me," she said falling to the ground, clinging to the folds of my mother's dress.

"Oh, befallen woman," said my mother, "You have done a grave thing, which you must repent for so the goddess will find you favorable again. You must pay your debt to the goddess by

fasting a day each week until your firstborn child will come," my mother said gravely. Shivering, the tearful woman got up to her feet and fumbled away into the darkness with her shame-filled husband.

The prayers thereby continued with some more singing and I felt like I was standing in the world of the gods that day and was filled with awe that lingered in my soul for many days after, making everything seem magical, like I had dived into a deep mysterious pool. When Annani came forth out of the darkness surrounding us and said: "Come, Ita, I will take you back," taking my hand and leading me back to the palace, I felt shaken, unprepared for the bustle of palace life.

The two closest people to me in my childhood were my sister Nikal, with whom I shared a bed as a small child, and Annani. I can still rehash in my senses Nikal's softness and warmth as I clung to her during cold winter nights. She did not have much patience for me, her little baby sister, but her heavy breathing and her body's fragrance always dropped on me a deep peace, and I would doze off easily by her side, sucking at my thumb. The person who was officially in charge of my upbringing was Annani, a stout, heavy woman who always fretted about what should be done, and how should we behave appropriately. I did not feel very close to her. But she did take care to feed me and dress me, and more than once spank me when I misbehaved. Annani had a sweet tooth, and when I wanted to appease her I offered her the gifts and offerings I received from our subjects as they came to my father's court for justice. She ate those honey cakes and juicy figs in secrecy. She thought no one could see her, but I had my way of sneaking in unnoticed. She would eat so fast and with such big bites that she almost choked while the crumbs of the cakes

would stick to her cloak. Even as a child, I found Annani repulsive with the black mole growing on her chin. I always thought Annani had no family but us, but when I grew a little and started wandering around the city, I saw her once walking down one of the streets in the washers' quarter at the northern edge. There, surrounded by squalor, I saw her hug tenderly, her body trembling with sobs, a girl, about my age, who had no sandals on her feet and whose clothes were tattered from too many washes. She hugged her for a long moment and then I saw the girl pick up the large pitcher she carried and walked away toward the city gates with it perched on her head. I asked Annani that night, as she was folding my clothes in her usual focused way, who was the girl she hugged. She stopped for a moment what she was doing and said as she looked at me with a dark gaze: "You shouldn't be wandering around the city by yourself like this. This is not proper for the daughter of a king. If you go on doing that you will have a grim future." She said and blew out the lamp by my bedside leaving behind her empty darkness.

I have far more memories of my father, in whose palace my sister and I lived. My father loved all the carnal pleasures of life. If my mother was deeply absorbed in her spiritual commitments to the gods, then my father was deeply absorbed in this world's satiation. He loved an abundance of everything – wine, food, artifacts and, more than anything else, women. If he heard of some riches in a far land he would send his clerks to fetch them. He even brought a craftsman from the Aegean islands once to paint one of the walls in our palace. If he couldn't get what he wanted, he would fight for it with all his might. It was almost a ritual that after the new year spring ceremonies and festivities, my father would lead the army to a nearby city so as to burn its gates and sack its crops, riches and women. Nothing was to be denied from my father. Not even his own daughters.

I had many brothers and sisters from his different affairs with his concubines and slaves, but as the three of us were born of an official marriage with a priestess from a noble family in the northern kingdom, he treated us with great attention and care. I did not like his lusty, pleasure-seeking nature. I did not like the gaze with which he took possession of the world around him as lord and king. But he was gentle with me as his youngest daughter and would ever so often ask me to come sit by his throne while he was discussing the matters of the kingdom with several of the noblemen, and then he would pat my head with a heavy crude hand. As I grew up, and my quick thinking became evident, he began also telling me about his tasks as a king and even allowed me to learn how to read and write from his head clerk Akirdov.

Akirdov was a very gentle man, and I especially remember his beautiful long fingers with wide, neatly cut nails with which he wrote my father's long letters on a sheet of freshly-made papyrus. Things always seemed very simple when I was around Akirdov. Unlike my father, he did not desire much and was content with his work, his simple meals, and clean bed at night. He was a sad man, though. As a child he seemed to me very old, but looking back I believe he was forty cycles old. He had learned the craft of writing and reading in Ugarit, up on the northern coast, and lived there happily with his wife and children until a plague had taken their lives. In his despair he wandered to the south until he had reached our city; tired and heartbroken, he found consolation in my father's warm hospitality. He was given a room in the palace and a young slave to warm his bed at night. Looking at him writing always calmed me down. The rhythmic, repetitive motion of his hands marking the page with the signs was like an ancient dance. Sometimes I would play a game of trying to harmonize my own breath with his, and deep peace would fall on me as I watched and breathed silently with him.

Akirdov was very patient with me as he taught me how to read and write in the Akadian language, which was the official language in the courts of kings in my youth. Now it's all gone, burnt into ashes. But at that time, I enthusiastically learned how to paint the marks of letters on the large sheet, and then put it aside to dry. Through Akirdov I learned much about the events of the hour. Our city lay on a mound by the moors of swamp Achula, where numerous kinds of animals, birds and fish flourished and the soil was dark, heavy and damp. I loved the scent of the hedge around the lake in winter and in summer we would bathe in its shallow waters, the shrubs growing from under the water tickling my bare feet as I sank into the ankle-deep mud.

As the land was fertile and many crops were harvested, we, the people of the city Hazor, heavily taxed the peasants of the surrounding lands and much of this abundance flowed into the city.

Akirdov and three other clerks counted the large sacks of barley and wheat, pitchers filled with olives and fresh fruit that were stacked in the large warehouse by our palace. It was always well-guarded by soldiers and much of these goods were then passed to the Egyptians' tax collectors, who transferred these goods in long caravans south, to the pharaoh's court. Not only goods traveled south, also the sons and daughters of our higher-ranked men were sent to be educated and wed with the Egyptian nobility. I had overheard my father complain that all the best spirits of our people were made to leave. Poor father, every spring he took a new pretty, starving-looking peasant to his bed, offered to him by her family in exchange for a reduction in the quantities of crop he demanded.

But my fate, as the daughter of the king, was to be different. I was to be raised like a precious jewel and then wed to an honorable prince, a gift from my father in return for riches and goods. And so my days could have been filled with feminine pampering. Washing in scented water, learning to play the lyre, weaving tapestries, softening my skin with perfumed oils and more than

all day dreaming about the man who will plow my field one day and water my orchids.

Dreaming about his dark curls and rosy lips, how he would come to demand me from my father one day...at least that was what my sister was busy with all day long, waiting for her great day when she would be wed. But I could not find pleasure in all those gentle dreams. Some other strange blood was flowing through my veins and as far back as I can remember, I was always more enthusiastic with stories of bravery and challenge. I chose again and again to sneak out of the palace to spend time with my brave brother practicing for combat in the soldiers' arena.

My brother Shahar, meaning the god of dawn, was my closest ally throughout my childhood. He was a very committed person and my father trusted him to lead his legion charioteers, the strongest force in our army when he went out for war. With my brother I felt like I really mattered and he truly listened to my dreams and ideas.

My favorite childhood goddess was Anath, goddess of war, hunting and fertility. She is a glorious warrior who has no fear to stand knee-deep in blood, slashing off heads and then binding them to her sash, dancing joyfully to the drums of war. I had dreamed that one day I would join my brother Shahar in battle; side by side on a chariot we would ferociously tear and slash who ever dared to confront us.

I was only a child of eight winters when my brother began taking me with him to the soldiers' practice. I would sit on a rock beside the training field and watch attentively the fighters practice shooting arrows, navigating chariots around obstacles and throwing a lance. It all seemed so elegant and beautiful to me – like a dance of bodies, arrows and chariots moving through space, dust filling the air in great whirlpools. I was also curious about the wrestling challenges. As I watched, I felt my body move with the fighters. I craved to do it myself. My brother, who was

amused by my peculiar interest in men's adventures, taught me some wrestling moves, and how to shoot with a sling. The first time I shot a stone, it fell two arms away from me but then I practiced again and again, never giving up until I became an expert at targeting anything with a small stone. The soldiers would call me "little crane," because I had the endurance to fly long distances.

But more than anything, I admired my brother's resourcefulness and courage. As commander of my father's right-handed chariot battalion, the strongest section of the army, he could throw a lance forty-arms distance, and shoot right on target while standing on a moving chariot. I loved watching him practice how to fall from a chariot without bruising himself. Elegantly he would fall, roll on the ground and get up, immediately guarding himself against the blows of another soldier. My brother was the complete opposite of my father – he never showed interest in women and I never saw him drink wine or even seek fortunes.

He was a man of dignity, discipline and camaraderie, and all who knew him loved and cared for him. I had heard once Annani gossip with one of the cooks that he must marry eventually, that it is every man's destiny, and that the gods will be furious if he disobeys them. But my brother always seemed to me somewhat elevated above human existence as he never got badly hurt in combat and he had this kind of limitless patience toward everyone. His name was spread to far lands as a mighty warrior and other kings feared my father's army because of him. I loved waiting for him in the shade of a bush, until he finished his practice and then serve him cool water.

But my goddess, my protector, did not let me stay in the shade too long. It was a very hot summer day when one of the soldiers brought his brother to the practice field. I think the



brother's name was Yarhum. He helped his brother tie the horses to the chariot when my brother called to me: "Here, Ita, go over to him, offer him a wrestling dual. He's only one head taller than you," he smiled mischievously. "I don't think he will be willing to fight a girl," I said hesitantly. "Yarhum, come here," ordered my brother. The child walked over to us clumsily. "I want you to practice with Ita the wrestling moves your brother had taught you," said my brother. Yarhum seemed confused. He could not deny a prince's request yet fighting a girl was utterly humiliating. But his fear was greater than his masculine honor and he agreed. We stood facing one another empty-handed on the fringes of the wrestling circle and all the soldiers practicing in the field stopped and directed their attention to us. I gazed into Yarhum's eyes and I saw in them deep sadness, as though the candle of his spirit had been blown out. Looking back, I wouldn't have fought him, but back then I was keen to wrestle anything that moved and I was glad for the opportunity. "I'll tear him to pieces," I thought and I walked around him, soft as cat. He followed me with his gaze, leaning forward, and ready to jump. Finally he attacked and I was quicker to avoid his clench, slid behind him, and grasped his neck with my arm pulling him swiftly back, throwing him into the dust, then jumping to sit on his chest, holding his arms under my knees. He made some futile effort to wiggle himself from under me but I was determined to stay on top, listening to the count of ten until finally my brother proudly called out, "Ita has won!" and all the great burly, sweaty warriors cheered with him: "Ita, light as a feather, has overpowered tall and heavy Yarhum!"

Yarhum got up and ran away from the field, his face flushed with shame. It didn't bother me much as I felt victorious and great. That night before I went to bed, I gave offerings to the goddess in gratitude for my achievement. Yet I was scolded by Annani and my sister for my

unruly behavior. I did not pay attention, and as the maiden washed silently the dust and dirt off my skin, I sang all the war and victory songs I had learned from the soldiers.

After I celebrated ten winters and the air became warmer, I began sneaking away from the palace during the day. My favorite place was the stream at the bottom of the city mound. The washerwomen, the water carriers, the fabric dyers and the shepherds all gathered there to work but it seemed more like a celebration of water and dance. The air was full of women's laughter and men's teasing banter, mixed with the sheep's bleat and the dogs' playful barking. It was not unusual that one of the shepherds played a flute while from somewhere a drum would appear and a lyre too, all playing intoxicating tunes. I would lie on the shore, listening, watching, for hours on end. Numerous birds fluttered within the ever-green thicket of reed and oleander, and at times I would get up and shoot my sling at them, succeeding to catch one of the doves humming on top of a tree. After I said a quick thank-you prayer I would rush back to the palace shrine, where I gave the priests the dead bird as sacrifice to Anath, my goddess.

On one of these dreamy days, as I was lying in the tall grass under a tree, drying lazily after a swim in the stream, a man approached me wearing a horned helmet. He seemed to me gigantic. In his hand he held a large strange sword. I could see he had come from afar and didn't know the ways of our city, as the men never dared to approach the daughter of the king. He stood above me, looking at my young body. There was a strange wild fire in his eyes. I cannot deny it was exciting for me. I felt a gentle softness coming over my limbs, along with a strong sense of thrill. I waited, breathing fast. He was about to say something when one of my father's Egyptian slaves interrupted. He said something to the man in a language I didn't understand and the warrior moved away, walking to his horse. "That is a Sardinian warrior," said the slave to me. "They are very fierce and hot-blooded. Perhaps you may want to go back to the palace now, princess Ita." I

was a little reluctant to go and the sight of that man followed me many nights after that, while I fumbled in the dark for the newly-founded pleasure I discovered between my thighs.

It was not a difficult task to disappear out of Annani and my sister's sight at that time. The New Year spring festival was soon to begin and much had to be done. It was a special time for the girls who reached marriageable age as during the festival, girls and boys were allowed to spend time together in the celebrations and many matches were made. I overheard Annani tell one of the cooks excitedly that a respectable suitor for my sister will be arriving from the rich city, Kineret, which lied on the shores of the great lake down south.

My sister waited with great anticipation for his arrival. She weaved presents for his parents, supervised closely the making of her nuptial jewelry – bracelets, anklets, necklaces made of gold, silver and precious stones to be adorned on her wedding night. She spent many hours day-dreaming and at times worrying about her future life with her husband's family. I remember her very vividly at that time as after she was gone we never saw one another again. She was like a cheerful sparrow, chirping all day about how lucky she was or nervously bringing to our chambers a magician to make a protective amulet against evil spirits that might harm her or her future husband. On other days, she spoke about how much she wanted to have a little baby to cradle. She wasn't sure when exactly the groom would arrive so every morning for at least a whole moon cycle she woke up early and prepared herself as though that was the day of her marriage. She bathed in perfumed water, combed her long heavy hazelnut hair again and again, and was very easily brought to tears. I loved teasing her and making her lose her temper. I would upset her by smearing her precious kohl on a piece of papyrus or by hiding her delicate mirror with its carved ivory handle, waiting till she broke into tears before I returned it back with a mischievous giggle.

I think it was the third day of the new moon before the spring festivals when the city's herald sounded his horn five times, announcing that a royal procession was nearing the city. All the girls of the palace rushed like a flock of swallows to the highest place in the palace, the large veranda on the roof, where we would sleep under the stars during hot summer nights and from up there we saw him – my sister's Baal, her very own human god of thunder and war. He had visited us three cycles before, still a boy back then; it was then that he was actually introduced to my sister. But now he was a man, riding a white donkey with such long legs that they almost dragged on the ground, leading a large party of soldiers. His long curly dark hair was oiled as customary, shining in the midday spring sun, and he was sitting upright, pushing his proud chest forward with each donkey's stride. He wore the most splendid robe I have ever seen, embroidered with so much gold and crimson that he seemed more like a god than a carnal being. His left arm held the reigns while his right held on to a large club. My sister, who stood on the roof watching him, realizing probably how he had changed, became so excited by the sight of him (as he looked exactly like a prince should), that she fainted and all our sisters and maidens fluttered around her, while Annani rubbed her temples with grinded mint and olive oil. But while the women were busy with their small trivial drama, something much greater was happening down by the gate. My father must have ordered the soldiers to block the prince's way. It was not acceptable according to our customs to greet a daughter's suitor with celebration. On the contrary, he had to prove his worthiness by his courage and boldness. The wall was manned with soldiers who shot arrows down at him and his attendants. He did not stay passive, but bellowed at the top of his voice:

"Hear me king of Hazor, open thy gates to me or I shall burn your city down," and while saying that, he ordered his soldiers to break down the gate. It was not an easy task. The gate of our city was twenty arms high, surrounded with twenty arms thick walls filled with gravel and sand.

"I shall not leave this gate until you open thy gates to me and my men," he continued. "I shall block your people from bringing water and food into the city...I threaten you here with starvation and plague...in the name of the gods open the gates..." he screamed waving his club in the air, then pounding with it noisily on the gate, in a fashion that was more ritualistic than real. The arrow shooters on the wall continued sending their arrows down at him and his party like a heavy rain of wood and bronze. (Did they shoot into the open air or I did I just imagine it? It was a fact that none of the men outside were hurt.) Bravely, the suitor did not move away; only two of his soldiers came to protect him with their shields. This continued most of the day until just before sunset my father, wearing his crown, gave an order to stop the shooting and climbed up to the top of the gate and then standing there shouted: "Oh you, prince of Kineret, what fortunes have you come to seek here? Why are you attacking my city?"

The prince, stretching his head back as far as he could, sang: "Give me your beautiful daughter Nikkal, I shall pay her bride price; let the fruitful one enter my house, and I will give her bride price to you, a thousand pieces of silver, yea ten thousand of gold; I will send gems of lapis lazuli; I will make her fallow field into a vineyard, the fallow fields of her love into orchards."

There was a murmur among the palace's crowd who were all standing and watching attentively.

"Young man, first you have to make your plea to the gods," shouted my father back. The younger man did not pause; he practiced these words many times before making his way to

demand his wife. "Nay, the gods are those who have sent me here. Let Nikkal answer me. Then afterwards make me thy son-in-law!"

My father paused for a long moment, then signaled with his head to my sister who was watching now from the window in our quarters on the second floor of the palace.

Trembling with excitement and shyness, she sang out of her window in a delicate voice what she had yearned to sing since she was a small child: "Oh, brave one, I shall open my gates to thee, I shall let you water my fields, let you squeeze the juice from my vines, bear fruit for thee..." she sighed from the depth of her heart, looking suddenly exhausted from all those days of anticipation.

When the crowd heard her, they all cheered, the men pounding their clubs against the ground and the women clicking their tongues to sound a high-pitched "la-la-lay." The young man at the bottom of the wall lifted his arms in victory and as the gates opened before him he walked in confidently and proudly. A few musicians greeted him with merry songs and he was led into the palace followed by his best men.

I was curious to see how he was received so I ran down the wooden stairs, just in time to see him bowing before my mother and father, who were both sitting on the thrones solemnly. My brother, who was standing by my father's side, saw me, and signaled me to find a place to sit. Children were not introduced to visitors among our people so I walked quickly to sit by Akirdov who was sitting alert, waiting with his writing stick for what will unfold next. My father's ministers and army lords stood around the hall watching attentively while in the background the musicians continued playing hymns to the gods.

Yet the prince did not sit down on the cushions placed for him on a broad stool carved with the picture of a victory procession. He knew what had to be done next – his servants brought in the treasures he wished to offer my family in return for my sister's hand. As he promised, large burnt clay containers with gold, precious stones and silver were brought in while a beam with balances dangling on both its sides was erected in the middle of the hall. As demanded by custom, my mother placed two pans on both sides of the balances and my brother arranged the weights. As the servants poured the contents of the jars on the balances, the room hummed with suspense. The prince watched silently my father's facial expression, waiting for his approval. For a while, only the sound of pouring riches, metals falling on hard surface, filled the large space, as a huge sand clock, a measure of my sister's life and womb. As my father stayed expressionless, the tension in the room built...how far will he take his stake before he loses his worthy groom? The audience scrutinized the young man's face – seeking the slightest tremble that soon he would give up on his pursuit as the bride price was too high for him. But he continued signaling the servants to bring jar after jar, until there was a mound that was large enough for me to hide in, sloping in the middle of the room.

One of the prince's best men whispered something in the man's ear. It seemed as though there were no more riches to offer. There was an anticipating silence in the room. Will the marriage be denied? My father said nothing until finally the prince walked forward and took off his golden wreath, throwing it on top of the pile, and then looked at the king's face. Still not a slight move in the coarse older warrior's face. The prince took off his golden bracelet plaid with rubies and placed it gravely on the pile. After that came his ivory earrings and his bow. Still not a move from my father. I caught my breath, as did all the others in the room. The only person who

looked as calm and contained as my father was my mother, who sat on her chair calmly, not a muscle moving in her beautiful face.

And then the prince did something that amazed me – he took off his magnificent one-of-a-kind robe, which now I could see had a large lion woven into its back, and placed it on the pile, and I saw a small twitch in his left eye. As he was standing there, bare and exposed, only a short cloth covering his loins, I wondered how far this would go. Would he have to stand naked as a baby before my father gave his consent to the royal marriage?

For a long moment he stood waiting for my father's response, and when that did not come, he turned to remove the cloth covering his loins. At that moment, my father and mother said simultaneously: "Your gift has been accepted. You may take our daughter." The prince halted, collecting himself quickly, and smiled victoriously; the marriage had been sealed.

I awoke the next day when it was still dark to the sound of the hurrying around the palace in their toils. As I walked barefoot along the corridor that was lit with torches, Sami, the nicest servant in my father's palace, passed me by, clasping in both his hands a bunch of terrified chickens. "Do you want to help out, Ita? There is much work to do today, on your sister's wedding day!"

Happy to be of help, I ran after him to the kitchen where the cooks were already grilling three lambs and cutting vegetables into a large pot. I spent the rest of the day cutting vegetables, and organizing fresh fruit on large clay plates. At a certain point, Annani came looking for me. "So here you are, I was worried when I did not see you in your bed. I was sure you ran down to the stream again." In Annani's eyes I was always a criminal, up to something mischievous. She never could see my good qualities. And even at that moment, when I was in the midst of giving a



hand at preparing the celebration, all she could think was that I was not where she expected me to be, like an object that was misplaced.

I walked after her out of the kitchen, spending the next couple of hours washing and grooming and getting dressed in my best clothes and powdering my eye lashes in blue. The only thing I enjoyed putting on was the silver bracelets that jingled around my wrists and ankles like the bells of the sheep returning at dusk to the city.

When the sun set and the moon rose high in the sky, shining with a mysterious glow on us, all the nobles of the city and the high priests from the temple arrived at our palace, dropping to their knees before my father and sounding their words of adorned flattery, until a servant showed them a place, where they squatted along a low table covered with dishes full of baked wheat and barley, cakes and fruit. Many cows and sheep had found their end that night and large vases full of beer were served, the guests sipping the bitter liquid with long hollow reeds. My father was known to be extensively generous and the food and wine that was laid on those tables that night could have fed many hungry mouths. After the offerings to the gods were given, and the priests chanted the hymns to the gods, so they would bless the marriage, my father stood up to bless the newly-wedded couple. "We thank today the gods for blessing this marriage; all signs have shown that they observe your union with favor, and so our kingdoms now will rest side by side in brotherhood. May the goddess bless you with much pleasure with one another and many children as the sand on the shore," he bellowed holding his cup of wine in his hand. "The great challenge, my dear man, is ahead of you," he said with a large smile to the groom, "giving pleasure to your goddess Nikal...touch her vulva gently and she will reward you with many blessings," he said and the crowd burst into merry laughter. As prescribed by custom, the couple then walked out of the hall to manifest their union in love and pleasure-giving, accompanied by music and song. By

then, the men became quite drunk and by an invisible queue, their wives and companions left to another room in the palace where they were served sweets and lavender tea.

I was curious as to what the men do after the women leave the room because until then I was always sent to my room early in the evening. So I hid, inconspicuous behind one of the large pillars. The men continued drinking and singing songs about girls' alluring bodies and sweet vulvas when in came ten dancers who were dressed only in skirts made of beads, hinting in their rustle the delicate flesh hidden underneath. Their breasts exposed, glistening from the scented oil smeared over their bodies, were of all sizes and shapes, but to me, they seemed all perfect and beautiful as they danced and jiggled their wrist and ankle bells. I was bewitched and could not move away.

