

## CHAPTER FOUR

I RETURNED to my camp to find the boy waiting for me. At my arrival, after having reassumed my jinni guise, he sprang up from his seat and trotted eagerly toward me like an enthusiastic puppy.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “I’ve been waiting here forever.”

“You don’t know what forever is, boy,” I replied. “I’ve been working on your wish like I said I would.” I moved past him as if heading for my tent. I then paused, turning halfway back around. “You do still want your wish, don’t you? I can stop now. It’s not too late.”

“No, no, no,” he exclaimed, almost panicked. “Please, that’s not what I meant.”

“Good,” I said, sounding satisfied and taking a seat at the now dead fire. I pointed, and with a loud whoosh the fire roared back into life. “Then no more asking where I’ve been.”

“Yes, sir.”

I looked him over slowly, causing him to squirm. “Did you sleep last night?”

“A little,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Hopefully it will be enough. It is time to begin your quest.”

“My quest?”

“Yes, you can’t play music in the king’s palace without an instrument.”

“But...I don’t play an instrument.”

“You do now.”

“But...”

“Look, Gim, let’s get one thing straight. You do as I say, without question, without hesitation, and I will make your wish come true. If not, I can’t help you. Got it?”

He looked down at his feet and scuffed at the ground with his toe. “Yes.”

“Good. Now then, about this quest of yours ...” I gestured to the rug lying on the ground across the fire from me. “Have a seat.” Once he sat, I began my instructions. “I am sending you to retrieve the Bull of Heaven Lyre. This is a magical instrument that plays beautiful music just by being strummed. You don’t need to know how to actually play it.” I didn’t mention that it had the ability to enchant anyone who hears it. I figured he find that out soon enough on his own.

“Why haven’t I’ve heard of this before?” he asked.

“Because it’s kept in the lair of the Anunnaki in the center of the sacred forest of Mount Mashu.”

Gimil-Sin visibly paled. He knew what that meant. It was a revered area and to journey there was to face the wrath of the gods.

“But, the only person to ever go into the forest was Gilgamesh.”

“Yes, and he survived. So, why can’t you,” I explained casually.

He sat still for a moment, debating. Good, he was finally considering the consequences of his actions.

“What do I do?”

Pity, he could have saved a lot of lives if he’d decided then to cancel his wish. Oh well...

“First, you have to enter the underground abode of the Anunnaki.”

“How will I know when I’ve found it?”

“Believe me, you’ll know. Once you’ve entered their home, you must survive three tasks.”

He swallowed visibly. “Survive?”

I acted nonchalant. “Oh, yes. But, you can quit at any time, however you will forfeit your wish.” I saw he didn’t quite understand. “That means if you quit, your wish is over.”

I could feel his indecision. “What are the three tasks?”

“Those I can not tell you, but I can say that they will test your strengths. To begin with, you will have to wrestle with your fear before you test your physical, emotional and intellectual strengths. In other words, you will have to be strong in your body, soul and mind in order to complete the ordeal. You will understand once you see what they are.”

“So, do I start now?”

“No better time like the present. I’m not getting any

younger. Actually, I'm not getting any older, either." I saw that he didn't think that was very funny. He would need to work on his sense of humor.

Gimil-Sin stood, and then looked in askance of me when I didn't rise to join him. "Aren't you coming?"

I shook my head, replying, "No, I can't help you. This is your mission and yours alone. I will wait for you here. If you wish to quit at any time, just say the words, 'Jinni, I quit,' and you will immediately return home." Of course, I knew, like so many men, he would never use the word 'quit.'

He turned and started grudgingly away.

"Oh, I can give you a word of advice."

He turned back around.

"Recognize thy adversaries."

A blank look came over his face.

I rolled my eyes. "Know your enemies."

"Oh. Uh, thanks," he said and then he headed for the woods.

Of course, I wasn't about to stay where I was. I became invisible and traveled with him, entering his thoughts and emotions. He finally came to the edge of the sacred forest. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he entered the dark, forbidding woods. He continued on, turning this way and that at my guiding nudges, thinking he was following his own intuition.

At last, Gimil-Sin came upon the entrance to the sacred dwelling of the Anunnaki. Naturally, I had informed the inhabitants that he was coming, so they were prepared

to put on quite a show for him. It wasn't often they had company of the human kind, and they were more than happy to oblige. Besides, what was family for?

