

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KING NARAM-GUR'S men reacted a moment later, forming a bristling, armed barrier around the king and his stricken captain.

Tepe started to rise from her seat. "Father?" she called.

I held her still with my hand. "He's all right," I said. "He wasn't hit." I wasn't ready to say who was, not yet. From where I stood, I could see Gudea. I expanded my being to fill the room in order to absorb all information from the various directions, in essence being in several places at once.

King Shamash had remained where he was and as the enemy troop circled their fallen soldier, he quietly gave orders to his men. "Captain Endilla, please inform my men outside that the imposter king has been overthrown and that Dilmun is ours. They will wish to celebrate. But, make sure they leave a few buildings intact. We don't want our new countrymen to think we're too barbaric." His man turned to execute his orders. "Oh, and Captain, tell the men to proceed with the cleansing of enemy resistance, starting

with the palace guards.”

The man went about his orders, departing from a doorway opposite the one now swarming with Naramgur’s men.

“That will teach these people to allow a false king to sit on *my* throne,” Shamash murmured as he turned and walked to the center of the room to await the retaliation he knew, and hoped, would come.

His foot caught on something causing him to look down. “Oh, you’re still here?” he asked mildly, hardly bothering to give full notice to Gimil-Sin as he lay supine on the floor where he’d fallen. “I thought you’d have run home to your little fishing shack by now.” He gave Gimil-Sin a swift kick, as he addressed his men. “Will someone get this cur out of my sight?”

One of the men sprang eagerly forward and dragged Gimil-Sin out of the fighting ring by this hair, where he was unceremoniously dumped against a wall. Gimil-Sin scrambled along the wall until he was at the corner of the dais. There, he slunk up and curled at the foot of his once-prized throne.

Moments later, two piercing whistles rent the air and an immediate response of war whoops and clashing weapons ensued outside the palace.

I debated on whether or not I should assist the Dilmunian army in battle, but decided that there was a more pressing matter inside. Triumph over the Dilmun army would not be easy. They were very well trained. Besides, in this throne room was where the real victory would be won.

Within the ring of soldiers, Naram-gur had reached Gudea's side and looked him over. The spear had pierced Gudea through the upper left chest muscle and effectively pinned him to the wall. Blood seeped up from the wound and soaked Gudea's linen shirt and was now running down to pool on the floor. "Gudea?" he asked, lifting the inert head.

Eyes fluttered open and Gudea weakly gazed back at Naram-gur. "Yes, Sire?"

Relief filled Naram-gur's face and he released his pent up breath. "You saved my life, again."

"All in a day's work," Gudea replied, smiling weakly. "Of course, if you would stop making people want to kill you, it'd make my job a lot easier."

Naram-gur laughed shakily and leaned forward to kiss Gudea's forehead in gratitude. "I'll see what I can do."

Shifting gingerly, Gudea glanced at the spear. "Would you mind getting this out of me now?" he said through gritted teeth.

Naram-gur inspected the damage. "It's pierced your shoulder, but seems to have hit nothing vital." He gripped the shaft with both hands and braced a foot against the wall, as two other soldiers held Gudea still. "Are you ready, Gudea?"

"Just do it."

Naram-gur gave a massive yank and the spear jerked out of the wall and out of Gudea's body after momentarily refusing to budge.

Gudea's accompanying shout of agony brought Tepe

straight out of her throne with a bolt. “Gudea!” she yelled.

It was all I could do to hold her back.

Tears of fury with me and fear for her beloved competed with her flailing arms. “Let me go!”

The painful firming of my grip on her shoulder held her incapacitated. “Not yet.”

She glared at me with eyes full of tears and betrayal, and it broke my spirit. “What? Why?”

“It’s not time.” I stared into her eyes, liquid eyes that burned and melted me. “Trust me,” was all I could offer.

She stared into my eyes for a moment, as if reading my intentions, my soul, and relaxed.

“Shamash!”

The guttural utterance swiftly transferred our attention back to the center of the room.

Naram-gur shoved his way through his guards and stalked to the middle of the room. Brandishing the bloody spear like damning evidence, he squarely faced Shamash. He threw the blood-soaked weapon at Shamash’s feet. “You traitor! You tried to assassinate me. Why? I helped you.”

Shamash actually chuckled. “Helped me? Hardly. I would have won Dilmun with or without you. I just allowed you to expedite the outcome, since you seemed so eager to do so.” He pushed at the spear with a toe. “As for being a traitor, I would say that title belongs to you, now wouldn’t it? You were the one to offer me your daughter in the first place, and twice you’ve broken that oath and given her to less worthy men. I was only getting my revenge. You

would've done the same."

I wouldn't have thought it possible for Naram's face to get any redder, but I was wrong.

"Don't you dare compare me to you. I'm nothing like you. Had I known, I never would have betrothed Tepe-Aya to you in the first place."

"But you did, and now she is mine, and everything with her, including the rest of your kingdom once I've dispatched you." With that, he drew his sword and crouched into a fighting stance.

Naram-gur drew his weapon likewise and prepared to clash. "Unlike the boy, you will not find me a weak opponent, Shamash. Nor will I concede."