One of the dancers approached my father and took his hand, bringing it to her mouth, kissing it gently, and then moving it slowly between her thighs. Her head stretched back as he pushed his fingers inside her, and she moved up and down, moaning until she came to a climax. The men watching this were mesmerized. The other girls, moved as they were dancing toward them, and along with the music, teased and aroused their throbbing manhood by sucking them or caressing them gently with their small hands. As I watched this I was aroused as well, and then and there, as much as a 10-year-old girl can, I gave myself sweet intoxicating pleasure. As I sat behind that pillar feeling warm and tired, all I could hear were the groans and lustful sounds of the men and women giving and taking pleasure from one another. For some reason, I didn't want to look any more, so I just continued sitting there, waiting until the sounds came to an end and in that quiet, I heard my father bellow: "Let us drink to the lives of the young couple!" and the men cheered and drank some more.

At some point, my father became so drunk that my brother was called upon from his chambers. He pulled him away from the table and dragged him to his quarters. It is customary among our people that a son's obligation toward his father is threefold: to help him away from the table when he is drunk, to wash his clothes, and as an adult – plaster his roof before the winter rains. One of the best times of my earlier childhood was the end of the summer when my brother, together of course with some slaves, plastered the roof with mud, while I played in it, spluttering and splashing large scoops of it at the obedient servants and of course at my good-spirited brother.

My newlywed sister and her husband continued to stay in my father's palace for some time after the wedding. It was done so as to ensure that my sister could bear children and to avoid the awkwardness of traveling to the groom's kingdom only to find that the bride is barren and send her back home to her father. My sister was very anxious at that time, obsessing incessantly over the question whether she was pregnant or not.

She and Annani consulted the fortune teller, who sang and prayed, then frowning, he closely scrutinized the signs on the pig's liver. Finally, he said: "You will have a girl. But she will not live long..." my sister's face collapsed, "unless you strengthen your prayers and offer the goddess Ashera a pigeon every day as sacrifice and gratitude for what she has given thee," said the fortune teller. Both my sister and Annani sighed in relief. "Yes, of course, I will do so..." whispered my sister and covered her face with her hands, to hide her inner turmoil.

Three months passed, full of expectation, until finally my sister announced with beaming eyes that she was carrying a child in her womb. My father smiled a big toothy smile and proudly hugged his new son-in-law. The mother and her child were blessed by the priest and offerings of

gratitude were presented before goddess Nikal in our family shrine. The next day my sister and her husband packed their things and left the palace in a large parade.

All the time of waiting, I didn't really comprehend that my sister would soon be gone, and I didn't think I cared much; after all she was so delicate and sensitive, and we had nothing in common. But that morning, when she was already sitting upright and dignified in the carriage as only a pregnant married woman could be, Annani pushed me forward to bid farewell and I came to stand by the carriage window, looking into her eyes with the dumb pride of an unruly child. She reached over to me, moved aside the hair that covered my eyes, and looked at me lovingly.

"Goodbye sister," she said and leaned forward to kiss me farewell, then whispered in my ear, "Cherish the wilderness within you, Ita. The years will take it away anyway," she said. It was strange to hear, and uncharacteristic of my sister to be so perceptive and supportive. I suddenly felt small and timid, and as I looked at her I could see how beautiful and pure she was, how complete, as I would never be, and some inner nerve in my heart twitched.

I watched the caravan move away from the city down the slope, until they disappeared behind the hill. Still, I could hear from afar the dogs barking. Only when everything was back to routine, and the palace's team of slaves and workers returned to their work, did I suddenly feel terribly alone. I walked inside, to what was until recently my sister's and mine chamber, and it was empty of her presence. The room felt bare and cold. I opened the large case where she always kept her scarves and dresses neatly folded, with cinnamon and lavender to keep them nicely scented, but now it was empty of all those treasures. Something in my heart sank, and I sat on my bed and cried.

The following two springs passed without event except for the fact that my breasts did not bud like other girls. They sent me to a wise old woman who groped my flat chest, then made me drink a stinking potion from a greasy cup. I began hearing the maids whisper behind my back that I am never to become a woman. That I am cursed by the gods to be barren, stuck between womanhood and manhood. I didn't care much about these talks and to be honest, I was more concerned that my breasts *would* grow. I didn't want to become a woman, nor did I desire to be someone's wife and bear his children. Secretly, I watched my body in the large bronze mirror, scrutinizing it, anxious at any sign of change. I wanted to stay agile and light so I could go out and fight with my brother.

Sooner than I thought, war did break out. At the beginning, it was just rumors, reading between the lines in Akirdov's letters for my father. From what I understood, my father's fortunes came from gathering taxes from the peasants cultivating the lands around our city. He had two main rivals: the city of Dan in the north and the tribes of Hebrew who had herds of sheep and every other year sacked the villages and took over their land in order to feed their cattle. They were known to be savage and rebellious and they had their own special customs.

One of my father's concubines was a Hebrew; she was captured four summers ago and had given my father a child. She had told me that among her people they didn't eat pork; nor did they have many gods as we. They had one invisible god who was in charge of all. I laughed when I heard that. How could there be only one god? The elements of nature are so different and they battle with one another so often. I knew for sure that there are many gods and we were created to take care of them. And if there is one male god, where will all the female goddesses go?

When the rains stopped and the days became warmer, my father gathered his army; led by him and my brother they left the city on their chariots to the sound of a hundred drums. They did not

leave before my father received the gods' blessing by my mother's oracle. I had watched her breathe the sacred smoke, then fall back to the arms of the priests who attentively listened to her words. At first she only moaned and twisted, then coughed, and then out came a deep masculine voice from the dark void of her throat: "The sun will bow to thee as you return with fortunes, yet they will have to sacrifice your most precious jewel." As the words blubbered out of her mouth, she arched back and howled with pain. She then became silent as though she had fallen asleep. I watched this and fear sliced through my heart.

I did not want my father to go out to that war, yet even after he heard this prophecy he insisted on going. "There is too much at stake," he asserted, "and there is no place in this world for those who hesitate to battle. A hero's life is short and glorious and if it is my time to sail across the sea of the dead, then so shall it be," he said, leaving the temple and giving my brother, who was standing outside, the order to prepare the army for leave before sunrise.

I don't remember much of the weeks that came after. I tried to spend as much of my time outside by the stream. By now I was a friend to all the shepherds, who had taught me to play the flute, so I would sit under a tree and play my flute, waiting. There were rumors that my father had met with grave resistance but Annani had told me not to pay attention to these rumors – as they are the shadows of the city, the chatter of the underworld demons. So I waited patiently. I think ten sunrises passed when one evening, as I was returning to the city from the stream, and the birds were chuckling their evening calls, I suddenly felt a heavy blast of pressure on my chest, and I fell to the ground. |

As I looked up, I saw right above me an eagle circumventing in the sky. Right then, I knew that my brother was dead. That he had fallen, that I would never ride with my brother to battle on a

golden chariot. I ran back to the city, to my mother who was urgently called upon from her inner cloister to see me.

"Mother, mother, Shahar is dead...I saw a sign that he is dead, the eagle..."

For a fraction of a second, my mother's face crumbled before me into a mask of horror; then a dark curtain of self-control fell over it like a somber shadow, and she was again the collected all-powerful priestess of the moon god, Inlil.

"Go back to your father's palace and wait for the official word," she ordered me.

"How you can be so indifferent and cold?" I accused her.

"Collect yourself, child. Do not allow the flood of your sadness to overcome you. You are the daughter of the king; restrain yourself..." She hushed me and at that moment entered the first priest of the temple with a grave face.

"Your majesty, a word has come. Your Baal (husband) has sent out the word that he had won the war with great victory. He will return with many riches and slaves. Yet he had met great resistance and your son fell in battle."

As those words echoed back from the walls of the room, my mother lifted her chin proudly, "I shall hope they will be back as soon as possible so we can bury my son with the blessings of the gods," she said, then signaled for him to leave.

I stood watching her, as she leant against one of the hall's pillars, watching her chest rising and falling. I could see that pain was overcoming her.

"Mother...I will not rest until the blood of my brother is avenged..." I said.

"Hush, child, know your place, you should be praying and giving offerings to the gods that your brother's soul will be carried safely to the underworld, rather than wishing to avenge him..." she said. "I do not know what future lies ahead of you, but it is not a woman's task to demand blood pay for the dead. Let your father deal with that." She said looking at me with a dark gaze.

"You will bring bad fortune on our house and you will never marry if your hands will be smeared with the blood of another human being...so know thy place..." She said icily. "The worst crime mankind can do is challenge the gods. It is enough that your brother did not take a wife and now he is gone..." My heart froze to these words, realizing my mother believed my brother had died because of his vanity.

"I cannot believe that," I resisted. "He had a pure heart...do not blame my dear brother for his death...what horrible god would cut down the tree of my honorable brother's life?" I shouted and ran out of the room.

The day after, my father returned with his troops. Although he was victorious and brought with him many riches, the people of the city did not greet him in celebration. The word of my brother's death spread through the narrow alleys of the city like a plague – bringing sorrow and lamentation to every house it had touched. Wailing women greeted my father's army and although on that day many returned safely to their families, it was remembered as one of the darkest days in the city. Many had waited with anticipation for my brother's rain and now their hopes had been crushed under the verdict of the gods. Many said that he had paid for my father's exuberant appetites that had aroused the jealousy of the gods and so they took his golden hair.

My father's face as he entered the gates of the city that day was gray and bereft. In a fortnight he had grown old and weary. As he faced the crowd that had gathered to receive him and his fallen



son, he tore his cloak and said: "A mighty man can fight and win a battle. With his wit and courage he can earn himself glory. But one thing he cannot defy, and that is the death of his beloved. I have come back from this war with many riches. Our men have brought fame and glory to our city and have stood by my side without faltering and I am indebted to them. But I have lost the jewel of my crown, the lamb of my cot. What shall be of me now and of my house? No glory is worth this price. I have been struck down by a higher blow for my vanity and now he is gone..." said my father and his voice broke.

For seven days and seven nights my father laid on the ground, unwashed, lamenting. He did not drink his precious wine; nor paid a glimpse at all the young virgins that he had brought back with him. And he was not alone. The entire city was under a veil of sorrow and even the dogs howled sadly at night. My brother was gone.

Oh, loved goddess, why have you taken my brother from me? I was so young then and he was my only anchor in this world. All the others were like ghosts and when he was gone I felt abandoned in this world. And I felt angry too. I wanted to avenge his death at any price. I wanted to know who had cut his cord, who had pushed him to the river of the dead, from where I could not bring him back. For the entire week of bereavement, I walked among the people, listened carefully, collecting hints of who was his slayer. No one wanted to speak about his last fight. They were afraid of offending the dead. But on the seventh day I went to Talmon's house, my brother's best friend, who was sitting with his parents, brothers and sisters as well as wife and three young children, and asked him.

"Tell me, Talmon, how did my brother die? I must know; my spirit is tormented. I must know how his life was taken," I implored him to tell me.

"Your brother had fallen by his own art. The enemy was cunning. Shahar was standing beside me on his chariot, and as we always do, I was holding the reins while he shot the arrows at the enemy's infantry soldiers. Then suddenly a giant foreigner, perhaps one of those Sardinian's wearing a horned helmet, used a peculiar-looking sword, with a design I had not seen before, to stab the wheel of the chariot and we both fell off. Your brother, as you know, was quick to get back on his feet, but this warrior seemed to know his tricks as he moved swiftly after the prince of Hazor and sliced his chest open with one swift slash. I can still see before my eyes your brother's expression of surprise when he realized he was knocked down. I don't think he ever thought it as a possibility. And a moment later he was laying there on the soft bloody grass, gone...." Said Talmon, lowering his head, his old father patting his back reassuringly.

"What happened to the Sardinian soldier after that?" I asked inquisitively.

"He cut your brother's hand, hung it on his belt where I could see he already had four other limbs. I turned to fight him, but he laughed in my face, not caring even to take my life, and then jumped on his horse and rode off. He had no further interest in the battle."

"Was his hair the color of hay?"

"Yes, actually," said Talmon, looking at me inquisitively. "Why? Have you heard of him?"

"Oh, just a hunch," I lied. "Where was the battle held?" I asked, as innocently as I could.

"On the shore of the River Dan up in the north," he answered. "We left the bodies of the enemy to rot there, so that it will be forever cursed for them and they will never try again to defy your father," said Talmon with a rage only the defeated know.

I kissed his sisters and mother goodbye, then went back to the palace up the hill. The silence of mourning was still lingering over the empty halls of the palace; only the muffled wailing of women could be heard from the back rooms. I knew I needed help; I could not manage this on my own. I walked to the kitchen and there I saw Zeit, the 13-year-old son of Adulb, my father's master of the storage rooms, who was eating an apple by the back entrance of the kitchen. I knew he fancied me for some time, at least I sensed so from the way he looked at me every time we crossed each other's path.

"Hey, Zeit, do you want to kiss me?" I whispered to him as we both sat on a bench facing the large fire at the center of the cooking area. "Sure," his eyes gleamed.

"Fine, first I want you to do me a small favor." "What?" he asked eagerly, wanting to get what was promised as quickly as possible. "Give me one of your robes," I smiled at him teasingly. At first, he almost choked on his apple, not believing what I had asked him for. "What do you want that for?" he asked, forgetting for a moment the prize that was offered.

"Just a game I want to play...find out if I can look like a boy..." I smiled at him mischievously. "Oh..." he answered, starting to like this new game.

"Maybe you would want to go with me to visit my friends..." he suggested. "When you look like a boy I mean..."

"Maybe I will, now first get me the robe..." Zeit walked out and returned after a few minutes holding a long cotton dress with brown stripes. "That's the nicest one I have..." he said humbly.

"Very well, thank you..." I said, then leant forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Naaldinak abu ars," he cursed, "you promised to let me kiss you..."

"That will do for now," I said decisively and ran out to the corridor.

I went to my room and there waited for dusk to fall. When the light from the window diminished, I took a sharp knife and cut my hair short, then covered my head with a cloth and tied it with a rope. I tied the knife and sling to my waist and then walking through the shadows slipped out of the palace. I was lucky that at that moment the horse groom was away and the stables were quiet and I could sneak in and pick myself a good-natured mule. Under the veil of darkness, I could leave the palace yard. As I approached the city gates, an alert soldier blocked my way.

"Where are you heading, boy?" he demanded. "I have a message from the king to his alliance in Kineret. He wants me to deliver it before morning," I said, looking directly into the man's eyes, "so don't stand in my way or the king's wrath will be upon your head." I pressed and began walking toward the gate.

"Show me the message," asked the suspecting man. I drew out of my sack a piece of papyrus with some lines of song I had written on it on the day of my father and brother's departure to war. It was full of glory and praise of our cities' forces. It seemed so naïve and long ago now that my brother was gone. I showed it to the soldier who looked at it, and obviously he did not know how to read as he gazed at it for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and shuffled away to open the gates.

As I walked out of the familiar scent and sounds of the city – the muffled voices of family's disputes and laughing around their fires – I asked myself if I was doing the right thing. But then the gates closed behind me and there I stood outside the walls, facing the vast darkness outside, only a thin slice of moon shining above my head surrounded by numerous stars. I felt a pang of excitement mixed with terror. I had not thought clearly what lay ahead of me. But I felt immensely alive and I had a powerful wish to go find my brother's killer and avenge his life. An eye for an eye – that is the law of our people. A tooth for a tooth.

The path to Dan in the north was wide. Every day farmers, herders and family of blacksmiths and other craftsmen and merchants walked that path, moving from one village to another, offering their services or goods. The night was quiet, and as I got used to the darkness I could see cows dozing on the side of the road, along with good-natured trees and bushes. The night felt harmless and my courage grew. In my head suddenly sounded the voice I had not heard since that childhood experience. The goddess spoke to me in her deep voice, guiding me as to what I should do next. I did not feel alone or threatened for a moment that night and as day broke I searched for large rocks to seek what the goddess had instructed me to do – to find a poisonous snake. That was not difficult to do – the snakes at that time of the year tended to be on the surface, and easily detected. Experienced at catching and holding these spirits, I had a viper in my bag by the time the sun reached the top of the trees.

Some herdsmen crossed my way and asked me with a smile where I was heading.

"Up to the city of Dan," I said.

"Be careful now," they said. "Dan was sacked by king of Hazor two weeks ago, so there are some hungry city people up the road who would be more than happy to eat your mule. Better walk along the river to the east," they suggested. I guided the submissive animal off the road and we walked the rest of the day out of the main road's sight.

As I neared the bottom of the city moat, trying to figure out how to find my brother's killer, I saw two young girls walking along the path holding large jugs on their heads. I assumed they were heading for the water edge so I followed them unnoticed.

Reaching a small clearing by the stream, I brought the mule some water from the gorge and tied her to a nearby tree. Looking around, I noticed four men cooking on a small fire. They wore ragged tunics and one of them had a bandaged stump instead of his left hand, making me realize they had fought in the war. I hesitated whether to approach them. I planned to stay the night nearby and was afraid they would find out I'm a girl. But then I thought to myself that they might have a lead as to the whereabouts of my brother's killer. So I walked over to them, pushing aside the fear.

"May the gods bless you," I greeted them in the thickest voice my twelve-year-old throat could muster.

"May you find peace," they said lifting their heads, curious. "You are not a familiar face," said the tallest and heaviest one of them who must have been the leader. "What brings you here and where have you come from?" The question did not surprise me as it is customary always to ask one of the road where he has come from and where is he heading.

"My name is Ko-ache. I am a messenger from the city of Kineret. The king has sent me to find a great warrior he had heard of – the Sardinian giant, so I have been told. Have you met him?" A

thick silence fell over the men, and then finally the man without the hand waved his bloody bandaged stump in the air and spat with rage.

"That man should be slain in his sleep, not invited as a hero to a king's palace. He cut my hand with an evil smile on his face, taking pleasure in my pain. He thrives on causing pain and death," said the man.

The leader looked at me with a steady gaze, then said: "You better disobey your master, boy. The Sardinian will slay you and hang your genitals on his belt before the sun rises again. He has no interest in king's courts and their glory. If your life is precious to you, stay the night here and tomorrow be on your way. Here, come join us for some dates and wheat porridge."

I smiled, "Yes, I have heard of this man many tales, but I have good news for him so he will not harm me. My life is more valuable to him than my death," I said confidently. "Please do tell me where he is," I said.

"And help this man find good fortunes...I shall piss against the wind before I do that!" The mutated one exclaimed and the others groaned in consent.

"I assure you that my news to him will take him far away from this land, never to return...so please do guide me to him..." My words held a promise none of them could ignore. Then the leader exclaimed: "Very well, we saw him this morning. He's camping up the stream, where it flows under an orchard of carob trees. You will not miss it by the strong scent of the tree. I suggest you approach him by day..." said the man, and I saw he took pity in me.

"Very well, thank you. May you all find peace and bounty," I said walking back to my mule, pulling her a little further up the stream, where I unpacked for the night.

I woke up the next morning with the first sparrows. The air was cool and I felt cold as I washed my face in the stream. Shana, the name I decided to give my mule, was, thank the goddess, willing to pace after me and we had reached deep into the thicket by the time the crows sounded their midday calls. I walked carefully as I wished to see the man before he could detect me, and so I constantly sniffed the air, waiting for the scent of the carob tree.

Shana and I had to walk for a while in the water as the trail disappeared when I suddenly detected that sensual pungent smell of the carob flowers. Leaving the mule behind tied to a tree, I quietly moved forward, careful not to leave the bush so as to stay unnoticed. Clearly, the Sardinian was there as I could see in the clearing that opened in front of me a large war horse grazing the grass by the water and an open fire that had been just fed. But the vicious giant was nowhere to be seen. As I mistakenly stepped on a branch, sounding a crack, I froze, holding my breath. Waiting.

All that time I was not afraid, but rather alert and ready. I did not care if these were my last moments of life. I was now Anath, goddess of war, determined to take my vengeance. When the man finally emerged out of the wood, I immediately remembered him from the stream by Hazor, and I observed him now with curiosity. He was like a huge bull, his eyebrows knotted together in determined fury. He seemed now almost human, as he was busy scalping an animal he had caught and preparing himself a meal. But then, as his food was roasting on the fire, he moved toward the water, and fully facing me, began to pull off his clothes.

I was only twelve years old at the time, but I had already seen several times in my short life men's naked bodies, and although I had not been known by a man, I had already sensed the burning desire and pleasure awaiting me when finally I would become a woman. So I was not



afraid to watch, quite the opposite. His immense body was muscular beyond human proportions, shining with sweat, and his manhood, now at peace, was dangling between his legs like a thick rope. I have to admit I was tempted to come out of the thicket. I had a small vision of myself laying on a rock and him standing and watching me with his intense gaze. But I held myself as I watched him wash quickly in the stream, and as he turned his back to me, I suddenly saw something that bewildered me.

Across the center of his back there was a large red scar, as though he had been sliced in two, from his neck to his waist, and somehow had survived. Seeing that scar and realizing what he had survived made him even more bewildering for my young eyes. I had never seen such a fierce warrior, and I was about to kill him.

As night finally fell, and the warrior fed the fire with more wood, I waited for him to fall asleep. Silence fell over the clearing; only the wooing of the owl was heard from the top of one of the trees. Like a flexible night creature crawling slowly after its oblivious prey, I neared the man with the snake held tightly in my hand. I lifted silently his woolen blanket and quickly slipped the snake under it.

I was almost out of his hand's reach when he grabbed me, shouting something in his wild tongue, squeezing my neck, choking me. I couldn't breathe and my sight became foggy. I could hear myself choking from afar; suddenly the pressure lightened and I was laying on my back, staring into his eyes that now gazed at me with surprise at how life was leaving him, surprised at my young face before him, while he convoluted, foam spluttering out of his mouth and his entire majestic body twitching violently. Little by little, he ceased to move, when finally his eyes dimmed out and they were empty. The snake had done his sacred job and after this wild

expression of death had fully bloomed, I remained lying there on the ground, unable to move, frozen. I had taken a life and so I whispered a prayer to goddess Anath, thanking her for helping me take vengeance over my brother's death. I didn't feel any joy, only the bitter taste of rust and loss washed my mouth. I do not remember for how long I lay there, but at some point the spell was gone and I could get up. Even in his death, the man seemed undefeatable.

Picking up his large heavy sword, I wobbled for a moment under its weight, then with a desperate cry lifted it high in the air and dropped it across his cooling neck. But the blow was not strong enough and so I had to repeat my effort five times before his head rolled slowly away from his body. Holding my breath I pushed it with my foot inside the canvas sack, I washed my hands and face quickly in the stream and began my journey home.

## Returning to Hazor

It didn't take me long to get back to my father's kingdom. Again I moved along the side paths and before nightfall the next day I was back at the gates, entering the city right before the gates closed. I walked directly to my father's chambers and there knocked on the doors. He had come out of mourning and was about to feast with a few of his newly conquered women who had probably lost a husband or a son not long ago. But I did not pay attention to them at all. I entered and requested to appear before him. "Where have you been, child? We thought you were kidnapped by the herdsman. But no man would have kidnapped you looking like this. So you must have been up to some new mischief," he said, sipping from his golden cup.

"Yes, father, I have been away. I walked north to the city of Dan. The warfare has left its people begging for food."

"What in Baal's name do you have with Dan and its weakling people?" inquired my father, his servants freezing in their places, holding the jugs and plates in the air like attentive statues.

"I searched for my brother's killer, the man who shed the blood of your noble heir."

"You did what?" he shouted, spitting wine, a few drops of it reaching my forehead.

"I searched for the Sardinian, and have found him. I have restored our family's honor," I said solemnly and then pulled out the heavy head of the dead man.