When Gimil-Sin saw the entrance, he stopped and quaked with fear. In front of him was an enormous head that was the size of a small building and looking as if carved from stone. Not just any head, but a monstrously deformed head with the snout of a boar, horns of an Oryx and the ears of a bat. The eyes were closed as if in slumber, but its mouth was open, and teeth jutted from its jaws like stalactites and stalagmites. A dull light flickered from within. Suddenly, Gimil-Sin realized that its mouth was the entrance to a cave and he shied away in terror.

After Gimil-Sin had stood frozen for several minutes, he eventually calmed down. *Okay, he thought nothing has happened. Maybe it's just carved like that to scare away trespassers. He waited a little longer just to make sure. Well, I'll never become king if I just stand here all day. I'll show that jinni how brave I am. Besides, it's just a rock.* He then boldly stepped forward and with each step I could feel his confidence increase. *See, he told himself, it's only stone. If this is what it'll be like, then this quest should be easy.*

Then the moment I always love came. Just as Gimil-Sin placed his foot on the lower jaw, the demon door's eyes flew open and he released a howl that shook the trees and sent the birds scattering.

Gimil-Sin flung himself backwards with a scream of mortal terror, his entire insides seizing up and his lungs

squeezing out the last of his breath in a wheeze as he hit the ground.

If the boy had the ability to hear the in-between plane of our demon existence, he would be mortified at how uproariously we were laughing over such a simple trick. I love intense emotions – such energy they put out.

After cowering for several more minutes in the ensuing silence, I finally convinced him to arise and try again. He stood on shaky legs and hesitantly stepped forward. As before, nothing happened until he set his foot on the lower jaw. Once again, the eyes flew open and the throat let loose another wail. This time, Gimil-Sin only lifted his foot instead of jumping away. The howl subsided. He stepped down again, and again the cry erupted. Once more, he lifted his foot, and once more the noise stopped and the eyes closed.

*I get it, he thought, this is like some kind of alarm system. That's what Jinni meant when he said I had to conquer my fear.* I could feel him bolstering his courage. *Okay, here goes.* And he stepped forward into the yawning maw. This time, as the maniacal shriek set forth, he wasn't deterred, but continued straight down into the awaiting darkness.

Of course, I would have taken the torch from the wall to light my way, but this wasn't my lesson to learn.

As Gimil-Sin continued walking down the demon's throat, the floor tilted downward steeper and steeper until he had to place his hands on either side of the walls to brace himself. As it grew steeper, it became darker, until

there was no light at all. I could feel his anxiety level rise, his heart rate increasing dramatically.

He had to stifle a moan of fear and disgust when his hand encountered something slimy on the wall. He paused. *What is that?* He almost gagged when the stench hit him. *Oh, gross. I've got to get that off me. But I can't let go of the wall or I'll fall. I just have to keep going.* He glanced once over his shoulder, into the all pervading blackness with a look of almost regret. On he continued as the floor grew steeper and the walls grew slimier.

Suddenly, he felt something brushing at him, at his bare legs, at his hair and chest, something soft and flowing, almost caressing. Crying out in surprise, he had to make a great effort not to let go of the walls. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he tried to control himself. *It's nothing,* he commanded himself, *it's just the wind, or spider webs.*

Of course, at the word 'spider,' I had to project an image of hundreds of tiny arachnids swarming over his body biting him in dozens of places. The little gargoyles brushing all over his body heard my instructions and proceeded to nip at his skin with their sharp talons.

This sent Gimil-Sin in a rage of panic. By now, his feet were almost dangling below him, the floor becoming another wall. *No! I hate spiders!* His mind shrieked. *Get them off! Don't let go of the walls.* In futility, he hung motionless in the cave, with abated breath, his hands pressed hard against the walls, arms shaking with the effort. Beads of sweat broke out on his face and dribbled down his neck,

leaving an itchy trail that only fueled his imagination.

“Can’t let go,” he encouraged himself. He forced another few steps, the itching growing worse. Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore, and with a grunt of frustration, he let go of the walls and began slapping at his body.

That’s when the floor dropped from beneath him and Gimil-Sin plummeted down into the emptiness below, his scream echoing up around him. He fell for what felt like eternity to him, screaming until his throat grew raw.