Shamash lips pulled back in a grimace of enjoyment. "Nor would I want you to."

Had I known what was about to happen because of my actions, I would have let them fight to the death. As it was ...

I withdrew the U-stone and Shiman stone from under my robes and handed them to Tepe. "Use these on Gudea's wound," I instructed, releasing my grip. "Go to him now."

She sprang like a gazelle from her seat and sprinted across the arena.

I had only meant for her to be a distraction. I'm sorry to say it worked a little too well.

In order to reach Gudea, Tepe had to pass close to Shamash. As she dashed toward him, her movement caught his peripheral vision. Whipping about, he snatched her by the arm and wrenched her to a standstill.

“And where are you going, my dear bride?”

She struggled against his grasp, until she realized it was futile. His grip was too strong and getting stronger the more she resisted.

The strength of the grip he maintained on her arm turned her skin white. However, she refused to give him the pleasure of seeing her react and she clamped her lips tightly together under the pain.

Shamash handed his sword backward to one of his men, his gaze never leaving Tepe. Pulling her close, he positioned her between himself and her father.

Naram-gur lowered his weapon but remained wary. “Don’t,” he said.

Shamash gazed at Naram-gur over Tepe’s shoulder. “She is my wife. I will do as I please with her.” Like a buyer judging a prize bull, he returned to Tepe. “Let me look at you a moment, my wife.” He perused her body with his eyes.

She turned her head with disgust.

Gripping her hard by the chin, Shamash forced her to face him again. “We’ll have none of that, now. From now on, when I touch you, you will respond with gratitude. I am, after all, accepting you even though you are damaged goods.”

I’m sure she would have spit on him, if she’d had any.

Shamash released her chin and allowed his hand to roam down her body, gently cupping her breast before continuing down to her belly. Here his hand paused. “Ah, the baby. Pregnancy does become you, my dear.” He spoke

gently, rhetorically, as he started stroking her roundness. “However, it’s not mine. That is unfortunate.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“Well now, we can’t have you bearing another man’s baby, can we? The people of Dilmun might think that this bastard is their legitimate heir to the kingdom of Dilmun. When it’s old enough, they might actually try to overthrow me and put it on the throne in my place.” He pulled his hand away and set it to his chin as if in thought. “No, this child must not be allowed to survive. You will bear only my children.”

With that, his fist flew down and slammed into her stomach.

She dropped directly to the floor.

“No!” King Naram-gur screamed. His sword came up and swung straight down toward Shamash’s head.

In an instant, Shamash’s blade was back in his hands, blocking Naram-gur’s swing.

Before their swords could meet, my fury broke. The blast from the explosion of emotions was like a detonation, and the shockwave slammed all the shutters closed on the windows and sent everyone in the room flying against the walls.

Everyone except Shamash. It was my turn to deal with him.

The blast had extinguished every oil lamp in the room. With the sun still on the other side of the building, the light coming in from the windows was weak. Only the glow of my *melam* illuminated the room. It writhed and undulated

like snakes of light about the room.

Dust and bits of ceiling settled to the floor.

Tepe-Aya lay groaning on the ground, curling around her abdomen in a fetal position, one fist clutched tightly. I could see blood beginning to trickle from between her thighs.

In the silence that followed, Naram-gur stole forward and pulled his daughter to safety next to his wounded captain.

Gudea stretched out his hand and weakly stroked her cheek. She struggled to drag herself closer to him. Her fist opened and pressed the healing stones to his chest. His bloody hand closed over hers, their fingers entwining.

Shamash faced me. "Yes, Jinni?"

His sheer insolence goaded me. With the sucking in of each breath I grew in size and stature until my horned cap touched the ceiling and my stretched wings encompassed the room. The glow of my *melam* increased until the heat and radiance from it became unbearable.

"How dare you treat her as such," I said.

"Exactly why would you care how I treat her? It's not like you love her or something," he said with a sneer.

"Who do you think you are?"

"Who am I?" He looked almost surprised. "Why, I'm a god."

"I will finish you."

"What, you, a mere jinni, dare oppose me? Your pitiful magician tricks don't impress me."

"Mere jinni? Does this look mere to you?" And I

showed him my true self.

He paled and raised his hands protectively to his face as he fell to the floor.

To the rest of the room, I still maintained my jinni guise, beautiful and brightly glowing. To Shamash, I appeared in all my horrific glory – talons of a raptor, black and dripping with poison, razor-like scales covering my leathery hide, vaporous cloak of black, suspended like the deadly tendrils of an octopus. I opened my cracked, sulfurous lips, bearing my snake fangs and spewed out noxious gas.

Even in his cowering state, Shamash was too arrogant to give up. “You have no control here. I control this land and everything in it. I control you.”

“Is that so?” I boomed in a voice of thunder. “Then control this ...”

Flinging my arms wide, I intoned, “Demon of wind and sand, stealer of the tablet of destinies, whose name I now speak, rise and destroy the enemies of your cousin, he who dares lay claim to your domain.”

And I released the Ifreet. For the love of a woman.