The room was frozen for a long moment. Was it horror I sensed in the air or astonishment at what I had managed to achieve. I hoped it was both. I will never forget that moment, facing my father with the decapitated man's head held in my hand. Never have I felt more brave and proud than at that moment. Looking back, I believe that was the moment when I turned into someone who was other than her years, her sex, her familial belonging. I was a creature that was greater than the sum of its parts. A mystery.

But then my father's face brought me back to reality. "You have strayed too far this time, Ita. You have brought great shame on our family. And your fate will be of loneliness and sterility. No man will ever want to take a woman who has the blood of murder on her hands. More than that, no man will feel safe at night by a female like you."

"But father...I did it for our family...I wished to please thee...I walked the path of Anath goddess of war...I have not done something that is not prescribed in the ancient stories of the gods...why would I be condemned for following the guidance of the gods?"

"What red vanity pushed you to do that? You are not Anath; you are a princess, daughter of King Yavin, Lord of Hazor. Your role is to be wedded with a prince and help me form alliances. So

freely and tenderly have I raised you...and you, you, again and again act with some strange fire within you," said my father, his disappointment tearing my heart apart.

"Go, go now. I do not wish to see thee until a decision is made. And take that head with you; it holds no sense of condolences for me but the pain of losing another child. Go and ask your mother to purify your bloody hands, cover your head and body with ashes and sleep only on the floor until I tell you otherwise," he said gravely, waving his hand for me to leave, and as I walked out, careful not to disgrace myself even more by showing him my back, I saw suddenly his deep sadness and I cried, "I'm sorry, father...I wanted to make you proud of me..."

He wouldn't look back at me or answer my plea, and the large doors closed behind me forever. I found myself standing in the dark corridor holding the sack in my hand, feeling that my world had fallen apart.

Suddenly, a gust of wind moved through the windowless corridor, the torches flickering and wavering, and I heard the voice of the goddess. "Ita-Anu," she whispered in my ears, "do not be afraid child; all will be well...bear with courage the consequences of your actions. There will always be those who will cherish and admire you for your boldness and others whose hearts will be filled with rage and contempt even at the sound of your name...now walk on, go to your mother now...."

Clutching the sack in my hand, I walked out into the warm night, deaf to the sounds of the crickets. Some women walking back from their evening offerings looked at me with what seemed to me like horror. I was not aware of my badly cut hair and dirty clothes, not to mention

the desperate look in my eyes as I knocked on my mother's gate. Her servant opened a crack to see who it was and once I was announced before my mother, she immediately let me in.

"Child, where have you been?" she asked, getting up on her feet and walking toward me. I told her of my deeds and then of my father's response. Losing all my previous boldness, I wept. I was only a child now standing before her mother. "Mother, what will be of me now? I did not know I had done such wrong...I wanted to be like goddess Anath who avenges her brother's death...why should I be condemned for seeking my brother's killer and taking his life...was I not brave, mother? Why should I be punished for having courage to bring down such a vicious giant? Mother..." I cried.

"Oh, Ita, what a peculiar creature you are. It is as though you have your own world with its own rules. We must obey many sets of rules in our lives: one is the gods, and in that realm you have brought goddess Anath great honor and I encourage you to offer her your prize from the kill. But Ita, in the realm of the people, you have disgraced your family, your city, your people. No woman should kill, and certainly not a princess. You have been raised surrounded by the most exquisite fabrics, food and drink. Your skin has been washed in goat's milk and moistened by musk oil...you were raised to be of holy or noble rank...not a warrior."

"But mother...why, then, did my brother teach me all the things he had...why have I practiced fighting with him...?"

"This was just child's play for you. I would never have dreamed that you would go out and kill a man like that. Now we will have to find a way to resolve your sin. There will be a price, Ita, like there is always when we do something terrible. But you will grow from it. I promise you that

although the pain will be great, you will come out stronger because of it. Now go and wash yourself, and after that we will purify your hands of the death they hold," she said and signaled to her maid to bathe me.

I grew older during the following days. No one but my mother spoke to me and I stayed at her shrine, ordered to pray and beg for forgiveness for what I have done. I think the hardest thing for me, looking back, was the contradiction between doing something that felt right and its condemnation by other people. This clash between my inner truth and external codes of conduct would haunt me all my life. So I waited, silently praying, in the shadow of the prayer hall.

Praying that the goddess will help me. On the third night I had a dream that intrigued me: in my dream I had a little sparrow in my hand and I fed it poppy seeds and it grew quickly and became a large hawk and I got on its back and we flew up into the sky – and all the people of the city, including my father, looked at us soaring above their heads and they called out in bewilderment: "Oh, we shouldn't have treated her so badly, she is queen of all birds, goddess of flight..." And in my dream I forgave them all, and showered on their heads warm rain and blossoming flowers.

I woke up to the sound of the rooster, looking into the dark, sensing the scent of the shrine incense and I felt safe and small under the blanket. Light spring rain began tapping outside and I just lay there peaceful. I felt well protected by the gods; I had followed their rule and I wouldn't be abandoned.

My father called for me that afternoon; the smile he always had for me vanished and I faced a stern-looking man, the judge and higher ruler of our city and I was not a princess now but a delinquent, someone who had trodden over the most ancient rules of man: no woman should kill or shed blood. The elderly men of the city and my father's chancellors sat around the hall on their stools observing me with sharp, demeaning eyes.

I do not have many memories of the event. I remember fragments – my father’s cumbersome face, the low grave tones of voice echoing from the walls. The waiting for the verdict, and the men's decision to banish me to exile. My father condemned and accused me of betraying the rules of our people. Finally he called out: “I have lost a daughter today; she will not be of my palace anymore. I send her away never to return.” Sending me out of the city would mean for a girl my age either being captured and sold into slavery or being devoured by the wild beasts. Not for a moment did I fool myself that I could survive outside the city for long.

But then my mother came to my aid like she had never before. Shedding her priesthood manners, she came forth and pleaded: "Great king, my warrior, my husband, please hear this woman speak for her child," she said and fell flat before my father's feet like one of the peasants at his court, waiting until he tapped her shoulder with his staff.

"Speak, wife, for thine own child."

Then my mother got back on her feet. Standing before my father and the elders she said:

"Ita-Anu has done the utmost wrong and she should be punished, but you must agree with me that she had shown great courage and she had done justice for her brother's memory. She is only twelve and has achieved such a feat. Remember, oh wise husband, that she is still a child, with the faith and courage and the misdoing of a child. Hadn't you told me that at thirteen you went out to war and killed your first kill with a sword? From whom do you think she got the fierce and wild blood?" she paused to look at him, then continued.

"Now I agree that she should be punished, but I see what an incredible woman this child could become one day, and you know what a kind heart she has at her core. She is wild and passionate, and clever...send her away to do service...send her to the shrine of the goddess on the shore.

There she will be trained to channel her passion in an acceptable way. The priests in the shrine will put sense in her head, and they will teach her the humility of those who serve the goddess. If she is not fit to be a wife and a child bearer, then send her to become qdesha. I have no doubt she will bring our family honor. I will send her every moon cycle a supply of food and some metal and gold and she will give offerings to the goddess in our family's name. Wouldn't that be a redemption for her sin – to serve the gods for the rest of her life? If she cannot belong to a man, let her be married to the gods..." she said gently yet decisively, looking directly into the eyes of her audience.

There was silence and then my father groaned and asked the men to have their say. They all agreed that it was a good solution. That I will bring wisdom, faith and pleasure to the world this way and my father looked at me for the last time and I saw a wave of sadness move through his eyes. Tears began rolling down my cheeks as he said: "I have decided that Anu, daughter of Uprishtim, priestess of Inlil, will be offered to the service of goddess Ashera and will be sent away for the rest of her life to the shrine of the goddess on the shore." He thudded his lion-shaped carved stick on the floor three times, then heavily got up on his feet and left the hall with no further word. I never saw my father again.

Preparations were made for my departure. Annani wailed the entire time, as if she was sad that I was leaving. I did not trust her bursts of tears and hands that clasped me. I was now a young warrior and I could not bear her emotional neediness. As far as I could see it, I was leaving my home, which was sad and frightening, but at the same time tremendously exciting – life now seemed like a wide blue sky that I was about to fly into with two broad wings.



Mother brought me an amulet of an oak tree scribed on burnt clay. "You are now to become a disciple of goddess Ashera, bearer of life; the tree is her emblem. You must always wear it and it will protect you. Remember, Anu, there is a time to be a warrior and there is a time to be compassionate to all beings. I urge you to do the tasks that will be given to you with dedication and bear with patience and humility the discipline and teaching that will be passed on to you.

"Become a vehicle to the goddess, Ita. Learn to own your passion, make it a friend, one that can reside peacefully among others. You must tame the wild tiger in your heart, put him on a leash and become his master. Obey the great mother of the shrine and do what is asked of you with patience. If you will do all these things, your tree of life will grow into a majestic Ficus tree. If not, you will become like grass that withers in summer. You are not a child anymore, Ita. You have initiated yourself into adulthood and have chosen a challenging path. Walk it always with the memory of where you have come from – never forget that you are a princess of Hazor.

"It is time for you now to seek the goddess and to become her slave," said my mother and placed her hands on my shoulder. "Now Anu, we say goodbye." She looked into my eyes and when I looked back into hers, I saw softness in their amber warm color. "Can I hug you, mother?" I asked timidly.

"Yes, you may," she said and for a long moment I hugged her. When I detached from her I felt a turbulent river of yearning and sadness gush through me. "I don't want to go, Mother. Please let me stay," I said

"You have chosen your path, Ita-Anu; now walk into the wilderness with a brave heart. Great challenges and deeds are awaiting you," she said and walked away. I remember how frail I felt back then, realizing there was no way back.

Later I stood by the open window in my room and called out for the goddess to change the course of events, but that night she did not answer. The gods must have decided unanimously upon my future.

## Traveling to Ghmat

The next morning Annani walked me to the blacksmiths' neighborhood located at the eastern wall of the city. As a child I had heard many stories from the servants about the mysterious blacksmiths, those men who knew how to smelt and forge rocks into tools and weapons. It was said they used dark magic in their craft and as much as they were revered they were also despised and as such they were segregated to their own places of living.

"Why are the blacksmiths said to be cursed?" I asked Annani curiously as we walked through the narrow alleys. Panting, she answered: "Their limbs are short. Among them you will feel like a giant. They only marry among themselves and live in their own compounds, so usually you don't see them."

That vision sounded frightening, as though I was walking into the underworld. But first we had to meet their chief, Asad, who was known to provide my father with the most brutal services of all – handicapping his rivals so they could not pose a threat to him anymore. Asad was the one to blind my father's uncles, nephews and cousins – so they would never be able to plot against him. He was also the one to collect the weapons and tools that the community of blacksmiths forged

and then passed on to my father.

"You must show great respect to this man," said Annani to me, when we reached the walls of his compound. "His craft has turned his heart into iron. He does not feel any compassion for anyone. He knows of what you had done and the king instructed him to get you to Ghmat without your identity being revealed. So listen carefully, don't make eye contact and be silent. Talk only if he asks you something. Do you understand, Ita? Your life as a princess is over and you must learn humility from now on," she said looking into my eyes with what seemed like a mixture of pity and pragmatism. "We must all obey the gods' command and this is your new path now," she said squeezing my hands in what seemed to be an attempt to be reassuring.

She then pounded on the large wooden gate with a large stone she picked from the ground. After a long moment, a servant opened it a crack, inquiring of our identity.

As she announced our appointment with Asad, the servant opened the gate and brought us inside a large courtyard surrounded by a high wall and a two-storey building, into which we were led. Moving through three different halls, reaching finally the last one that was ablaze with the light of numerous torches, I saw a dark heavy man with a long black beard sitting on what appeared to be a very large seat. Asad's two short legs were dangling far away from the floor. As we approached him, he signaled us to come closer and then after looking at me with a cold stare, he said in a hushed voice so no one but us could hear him:

"So Anu, you have gotten into some trouble. They tell me you avenged your brother's death. I will not deny that I have respect for your act. But our customs must be respected or we will lose

all. I have been told by your father that you will be ordained as a Qdesha in Ghmat and it is my task to get you there safely and anonymously. Your name from now on is Ninve and you will be given new clothes to wear.

“You will not talk to anyone and you will mind your own business. Do you understand that? The blacksmiths’ ways are mysterious and secret, and if it was not for your father I would never let you join us, but as it is, you will walk to Ghmat with the Adalbirtu family who is being sent by your father as a gift to do service for the king of Cabri. I will tell them that you are the daughter of one of your father’s rival, a nobleman I had just executed. As such, you are exiled to become a qdesha.”

Annani was dribbling and sobbing when she left me at that house. "My poor baby," she cried while hugging me to her bosom. "You get into so much trouble," she cried. When she finally went on her way I felt relieved. Left behind to sit on a low bench by a window facing west, I waited for what was about to happen, feeling brave under the sunlight that was washing me from the window. After a while, a servant took me to the house of the Adalbirtu family.

At first they seemed so strange in their small height but then Omchir, the big mother, offered me freshly baked bread, olives and a delicious slice of goat cheese, accompanied by a lively story about how the craft of iron-making runs in their families five generations back, and they originally hailed from Urartu up in the north, beyond Ugarit. Despite their small disposition, which made me feel quite large, even as a thirteen-year-old, they were industrious and canny in their affairs. They seemed to pity and respect me both at the same time. After all, in their eyes I was an orphaned nobility. But perhaps that was actually not so far from the truth as I genuinely believed I would never see my parents again.

Omchir made it clear that I was strictly forbidden from coming near their working area. "We women don't come near the furnace. If we would do so, a curse would fall on our family; stay with the children at all times," she told me and I nodded my head in consent.

As we set out in a long caravan east, I spent most of my time with Simola, the 14-year-old daughter of the second son who was quiet and sad-looking. Together we took care of the small children – entertaining them with games while steadily walking the path that passed between majestic mountains that were green and blooming with lots of spring flowers. As we walked, Simola showed me and the other children which plants were edible and we picked them, bringing them to the elderly women who cooked it when we camped for the night in a large family pot together with fresh poultry.

We picked Hubezot and Maluchia, wild onion, and Zaatar. During that journey, we ate two meals a day – one late in the morning when we ate some fresh Panu bread that was baked fresh on a hot bronze plate together with olive oil and some goat cheese. In the evening, the women cooked different mixes of meat with the vegetables that we had collected on the way. I enjoyed the voyage. We slept under the open skies, resting on a large mattress made of sewed-together pieces of sheepskin. I would lie on my back and look at the stars, sensing the majestic presence of the goddess in that vast landscape of darkness, filled with numerous stars.

The children were covered with lice and fleas, and very quickly I, too, scratched and wriggled all day under the attack of the little insects.

But there was much good humor and laughter among the group as they walked with their sheep and donkeys, goats, dogs, and young lambs. On the fourth day we crossed the mountain ridge

and we reached a village that rested by a fountain. The dogs were the first to greet us and a commotion occurred when the dogs got into a fight. Ahib, the big father, shouted at them, hitting them with his stick when the people of the village came out too. They were the most miserable, tattered lot I had ever seen in my life.

## At the village

As we built a temporary camp, the peasants brought Ahib their working tools, swords, pots and pans as well as small amulets with depictions of the gods made of bronze, copper and iron. As the sun climbed up the sky, I watched how the four men of the Adalbirtu family raised a shade made of animal skins, then surrounded it with a strong straw fence they had brought with them. Meanwhile the women gathered wood and piled them on the far corner of the compound.

I felt frustrated that I could not see what all the piles of wood were gathered for as Simola and I were told to look after the small children. When Simola and I were feeding the young children baked wheat and dates, I turned to her and asked: "Tell me, Simola, is it true what I have heard about your people?"

"What have you heard?" she asked alarmed.

"I have heard they are the servants of Mot, lord of the underworld" (I made this up to get her talking).

"We are not any such thing," she protested. "We are the descendants of the Kurdagon, a godly blacksmith who formed swords for the gods and all the great warriors of antiquity. His art has been passed to us through the generations."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Because we have our songs that teach us so," she said and sang a peculiar-sounding song in a language I did not understand; its pitch was very high, swirling and curling at the edges like the song of the nightingale.

"What does the song tell?" I asked when she finished singing it with a proud smile.

"It's about Pkharmet, the blacksmith who stole the fire from the gods so we mortals would have tools. According to the legend, because he stole it from Kurdagon, we always have to wander from one place to another so the great god Kurdagon will not find us and take his knowledge back. If we stay too long in one place we will always get into trouble," she said.

"And do you like to wander?" I asked, no longer teasing but genuinely curious.

"No. I wish we could stay in one place. There was a village where we spent some time a year ago. I met a boy and I wished I could stay with him and have his children. But we had to leave...I still dream about him sometimes..." she admitted and I thought to myself how peculiar love is that it nests itself in one's heart long after the loved one is gone.

That night, some of the villagers joined us around the large fire. After the meal, the smith's wives and daughters served some freshly picked dates and figs together with mint tea. The villagers quickly gobbled up the food and there was a long silence before Ahib spoke out: "We have come a long way, villagers, and I cannot ignore that your hunger has grown mighty since our last visit," he said, scratching his beard.

Barak, the villager's head, nodded his head gravely: "The city people are sucking the marrow out of our bones," he said angrily. "Their taxes are dwindling our resources not to mention that our

most beautiful girls and industrious boys are taken away to serve the king and his men. We are living in growing scarcity and there is talk of a plague moving up from the south. One more draft like we had last year and there won't be enough people among us to cultivate the lands. In two years I have lost my wife to the cholera, my vineyard was hit by a swarm of locusts – so when the soldiers came to collect taxes all they could take was our barley and wheat leaving us starving. There is no limit to the greed of the king. His tax collectors come now twice a year taking what they find. Leaving us only with barely enough to survive," he said, his desperation highlighted by his lean face. I could sense without looking the gaze of the numerous hungry eyes in the darkness just outside the circle of fire. That was the first time I saw what starvation looked like.

I had always felt uncomfortable with my father's insatiable desire for pleasure and riches, but now I witnessed the results of his greed. At that young age, I realized that I had been saved from a corrupted life and I thanked the goddess that night for protecting me by sending me on a different path.

"But we will not sit in silence for long," said Barak. "In the name of El, if we are left with nothing, we have nothing to lose and we will fight for our lives. We will turn our plows into swords and we will fight for the little honor we still have."

### My insatiable curiosity gets me into trouble

The next morning, the Adalbirtu men began building the furnace for the iron smelting. I woke up before the other children, hearing the men chanting as they were mixing mud with straw by the stream. I wondered, what is so secret about their craft? Could I find out without being



discovered? Lying on the sleeping mattress I looked at the trees towering over my head and suddenly it occurred to me that I could climb on one of them up to the highest branches, and that from there, hidden by the thicket, no one would see me, yet still, maybe I could see what they were doing.

I didn't think it over much. Oh, how hasty I was. I just jumped very quickly to my feet and, looking around to make sure that no one was watching, I climbed up the large oak tree, and before long I was well hidden among the branches. Now I had to find the right spot from where I could see their secret craft. I crawled along a branch until I reached the point where it began bending down, and then leaning forward, I moved aside a bunch of leaves in front of me and to my great joy realized I was looking directly at the smelting scene.

Thrilled, I saw the men digging a wide hole in the ground. They were drinking wine while doing so, drinking and chanting. The smallest son was giving them rhythm with a drum while Ahib lit a bundle of herbs (I could not decipher what they were). Moving the burning herbs in the air, he formed various formations of smoke in the air, then placed them at the bottom of the pit, where they next placed a figure of the goddess. A circle of sand was piled around the ridges of the pit. As the drumming quickened, Ahib's two oldest sons suddenly removed the cloths wrapped around their waists, and to my great astonishment, they sat naked on the ridge of the hole with their backs to one another, singing a peculiar song about how men insert their iron rods into women's furnaces and babies come out, and so may the metal these humble men put in the furnace's belly bring out many powerful tools. And as they chanted, they wriggled their behinds, pushing the sand backward. As the rhythm intensified and they rose to their feet, now all four of them danced naked around the pit, their voices heavy and low like the groaning of bears.

Transfixed by their peculiar ritual, I pushed myself lower to get a better view. Suddenly the branch I was lying on cracked underneath my weight. Before I could do anything, I landed with a thud three lengths away from them.

"In the name of El, what is this female doing here?" shouted Ahib after a moment of catastrophic silence. I said nothing, trying to assess the damage to my aching body. The men fumbled for their clothes so I thought this is my time to disappear as quickly as possible. But then a heavy hand grasped my neck from behind, and I was pulled back. "She must be killed immediately," said Ohad, the youngest middle son.

"She has seen too much."

"I agree," said the eldest son. "She has broken the spell and our actions will not hold their blessing anymore. It will be the doom of our art, our family..." he said, sounding desperate. Once again, I had brought curse over a family. It was too late for remorse. "We cannot kill her. I had promised to Asad that she will be taken to Ghmat. I gave an oath to protect her," said the father.

"So let someone trustworthy take her there; we have to get rid of her as soon as possible. She is a bad omen," said the smallest son, standing beside me holding the drum. I think he liked me. "So be it," said Ahib. "Fill that pit with sand and go pack. We will not be doing any smelting here. We are leaving tonight."

The caravan's pace was hastened now. We pushed the next day across a landscape of soft hills until we reached the outskirts of a living compound. I was tied to one of the donkeys behind, feeling sorry for myself, walking silently. Every now and then one of the children would bring me a little water.

At midday I realized we had arrived at a settlement because I could hear the chatter and clamor of living beings of all kinds. Indeed, as we entered a little clearing in the forest, I saw we had arrived at a country market. Large vases of wheat, olives, and dates were stacked by a stone wall as well as various caged or tied animals. In between walked many people of diverse origins shouting, talking, picking merchandise from the large piles on the ground and haggling. A few merchants turned around when they heard our clamor of metals nearing.

One of them cheered with apprehension and walked toward us calling out, "Brother Ahib, bless the earth under your feet, it has been long since we last met." He looked like a grave bandit with the pouch he had over his eye, his dusty gray hair and furs of a leopard covering his loins and chest. "May the gods bless you, Asur," said Ahib and placed his arm on his shoulder as they walked away to speak privately.

I sat on a rock watching the Adalbirtu men quickly build their shop which was in great demand, when Asur the foreign man approached me smiling. One of his front teeth was missing, something I had seen many times among my brother's soldiers. He actually resembled a large cat that had a little too many mating fights. And he also smelled like he had a little too much wine. "So, I'm told you are a girl from Hazor, a child of a nobleman, sent to the temple on the shore. Are you happy to become a Naditu? Free from the bondage of marriage and child-bearing?" he said with a large drunken smile. I looked at him for a long moment, pausing to think of what he had just said, aside from the fact that his direct speech to me was totally inappropriate. "I don't know you and I don't want to either. Go away," I said, reluctant to get into a conversation with him.

"Oh, but you should care. You are to become a holy concubine of the gods and much devotion and passion will be demanded of you...the last thing you will be able to be is indifferent...and my name is Asur," he said sniggering.

"Well, I don't care to talk to you. I'd rather be alone..." I said, looking the other way.

"You are quite a rebellious child, and rude too. I have also been told that you trespassed into the Adalbirtu family's secret ritual, so you were also just a tiny thread away from being killed. I actually don't think you are in a position to tell anyone to leave you alone. As a matter of fact," he smiled widely, "tonight, after the closing of the market, you and I will be walking together the rest of the way to Ghmat. So you better get used to me as we have two days walk to the shore. I'm your official guardian now," he said, looking at my revolted face with amusement.

"...Well, one thing I know by the way you look at me – I better watch my back at night," he said, smiling slyly, then spat on the ground and uttered something in a strange language that sounded like a curse.