Finally, with a thud that shook his body and knocked the wind out of him, Gimil-Sin hit the ground and rolled to a stop on his back, panting with the exertion. After he’d had a chance to collect his breath, he lifted his head to look around.

Lances of dim light revealed to him a large, open area with solid-looking walls all around. The air was still and dusty. Gimil-Sin squeezed his hands into fists and looked down in surprise. *What’s this? Sand? That’s why I’m all right. I landed in sand.* He lifted a fist and watched as the earth spilled like gray silk through his fingers. *Gray? But sand isn’t usually gray. This doesn’t feel like sand.*

He got up and headed for a shaft of light. As he held his hand closer to his face to inspect the grime covering it, his toe hit a sharp object that sent it skittering across the floor. Curious, he bent down to retrieve it. After a moment of inspection, Gimil-Sin threw the object away with a cry of disgust. It hit the wall with a clatter that quickly faded away.

*That was a bone!* His mind reeled. *I’ve seen enough*

*graves that have been robbed to know what that is. That was human.* He looked about him at the sand and noticed how it sifted like soot from a fire. His scalp tightened, and his eyes grew wide. *These are ashes, human ashes!* He had to control the impulse to vomit. *Is this what the dead eat in the afterlife? For eternity?*

In a panic, he began spinning around, searching for an exit. His feet, ankle deep in ash, whipped the powdery earth up into the air, clouding his view and choking him. His breathing grew ragged, and his eyes stung. The ashes began clogging his nostrils and he could taste the ash that seeped into his mouth. Hyperventilating, Gimil-Sin fell to his hands and knees, fighting for consciousness. He remained in that position.

Slowly, the ashes settled around him, the air growing clearer. *Think, he commanded himself, you won't get out of this by panicking. I refuse to die here like this. Now, get up and find a way out. Calmly.* Placing his feet beneath him, he stood up straight, being careful not to disturb the dust. He looked about, still seeing no way out.

Then, a tickle began at the corner of his nose. He tried to ignore it. It grew worse. He scratched it. The tickle grew worse. It began traveling up his nostril as if climbing on its own. At this thought, Gimil-Sin clawed at his nose trying to get the dirt out. He could feel it building and knew what was inevitable. His head reared back, and he let out a deafening sneeze.

The reaction was immediate and awesome to see. His sneeze blew like a monsoon wind across the sooty floor,

lifting the layers of ash into the air and whipping it into a whirlwind. It began spinning around the room, sucking up more and more ash, its size increasing exponentially. The roar of the wind it created pressed in on Gimil-Sin, decreasing his hearing and flapping his skirt about like a sail in a tempest. He could feel the tug on his body.

The tornado spun wildly around the room, growing larger, then centered itself in the room. The ground below began to spin in the opposite direction as the twister, creating a vortex. The two monsters spun, opposing each other, and seemed to wait.

Gimil-Sin cleared the grit from his eyes the best he could and then studied the phenomenon. *So, what do I do?* He glanced around again and still saw no sign of escape, except for the two forces in front of him. *Am I supposed to jump into the tornado, or the quicksand? He glanced at the ashy ground about him. Is that what they did? Is that how they died? But, I can't just stay here.* His throat released a sob. *I wish Jinni was here. He'd know what to do. But, that's what I'm supposed to figure out. Besides, he'd never tell me even if he was here.* How true that statement was. He squared his shoulders. *So, what would Gilgamesh do?*

A sudden and intense heat at his back caught his attention. He noticed that the room had grown brighter. A deep orange light. He whirled around to face the wall and jumped back with a scream. The wall behind him had caught fire. He watched, stunned, as the flames licked up the wall and spread insidiously around the room, engulfing the other three walls and flowing across the ceiling.

*Whoa! Now I know how all the others died. Gimil-Sin looked back and forth between the twisting monsters and the encroaching flames. If I stay here, I'll be roasted alive. If I jump into the tornado, I'll be spun to death. If I jump into the quicksand, I'll suffocate. The fire is moving toward the cyclone, so if I don't jump into the tornado before the flames reach it, I'll be spun and burned to death.* He was certainly cutting it close.

“Ohh, here goes nothing!” he yelled, as he flung himself into the tornado just as the flames reached it.