Eventually we left the market village a little before dawn. I tried to say goodbye to Simola but she would not talk to me. The entire Adalbirtu family shunned me. That saddened me as I had grown to like them and her especially. She was actually my first friend ever. We walked silently as the delicate fingers of dawn began to light up the sky. Asur walked ahead with his two large dogs, and the donkey followed us slowly, burdened by wooden logs and sacks of merchandise.

Sober now, Asur was much more quiet and submerged in his thoughts than I expected him to be after our first conversation, but he did tell me when I asked that he was a wood carver that came

from Ninve up in the north east. We walked steadily through the thick bush, Asur navigating the narrow path between rocks and low growing oaks. Thorny Poterium in its full yellow bloom filled the air with its sweet scent as the shadows began to grow longer. We reached a small fountain among the low trees that formed a little pond between two large rocks. Asur, who seemed to be a self-sufficient man, accustomed to being on his own, began unpacking and building a fire industriously. I stood watching. He paused for a moment, returning my gaze.

"Go brush the donkey," he said throwing my way a coarse knot of nettle threads. I walked to the donkey, who looked tired and began scrubbing it as it was chewing the low grass. Perhaps it was the hour, or maybe the repetitive motion of cleaning the beast, but peace came over me and I felt safe. I looked at the dark pool and realized that I hadn't washed since I was at my mother's chambers. I looked to see what Asur was doing. As he was busy with building the fire, I hastily unwrapped myself of my clothing and walked carefully into the water, feeling a deep sense of relief as I dipped my head in, like a thick layer of sadness was peeled off me.

For a long moment I floated in the water, savoring its tingling caress against my skin, when I suddenly realized Asur was watching me. He seemed transfixed by the sight of me. I had never seen such admiration in anyone's eyes before. For a long moment there was total stillness but the dripping of the water from my hair into the pool. Then he moved slowly toward me and I caught my breath. But all he did was crouch on the edge of the water, and continued looking at me with a soft glow in his eyes.

"You are very beautiful, Ita-Anu," he said. I waited, wondering what would happen next. His

hand reached out to touch my nipple, aroused from the cold water. He hesitated for a long moment, like he was weighing something, and then said, "You belong to the goddess, Anu. Go get dressed. I want you to gather wood before it's completely dark," he said and rose heavily back to his full height and walked away.

That night I slept a sweet deep sleep. We were high in altitude so the air was cold. I huddled between Asur's two large dogs and dreamt of a man with gentle hands and wrinkles of laughter around his eyes. He smiled at me and I woke up laughing as the sun rose over the trees.

We walked down the slope of a hill when I asked, "Asur, can I ask you something?"

"Yes," he replied, his eyes focused on the path.

"What does a priestess of Ashera do exactly?"

"You don't know?"

"No one will tell me," I said, embarrassed, wiping the sweat off my brow.

"Well, maybe they were right not to tell you. It's not something a young girl can understand," he admitted, giving me a hand to jump off a large rock.

"It would be silly to get there and not to know anything. I'd look silly," I said.

"Fine, I'll tell you what I know. The priestesses, or how they were called in my childhood town – the Naditu, take close care of the gods. Mainly they do three things: the first thing is prostrations to the goddess through prayer and sacrifice. Sacrifice can take many forms: sacrificing animals, libations, as well as giving the gods pleasure, while making beautiful things, dancing, singing and also making love. Then the Naditu also take care of the shrine's dealings, because the shrine

has many fields and orchards to take care off. And if you're really lucky, you will get to enact the sacred marriage with the king."

"But how will I know how to do all this?" I asked, worried. It sounded like a considerable feat.

"You will be trained. You will be initiated. A long journey lies ahead of you. It will not happen tomorrow. You are now like a bud just hatching from the soil. You will become a Qdesha only when you will be in full bloom...when you are ready..." he said and smiled at me, looking surprisingly sincere and kind.

"We will soon get to our destination," he said at some point and I was a little sad at the thought of leaving him. We walked in silence under orange skies, the light extinguishing quickly until the only source of light was the rising moon, half-impregnated.

The world seemed pale and lonely and my heart ached; there was nothing to hold on to but the rope tied to the mule. The moon resembled a crack in an opening eye; it must be the goddess watching over me, I thought, feeling better. Walking became easier and I noticed now that the trees were becoming smaller and something I had never sensed before filled my nostrils. It was salty and rich, a little like decaying fruit of some kind.

"What is that scent, Asur?" I asked

"Oh, you must mean the scent of the sea," he smiled. "You either love or you hate it. What do you think?"

"I don't know. It feels alive," I said and felt excited hearing suddenly the sound of water crashing forcefully. I quickened my step; reaching the top of a sandy hill, I was suddenly struck

by the most liberating, intoxicating and at the same time frightening thing I had ever seen in my young life.

I saw before me a glistening dark landscape of water which had no boundaries, and in it was reflected the moon in a thousand sparkling gems. Above all this endless shimmering and constantly moving space, there was the sky filled with its endless stars. I dropped to my knees in awe and cried and prayed to the goddess who had brought me here, and to god Yam, who was no doubt almighty and to be respected. I was a tiny ant standing by two giants, silently leaning one against the other. Should I not plea for mercy?

We stayed the night there, most of it spent absorbing the sky and sea before me. Asur waited patiently, chewing wood sorrel.

"We better get going, the shrine is not far now," he said when light began to color the sky and started pulling the mule north. I followed after him, struggling to keep pace while treading the sinking sand underneath my feet. Large white-winged birds I had never seen before were gliding in the wind above our heads, beautiful and free.

"Look see Ita-Anu, here is a crab," Asur called out and I saw a funny creature walking sideways like a dancer on the tips of his stick-like legs in to the water.

A cool breeze from the north brought with it the sound of people. Chanting of the sacred songs to the goddess. The path we walked disappeared into the dense shrub, reaching a heavy stone wall with a large open gate. Entering, I was struck by what I had seen. Under a large fichus tree danced a beautiful woman. Her breasts bare, her body covered with turmeric drawing, moving in a peculiar ceremony, accompanied by a drummer and a harp musician.



I feel a deep need to rest aside for a moment the telling of my own story and describe her dance as it later became my own. She moved from one side of the yard to the other like she was a graceful swan floating on a quiet pond, her hands cupped before her, open for the goddess's blessing. She signaled with her hands over her body the sign of feminine bounty, and a small secretive smile spread over her face. Dropping her head back as she swayed her hips back and forth, she lifted her arms in the air as though she was about to fly, then tilted herself up and back, in repetitive motions, until she turned on her heels, and showing her back to the large group that surrounded her, she let her hips tremble with amazing attention. The act reminded me of boiling water on a fire. Her hands moving like two large snakes on both her sides, she turned to us again, shaking her generous breasts, smiling and nodding her head gently from side to side. She gestured with two of her fingers as though she was placing something in her womb and began spinning faster, using one of her arms as the center point.

Raising her delicate fingers to her mouth, while looking up at the blue sky, she signaled something falling from the sky and began twisting her abdomen like a ripple of water in a pond. Finally, her hands came together before her as in prayer and her eyes closed for a long moment. Breathing heavily, she came to a stop (later I learned that it was a prayer for the gods to shower the land with rain), standing before the cheering crowd who threw flowers and green leaves at her.

I stood watching her speechless and Asur, who was standing beside me, whispered, "This is Agil-Ur. She is the Supreme Qdeshitu of the shrine, performing the morning rituals. And these are the pilgrims who have come to worship the goddess. She is embodying the goddess herself and everything about her is sacred," he said.

The woman finished her dance and sat down peacefully on a large cushion under the tree. One after the other the pilgrims came before her, placing in her hands and around her various offerings: baskets with fruit, jewelry, little bronze statues of the goddess and beautiful crimson-colored fabric. She bowed her head down, placed her hand on the head of the pilgrims as they knelt before her, blessing each of them in turn.

Looking at her I suddenly realized that she was not looking into the eyes of any of them.

Actually it seemed like she didn't see anything. "What is wrong with her?" I asked Asur.

"The goddess has blessed her with heavy sight so she can see and hear more clearly the god's guidance," responded Asur.

As we stood watching, a young girl came out of a building dressed in a white tunic. She came to Agil-Ur's side and placed her hand gently on the older woman's shoulder. Agil-Ur rose to her feet majestically, and the crowd that surrounded her fell to the ground in full prostration. One of the women in the crowd placed her long hair on the ground before Agil-Ur's delicate bare feet, for her to walk on it like a carpet. Silently, Agil-Ur walked into the shrine with the girl guiding her.

"What do we do now?" I asked Asur, feeling tiny and scared all of a sudden, realizing that soon I will be left here to my new destiny.

"We have to talk now to the head priest," said Asur. As he tied the mule, he pulled out from one of the inner pockets of the bundle on the mule's back a small beautifully embroidered pouch, tied with a golden thread. Asur began walking. When he realized he was walking alone, he turned around, looked into my eyes and said: "You'll be fine, don't worry. Come now."

Reluctantly I walked after him, my arms wrapped around my body.

Asur talked to a boy about my age who was standing at the shrine's large golden gate. He was handicapped in his right arm, the arm dangling along his body while his other hand was signaling to Asur the gesture of "May peace rest upon you as you come hereby."

Asur replied with a similar gesture, then explained to the boy that we would be most grateful to speak with the head priest. The boy disappeared into the darkness of the shrine and reappeared after a few minutes followed by a large heavy man with a long graying beard that stood in contrast to his cleanly shaved head.

He smiled at us patiently and greeting us as required by custom, he asked us what had brought us here. We both bowed before him and Asur said with great reverence in his voice, "Your holiness, we have come from the eastern kingdom of Hazor. The noble parents of this child had separated from this world and their last wish was that she would be dedicated to the holy service of the goddess. They have sent their humble donation to help the shrine sustain her life here and to buy the needed supplies for her sacrifices to the gods until she comes of age," he said and poured from the pouch a pile of pink diamonds as well as little nuggets of gold onto his large hand.

The priest looked at me for a long moment, then at the riches placed on the palm of Asur's hand. "Does the girl know how to sing and dance?" Asur nodded his head. "She has been trained by the best dancers, singers and musicians of the kingdom. She can also play the harp, read and write in

Acadian and has learned the ancient texts. She will be a great asset to the shrine. I assure you," said Asur gravely.

"Has she had her first menstruation yet?" asked the priest, looking at my body for a moment. I resented this visual probing and looked back into his eyes defiantly.

"She has a stubborn and rebellious soul," said the priest. "Yet she is also very beautiful," countered Asur.

There was a long moment of silence and I could hear the sea roaring. I surrendered at that moment my will and my life to the goddess. In my heart I said, "Do with me as you will" and then the priest smiled grimly. "Very well, she may stay. Akuka will take her in to the pre-puberty girls' cloisters where she will be able to place her mat and rest. She is probably very tired from the voyage. And you, sir, must eat and drink before you continue on your way," said the priest as he took the precious gems from Asur.

I was then led down a path between low weary wind-blown trees to a compound of small houses organized in a semi-circle around a large yard with a ficus tree at the center. The large and majestic ficus tree created a natural canopy of shadow over the houses.

"Those are the women's living quarters," said the boy named Akuka as he led me to one of the buildings, "and this is where the pre-puberty girls sleep," he said, showing me inside a large rounded room covered with carpets and sleeping mats. On the far end lay a small figure covered with blankets.

"That's Umanashe, he is Agil-Ur's personal initiate. He has not been feeling well for some time

now. So they brought him here from the men's quarters so Dorith, our medicine woman, could take care of him. I wonder where she is now," said Akuka.

"I'm right here," said a lively voice behind us. The healer named Dorith was a stout woman who gave off the impression that your life would be safe in her hands. She smiled warmly at me.

"Welcome, I assume you are a new initiate. What is your name, precious?"

I smiled, encouraged by Dorith's kindness. "Ita-Anu."

"Nice, where are you from?"

"Hazor," I replied.

"You have come a long way. Have you had something to drink or eat? You must be very tired. Come, I'll show you where there is clean water and we'll find you a place to lay your head and rest a little while," she said and walked me to the far end of the space.

"What is wrong with the boy there?" I asked shyly as Dorith spread a mattress for me over the red striped carpet.

"Umanashe has lost his will to sing ever since he has been gelded. You will see many times in life that the wound of the body heals before the heart does," she said, looking at me compassionately. For a moment, I was afraid she would ask what has been my share in this world's suffering. But she didn't.

I looked for a moment at Umanashe's small figure huddled silently under the blanket.

"He is an amazing singer. Agil-Ur always picks him to sing during the great festivals. Even the king loves listening to him," said Dorith. "I think the cutting of his testicles has weakened his soul and an evil spirit has entered him.

"If he does not get better today, we will summon here the shrine's exorcist to relieve him of this evil spirit," said Dorith. "Now come with me, I'll show you where you can wash," she said and showed me the way to the washing hut.

When we got back, the sick boy woke up from his sleep with a sigh of pain. "Dorith," he whispered, "could you bring me some water? I feel like my loins are on fire." Dorith patted the boy's forehead. "Of course. Here you are, dear," she said and gave him a small wooden cup with water. He sipped a few small sips of water and slowly returned to his fetal position on the mattress.

"I am going now to speak to Adak," said Dorith to Umanashe, leaning over him. "I will return as quickly as I can. Meanwhile, our new girl, Ita-Anu, will keep you company," said Dorith and signaled me to sit down, then walked away.

Umanashe turned his head and looked at me with sunken eyes. "Where are you from?" he whispered, seeming to me more like a very beautiful delicate girl than a boy.

"I'm from Hazor." These three words had left my lips far too many times these last few days.

"That's far...I come from a far place too...from Ur...far far away in the north..."

"Why were you sent here?" I asked.

"Well, I am a weaver's son, and according to our custom I was ordained to sing. The king sent me to this shrine as a gift to the goddess," he said. "Why were you sent here?" he asked faintly.

"I did something wrong and my family decided to offer me to give service at the shrine," I admitted quietly.

"Well, we were both sent away from home against our will," he said and for a moment our eyes met. We sat silently for few moments and then I had an idea. "Do you have a lyre here?" I asked

"There should be one over there," he said, weakly pointing. I looked around and surely by the entrance there was a small lyre. I rested it on my lap, toned the cords, then began singing to Umanashe the hymn to Nikal, such a sweet, touching melody that I had learned from my music teacher. Tears rolled down Umanashe's cheeks and he tried to dry them with the edge of his blanket.

"Truly, a bad spirit has entered me," he said, "I can't stop crying and my heart is in such pain for so long," he said and I felt a little embarrassed. I never had to console anyone in my life before and I didn't know exactly what to say. Umanashe closed his eyes and turned his back to me. I waited for a while, then lost my patience, sitting there doing nothing, so I walked back to the washing hut and purified my hands in the rinsing bowl. Returning to my mattress, I rested on my back looking at the ceiling. I felt curious and anxious, imagining what my life in the shrine would be like. The warm voice of the goddess whispering with the crashing waves on the shore soothed me to sleep, reassuring me that I was on the right path and all would be well.

The next morning I was taken by Akuka to see Adak the head priest. Adak was sitting crossed-legged under a tree with several other priests. It seemed like they were in the heat of an argument as I overheard one of the priests say: "We must tell the king the Qdeshot are not trained to satisfy his appetite; they are the holy concubines of the gods."

Adak peacefully nodded his head. "Yes, Amar, you are right, but we must remember that the king is the embodiment of the gods upon earth. He is god and he is necessary for the sacred marriage to take place."

The priest called Amar would not be appeased by this logic. "I still insist that there is a difference between holding the ceremony here in the shrine and sending the girls to entertain the king in his palace. They are not for his amusement. This is degrading our dedication to the gods."

"Well to be honest, Amar, even if you are totally right, we are not capable of refusing the king. As the poverty of the pilgrims is growing, and they give less offerings when they come to us, we depend more and more upon the king's generosity," said Adak and so ended the argument.

He turned to Akuka and myself and said, "Hello Ita-Anu, come sit. We welcome you to the shrine. We must dedicate you to the goddess as soon as possible. To become a holy Qdesha, first you are dedicated to the goddess, after which you will be trained to practice her rituals of prayer, offering, dance and song, and then when your first bleeding will come, you will be prepared for the sacred marriage rites," he said.

"But first you will be prepared for the dedication. According to the stars, tomorrow will be an auspicious day to hold the ceremony so today you will be prepared by the older Qdeshitu for the ritual. Are you ready to shed your old self and become the bud of a new flower?" he asked, looking directly into my eyes.

I squirmed for a moment. Did I really want to be dedicated to the goddess? If you would have



asked me that a few months before, I would have surely said no. I would rather be the disciple of great Anath and wage war with the men. But now, I felt that there was hope for something new in my life; some mysterious power was hatching inside of me that I had never known before. And beyond everything, I was curious.

"Yes, I am willing," I said and bowed my head in surrender. "Very well," approved Adak.

"Akuka, take her to Atara and Amalia and tell them to prepare her for the ceremony."

Atara and Amalia were only a little older than me, yet they had already gone through their rites and had begun participating in the evening ceremonies. Like the other Qdeshot, their faces were ornamented with turmeric paintings of the sacred symbols of the goddess. They were kind and gentle toward me, washing me in a large basin filled with lukewarm water, then dressed me in a white cloth. They told me I am the bride of the god's now. No ornaments or decorations were attached to me and I was instructed that at this time I will be dedicated to the shrine, like a young child is dedicated to his family and tribe. From hereafter the ceremony, my life will be tied forever to the shrine, to fulfilling my duties as a Qdesha, and as a member of the shrine's staff. I must always obey the priests and senior Qdeshot and should never leave the shrine without a chaperone. I should perform the chores I'm told to do promptly, and should never speak badly about another member of the shrine, as it is slandering a child of the goddess and she will be angry and avenge. I listened to Atara and Amalia as they spoke calmly while grooming me; by the time they had finished with me, I felt like a sweet little girl with rosy cheeks and a loving mother for the first time in my life. I found myself excited about the ceremony and fasted in complete silence very easily all day after.

I was awoken before dawn by Atara to the sound of the horn. Through the window I could see many lights flickering in the dark, and as I followed Atara out of the pre-puberty house out onto the path leading to the shrine, I heard the chanting of the priests accompanied by the musicians. I walked ceremonially after Atara, who wore a crimson dyed dress and a bracelet of little shells tied around her ankles that made a rustling sound as she walked. I realized suddenly that we were followed by a long line of women, I assumed all Qdeshot, all beautifully dressed as well, and holding small lamps in their hands.

My heart fluttered at the sight of all this. I had the feeling that something incredibly mysterious and powerful was about to happen to me and I sensed the magnificent presence of the goddess inside me. "I surrender to you, mother of all, goddess of the sea," I whispered to myself as we entered the main hall of the shrine.

The priests gathered by the great stone altar, which was lit with numerous lamps. The grimace of the golden goddess and her eternal mate El, imperial and mysterious, filled the room with their powerful presence. I was stricken with awe and my legs trembled as I walked to stand before Adak who was wearing now the emblems of high priesthood which I recognized from mother's temple at home: a large crimson heading covered with rubies and in his hand he held a staff with the golden image of the horned star sculptured on it. He chanted the sacred vowels in a deep voice while the other priests stood on both his sides accompanied him. His prayer repeated itself several times, pleadings before the goddess to protect us, then he mentioned my name: "I here give you as offering to your joy and pleasure, Ita-Anu," he said and then he anointed me with the sweet-scented *Mor* oil to become a disciple of the Naditu or in other words "A qdesha." After that I was taken to the king's palace and I had to enter his bedroom where he sat on several large

cushions. I followed the script of custom – I looked into his eyes for a long moment than touched his bed. He smiled at me.

"Welcome, Ita. May you be blessed with many years in the shrine," he said as he placed his hand on my head for a long moment. I remember him very vaguely from that first time. I remember the smell of his room which was condensed with musks. He was older than my father and he had a large belly. I was taken back to the shrine then, and that was how I became a servant of the goddess.

A new life had begun for me, yet I remember most vividly at the beginning of that time the exorcism of the evil spirit that had entered Umanashe. He didn't get better; it was as if the will to live had left his body, so finally the superior qdeshot decided to call in the official exorcist named Ashipu, who was known for his immense powers to expel evil spirits from the suffering bodies of their victims. He was the official exorcist of the king's palace and shrine and as such was highly revered. He came, so I was told, from the ancient city of Eridu in the north.

It was not my first time seeing an exorcist; there were many of them in my home city, but this one was the grandest I had seen. He wore all red to frighten away the spirits and tied around his abdomen were many small terracotta figurines of all the evil spirits. When he moved around, they rustled and clanked like he was a rattle snake. His face was covered with ashes and symbols against the evil spirits were painted with red ochre on his forehead, the back of his head, and bare arms. A strong peculiar scent stemmed from him as he passed me, entering the woman's hut. Sprinkling ashes over Umanashe, who lay weak and frail on the mattress, Ashipu hissed the words of the exorcism, spitting on Umanashe's body three times, then, cutting with his knife one of the figurines off his garment, he held it up in the air and said: "In my hand I hold the body of

*Shed*, evil spirit who has taken hold of this young being; I call upon you to leave this poor body and return to the underworld."

Umanashe's body trembled and shuddered with those words and his mouth opened, a high-pitched shriek coming out. "Oh, you rebellious demon..." responded the exorcist "...I offer you an ass to cross the desert...I offer you a boat so you can cross the waters beneath the earth...take these gifts and leave..." he chanted over and over again. Umanashe's body trembled and shook, foam coming out of his mouth and his eyes rolled back. The audience of Qdeshot emitted sounds of fear as I watched bewildered. Then Ashipu called out at the top of his voice:

"Be gone spirit, return to where you had come from," he said and broke the head of the figure he was holding in his hand. Umanashe's body fell into a convulsion of shudders and it seemed like a terrible fight of forces was taking place in his body. This continued for a long time until finally, his body came to rest, and he seemed like he was asleep.

"May you have a safe journey back home," said the exorcist and sprinkled some more ashes over Umanashe's silent body, then smeared the sign of the sacred star on his forehead with deep red ochre.

Before he left, the exorcist burned some incense and gave Dorith another small depiction of the demon, telling her that every day for an entire moon cycle, offerings should be given to the demon together with the others gods. Then he left, leaving behind him the silent, barely breathing, Umanashe.

The days that followed were filled with new experiences for me. I was now a part of a group of six pre-puberty girls who were instructed and trained in the various practices of the Qdesha.

Every morning before the morning meal in the kitchen, consisting of some fruit and grain

porridge, we had a ritual dance class, followed by chanting and singing as well as detailed instructions of the various rituals we would have to complete as part of our duty. This included all the offering procedures which had to be punctually completed or they would be considered contaminated and thrown away to the dogs, and everything would have to be repeated with new offerings.

That part was the hardest for me. I remembered how meticulous mother was about the offerings – the amounts given, the order of placing the small bowls in front of the gods, the right prayer along with the act of pouring either milk, oil or wine over the burning incense. And it all had to be done in the right measure, with gestures that were neither grand nor limp. Now I had to do it myself and I was facing extreme difficulties. By nature, I was restless, and unfortunately I conducted terrible sins at that time. Once, I stepped inside the libation, after which I had to confess my sin to one of the secondary priests. Confessing was difficult as well. I'd rather forget about my sins than talk about them. But the longer I stayed in the shrine, the more I grew to appreciate the gravity of every breach of the laws and customs of the gods; eventually it became second nature to rush to confess this sin or another, to unload the heavy weight off my heart.

Although I enjoyed the dancing, it was physically demanding. We would repeat over and over the sequences of movements; each gesture was an expression of the goddesses' powers so I had many opportunities to release my inner fire. Hila, our dance instructor, a fragile-looking Qdesha from the lands of the Hittit in the south-east, must have been of royal descent too, as she had the manners and the delicacy of a princess. She trained us to dance with the quality of a "contained storm." She would talk to us about moving with full presence, focusing our energy on the goddesses' desires, but hold it, not spill it. One of our practices was to dance the song of the sea while holding a jug of wine on top of our heads. She was very patient with me because

sometimes I would give in to my natural inclination, and dance wildly, using combat movements that my brother had taught me. The other girls would laugh at my outburst, but Hila would shake her head gently. "Hold it...water without a container is just wasted..." she would say. "Ita-Anu, this will get you nowhere."

Looking back, I believe she was fond of me, because she never actually punished me but guided me gently. She said once at the end of the class: "In my homeland they would say it is better to tame a wild spirit than kindle a cold heart. Work hard, girls, but do not extinguish the beautiful free calf in you that will graze in the god's meadows for eternity."

Then Umanashe died. He never recovered after the exorcism. It was like the demon had taken his spirit with him to the underworld. None of the offerings helped. He passed away quietly when the warm winds of the new year dispersed small grains of sand everywhere. He was buried in the small Qdeshitu burial tomb, a little bundle of white shroud lowered into the darkness, with his favorite tune playing on the lyre in the background – prayer to Nikkal. He was thirteen summers old when he died and Agil-Ur spoke softly of his dedication and his kind spirit.

The priests, somber and cool in their conduct, sprinkled sand over his open grave and chanted the prayers to Mot, god of death, so he will carry him over the sea to the world of the dead where he will grow and bloom to be a beautiful Qdeshitu held in the arms of the goddess Ashera. I cried when I listened to the words of their prayer. I truly wished Umanashe to find his way; I had become close to him during the few months of our acquaintance. For some reason he had wanted me in particular to sit beside him and hold his hand as he slowly withered. It was during those times, when I sat by his side, that I experienced for the first time genuine peace. Something gentle and delicate bloomed in my heart. I understood why my sister took pity on orphans and

cripples when we would walk through the narrow alleys of the city market and offer them all she had in her sack of coins.

I grieved over Umanashe as did all the other shrine members. A week after we rose back to our feet and washed the impurity of death off our bodies and clothes, Agil-Ur called for me and told me she had watched me care for Umanashe on his death bed.

"Your teachers tell me you have a wild nature, Ita, and you do not follow instructions easily. But this is exactly the nature of the goddess – beautiful, ferocious, wild and untamed. And I have seen a seed of true goodness and compassion in you, Ita-Anu. I would like you to be my disciple. You will assist me from now on in the morning and evening ritual. Every day you must purify yourself in the sea at dawn and bring me some fresh water after that. We will eat our first meal together and after that you will continue with your practices. In the afternoon you will join me again and help me with what is needed. Do you think you can do that?" she asked with a gentle smile.

"I think I can," I answered quickly. And so I found myself a mentor.

Attending to Agil-Ur's needs demanded deep attentiveness. Somehow, just by being at her side made my senses alert to every gesture, every one of her needs. After only a few days at her side, I could detect by her breathing if something was too much for her and if she wished to walk out of the chamber. I would quickly hurry to her side, gently tapping her shoulder so she would know I was by her side.

There was something very comforting in getting to know someone so closely. Beyond the tasks of aiding her in the rituals, we also read together from the holy epic of Gilgamesh and other

writings of Ugarit and Babylon. She was very kind and patient toward me and many times as we ate our first meal together she would tell me about the river Tigris, where her parents dug canals for the flooding water of the river to water the king's fields. As a child she could not work with her parents because of her heavy eyes, so when she began to speak with the goddess, it was perceived as a great blessing. At the age of ten she was taken to the magnificent temple of Ninve to be trained as a Naditu, or as we call them in Canaan the Qdeshot – priestesses of the goddess.

The poor, almost blind, Agil-Ur, became, after just a few years, a highly venerated priestess. Her connection to the goddess and her prowess at performing the sacred arts secured her the title of head priestess in Ghmat.

"But inside here," she tapped the center of her chest delicately, "I will always remain a little girl, hearing the goddess soothe me in the shadows that surrounded me," she said. I then told her all about my family and how the goddess speaks to me too. That conversation laid the foundations for a special bond between us. In a sense, Agil-Ur became a mother to me and I tried to help her as much as I could. That strong connection softened my soul, arousing in me a desire to be the best disciple I could be.

Once, when I was brushing Agil-Ur's long bronze hair with long strokes, she placed her hand on mine and asked: "What do you know, Ita, about the art of the Qdesha?" I then repeated everything I had heard from different conversations with people.

"Well, what you have been told is true, but no one told you why we really perform this sacred service. We, and I mean all the Qdeshot in this shrine, are incarnations of the goddess upon earth. We are responsible for forming the bond between mankind and the goddess through the ritual of sacred marriage. It is not a simple act of coitus. It is a complete and subtle artistry of the



sacred act of union between female and male, the basis of all creation," she said, and signaled me to sit beside her on the little straw stool. "Do you remember, Ita, that we read from the scrolls of Gilgamesh a few days ago, and in particular the story of how the sacred harlot was brought to wild Inkidu in order to tame him and make him into a man through the act of copulation, how after seven days of love-making he became a true man, forgetting the language of the animals?" I nodded my head. How could I forget?

"I love that part that she shows him how to touch her, and in knowing her he forgets himself and becomes a new being," I said.

"Yes, you sensed the essence of that moment – that by the act of knowing one another, men and women are initiated into humanity, distinct from the dumb, unknowing animal kingdom," she said signaling with her hands the symbol of holy union. "That is exactly the art of the Qdesha: through the ritual of conscious, artful, instructive coitus with a man, she puts into motion three processes: she is offering her act to the goddess which brings blessings to her, her family, her people and the shrine. She is also allowing the man she is with to give his seed as an offering to the incarnation of the goddess upon earth and so brings him many blessings as well and she is initiating every man she is with into maturity, humanness, and the ability to bestow goodness and gentleness upon others after that," said Agil-Ur. "You see, most of the men that will come to you will be in a state of beastliness. Blind and tormented, they are consumed by their lust like felines or beasts in the field, untamed and wild. It is our task, with our gifts and training in the arts, and the subtle knowledge of what pleasure can be when properly contained, to teach them, make

them human in the sense that they will be a depiction of the way gods live in their eternal kingdoms – elegant and formidable," she concluded.

"That sounds so beautiful, Agil-Ur, but what if an ugly, deformed, odious man will come to me?" I asked, worried.

Agil-Ur smiled knowingly. "Yes, for the time being you see before you men that are either attractive – young, handsome, clean...and those that are not so are repulsive to you. But you are still a child, Ita. You have not seen the world yet through the eyes of the goddess. The goddess loves all creatures, they are all her beloved children and when your training will be over, you will perceive men as wild, unruly children of the goddess that it is your task to initiate into manhood. One day, Ita, you will lose your old self and you will become a presence of the goddess upon earth. And as a goddess – all men will be worthy of your love."

I was astounded by what she had told me and a mixture of repulsion and excitement filled my stomach. "Now, Ita, it's time for the evening libations," she said, rising to her feet.

I served Agil-Ur and practiced for twenty moon cycles, from one humid summer to the beginning of spring. I cherished my life by the sea, the teachings of Agil-Ur, and being surrounded by girls sharing a similar experience to me. I rarely felt alone and every day was filled with a sense of fulfillment and joy. Every season had its own colors on the shore and I loved the long walks I was allowed to take from the shrine up to the north where the sea crashed into the mysterious lime caves.

On one of the warm dry days of late spring I woke up with a headache and a feeling of emptiness in my lower body that was soon accompanied by bleeding from my vulva. By now, I actually felt relieved. I feared that it would never come. I told Dorith and she was glad to hear. She then instructed me on how to stay clean during the upcoming days and how to purify myself. I was banned from entering the shrine during the next few days and I spent them quietly at the women's quarters, creating clay depictions of the goddess.

Dorith passed the word to Adak that I was ready for the great ceremony. Spring was an auspicious time to become a full woman, with everything blooming and the festival of the new year soon to be held. Awe fell over me when I was told that I would be the Qdesha that year to perform the sacred marriage. I would be the goddess upon earth: that would be my first sacrifice to the goddess, the first gift of love-making that I would give her.

At the heart of the new year festival was the marriage of the king/god Tamuz, god of fertility, to the goddess. The king would bring many offerings and riches to the goddess, represented by one of the Qdeshot, and following the goddess's consent for the marriage, they would conduct the ritual of the sacred sexual union. The ritual began with a grand procession from the king's palace to the shrine. Riding a golden chariot pulled by four war horses covered with blankets of golden scales and rubies, came the king with his soldiers, horses, and legion of charioteers, followed by carriers with gifts for the goddess – dyed clothing, flax, oil, barley, wool, statues of the goddesses made of gold, and pots filled with silver and precious gems. Meanwhile, I was prepared for the ritual, bathed with warm water and smeared with scented oils.

Thereafter Agil-Ur and the senior Qdeshitu prepared me ceremonially. While chanting, Agil-Ur gave me a cup of scented wine. I was told to drink all of it.

"It is a mixture of wine with the potion of the gods," said Agil-Ur.

"Pay attention. Be alert," she added as I felt a peculiar state of consciousness coming over me with each sip. I could now see things very clearly. My passions no longer clouded my vision and I felt calmer than I had ever felt before. I breathed deeply with relief and looked around at the women in the room. They were serious, every gesture weighed for life or death.

First, my body was decorated with turmeric symbols of the goddess. Next, they tied around my body the various jewelry items of the Qdesha, all made of precious jewels and gold: a large necklace that touched my exposed breasts with a lapis lazuli at its center, a nose jewel, earrings, numerous bracelets for the wrists and ankles, as well as a large plate of gold with beautiful gems plated on to it, to cover my vulva. Finally, while singing the hymns to the goddess, they placed the magnificent mask of the goddess on my head. I was suddenly hidden behind something that was greater than me, and a sense of deep ancient mystery came over me. The wooden mask was heavy and large, and I could peek outside only through two round holes. Within the dense air of the mask, I was not Ita anymore, but a divine being. My hand, guided by the goddess, lifted to bless the women. The faces of the qdeshot filled with reverence, they fell to the ground, bowing before me. I was now the goddess upon earth, soon to be married to the king-god.

Slowly and ceremonially they walked me outside to the sacrifice stage, while singing the prayers in unison. The sacrifice stage was situated high on a hill so the people of the city could stand and watch. As I stood on the stage I saw the king arriving with the procession, and my heart leaped, remembering such grand celebrations at home in Hazor.

Finally, the king reached the stage and climbed to stand before me, wearing the mask of the god Tamuz, he called out: "Goddess, alluring, beautiful one, I have brought you gifts, would you take

me as thy husband," he asked ceremonially, and I responded as prescribed by the sacred texts: "My lord, you are indeed worthy of my pure embrace...My lord, your riches are sweet; your herbs in the desert are all of them sweet," and with those words, I, the goddess Ashera, stated my consent to marry the king-god Tamuz.

Then the musicians played and sang while Agil-Ur recited the numerous names and blessings of the goddess. A young calf was brought forth and Adak with his ritual knife cut swiftly its neck artery. Blood gushed out and was collected in a large vase that was poured as libations before the gods. A fire was lit on the altar and the calf was burned in sacrifice, filling the air with the pungent scent of burnt flesh. After further libations were made to the gods, the king and I began the sacred marriage dance.

Standing before him, all I could see beyond the mask were his chubby shoulders and his protruding belly through his crimson robe. His arms were covered with thick dark hair and I could smell his sweat mixed with the heavy scent of musk. All of a sudden, I was filled with dread, my limbs became heavy and my mouth dry, but there was no going back. But my hesitation did not last for long. The chanting of the love song between Ashera and Tamuz to the music of the lyre, drums and horns carried me quickly deep into the mystery of the dance, formed and performed by kings and priestesses through thousands of years. I had learned this dance the previous year, but this time standing before the god, being the goddess myself, made something in me expand to become one with the stars, to be tall enough to touch the sky and as powerful as the sea. I was a storm as I moved; I was a crushing wave while god Tamuz kept his collected balance, moving with precision in the chaotic passionate world of my turbulent divinity. As I had learned the movements after numerous rehearsals, now they became my own,

and I felt the immense energy of the goddess, the power to arouse desire, the endless vibrating life pulsating within me, creating life as well as destroying it. But god Tamuz had his moves too. He called out with full lungs, so all the crowd could hear him: "As sweet as your mouth are your parts, they befit princely state indeed, let us dance, let us dance, o desirable one, let us rejoice over your vulva," he sang and the choir repeated after him. That was the signal for the ritual to move into the nuptial room and as the music came to a climax of commotion, I danced toward the shrine, the audience opening up to let me pass.

Passing through, I threw into the air many small beads, the crowd reaching out to catch them as they held blessings. The king followed me with the higher priests and the musicians.

The nuptial room was spacious, lit by numerous lamps, with a large bed in its center and beautiful carvings of men and women in different forms of copulation on the bedhead. The walls were painted with a dense foliage of leaves and flowers creating a feeling that one was actually entering a forest.

The king and I were guided to stand side by side before the sculptures of the gods.

"Oh, goddess Ashera, god Tamuz, we are thy slaves, you are greater than our small lives, may our sacrifice encourage thee to bless us with health and abundance," declared Adak standing before us to the sound of the horn, while the party of ten priests and priestesses came to sit on a stone bench. The musicians continued to play hymns about divine love-making while the king and I came to stand one before the other.

Sensing the warmth of the glowing flickering light of the lamps on my bare skin I looked at God Tamuz who was facing me, huge and imperial, breathing heavily, and I felt my vulva become

wet with desire. In all my short life I had never felt as awake as at that moment. Maybe it was the potion I had drunk or the presence of the goddess in me, but I noticed every detail in the room at that moment and especially the sensation in my body that was completely ready for any challenge ahead, warm and flexible.

Every gesture, breath, or pause we took that night was orchestrated long before we were born, through a thousand glorious years of Canaanite rituals of sacred marriage. It was what held our culture together – what, in spite of city rivalry and much envy between rulers, had kept our people as one – the ritual of marriage between the gods, the deep faith that the marriage between Ashera and Tamuz was what kept the rains falling every year, sickness being cured, wombs coming to life with new babies and couples coming together to form new families. Our ritual that night was the magnificent poem of our culture. I deeply mourn the loss of all that sacred beauty.

Taking off our masks, our human form was suddenly exposed. Looking at him I noticed the cracks around his eyes and his graying balding hair, yet, just like Agil-Ur had told me, I didn't care at all. He was perfect in my eyes. He looked at me for a long moment and said: "Your beauty fills me with awe. Oh goddess..." and then he came close and kissed me gently. I was a little scared at that moment. But then the king said: "Do not be afraid, little stag," and he gently untied the gold plate that covered my vulva, exposing the soft-scented pubic hair. He fell to his feet and kissed my vulva gently. His hands caressed my round belly, my thighs and my buttocks. I looked at him from above, feeling indeed like a magnificent goddess, my hands caressing his head and shoulders. He continued to taste my vulva, exclaiming, "Your vulva is as sweet as honey," while ripples of pleasure moved through me. I forgot that I was being observed by the priests. We were enmeshed into one. I whispered to him: "Come, my champion, let me untie you from your chains," I said and he rose to his feet to stand close to me. I untied his robe, then

opened his iron belt, allowing the heavily embroidered garment fall around his feet, exposing his throbbing member.

We were standing now bare one before the other. Two naked gods. The impulse was to cling to one another in an eternal embrace, but ritual dictated that the king, God Tamuz, placed his open warm palm on my chest while chanting the song of abundance and fertility. I did the same while he sang the song of rain and sea. We stood for a long moment just breathing and singing, sensing the touch of the other. When our breathing stabilized, I moved to lie on my back on the bed, the jewelry on my body jingling with every move I made.

The sheets were smooth and tingling in their coolness under my bare skin. I looked at the king-god that was standing now at the bed edge, looking at me. We paused. I was filled with awe and excitement at what was about to happen.

Coming to sit by me, the king placed now his hand on my vulva and recited the prayers. I breathed. All I had to do now was pay attention to what he was doing and breathe. The sensual pleasure of his hand made me want more of it, and as he now caressed my pleasure button, I surrendered to the joy of his touch, calling the many names of the goddess. I wriggled under his hand, moving under it so as to heighten the pleasure, calling him to give me pleasure, that my flower is open to him. I reached out to him, wanting to guide him inside me. But he, tormenting me, only reclined between my legs, kissing and tasting my sweetness while chanting the psalms about the juices of the earth's fruits and "Oh fair is thy love, goddess Ashera, honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of the Lebanon. How much better is thy love than wine and the smell of thine ointments than all manner of spices," he moaned as he kissed my delicate button of pleasure over and over again. He then penetrated me,



and the moment of intense pleasure was mingled with the sudden pain of my first time to be known by a man. As he continued to rock gently back and forth, the pain faded and the pleasure began growing in me again. I knew with every part of my body and soul that this pleasure was given to us from the goddess and she is full of love. For a long moment I was a wave in the sea of the goddess, knowing only the sweeping pleasure of oneness with all creatures. I called out the many names of the goddess, so loud the gods must have celebrated our sacred union with complete abandon.

When I had come to a climax again, the king relinquished all self-control and wildly thrust inside me, which only heightened my pleasure even more. He exclaimed a deep groan as his body shivered inside me and then came to lie beside me, panting. After a while, I turned to look into his eyes. They were filled with kindness and gratitude. We lay side by side for a few minutes, sensing one another's warmth; his hands caressed my belly. Indeed we had felt at that moment peace only the gods could feel.

"I proclaim you hereby," I said as tradition called for, "suited to be my lover, to dance on my holy breasts like a tender calf, you are suited indeed...and I bless you with abundance, health and prosperous reign over your kingdom, may your riches multiply as the sand on the sea, as the stars in the sky..." I recited, and then the musician blew the horn seven times and the priests sang in their deep voice blessings to the reign of the king.

With that, the king and I had to return from the land of the gods. We got up and rinsed our hands three times. There was a blood stain on the bed. My offering to the goddess. Then the

masks were tied back to our heads, and the nuptial ceremony was finalized by lighting a large lamp, pouring wine over the flame. We followed the priests outside to the sacrifice stage where two large thrones were placed and as we sat down, a fresh lotus flower was handed to us from the priest. We held it together, expressing our ceremonial union before the large crowd.

Following that was the great feast funded by the king, his offering of generosity to the citizens of the city. The citizens came one after the other to receive our blessing. Much food and drink were offered that day and spirits were high. We were all joyous indeed.

I became a Qdeshitu four years before the fall of the city of Hazor, my glorious city that was conquered and burnt by the nomadic clans of the Hebrew. I had learned from one of the refugees that had come to the shrine that the king and queen had been slaughtered, their heads stuck on a pole, and placed on the city gate for all to see. All the people of the city were slaughtered, the magnificent palaces and shrines burned to the ground. The Hebrews did not fight out of greed but out of blind faith that there is only one god and he shall rule over all. I tried not to think about it but many times at night, my mind would show me horrific scenes of my parents' death.

But before the terrible news came, I had four years during which I practiced my new art. I had gladly served my lady, goddess Ashera, by praying, dancing, singing, giving libations and sharing the pleasures of love-making with men that had come to the shrine for our blessing. I loved my vocation and I performed it with much passion and pride. I cherished every act of servitude; it was complex and deep – learning to know the hearts of these men, only by hearing them speak, then touching them.

My art was not only in giving pleasure, but also showing generous compassion and healing broken spirits. Sometimes I tamed the wild by tenderness and restraint and at other times strengthened the hearts of those who had become meek by unleashing their inner god. And most of all, I was not a girl anymore. I was now Ita-Anu, the Qdesha, priestess of Ashera, one who was practiced in the sacred arts.

Many gifts were offered to me as the servant of the goddess and I had used them wisely. My upbringing in the court of king Yavin, under the tutelage of Akirdov, had prepared me well in the practice of commerce and finances. The first thing I did, when I had swiftly accumulated enough offerings of gold and other riches, was to purchase a small piece of land. The humid air of the seashore did not make it possible for me to plant my childhood vines, but I did plant wheat and barley. I hired a family of dedicated peasants to live on the soil, take care of the crop, and when the season came to harvest them, grind them into wheat and bring them to the shrine for consumption. In return, they received three portions of the harvest to do with them as they liked. I collected from the shrine's treasury generous returns for my investment. Indeed, I had pleased the gods with my offerings.

But then we heard of the burning of Hazor. Rumors said that the army of the tribes were heading west and fear gripped our hearts. I mourned over my family for seven days. Old pain stabbed my heart. I longed to see them; the realization that I would never be with my family again hurt me profoundly. But with loss always come new beginnings and shortly thereafter I found that I was pregnant. The Qdeshot have their way of preventing impregnation but I had missed drinking the bitter potion a few times and suddenly I began feeling sick in the morning.

Little by little, a small creature was growing inside me, bringing me much happiness. I could have ended the pregnancy early, but my heart wouldn't let me. I felt that the goddess must have wanted me to have my child and I was filled with gratitude. I loved being pregnant and I felt safe and secure carrying around another human being inside me.

I gave birth to my child when the dry cold winds of autumn blew dry twigs and dust across the shrine's yard. Perhaps I should have seen this as a premonition but I was overwhelmed with love and happiness when they placed him on my breasts and we looked into one another's eyes.

Magnificent Mahir-Sha, I called him. Mahir is the name of the gods' legendary creature who stood by their side and fought with them. Sha was in memory of my brother.

Mahir was one month old when news had come from the king's palace that the Hebrews were on the outskirts of El-Cabri. A day or two after that, a messenger bore the news that El-Cabri had been conquered. Panic overcame the shrine. The Hebrews' hatred of the goddesses' rituals was renowned. Their god had no mercy for other gods. He wanted total submission to him and only him. What a jealous god, I thought to myself.

The priests congregated to decide on the correct course of action. Should we all escape or stay to face the raging tribes? I was breastfeeding Mahir by the fire in the women's quarters when one of the girls came running to tell me that the priests had decided that the gods were angry at us that we had stopped sacrificing the best of our harvests, our babies, and to appease the gods, and make the Hebrews go away, a sacrifice of a child had to be conducted. My little Mahir was chosen. He was at the right age.

I panicked. What was I to do? I am a Canaanite, and this is the custom of my people. That is the sacrifice needed since the beginning of time, to receive the god's protection. But how could I give them my little baby? My heart was tied to him. I would not let them have him.

Holding Mahir in my arms, he suddenly began to cry. Perhaps he had a stomachache, but to me it sounded like a cry for help. I could not give him away, not even to the goddess. But the gods would be angry and how could I oppose the word of the priests? What was I to do? I was terrified.

Walking with Mahir through the inner corridors of the shrine, I sought out Agil-Ur. Maybe she, as my mentor, would know what to do; maybe she, as a priestess, would be able to defy the order. I frantically looked for her in all the rooms, disturbing prayers and rituals. Startled faces looked up at me. Who was the abomination who dared to disturb the sacred motion of the universe?

Finally, I found Agil-Ur. She was outside by the stone basin, rinsing her hands silently, deeply absorbed in her thoughts. "Agil-Ur, you must help us; they want to sacrifice Mahir," I called out to her, falling before her on my knees. To my surprise, she was embarrassed by my desperation. It disturbed her peace.

"Ita, the child was never intended to live a human life. He belongs to the gods. And the time to appease them has come. The lives of all of us are now at stake. Do not cling to his flesh. Let him go where he will roam freely in the flower fields of Ashera and El," she said.

"I cannot. I cannot. He is too precious to me. Too dear. It cannot be that something that has

grown for ten moons inside me now has to be killed. I cannot believe that this is the wish of the goddess, mother of all beings..." I cried out desperately. "Please, Agil-Ur, use your power to help us."

"No, I shall not defy the gods or the higher priests. What has been decided in the stars shall be completed today at dusk. It is our only chance of resisting the pending attack of the Hebrews," she said and turned away, accompanied by her young disciple.

When I was a child, Annani would tell us of how mother bears would do anything to save their cubs, even if it meant going against stronger beasts. She said, mother bears will fight to death so that their cubs will live. I remember that, because it made me always think of my mother, and why she hadn't ever been there to protect me against anything. She surely enjoyed giving me enlightened suggestions as how best to spiritually handle this situation or another. But then I thought of how she had struggled with the council of men to send me to the shrine instead of sentencing me to a sure death, and I realized mothers have to make painful decisions to save their children.

But now I was alone with a child. And all I could think about was escaping. We had to get away. I knew the world outside was no place for a woman alone with a baby. But we had better chances of survival somewhere under a tree than here.

"Goddess," I prayed with my eyes closed, facing the shore, "please give me a sign. What is thy will? I surrender to you. You may have my child if that is your wish, but if not, then guide me forth to the next right thing...lead me," I whispered into my hands, and as I said that, suddenly the sound of the waves became a language I could comprehend, and so I heard: "Flee my child,

flee to your destiny. The child shall live and his seeds will disperse with the wind to the far corners of the world. He is a strong force that cannot be stamped into the ground, the dead fruit of a brokenhearted mother...he and his children will always survive...flee."

Hearing those words, I ran to my mattress and rolled it with two warm blankets and some clothes. I could not fetch food from the kitchen because the evening meal was being prepared at that time. I could not go out of the main gate because the guard would stop me. My only way out was through the shore. Mother goddess, I thank thee for guiding me out of the shrine that day. So I walked unnoticed to the water edge with Mahir on my back and headed south.

On the north coast the Canaanite refugees from inland were gathering, while in the south resided the Hebrew tribe of Asher. I knew that they were generally not hostile to our ways, and some of them who couldn't conceive a child even came to ask for a blessing from the goddess. But there were also stories of women being raped on the sea road. A woman walking the road without a male protector was not an ordinary sight. Actually, the only women one could find walking on the road were the harlots, those that offered the services of the goddess for a loaf of bread or a jug of wine.

As I walked along the rocky shore, as fast as I could with Mahir tied to my back, I looked at the sinking sun. Soon they would discover we were gone and they would probably come looking for us. I had to find a shelter as quickly as possible. Goddess Anath awoke in me. I sensed inside myself a turbulent vitality. If needed, I was ready to fight and kill for our lives.

I reached a small bay where the dark sharp edges of the rock turned met the sand, and there I saw a stretch of wind weary trees. I walked around them, finding a narrow path between the yellow dry shrubs and thorns. Walking along, hidden by the trees, I felt safer and now could tend to

Mahir who whimpered on my back. I was so new to mothering a baby, yet I sensed that he must feel uncomfortable with my haste. I took him off my back and walked along with him cradled in my hands. When he began to cry, I let him nurse under the woolen scarf.

In the silence of late afternoon, disturbed only by the melancholic calls of the blackbird, I had time to think. I needed to find a permanent place to stay, at least for the winter. Soon the heavy rains would begin and it would be too cold to wander with a tiny baby.

I knew that great danger lay ahead of me. Bandits, soldiers, wandering men, wild animals, they all could wish to harm a young woman and her child. I realized that staying on the shore line was particularly dangerous. It was a no-man's land all the way to the city of the Asher tribe in the south. It would also be hard to find shelter.

As I realized I had to walk east, I carved myself a path through a patch of dry wild barley stalks, shielding Mahir with my arms. It was almost dark when we reached a large oak tree. Sitting down to rest underneath it, I changed Mahir's cotton nappy and made a fire from some wood that I found by the tree. Although I was worried and did not know where our help would come from, I felt comforted by the yellow warm glow of the fire. Nursing my child, I thought there was something nice in being free again. I could make my own decisions now. I could talk with the goddess of my childhood again and follow her instructions as she spoke to me.

We stayed the night under the tree and in the morning I continued walking Kadma, to the east. I was grateful to reach a small stream, hidden by heavy grass and long-bowed reeds. I couldn't reach the water with Mahir so I placed him on the little path I formed. Hastily I filled the water container made of a cow's stomach and thrust widely through the dense growth to get back to my baby. He was where I had left him, but just four arms' length away was a wild cat, about to



spring. In a flash, I roared like a lioness, and charged forward to scare away the feline. For a moment it responded with exposed teeth and hissed at me, but as it saw I was not afraid of it, and was about to hit it with the filled stomach, it turned around and fled back into the thicket.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, I picked Mahir back into my arms and took a deep sniff of his sweet baby smell only to wake him up hungry for milk. Breastfeeding made me immensely thirsty and as he was making his tiny suckling sounds, I drank big gulps of water. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I tied Mahir who fell asleep again on my back and began walking in a quick steady step.

I was glad that I had not discarded the sling my brother had given me and that I had kept it among my belongings. Now I took it out and while I was moving, my eyes constantly searched for prey. But walking and hunting do not go well together because of the noise one makes moving through the thicket. My stomach churned and began hurting when we reached a fig tree surrounded by a cloud of wasps. I didn't care to be stung, but to protect Mahir I covered him carefully with my cotton scarf and walked to the tree. The figs were far beyond ripe and they fell apart when I touched them, but I did manage to pick a few that could still be eaten. My hands began to sting because of the fruit's milk, so I quickly washed my hands and sat down to eat. Satisfied, I pressed on.

It was a clear day and the sun was up high in the sky when I reached a settlement. I knew I was nearing one, just by the barking of the dogs who sensed my approach. The settlement was actually a compound of several two-story houses surrounded by fields and animal sheds. Coming closer, I could see a woman standing outside one of the houses weeding a vegetable garden. She saw me and stopped her toil. She was a heavy-set woman, and although she wore the usual

peasant cotton dress, she had a sturdy look to her. I noted to myself that the goddess is strong with her.

She lifted her hand to greet me with "Welcome the traveler," scrutinizing me with her gaze. I knew one could easily see that I was a religious devotee by my dress. It is an auspicious act to give hospitality to a priest or a priestess.

"Bless those living here," I replied, looking straight in her eyes. "I come from the shore. May we stay here the night?" I asked. "My child needs washing and I need a rest."

"It is not very often that we see women priests walking these paths by themselves. What brings you here?" she asked.

"My son and I are the sole survivors of the Ghmat shrine of the goddess. We were attacked by the Hebrews yesterday after they set fire to the shrine and all the priests inside. The great tree of the goddess has been cut down. No lives were spared," I lied boldly.

"Oh, that is terrible," she said. "You are most welcome here. Our house will be blessed by your presence," said the woman, following the hospitality code of conduct in our land.

"Follow me," she said and began walking toward one of the two-floor buildings. I walked after her and we entered a large storage room filled with large stacks of crop and straw as well as stalls for farm animals; the large space had an overpowering scent of manure and wet straw.

The woman led me up a stairway to the second floor which was actually a line of rooms arranged around a balcony overlooking the ground floor. There was an altar by the stairs with neatly placed figurines of the household gods and offerings of chopped fruit and barley placed in cups by a lit lamp.

"Your house is blessed. I see you keep your respects to the gods," I said kindly, and the woman's face lit up with a large smile.

"This is where we sleep. My family is away now in the fields, but when they will be back you will sleep in the women's room right here," she said and walked me to a small room at the end of the right-winged balcony. The room was small and clean with a thick mattress at its far corner.

"I will get you some food and water to wash your child," she said and peeked into the bundle in my arms. "He looks like a strong child. He must have been born only a little while ago," she said.

"A month ago," I admitted.

"May he be blessed with El's wisdom and Baal's rigor," she said smiling back, leaving the room.

I sat down, unwrapping Mahir from all his layers. Although the air was becoming chilly, he seemed to be pleased to feel his limbs free again, waving them in the air and making his sweet sounds. I liked answering him back with my own sounds and he would stare at my moving lips and face with fascination. He also liked to urinate immediately when his wrapping was removed and I was relieved when the woman came back with a jug of water and a large bowl of food.

"What is your name?" I asked her as I began to wash my baby's chubby body.

"My name is Nira, wife of Ahub the Gargasian," she said. "My family will soon get back so I can't stay here with you for long. But you must be feeling terrible after what you have seen and gone through. You can join us, the women downstairs, after the men move to the front yard to drink wine under the vine."

"Thank you, I am deeply grateful for your hospitality," I smiled. "May the goddess bless you with many fruits of the womb," I blessed her and she smiled in return. "Oh, I have been truly

blessed, I have six healthy children," she said, then spat toward the south, to scare away Mot, god of death.

Washed and fed, Mahir fell asleep on my breasts. Gently I moved him beside me and looked at his tiny content face. Fear gripped me. How would we survive? Once we would leave this temporary shelter, we would be exposed again to the rapidly approaching winter. It was colder inland than by the temperate shore. Who would be my helpers? Once the truth about my escape with a sacrifice child would come out, I would no longer be welcome among the Canaanites.

As I drifted into sleep, a dream showed me the way. I saw myself toiling with my back bent, in a field, a peasant. I looked at my hands; they were coarse and dirt gathered under the broken nails. I cried in my dream over all the loss there was and will be. But when I woke up before dawn, I knew what had to be done.

From now on I would hide my true identity. I would ask my hostess for some warm clothes in return for one of my pieces of jewelry that I had with me. I would present myself from now on as a survivor, a peasant who had fled the war, who had lost her husband and protecting family, and I would seek refuge in one of the villages to the east, as far as possible from the shore.

## The storm

We set out the next day. As planned, Nira was willing to exchange some clothes for my beautiful bronze beaded necklace. She was so overjoyed that she also made us a generous package of food for the way.

I walked at a steady pace through a large valley between a mountain ridge and two distant sloping hills. Reaching the hills at midday, I decided to climb their gentle slope through a dense forest of cedar trees. Taking a break to drink water and change Mahir's wrappings, I looked to the west and saw heavy rain clouds moving toward us like galloping horses. Before I could find any shelter they were above our head, heavy and filled with dark premonition. Rain began falling and I tried to shield Mahir with whatever clothes I had, but the rain only became heavier, soaking both of us to our bones.

With no other choice, I walked on and on, desperate to find shelter. It didn't get better all afternoon, and by nightfall, my heart filled with fear. What would become of us? I was afraid for Mahir's life as I couldn't warm him anymore; finally it was so dark there was no point in even searching for a shelter. I just fell to my knees on the soaked earth, covered with wet foliage. Mahir and I were both trembling. Desperation took over. "So goddess, is that the end of our path?" I cried.

"You can take me but spare Mahir's life. Forgive me for disobeying the priest's order, but let this child be your servant upon this earth. Do not take him yet," I cried for a long time, the warm tears cooling quickly and joining the water that was dripping from my face anyway. With anguish in my heart, I told Mahir that I loved him and was sorry that I was not able to protect him. Finally, when there were no more words left to say, I just sat holding him, breathing warm air into his blankets to warm him up a little.

Then I heard a sound in the dark and I lifted my head. Further into the forest, I noticed a flickering light between the trees. A fire. I rose to my feet and rushed toward it. As I came near I realized it stemmed from a shelter on the edge of what seemed like an open meadow. By the

bleating of the sheep, I knew it was a herdsman's shelter. It was simple, made of a boulder of erected stones and a mass of tree branches placed on it to form a roof. Cautious, I stayed outside the circle of light, waiting to see to whom belonged this shed and fire.

I didn't have long to wait before a tall heavy man emerged out of the dark, his long hair dripping from the rain, holding in his arms a sheep that he placed by the fire. She must have been wounded as he was concentrating on taking care of her.

Yet his dogs smelled my presence and barked in my direction. Alarmed, the man turned around and called out toward me. "Who stands there? Show yourself or I shall send my dogs at you," he said and I called out, "It is I, Ita-Anu, a Canaanite woman with her child, seeking shelter," and then walked into the circle of light.

He looked at me for a long moment, then said: "That is a rare sight, meeting a mother with her child out in the cold and rain."

"We have fled from the war," I said. "Come sit by the fire," he immediately said. "Tell me about your ordeal."

"I'm a survivor of the great massacre at Cabri. The Hebrews sieged the palace and the town, burnt it to ashes and killed all men, including my husband."

"War is a terrible thing. I am a Hebrew myself, but we do not all seek to fight. My tribe is a peaceful one, having good relations with our neighbors," he said.

My heart lifted as he said that. I smiled, "Which tribe do you belong to?"

"Asher. Most of it resides to the west and north, along the shore. But my brothers and I decided to build ourselves a new settlement in Yodfat, south east from here. We wish to harvest our own crops. We are tired of our dependency on the Canaanite grains, fruit and oil."

"But the Hebrews are famed for herding superb cattle," I said, recalling how my father would praise the Hebrews' cattle.

"Yes, as you see, we still do that, but there is a shortage of crops as much of it is taxed by the Canaanite cities and the Egyptians. So we moved to the mountain area to cultivate our own lands, where no one has been before. It is a painstaking venture but this year, for the first time, we have enough to sustain us all and even more than that, thanks to the blessings of Jehova, our one and only god," he said while I unwrapped Mahir and sat with him by the fire. "Your child looks ill," he said when Mahir coughed a wheezing cough.

"Yes, we have walked a long distance today in the rain. I'm not surprised," I said and let out one of my breasts to feed Mahir. There was silence as the man watched me feed Mahir. Only the soft suckling sounds of Mahir and the bleating of the sheep could be heard along with the crackling of the fire.

"Please forgive me that I have not yet introduced myself," said the man, with desire in his eyes.

"My name is Azuz, I am the son of Hesiel from the tribe of Asher. And what is your name?" he smiled.

"I have some bread, cheese and olives if you wish," he offered and as I ate he attended to the sick sheep. Warm and well fed, Mahir fell asleep after a while and I placed him gently on the mattress turning to open my pack.

"You can have my mattress," offered Azuz when he saw me fumbling with the wet items. "It's dry."

"Thank you," I refused. "I'll wait for the mattress to dry," I insisted, feeling that laying on his mattress would bring the inevitable a little too soon.

"Very well then, I shall warm some wine now. That never fails to make one merry," he said, emptying a clay jug into a pot, then placing it over the fire while adding some spices and honey.

I felt warm and pleased when I took a sip from the sweet warm liquid, taking it in slowly. Azuz gazed into the fire. "What are you planning to do next?" he finally asked.

"I'm seeking a village where I can offer my labor," I said. He looked at my delicate yet strong hands for a while.

"It doesn't look like you have known much toil in your life," he said.

"Yes, I was lucky to have slaves and servants all my life," I disclosed, fearful, looking at my betraying hands.

"Are you ready to live a life of hardship?" he asked, and I could hear a tone of concern in his voice.

"I don't have much choice. Times have changed and one must be willing to do what is needed by the gods," I said, clenching my jaw.

"True, the world is not meant for the weak. Since man was banished from paradise, god has ordered him to earn his livelihood by hard work and sweat."



"My people believe that one has to work hard not as punishment but because it is required to serve the gods as well as one can. Man has done no wrong; he only has to serve the gods with joy and deep willingness," I said. Azuz frowned, thinking about what I had just said.

"That is very different from the way of our fathers," he said. "Our god wants us to keep the commandments because otherwise we tend to stray and do wrong, we tend to sin...like sheep we roam with no direction into the thicket and god is our shepherd," he said, his eyes deep under his thick eyebrows.

I wanted to answer him back that I'd rather serve my goddess and rejoice life and beauty in her name, but kept silent, not wanting to turn him into my enemy. Instead I moved the now-dry mattress a little further from the fire, coming to rest on it on my side, with Mahir beside me.

"Perhaps," I finally said, then pausing for a few seconds, I added, "We are very fortunate to have found you. I don't know what would have been if we hadn't come by your shed and fire," I said and smiled into his eyes.

He swallowed deep and got up on his feet, restless suddenly. He was not a man who would easily say his heart's wishes.

"Where do you suggest I walk to tomorrow?" I asked. "Where do you think they will welcome me?" I added softly. He said nothing as he placed the remains of my meal before the large dogs.

After a few moments, he said, "You can come with me. Tomorrow, I'm returning the herd to the village for the winter. You can join my hearth if you so wish," he added quietly. "I will care for you and your child. I cannot offer you a privileged life like you have had until now, but I can give you a home and a family to protect you. You and your child will not wander the land alone

anymore, scrimping what you can from the fringes of the fields..." he said, poking at the fire with his stick, then looked at me for a long moment. Things would be very different than all I had known until now. "What is thy will, goddess?" I asked in my heart and so I heard the word: "Good. Good it is to be with this man...surrender to him, be a woman of his hearth," and so I looked up at him and smiled.

That night our covenant was struck. He knew me in the solitude of that shed with warm clumsy passion and I cherished the peace that he brought back in to my life.

My life had been a twisting and curving path, changing quickly its direction. Here I was one day a priestess of the goddess in Ghmat, and the next day a fleeing woman with a child seeking refuge before the onset of winter. That night, my life had taken a new turn.

We walked most of the next day, Azuz focused on gathering and walking the sheep with the aid of his gods. I was fascinated by how he managed to guide a herd of what seemed to me like five hundred cattle heads back to the village just by throwing a pebble here, whistling there. He created these transparent boundaries beyond which the sheep did not walk – until at dusk, when the birds chuckled their night gathering calls mixed with the tired jingling of the sheep's bells, we reached the village that overlooked a vast fertile valley.

As we entered the large circle of tents on top of the hill, it took a few minutes before we were noticed. The few people we saw were busy with their evening chores. But eventually, a tall boy of about twelve, with a little soft mustache beginning to grow, came running towards us.

"Father, you are back!" he called, and they clasped each other's shoulders. Then the boy looked at me. "Who is this woman?" he asked. Azuz smiled and stirred the boy's hair. "Her name is Ita-Anu and she's from the coast. Now go call Reuven." The boy inspected me for another long moment and then ran to one of the tents on the far side of the circle. "Don't be so alarmed," said Azuz. "You are now one of my family. I have a first wife named Lea and we have three children. She will teach you all you need to know. She is a good and trustworthy woman, you will see," he reassured me but my heart sunk.

Azuz guided me toward a large tent among the circle of tents. His tent was large and strong, enough for more than one family. "I see you have been busy, Azuz, picking flowers this morning," I heard a woman's stern voice behind me. Azuz and I turned around to face a stout woman with a heavy jaw and two deep brown eyes. "Introduce me to our guest," she told Azuz as she scrutinized me. Azuz smiled, "Lea, I want you to meet Ita-Anu of the Canaanites. She and her child will be living with us from now on. I want you to teach her everything you know so she can be another pair of hands."

Lea, seeming like she was happy to have help, smiled at me soberly: "Hope you know how to work." Although I felt an inner revolt toward the whole situation I took the bitter ointment and nodded my head. "My spirit is strong and I shall learn whatever is needed."

"Very well then," Lea nodded, as if she had made up her mind to give me a chance. "You would probably like to rest with your child," she suggested. "I will show you where you can place your mattress," she said and guided me to the edge of the tent where the area of sleeping mattresses ended and the stacks of barley and wheat began.

That is how my life at Azuz's tent began. No ceremonies or vows were given, I was just added during the day to the workforce and at nights I shared his bed. Being under his protection was peaceful – there was always food and a warm fire in winter. Perhaps the most important thing was that I could feed and care for my child and Mahir quickly grew into a beautiful, clever child that understood everything in a wink of an eye. But I was always conscious of the fact that I had become one of Azuz's possessions – like a sheep or a new plow, I could not make my own plans, have my own ambitions.

What reinforced this feeling was how Lea treated me – she would work and issue commands constantly while complaining that I did not know how to work. That I am spoilt and lazy. I could see that she was a very industrious woman and I knew that she had accepted me into the household because she had no other choice. It was apparent from the very start that I was not experienced in a life of hard work and toil. Everything had to be explained to me and my output was slow and lacking. In the first year I had a constant feeling of inadequacy that only my ability to satisfy Azuz at night and my deepening connection with Mahir could pacify.

It became a pattern of life in our family triangle – Lea would complain to Azuz about me, Azuz would try to appease her and speak in my favor which made Lea even more outraged. She would then lash out at me during the day's work for my clumsy hands, spoilt manners, and manipulative femininity that is blinding Azuz although I am only another useless mouth to feed.

And so I learned that there is a price for a full stomach.

But my life was not entirely made of suffering and humiliation. Azuz was kind to me. I knew he wouldn't mistreat me and I loved the warmth he radiated. He liked to joke a lot, teasing my Canaanite manners – that I would bow a little whenever I greeted someone, while the Hebrews

just placed their hand on their heart and looked directly into the eyes of the other. At nights, I became a goddess again, when Azuz, grateful for my talents, whispered in my ears such admiration that again and again after a long day of toil, I was appeased and willing the next morning to continue with my hardship.

That was my first year, which had moments of extreme joy with Azuz and Mahir, and terrible anguish with Lea and my work. But then the work was not something you needed supreme talent for, so I eventually learned my ways with grinding, squashing, molding, weaving, spinning, brewing and on and on, until finally life became more bearable, and perhaps also because Lea became pregnant again and my relationship with her improved.

We had one area that we had understanding and common ground – the children. She loved Mahir from the very beginning and she was always willing to give me a hand with him. I on my part loved her children too, and so we formed an unspoken alliance around the children, caring for them together, worrying sometimes for them together, and developing long conversations about how to deal with that problem or another. In the beginning, there were only four – her three sons and Mahir, but then, thanks to the blessings of the gods, as time passed, we both became pregnant again and again, and when labor came, we delivered one another with the help of a few women from the other tents. And so as time unfolded we did become a family.

Within fifteen years Azuz had with Lea seven children and with me ten. Together, we built ourselves a stone house with a vegetable garden and also some beautiful flowers that Azuz had dug their buds for me in the mountains around the village. Azuz was a peaceful man and it was hard to upset him. But every so often when the disagreements between Lea and myself filled the house with quiet tension, he would erupt like a volcano, shouting at the top of his deep voice that

god has created women to be of help to men, not nag them all the time with their issues and complaints. But then, as quickly as he was angered, he also calmed down.

During those years in Yodfat I had known much happiness with Azuz's family. They accepted my different ways silently and when I planted an Ashera tree on the western edge of the mountain, facing the beautiful blue ridges all the way to the sea, they did not resist. Every morning and evening I conducted there my prayers and offerings, taking care of the statues of the gods I had placed on two stone blocks. I also created clay figures of the goddess and burned them in the large furnace the men had built. I sold them for a nice price at the market in the valley. I danced and sang the songs of the Qdesha and felt sweet contentment.

The women from the other families were friendly toward me, and I did share some nice moments with Rachel, Azuz's niece, who just got married to her cousin Yoram, the son of Azuz's third brother. The only one who protested against my rituals was Lea. Once, as I sat creating clay figures of the goddess and singing to myself, she came to stand and watch me work. I could see she was not favorable of what I was doing so I worked in silence.

She bent forward to look at what I was doing then commented: "Are you not ashamed to show the woman's crotch? We are mothers to children. We do not walk around with our bottom parts exposed like that, so why should your goddess look like that? This is fitting harlots from the shore, not dignified Hebrew women!" I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach when I heard her say that, and was rendered speechless.

I breathed deeply and turned to my goddess for help, then these words came out of my mouth: "There is nothing to hide in the goddess's flower of pleasure. The vulva is sacred. Sweet and alluring. Like the goddess. It is where children come out...where men and women unite...it is

sacred...go on, hide what you have to hide, but I will not be ashamed of the goddess's nakedness...she is an inspiration for me for openness, pleasure, fertility and abundance..." I said and looked directly into Lea's strong eyes. She walked away then, but it was not the last of it.

Two nights later, as I lay by Azuz's side, he turned to me and said: "There is some difficulty we have to resolve. Can you listen to me for a moment?"

"Yes, my lord. I will listen," I said.

"Lea spoke to me today of your 'Canaanite harlots ways' that you have brought to our settlement. That you bring shame on the women of this family and village. She said that if you continue with your ways she shall return together with her children to her father's tent." Azuz sounded concerned.

"What shame can there be in the body of the goddess?" I began saying.

"I know, my sweet one. You know I adore you but this is serious. Our family can fall apart because of this. Our family's unity is the most important thing. If we don't stick together we are like leaves without a tree to hold them together, there is no meaning to anything..." He said and I saw he was seeking understanding in my eyes.

"What do you want me to do? Stop praying and giving offerings to the goddess? Stop making her offerings? Tell me because I have no life without the goddess. I am like a sea with no water, empty and dry..." I said and I think, if I remember clearly, I cried.

"No, I don't think you have to go that far. I think it is a question of how much you reveal. You see, I think what troubles Lea most is that the body, the women's parts, are exposed."

"But it is beautiful...it is a blooming flower..."

"Yes, yes, Ita," he said and kissed me. "No one can testify more to that than me. But will it cause much harm to conceal a little? To make it into a secret, something only the worthy get to see...like me or like other husbands? Something for a man to dream about and work hard to be worthy of? Isn't a woman's vulva like a sacred room of a shrine that only those chosen can enter?"

I hesitated. There was a point to what he was saying. "So maybe we can create the goddess's figures with a hidden flower, maybe we can highlight her breasts, as giving life to children, as a source of beauty...maybe we can keep the lower part a secret? I don't know, it feels to me like we are saying that there is something wrong with a woman's vulva..." I said, troubled.

"That sounds good, give it a try...see how the other women feel about it. Maybe it would make things a little easier for you here...you don't really pay attention, but I feel how strong the men's attraction to you is...if I was not around they would have you under any tree they could find...making things more hidden would help you also become more at ease with others in the family. Remember, Ita, you are a member of a Hebrew tribe now and a mother. Please try to make it work together...for me, for your children and eventually for you too. This is your life now."

His words burned my skin. He was trying to convince me to give up on celebrating my beauty, my being a manifestation of the goddess. How could he? I turned around showing him my back.

"I know it's hard, Ita, but please try."

The goddess appeared to me that night. She was different this time. In my dream, she was sitting under a tree and playing the lyre. She was dressed in a simple brown dress and wore sandals on her feet. She looked like a hard-working woman who was sitting to rest. She spoke to me. Her



voice sounded coarse. I came closer and saw that her face was blemished with sun marks and wrinkles.

"Hear me child," she said. "The power of the goddess is moving through the universe in many endless ways. In your early youth you were wild as a tiger to go out and fight. Then you grew into a beautiful flower that everyone who smelled it would fall at its feet. But you have become a mother now and a wife, and by nature, you need to learn to restrain your passions. So the magnificent fire that is burning inside you will not harm others. You will become a teacher, and you must teach not just passion but also restraint, self-containment, and pure love that is beyond lust. Love for thy children, love for thy family and tribe. Take a step forward beyond what you have known until now," she said and went back to playing the harp, a tune so full of longing I woke up weeping.

In the following weeks and months I went through a deep change. At first, I changed the little figures I made out of clay, concealing the women's organs behind a large skirt, highlighting instead the breasts to express the life the goddess gives to her offspring through her milk, like the cow feeds her calf.

But that was just the beginning. I also stopped dancing in public and I began to walk into the forest to find privacy by a tree that I had found and there I practiced my rituals. It was then that the women began to show greater interest in what I was doing. I realized that they had no objection to my sacrifices nor to my dancing and praying – they just didn't like its public nature. So that's how we formed our group of women. We would sneak away every morning before dawn into the forest, when our little children were still asleep. Reaching the clearing, we would light lamps and burn incense, pray to the goddess and make libations, asking her to give us an

abundance of healthy children, make us always appealing to our men, and fill our store rooms with barley, oil and wine. We would dance in a circle to celebrate the goddess's abundance. And when the winter sun came out behind the mountains, we returned to our newly built homes, to our endless toil, feeling uplifted and full of potency.

I loved this new secrecy, this hiding of the juice. The secrecy of my sensuality, of my wildness, revealed only to my lord, made our time together wilder than ever, full of passion. The other women and I began to explore more ways of concealing our femininity to highlight its mystery – we covered our heads with large cloths, we hid our body under colorful dresses. Yet at night we celebrated our love to our husbands with joy and passion.

I will never forget one evening, early summer, when all the children played under the supervision of Lea. Azuz had just returned from his purifying dip at the stream down in the valley and he looked very manly. I had just finished making some dry fruit cakes on the fire. The smell must have attracted him because he came sniffing. He reached out to take a cake from the pile I was protecting from the dogs and flies and I scolded him playfully for eating without permission. He hugged me from behind and took a deep sniff from my neck, which caused ripples of pleasure to move through my body. "Azuz, maybe we can go for a little walk alone? Enjoy the cool evening air?" I suggested to him with a promising smile. He agreed and so we walked out of the village down the path we once climbed together when I just arrived, and strolled through the forest, reaching the sacrifice tree. There was no one there and the air was cooling, filling with the evening bloom; only the chuckling of birds before dark sounded every now and then.

I turned to him and looked into his eyes, then kissed him gently. Then I took off my head cover and untied my dress, coming to stand entirely naked before him, surrounded only by trees and low bushes. He looked at me for a long time. It was the first time he had seen me fully naked. I stood there, letting him look for a long moment, feeling beautiful and sensual in my nudity amongst all those trees.

"Without your clothes, you become an amazing beast...a huge leopard..." he said, not taking his eyes off me when I began caressing myself, moving back to lean against the tree.

"Is that how you make love among your people?" he said smiling.

"I don't know. This is how I want to be loved by you. Come, take me. I want you inside me," I said and he moved toward me with three quick steps, grabbing my body. He pressed his lips to mine with intense force and I softened myself to him, containing his lust. Sensing my softness, he slowed down, taking the time to hold my nipples in his mouth, suckling at them like Dov, my youngest son. Kissing my soft belly, with its delicate stretch marks, he fell to his knees, pressing his face to my loins. "Come, my beautiful, show me your secret palace," he whispered and I leaned back against the large tree letting him spread my thighs apart, sensing the cool air against the wetness of my vulva. Again, he stopped and looked for a long moment. "It is so beautiful," he said and kissed me there gently again and again. Then he tasted me and a wave of pleasure rippled through my body as I gasped for air. He must have liked the taste of it all as he continued licking and tasting my vulva like it was covered with rare wild honey. The pleasure intensified further and further and I held his head between my hands, caressing his still-damp hair. Then, when I was about to come, he stood up and untied with one hand his waist cloth, his throbbing member now pressing against my stomach. He grasped my soft hills and then penetrated my

tingling dampness with strong deep thrusts, again and again, breathing like a horse in heat. The intensity of his need and my previous excitement filled me with intense pleasure and I panted as he reached deep within me, to that point of surrender to the pleasures of the goddess. We were both like animals of the field, beautiful as I had never felt or thought I could be. I felt the pleasure intensifying, bursting, exploding inside me with millions of shimmering tentacles of pleasure. I called out the name of Ashera, hearing Azuz calling out as well the name of his god.

We clung to one another for a long moment, not wanting to relinquish the pleasure that was already fading. "My love, my precious vine grove...I worship you...you are the most beautiful expression of god I have seen," he said and with his warm heavy hand caressed my hair with long strokes.

Tears filled my eyes and I sobbed. I was so deeply moved by what had just happened between us; I felt so close to him, and was filled with gratitude. But then I realized how fleeting this moment was. Soon we would each be on our separate ways. This divine unity could only be temporary. How I yearned at that moment to be a part of his body, one of his limbs. That felt like the natural order of things.

Azuz noticed the tears rolling down my cheeks and dried them with his palm. "Why are you sad?" he asked. I told him how our time together is always so temporary and fleeting.

He smiled at me and as we got dressed and began walking back holding hands, he said: "I don't feel ever separated. I'll tell you a story my mother used to tell me as a child."

"Once, before time, god created man. He created him just like you make clay statues – taking mud and molding it. So that is how man was created. And man was god's favorite toy, he would play with him and enjoy watching him dance and sing, and play the flute for the animals of god's

ancient garden. But then god noticed that the first man was sad so he asked him why? Why, man, are you sad? And man said it was because he saw how the other animals had their mates and offspring and he felt sad that he had no one to take care of.

"I'm like a cub who never grows to be a lion," he said. "I have no one to take care of," he complained. So god decided to make him a mate. He put man to sleep and in his sleep took out one of his ribs and made it into a female – a woman – and when man woke up and found the first woman he was delighted. Finally he had someone to take care of. He could grow up. He could become the lord of his kingdom. And he loved his woman dearly and he cherished her, she was his goddess, and she in return worshiped him and gave him respect like he was her own personal god," Azuz said with a large loving smile.

"Oh, beloved. That's a beautiful story," I said. "That's why it is so sacred and noble to have sexual union. It is the spark that lights the world with new light," I said and Azuz kissed my eyelids. "Bless your goddess," he said as we walked back into the village.

Giving birth to my children was an adventure as I never knew if I would still be alive when it was over. As the birth began, Azuz's brother's wives would gather around my mattress to pray to god that the labor would pass easily. One of them would recline behind me, holding me and supporting my back while another prayed while pragmatic Lea delivered the child. She was like an army commander when the pushing stage came. It seems like the newborn child and myself obeyed her blindly, as every birth ended well. I loved my children and they were each such a unique expression of the divinity. It was an astonishing voyage watching them grow from just small movements tapping on to the walls of my womb to grown-up, speaking, feeling human beings, expression of the gods.

One thing that always fascinated me was that the eyes never changed. It was truly the goddess breathing their souls into their bodies and each one had their own special gift: **Mahir** was the one who asked questions all the times and he continuously challenged me on everything; **Ehud** was the one who could not sit quiet for a moment; **Dov** with his long fingers and large eyes sensed everything. And then **Malka-El** who loved helping me with all the toil, industrious and cheerful. **Ruchama** loved sleeping and snuggling wherever she was. **Luzit** liked collecting flowers and stones, making herself a beautiful collection. And **Micha** who was absent-minded and always breaking things in his way, we realized his eyes were heavy. **Adir** was born early and loved eating whatever he could find. Especially honey and fruit. He was the chubby one and also the one who smiled the most. And then **Nisim**, who was easy to cry and easy to fall sick, almost died when he was three; only the blessings of the goddess and our sacrifices had saved him. I was always the most worried about him because I had almost lost him. And last of them, my little fish, **Neo-Mi**, my little singer and dancer, a joy to the eye, who all she wanted to do all day was skip around and make up songs about the trees, the animals, everyone in her family and village. Each one of them, I taught something different according to his or her gift, and they all grew up to be competent, decent and respectful members of our tribe.

In the mornings Azuz took the boys to the fields while Lea and I stayed with the young ones and the girls to prepare the food and work in the vegetable garden. Clean and mend, weave and sew, as well as attend to our farm animals. In the afternoon, after everyone had washed from the day's work, I would teach the children to read and write. I had no papyrus to write upon, so we used clay tablets. Both Azuz and I told them the tales of wisdom from both our people and we encouraged the children to ask questions.

Mahir was the one who showed the deepest interest in scholarly teachings and by the time he was ten, it was obvious he was not made for peasant life. One night, Azuz said he had to ask guidance from god about what should we do about Mahir, whom he treated as his own son. He left before nightfall with some food and burning coal to light a fire. I didn't like it when he left the village at dark; there were bandits in the area who were said to rob and sometimes slaughter people they encountered. But he said it was god's call and left.

Azuz returned two days later, tired. As I washed his feet in the large pile, he said: "I have encountered god's angel, up on the ridge by Village *Halfish*."

"How did it happen? What did he look like? What did he tell you?" I showered him with questions, filled with excitement and a measure of envy.

"He looked like me and you," he admitted.

"So how did you know he was god's angel?" I asked.

"Because of his eyes. They were completely blue – there was no white, just vivid blue. It was as if the sky filled his eyes and his voice was as deep and peaceful as the well we have dug this winter. And he was actually whispering to me in a great roar the following things: that my son, although he is not of my flesh and blood, will become one day a judge among the Hebrews, and I have to send him to Mount Efraim, where the wise woman and judge Deborah sits with her people, so she can teach him. He must leave as soon as possible. There is peace now after the war with the Canaanites has been won, so he will be safe. So the angel told me," said Azuz, looking with deep conviction into my eyes.

"I can't let him leave," I snapped out. "He's still a child. Not even a young man."

"You must," said Azuz. "This is the word of god."

"Maybe your god. I have to ask my gods too," I said getting up, moving away from him.

"It's not something to question anymore. Mahir is clearly gifted and he must be tutored. He has a destiny to fulfill. You must allow him to go on his way," said Azuz and stood up, coming to stand behind me. Reaching out to touch my shoulder.

"But what if he will not return? What if something terrible happens to him? What if the animals devour him on his way there?" I exclaimed, now warm tears gushing out of my eyes, my throat throbbing with pain. "I can't let him go," I said and walked away, to the wood, to my sacred tree.

As I crouched by the tree, leaning against it, I cried out to the goddess. "Why are you taking Mahir from me, why? So much has been sacrificed for him to live, and now you are send him into the wilderness?" I cried out to my goddess. Then I could hear her voice in my head, speaking to me: "Oh, how deep are the sorrows of the mother, you are lamenting the inevitable. Children leave their mother's womb. And cubs leave their mother's den to become lions. Your son has his own path to walk and you should not stop him. The future holds much destruction for you and your ancestors, but Mahir, who is the child of Canaan, will carry the seed of wisdom deep, deep, into the future. Do not stand in his way. Your paths separate now. Hug him like a mother for the last time."

So the voice sounded clear and strong in my head and a small crow's feather lightly dropped on my nose. I then understood that I had to let my child go. I thought then of my father and mother and how they may have felt when I had to be sent away. But that was different. They were



different than me. Or were they? My mind kept drifting to Hazor, to the memories I had pushed away to the furthest part of my head for so many years: the complete destruction of my childhood palace, the death of my family. The death of all the people and things that were familiar to me. I then cried for a long time. Deep heavy sobs that erupted from my chest like I was vomiting all the death that was inside me. I cried till little Neo-Mi came to me, seeking a hug. She cuddled so sweetly in my lap that it aroused in me again the hope and joy my life in Yodfat had given me and my spirit was uplifted again.

Three days later, Mahir departed from us, riding a shy donkey, accompanied by Mamu our household servant, armed with a dagger in his belt and a letter from his father to Deborah, telling her about Mahir's competence and asking her to take him under her scholarly tutoring. I slipped into his bags the figure of the goddess so she would protect him on his way and spitted three times in the air to chase away the evil spirits. Holding his face in my hands, I looked into his eyes and said: "Mahir, my oldest son. May the gods bless you and take you safely through this voyage. I am very proud of you. Please don't forget the breasts that have fed you since birth. Please don't forsake our gods. Learn new ways but do not forget where you come from," I said to him, kissing his serious face.

"I promise, mother. Pray for me every day and I will bring you honor," he said and placed as customary his small hand on his chest for farewell. His father walked them out of the village and down the path to the main traveler's road.

When Azuz returned, he said: "Don't worry, he will be fine, they joined a caravan of merchants walking down south. And Mamu's with him." But it took a few days before the heaviness on my

chest lifted. When Mamu returned after two weeks with good news that Mahir had been accepted into Deborah's circle of pupils, and he was fine, I could breathe easy again.

Five years later

As one moves through the cycles of the sun, sunrise followed by sunset, changes happen; they creep in without being noticed at first. I sensed the changes in the back pain I began to feel when I leant forward for too long. I noticed it in the laughter wrinkles around Azuz's eyes and most of all in the rapidity with which my children grew.

Our life was full. Rains followed the plowing and sowing season, then harvest came, after which came the storage and preparation of supplies, transporting the residues to the market, and in between many village celebration, marriages, births, circumcisions, puberty rites, and yes, we also buried some of us who had died by accident or illness. I continued to practice the rituals to the goddess and many of the women in the village joined me by the sacred tree. Its branches were heavily laid with tied cloths and scarves to it, each one a reminder to a vow a woman had made to the goddess if she would bless her with her request.

Things change. I cannot remember when Azuz stopped looking my way. Did my beauty fade? Had I ceased to be alluring? Following a long rainy winter, distance had grown between us and he did not ask me for a long time to join him in his bed. Neither did he seek Lea. I would sleep with the children and before I fell asleep my heart ached. I missed his warmth. I tried to ask him several times what was wrong but all he said is that he had been distracted with getting through the harvest that was especially abundant that year. We did work very hard managing to gather all

the crop before it dried up in the sun. But that had never bothered him before. Our love was the flame that made all our work possible.

I will never forget the day I walked down the path to the terrace's fields and before he could see me, I saw he was kissing Zipora, the young daughter of Reuben, who now bloomed and had become a beautiful young woman. My world crashed at that moment. I felt like a flower that had been trampled upon. I didn't know what to do. So I turned around and ran back up the hill, to the forest, to the tree where I fell at its feet and cried to the goddess: "Why, why goddess, have you struck me down like that? Why have you devoured my heart?" There was no answer this time, just me alone, an abandoned woman in the forest. I wept now not only at his betrayal but also my womanhood. Who was I as a woman if Azuz didn't see my beauty anymore? He was my lord, my human incarnation of god. How could I live without him? I felt deep confusion and loss of direction.

"What do you want me to do now, goddess?" I shouted, but only the sound of the birds echoed my cry. I stayed there until Lea came searching for me. There were chores to be completed. She saw my swollen eyes and something in her softened.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"Azuz has taken interest in Zipora. I saw them together today," I said. Wiping the tears off my cheeks, I took a deep breath and got up.

"Well, it was bound to happen," she said. "That's the way they are. If I would have depended for a moment on Azuz's love, I could not complete a full day. My heart would have been broken long ago when you came along," she said.

"It must have been terrible for you when I came," I said looking into her eyes.

"Yes, it hurt, especially when I couldn't compete with your beauty and allure. Many nights have I lied with my eyes open into the dark listening to the sound of your lovemaking," she admitted.

"But I reminded myself over and over again that Azuz is a child of god. And god is greater than all, the father of all beings – and to him, only to him do I belong, not to anyone else," said Lea.

I listened, surprised at how she understood things.

"Human hearts are fickle, changing all the time. But god is always there. So I put my trust in him...and see how things came out well? We have been raising our children together and today I am pleased that Azuz lets me be and does not ask for me at night anymore," smiled Lea.

I could see the point of what she was saying. But my heart ached for Azuz, for the warmth of his desire, like he was a sun for me, warming me and lighting me, his moon.

"Now come along," said Lea, interrupting my thoughts. "There's work to do. Just continue with your life," she said and offered me her hand.

But my heart wouldn't rest. I felt like a thorn had pierced it and it was slowly bleeding my life away.

When Azuz returned that evening, he was the one to speak first. "I will be taking soon Zipora as a second wife," he said while I placed his food before him and Lea filled his cup with wine.

"How will you provide for such a large household?" I asked, pushing away my pain.

"We have had abundant crops the last two winters and we don't need to sell so much. We can manage more mouths and we will be able to build more terraces on the eastern slope once the

new wife gives birth to more children."

"Is this all you think about? More crops? More hands to work? What is gone wrong with you, Azuz? What about us? What happened to all those sweet nights we had together, the soft vows you had whispered in my ears?" I erupted suddenly, my voice sounding like an animal's howl as I threw his cup of wine on the ground. Lea moved toward me to hold me so I wouldn't do anything harsh. Azuz wouldn't look in my eyes.

"This has nothing to do with you. I have needs. The new wife will help both of you with the household. I have been feeling dead inside for some time and Zipora makes me feel alive again. I don't expect you to understand. But I do expect you to contain yourself and be honorable about the whole thing. Know your place, Ita-Anu, you are only my concubine," he said and took a sip from his cup.

His words were like an arrow in my heart. If until now I suffered pain and loss, then now hatched in me something altogether new – spite. And ill wishes and a desire to pay him back. How could he say that to me? Me, Ita-Anu, daughter of Yavin, King of Hazor, a priestess of the goddess who had fulfilled the ceremony of the sacred marriage with king of Cabri? May all the demons rise, so my heart said, and take vengeance on Azuz, for he is greedy and blind, for he has forgotten our bond. I had given up on my honor, my hands have turned into the paws of a beast, my breasts have shrunken from bearing the children of this man, I had given this man the precious years of my youth, and now he forgets it all, for a new body.

Old feelings arose in me. Dormant all those years. The passion for revenge. Dark fumes of hatred blinding me. I remembered all of the sudden the sorceress and clairvoyants of Hazor, their dark

little rooms, full of smoke and the pungent smell of rotten matter, their shelves stacked with ingredients to put a spell on those who have inflicted harm on someone. Such a potion I need, my thoughts rushed, something that will put an end to the life of that young woman, so she will not bear more children to treacherous Azuz, so he will weep too, full of anguish just like me, for the loss of his loved one.

That night I walked to the sacred tree. The forest was silent, I could feel the blood of hatred in my heart roaring, engulfing it until it had become the face of all. Under a small lamp I fumbled, lighting incense and praying to god Moth and his demon helpers, to come to my help. Making out of mud a figure of a woman, I placed the light at the foot of the figure and carved the name of Beleth, demon of abandoned women on the figure. Then I closed my eyes and visualized Zipora's face crumbling before me, mutilated, until no one could look at her and she had to leave the village altogether, to join the lepers. I prayed all night for that and before dawn returned to the village, as it was time to milk the cows. Hope bloomed in my heart that my ill wishes shall succeed and soon Azuz would return to my bosom.

But as the next days passed, I saw that my chants did not help. Preparations for the marriage continued – a three-day feast to which the surrounding villages were invited. Much work had to be done, and as I toiled like all the household, my heart simmered. To the outside world I was an industrious woman getting about her business with what was needed, but inside I was plotting, my eyes following Azuz wherever he went.

When he was choosing cattle to be prepared for the wedding meal – I thought, "He never prepared a meal in my honor" and my heart ached.

When he brought from the market luxurious clothes and a sack filled with jewelry to give to Zipora, I thought: "He had never bought me such" and my breath became foul with rage.

But then, when he sat with Zipora in our yard, where we all planted together vines that grew into a beautiful canopy, and he gave her wine and played the flute for her, like he used to do when we had just met, something inside me broke. He had received all of me and all of what I had and now he is forsaking me so easily for another woman. He must pay for that. He is defying the common sense of the universe. This cannot be. I vowed to wait quietly for the right time to take my revenge on him and his "little sunshine" as he kept calling her.

"How are you, sister?" Lea asked me one morning as we were kneading. "I'm fine. Just getting used to the new situation," I said.

"Yes, you will see, she will become like a younger sister to you," she tried to encourage me.

"We shall see," I said, pushing both my fists into the dough.

I was so deeply entrenched in my painful thoughts that I did not feel the time passing by. I believe my children who were running about, independent and busy with their chores, did not feel that I was actually absent that whole time, that I was a shell filled with bitter pus.

Then came the day for the wedding. I did not want to see the ceremony, nor bless the couple. My heart was festering, and all I could think about was how to accomplish my plan. I told Lea I was

feeling weak and tired after all our toil so I preferred to rest on my mattress. As sunset was nearing, which is the perfect time in Hebrew customs to hold a marriage ceremony, everyone left for the far edge of the village where gatherings were usually held and there was a view to the west.

I lied on my back and closed my eyes. In the emptiness, the goddess Anath appeared to me in all her might. It had been many years since I last sensed her presence. Her voice was as clear as the roaring of the sea at night. "Hear me Ita..." she called out, "Blindness has struck you, made you into a fool...for weeks you have been indulging in hatred and spite, lost, without direction. I command you now, relinquish your selfish search for human comfort. For too long you have been trudging familiar roads, forgetting that all is fleeting and soon will be gone. Forgetting your higher purpose and destiny. Now you must seek solitude, you must leave all that is known to you, detaching from all that is comfortable and set out into the wilderness, where you will learn the lessons planned for you from the very start. You have done well as a mother and mate but now it is time to shed this skin, as you witness it is already withering by itself. You must pack tonight a few belongings for the journey and bid farewell to the hearth by which you found an illusory sense of safety, departing from the beautiful garden you have created, your children, mate and kin. Your life was never meant to be a life of comfort. Something else is awaiting you. Walk away," so the goddess spoke, swaying her heavy sword above my head, exposing her bloody teeth, and to the deafening sound of thunder, disappeared.

Alarmed and speechless, I then knew that a circle had been completed and a new cycle was about to begin. Suddenly, the music from the wedding, that drifted from the West, sounded so strange to me, like a waking call, a reminder that I did not belong here. Perhaps I never had. And with that, something in my chest untied. Azuz and Zipora did not matter. All the disappointment I felt



toward Azuz, the rage, the sense of waste for all those years that were forgotten – all that was gone. Azuz was nothing. Just a small man with his lust and fear of aging. So Zipora will warm his bed a few more years and then the inevitable will come – his manhood will shrink, he will not be able to drop his water and the only food he would be able to consume would be the food she would mesh for him into a pulp. I laughed. There is no need for me to avenge, time is much crueler than I could ever be. Slowly, he will wither before the eyes of his young maid, sensing her repulsion from his stinking breath and limp limbs. Perhaps, if the gods will be even more generous with me, they would make him watch her take as a lover a younger stronger man.

I got up on my feet feeling revitalized. I packed myself a simple yet practical sack for the voyage and my heart danced as I prepared to leave before they returned. I was troubled though, about the children. How would they feel when they realized I had left? So I watered a small stretch of ground in the cooking area and in the soft mud I wrote with a stick:

"Dear ones, fruits of my womb,

I have been called upon by the gods.

I am leaving, not knowing when I will return.

I am sure you will be fine under the care of Lea.

I want you to remember something always:

You are the jewels of my crown.

Remember well what I had taught you

And be always kind, honest and willing

Farewell. Mother."

## Walking on All-being's path

As a pale dawn lit the sky, I could see that the path that I had walked that night led to a passage between two steep mountains, covered with heavy bush. I was on the verge of an unknown territory for me. We had traveled once to a creek nearby, to meet other Hebrew settlements in the area, but now I was walking north again and I could feel fatigue coming over me. So I stopped to take a nap under a small oak tree, its branches touching the ground forming a small space that one could shelter in without being noticed.

I slept until the flies and heat woke me up, feeling famished. I pulled from my sack some bread and poured olive oil into a cup, dipping the bread in it. I sipped from the waterskin, getting back on my feet.

I didn't have much of a plan, except for walking into the forest and not to be found until the goddess would tell me so. "Cut your hair, leave behind your clothes. Stay only with bare necessities. Shed the dying skin of your youth and parenting. Prepare yourself for the new to come," sounded the voice of the goddess as I looked south. So I took my slicing knife and cut my heavy braid that was dangling behind my back, feeling suddenly very light. I changed to a simple cotton dress, held with a pin at the shoulder and a rope made of nettle at the waist. The rest of what had made me into who I was, except for the family of gods I had kept with me since I left Hazor at the age of twelve, I packed into a bundle and buried under a pile of leaves by the tree.

I walked the rest of the day on that path, reaching a high point from which I could see the vast landscape stretching to the south, east and west. A pang of guilt and longing stabbed me as I walked, thinking of what my children might be feeling now. As far as my memory goes, I

walked for three days into the forest before I heard the barking of dogs and I knew I had reached a camp. So I turned around and moved back into the forest, seeking a place to build myself a small shack. After some wandering between the low dense trees, I found a fountain trickling from a rock in the form of the goddess's vulva. I felt it was an auspicious place to stop. So I unpacked and built a small fire. After I had washed in the fountain I prepared myself some fresh bread and ate it with olives and dates.

That night as I lay in the dark, I felt pangs of pain in my heart. I cried over the loss of Azuz's love. "Die heart, die..." I pounded my chest. "This is your first exercise," howled the goddess with the wolves. "You must learn to live by yourself, not to depend on anyone's support or love. You have to be like a flower that blooms alone, that does not need to be looked upon. That finds its joy just by the warmth of the sun and the generosity of the earth." I cried as I listened to her. I felt deep gratitude that finally my pain would subside, that enduring ache I had experienced since I longed for my absent mother – the longing that could never be completely fulfilled. Now I was to be stronger than that pain. I was about to live a new life of freedom.

On the twentieth day out in the forest, my soul finally found peace. That evening, I grilled myself a dove I had caught with my sling, and some wheat that I had brought with me, and simply enjoyed gazing at the fire I had built.

And so began a new time in my life. I returned to old rituals from my childhood, like sitting by the creek with my eyes closed and listening to everything that was happening around me. A deep peace came over me, and new thoughts, thoughts of a kind I had never had before, began to hatch within me.

One morning I noticed, as I was spinning a strong rope from nettle, a dense spider web on a low bush and it fascinated me. As I looked at the tiny pearls of dew on the threads, I fell into a state of dreaming and the goddess appeared before me, and so she said: "These delicate webs are an expression of all the universe around you. Everything you know is connected with invisible threads; everything depends on everything else. Every change you make alters the entire web. That is why you must do every move and every action with great care so as not to disturb the balance. Seek how to sustain yourself while keeping as much as possible around you intact. Do not ask for more than what you are given. Be grateful for the abundance I am giving you, and move yourself in tandem with nature's rhythm," she said.

From that day on I began to hunt only what I needed and when I ate, I did it with moderation. The remains I threw to the animals by a rock a little further than where I had built my camp. I found a good spot under a small tree to observe the animals that came to feed.

A wild cat and a pack of wolves had come. Then some hyenas too and once, a she lion came, snatching the remains and returning to where she had come from. I noticed that the same animals came again and again; they became familiar to me and I named them. Nata the wild cat, the Markul family of wolves, Sebron and Sagia the hyenas and most beautiful of them all – Igara, the she lion who one day came with her two playful cubs, and they ate together the deer I had placed on the soft grass. I named them *Kochav (star)* and *Zricha (Sunrise)*.

They were all children of the goddess, parts of her presence, and every piece of meat I had placed by the stream for them was an offering to the goddess, me nurturing her children. The everyday contact with all these living beings made me look at the statues of the gods I had brought with me from a different angle. Suddenly they felt so still and lacking of the real

goddess's powers. I was surrounded by something that was pulsating with life, and I was a part of this pulsating being and so were the animals – that vibrating being that was continuously growing and evolving, that thing that was both male and female. Bit by bit, I stopped giving libations to the statues and instead I gave my offerings to this all-being by listening and tending to the creatures around me.

Observing the life of the forest, the carnivores as well as the grass eaters, the insects, the flowers and trees through the fleeting seasons, made me realize that they had thoughts, just like I had thoughts, maybe different ones, from a different point of view, but they were interpreting and learning the world around them just as I was. Even the plants were in the process of learning – passing their knowledge from one generation to another – because how could it be otherwise that the broom had taken its unique form if not by learning that this is the way to attract the bees that move its seeds from one plant to another?

In my heart, in my soul, formed a deep understanding that it was all one being connected, a being that learns and grows. And I too was a part of it, of this living, learning, sensual, sexual, pulsating and growing being.

"What is my place in your divine force?" I asked, sensing an overwhelming expansion in my mind and body. "What would you like me to do?" At first, there was silence and then I heard the trees whisper to me of their joy. They told me how happy they were with the rain and the sun, and how beautiful and delightful was the birds' song to them. For long blissful days I could hear the joy of every plant, animal, bird or insect. And as I listened, the joy or maybe, better expressed, the explosion of pleasure, happened within me.

And I understood. This force is at its core a ripple of pleasure. One can learn the principles of this wave and be able to align with it – and so become an expression of it. And by that, join all that exists and find deep fulfilling sense of blessing in one's life no matter what their circumstances were.

"Teach me, all-being," I called out into the darkening skies when night began to fall, sensing those ripples of pleasure moving through my body. "All this that you see before you," uttered the warm voice of the mysterious being, "All this began in a great pulse of pleasure – think how you were conceived – in a great explosion of pleasure between your parents – that is the power that is moving the universe. Every part of your body, from your very eyes to your toenails have the capacity to experience pleasure. The source of human suffering is that they move against this pulse, they contract, place barriers and rules against this natural beauty and joy of it all," said All-being.

"Do you mean that it is all about sexual pleasure?" I wondered.

"Not necessarily. There is much more than sexual pleasure. Sexuality is one of the simple forms of pleasure. Joy and pleasure are endless and can be attained through the various organs as well as through the thought capacity. That is why I had created mankind – so they could experience this sensual pleasure with all their being," said All-being and I could sense its expansive smile inside my guts.

The next day I watched a gazelle grazing in a small open clearing. She was alert to every sound. All-being then spoke to me of the power of carefully listening. I then practiced doing only what was necessary and the rest of the time I sat and listened and observed. I noticed again, like when I was a child by the creek in Hazor, the pattern of birds calling through the day. At each hour, a

different bird sang its song. I learned to decipher what hour of the day it was with my eyes closed, just by listening. Sound began to fascinate me. When I closed my eyes and listened, I could sense how the sound of every living being around me was touching me in a different place. They had power over me, influencing my feelings and thoughts, forming shapes in my inner rooms of being, some pleasurable and some making me contract. Some sounds were painful just as others were soothing and gentle on me.

"Do not push away the pain," said All-being. "Pain is only an extreme form of pleasure. Allow yourself to be overtaken by this extreme pleasure – listen to everything. Do not push away what is unpleasant. Befriend it all – take pleasure in the exploration of the unknown, the unexpected and the unwanted. Be intimate with it all, with no prejudice...just like your teacher at the shrine had told you – not to discriminate between men. Now go further – find pleasure in whatever your being touches, like a tongue that tastes something new, with curiosity." So said All-being.

Time passed. Months. Years. I became one with the forest, learning its pulsating force. And my heart rejoiced. Attentive to every sound, smell, and sight. Feeling deep peace and joy. New forms began to evolve from within me as I glided on All-being's wind of pleasure. I gave them shape in clay. I wrote poems to the force on mud tablets and made depictions of what it meant for me. These forms were themselves the expression of this pulsating force. Nothing was omitted from this force, everything was its child. Even moments of pain, death, sickness were part of its pulsation. As it moved through all like a wave – sometimes pushing forward, sometimes withdrawing back, and again moving forward just like the tide. That had given new sense to all the pain and losses in my life. Sometimes All-being creates and sometimes it destroys only to build again.



I bathed in my newfound bliss for a long time, when one day as I was resting by the stream, I heard the voice of All-being speak to me through the sound of the trickling water. And so it said: "Hear me Ita-Anu, Oh blessed one, hear your calling now. Mankind is building huge walls of pain and separation. It does not see how everything is connected. It is forgetting the joy of being alive. Being aligned with me, the force of all living beings. There is no other god but the world around you. Everything you see around you is a manifestation of me. You are all moving, growing and fading on this huge ripple of pleasure in the huge womb of the cosmos," so said All-being.

"Soon you will leave here and return to the company of mankind. I call upon you to wake your fellow men and women from their sleep. Be my voice, telling them not to contaminate the umbilical waters they are swimming in. You must remind them that god is not a high priest or a raging king sitting on a golden throne demanding taxes and chastity from them. For I am like a simple, kind, loving mother who enjoys seeing her children grow to be happy beings. She does not need riches or slaves to be appeased. She does not need sacrifices of dead flesh to be willing either. All I want is a flower and a smile from my child."

As I heard All-being's command, my heart filled with terror. "All-being, they shall shower me with stones. They shall condemn me for a lack of morality. They will say: who is that befallen woman who teaches about taking pleasure in one's existence? They will say I lack all moral values, that I am corrupting all good that man has formed by rules and restrictions," I called out to All-being as I was sitting that night by the fire, fear crawling up my throat like a poisonous spider.

"Sweet child," then said All-being in its warm and lucid flow through my mind. "Have you done something wrong in your life? Have you thought a bad thought about another human being?"

"Yes, I have."

"Did it give you pleasure?"

"No, I suffered," I replied, remembering my hatred toward Azuz and Zipora.

"Then you will understand that being good, honest, kind, generous, considerate – all the good moral qualities one can have, they also give you pleasure. There is no joy in doing wrong to another human being. Remember the bitter taste in your mouth after you had killed the Sardinian. You performed justice indeed according to the law of man, putting an end to the man who killed your brother – but how horrible did you and the people around you feel as a consequence? Being good gives pleasure...perhaps the most deep and meaningful pleasure one can have...a divine bliss...that is as close as one can get to being one with me..." said All-being as I looked into the glowing embers.

"An existence of pleasure has principles too. Be a truth-saying, honest and kind being. A being that enjoys dancing and playing music, celebrating her life in the company of all other beings who take joy in the paradise that I had created for them. Tell them, Ita, that All-being wants them to live fully. Sensual, playful, emotional, passionate and creative. Teach them to use their powers in resonance with all the other powers in the universe, like the way men learn to collaborate with one another digging a well or plowing a field before the rains," so said All-being.

My heart filled with awe. How could I teach mankind all this wisdom? How could I counterprove all their faith in their mighty gods, in their belief that they are sinful? How will I make

them remember the pleasure of their youth? And with that, I thought of my children, and sadness fell over me. Had they forgotten me? It had been more than thirty-six moon cycles since I had left.

That night I had a dream. A messenger had come. He was neither a man nor a woman, lacking any hair. A star was written on his forehead, and his eyes were a void of blue emptiness that had no end. "It is time to return," he called out. "Your name from today on will be Ita-Haya," 'with her – alive,' as you will unite mankind in a bond of joy and life. Time to rejoice with others," said he.

"I do not want to return," I cried in my dream. "I will meet pain and death. Let me please stay here in the tranquil world of the animals," I pleaded.

"I will be with you, Ita-Haya. You shall be curious about it all – with no discrimination. You will touch upon all sensual experiences with the same interest. Whether they throw flowers or stones at you," said the messenger, turning then in my dream into a boat with a white sail that drifted empty into a silent sea.

As I awoke, I dug a pit and buried the few belongings I had accumulated during my time in the forest. Staying with the same yellow dress I had come with and a deerskin wrapped around my shoulders.

I prayed my gratitude prayers to the trees that gave me shade and fruit, to the animals I had hunted for food and skin that warmed me. I thanked the fountain that had supplied me with fresh water and its pleasant soothing sound through the days. I placed the sacred figure of the goddess by the tree that gave me shade and tied a thread to one of its branches, a token to the bond I had formed here with the All-being. I called that place Gal-Ed - be this a witness to the revelation of

All-being to me in this place. Then I began to walk back to the world of mankind. It was time to return.

## Epilogue – The gospel by Neo-Mi

This is how Ita-Haya brought her message to the world when she came out of the forest. She walked down to the sea of the Galilee, Kineret, where she reached a market in one of the villages. Upon entering she saw two spinsters selling figs and dates. She told them, "Follow me and I shall teach you how to take pleasure in the eternal fruits of life, those that never rot."

Immediately, they left their merchandize and followed her.

She walked around the Galilee, teaching wherever she went about the joys of life. When sick, old, and moonstruck people came to her, she said to them: "I cannot prevent suffering and pain from you, as it is a gift from All-Being, inspiring one to seek and search its love and comfort. But I can teach you how to take pleasure from your existence, how to be curious about the miracle of life in its numerous manifestations. How to enjoy every breath of air you take."

Upon hearing that, the hearts and minds of the people opened and they danced and loved one another. Peace came over the sick and they embraced their pain. The demon-possessed befriended their demons, taking pleasure in dancing with them. The weary enjoyed sitting silently in the winter sun and were grateful for a bowl of soup that Ita-Haya's helper gave them.

A large crowd followed Ita-Haya around the Galilee. She brought music and dance wherever she went, farmers opened their barns, lords let their slaves and servants free, the blacksmiths melted the swords into cups and pots with which everyone shared what they had so generously that great feasts were held. The land was full of celebration.

Then Ita-Haya reached Mount Carmel. She sat there for seven days and seven nights, praying and teaching her disciples. A large crowd of people came walking up the mountain, coming to sit before her. And so she said to them:

"Happy will be those who listen to the force, those who know the waves of All-Being. Joyful shall be those who turn their lives into their art. Blessed are those who can turn anything harmful and painful into something full of light."

"No one can avoid suffering in this world, but you can establish a joyful and peaceful relationship with everything you do. When my back is tired, I listen patiently to it, I rest. I enjoy breathing. Even when you are on your death bed, you can enjoy the comforting hand of another human being. If you turn everything in your life into an expression of All-Being then you shall be the richest people on this earth, and your death shall be a peaceful act of consent, a long entering into the realm of the beautiful, loving All-Being. You shall be embraced tenderly and no fear shall fill thy heart."

"Do not think that I have come to disclaim the truth of your gods," she said. "I have come to show you how to be in the light and forsake the darkness in your souls. Life upon earth is a gift, one has to cherish and respect – a garden where one grows delicious fruit of all kinds – fruit of the spirit, the womb, the mind and of our hands toil – to enjoy and share with others generously."

"I call upon thee to follow your gods without hatred in your hearts for those who hold different ones. I call upon thee to seek joy and pleasure instead of cultivating your desires for revenge and death, as it only rots the spirit. The ramifications of every violent act are always bringing you sorrow and loss. Give your gods the fruits of your effort without killing other beings for sacrifice. All-being does not wish you to bring death to his garden of creation. He has created

you to be his creative being, the one who expands and triples his power on this earth with the power of your dreams. Share what you have with all, expand the blessing of the earth numerous times with good action, good thought and a pure heart," so she said.

Then came up the mountain Mahir her son, who had become a prophet of the Hebrew. He was accompanied by many men holding swords and daggers in the name of their god "Jehova." As he approached her and her circle of devotees, he placed his hand on his chest with courtesy.

"Mother," he said, and she invited him to sit with her, under the carob tree. Silently, she poured him water into a bronze cup and smiled at him.

He was grim, so she asked him, "What is it my son? It has been so long since we have spent time together and you seem so grave, like you saw in me your doom, not your loving mother," then she reached out to caress his hair. He resisted, then said, "Your ways are wrong, mother. I cannot find peace sitting with such sinners," he said looking straight into her eyes, accusingly.

"What do you mean - sinners?" she asked.

"God is too great to be seen, he is greater than mankind, than the animal kingdom. He cannot be conceived. There are no words to express his presence in the universe...he has no face or form...you should not preach that he is present in all, you cannot sense him...you are a liar..." he said, seeking a place to put the cup away.

"I don't know..." She responded. "I feel All-being all the time...he is everything...the visible and the invisible...we are him ourselves...a limb of his/her divine flesh...everything you see around you is all being...the animals...the sky...and I worship them all...it is the force pulsating like a heart in everything there is..." she said and smiled at him, remembering how they would argue about things when he was a child.

"I don't think so...you are confused, mother. This world of yours lacks order and morality...if everything is god, then everything is just...even murdering your siblings or fornicating with your neighbor's wife...it brings chaos and what it is actually is a legitimization to conduct unlawful acts," said Mahir, his eyebrows tightened with contempt.

"Why do you say that, my child?" she asked him, and the crowd that was standing around them moved closer to hear better what they were saying.

"You call people to take pleasure in their lives, to sing and dance...that is a short distance from idolatry...losing one's reason, drinking wine and dancing with total abandonment....your followers leave their work...abandon their families...and indulge in sinful pleasure...." he said getting up on his feet, his men coming to stand around him.

"Mahir, my child, what has become of you?" Ita-Haya called out. "How can you confuse your mother's pure and noble faith in such a way? Pleasure has many faces...there is no pleasure in abandoning one's kin...but there is pleasure in listening to a bird's song or rejoicing the force of All-being with dance and song...how can you dispense with all that beauty for this jealous god of yours that wishes his believers to abandon their tie with the world in order to be good," she called out. "Your world of reason, your orderly laws, are cutting away the bonds between mankind and the universe. It is a false belief that is distancing mankind from All-being, the force that moves through all..." she called out. For a long moment they looked at one another. Perhaps with hesitation, realizing that a deep chasm had grown between them, one that cannot be healed.

Finally, Mahir shouted: "You are a false prophet, Ita-Anu of the Canaanites," the words spewing from his mouth like a curse. "No one but the prophets can speak the word of god; only they can speak the simple, pure and humble words of god to the people. Lowly kinds such as you must be

stopped from their evil acts," he said and then he shouted, "I, Mahir, have been summoned here by Jehova, lord of the Hebrews, to end the false prophecy of this befallen woman. I hereby sentence you to death by the power of the stone," he said.

"You are hurting only yourself," she said to him calmly. "I am your mother, and you are son of the Canaanites...son of a Qdesha, priestess of the goddess Ashera, you cannot run away from your roots, what has made you into who you are. You can try to forget me, but I will always come back to you, even when I am gone..." she called out, continuing to sit peacefully under the tree.

"Your words slide off me like water on a rock," he laughed dryly. "God has sent me here today to bring an end to your defiling this world with your prostitution and *Avoda Zara*," he called out. "Everyone will see the fate of those who practice your corrupted ways. Perhaps you have given birth to me, but my true mother and father is Jehova and there is no one but him," he shouted and with fury grabbed a heavy stone from the ground and threw it at Ita-Haya. The stone struck her chest with a thud. Then Mahir and his followers showered Ita-Haya with stones, blood flooding from every wound they had opened in her flesh. But she didn't recoil. She continued to sit, leaning against the tree, smiling serenely.

Her followers, who had been taught by her not to strike back, came to stand in front of her so as to block the stones from hurting her. One after the other, they fell to the ground too, injured. Then Ita-Haya called out, blood gashing from her mouth, broken teeth falling out, "Have no fear, this is a world of perfection. My wounds, my pain are a high note in the song of life. It is so strong, like my entire being has turned into a huge drum, pulsating its last extreme and mysterious beats, leaving nothing but the voice of All-being echoing inside me in a thousand



voices, telling me to surrender...Goodbye my friends" were her last words before she came to her end. Only her left foot kept quivering like it was a sparrow shaking its wing.

When Mahir heard his mother's last words, he called out, "And so god has said today...This fornicating woman shall not live...and she shall be stoned to death, and the shedding of her blood would bear witness to the end of all false gods in this land of the one and only god," he said, grabbing a huge stone, he walked to stand above her, and with one great blow cracked her skull open.

When her followers saw that, a great wail aroused in them and the crowd that had been watching all this screamed with horror. When Mahir saw that she was not moving, he signaled to his men and they all went away quickly, before the crowd would gather itself to take revenge.

A great wail rose in the land. Many came to bid farewell to the woman who had brought so much joy and freedom to the land. For a little while she had helped them see it is possible to live without war or famine. That there was plenty for all and that one could take simple pleasure in their existence. Her body was buried in a cave by Yodfat, close to her children.

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I, Neo-Mi, daughter of Ita-Anu hereby testify that these events and these words have been spoken. May Ita-Anu's wisdom be awakened when the time is ripe; may humanity's senses open up to All-being's eternal song in the universe. May one day, mankind become a vehicle of pleasure and beauty, singing a hymn to existence upon earth and universe.

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