

Brothers of the Zodiac



WATER

Maxwell Thomas

BROTHERS
OF THE ZODIAC
WATER

MAXWELL THOMAS

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PROLOGUE



**SPRING, CIRCA 3500 BC
UR, MESOPOTAMIA**

PROLOGUE

GIRTAB PATTED HIMSELF DOWN. The knives were hidden in his skirt, among the folds of fur that he had sewn in for just that purpose. It was chilly tonight, so he could get away with the ram's-skin skirt.

He was going to meet the Brothers tonight. Although the way would be brightly lit, the way back would be dark, and he didn't want to get caught unawares. He would walk with Saj most of the way back. But here, toward the north half of the wharf where he lived, no one really had homes, except thieves and the slaves he hadn't sold.

Girtab locked the door and started away from his home. He headed west, to the northern part of the city, to the White Temple. There, the Brothers would meet, and reiterate their quest to the Lady.

Girtab had called this meeting because of what he had seen two days ago. Gud, the Bull, had come to his slave market, even though he was provided slaves — and more — with his position in the palace.

Girtab grinned. How ironic that the man who had succeeded in rushing the bulls during a celebration of Gilgamesh's victory over the Bull of Heaven would be the man to kill him.

The Lady Ishtar blessed him, as she had blessed all the Brothers, with abilities beyond those of even Gilgamesh and Enkidu. With this blessing, however, came this quest: they must kill Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh had vanquished the Bull of Heaven, who had been sent by Ishtar's sister to punish Gilgamesh for repudiating Ishtar. Now she had men to kill Gilgamesh.

Except, they needed to be reminded every once in a while.

It had been three years, and each of the Brothers had partially gone their separate ways in the city of Ur. Three years while they bided their time. Girtab knew it was time.

Girtab turned the corner and literally bumped into an archer in full regalia.

"Saj!"

"Girtab!"

They clasped their forearms and looked into each other's black eyes. Both men were dark skinned and bald. Saj carried a bow and a quiver, and wore a necklace of blue stones on a thong. His fur skirt was similar to Girtab's, without the pockets for the knives.

Saj smiled releasing his forearm. "You called this meeting?"

"You'll see why when we get there."

"Do you have a new plan?"

"We need new ideas."

"Good. I have a few."

"How have you been doing?"

“I have a hundred and twenty men under my command.”

“Very good.”

“How’s the slave trade?”

“Lucrative. I have some women for sale.” He grinned at Saj.

Saj laughed. “I’ve already fathered five children. I’ve done my duty.”

“Five that you know of.”

“I was a soldier before the Lady rescued me, just like you.”

“Yes, but I stayed with the soldiers.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice. I was married before going off to war.”

Girtab waved a hand in dismissal. “Those are the old days. Now it’s different.”

“We still have a war to fight,” said Saj.

“I’m glad you still know we have a war. Some of us ...”

Saj sighed. “Is this about Gud again?”

Girtab turned another corner and didn’t answer.

“What is it about you two?”

They came upon the plaza that led to the White Temple of Ishtar. Saj almost put a hand to Girtab’s shoulder to get him to stop, but Girtab turned around to him.

“We have a *duty*.”

“That doesn’t mean he can’t live a little.”

Girtab glared, and then tossed his head back. “You’ll see.”

The men walked across the plaza to the ziggurat and entered one of the lower levels. It was getting dark, so someone was beginning to light torches through the

hallway. They walked through the halls, Girtab knowing his way through, and Saj just a half-pace behind.

They came out into a small room, lit by torches. Two men were seated at a table full of food. One had his long hair pulled back by a white fabric headband and wore a robe decorated with tassels of fringe on it. He had a short, thick beard. The other was bald and wore a tunic similar to Saj, but much simpler.

"My brothers," said the man with the long hair, as he held his arms out. "Welcome, welcome."

"It's good to see you, Urmah," said Saj, clasping forearms with him. Girtab did also.

"You come here armed, Girtab?"

"It's for when I leave."

Said the other bald man, "I came with my spear and you didn't complain."

"Because," said Urmah, "You didn't hide your spear."

"Leave him alone," said Saj, as he took some cheese.

"Where is Gud?" asked Girtab.

"You know him," said the other bald man. "Late as usual."

"Hail to you all, blessings be upon your house," came a voice from the doorway. They all turned to see another bald man come in, wearing only a loincloth woven between his legs and pleated.

"Allul," cried Urmah, again holding his arms out. "Welcome!"

"Our Lady's grace upon you," said the bald man, as he kissed Urmah, and then each of the other men in turn. He stopped at Girtab, and put an arm around his waist. "Why are you angry?"

"Where is Gud?" he spat.

The rest of the men looked at him.

“Eat something,” said Allul. “Because otherwise your anger will eat you up inside.”

The bald man in the military tunic approached with a piece of bread and cheese. “He’s right.”

Girtab took the bread. Allul did not release Girtab’s waist. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy to come to my little hovel by the sea? You used to come there after every market day.”

Then a man came into the room. Big and broad, he was built like a house. He filled the doorway. He smiled, beaming at them.

“Look what I have!”

He stepped aside, and a smaller man, with hair of flax and wearing only a loincloth like Allul stood in the doorway. He looked embarrassed.

Girtab drew himself to his full height. “Get that slave out of here.”

“Slave?” said Urmah. “This meeting is for us only, not for any slaves.”

“How do you know he’s a slave?” asked Allul.

“Because I sold him to him two days ago,” snarled Girtab. “Now get him out of here.”

“He doesn’t understand what you’re saying,” said Gud.

“Oh, he understands well enough!” said Girtab, as he approached the man.

He knew the man intimately because even he himself found him irresistible. Girtab didn’t damage the goods, but he did take the slave to his bed to examine him thoroughly.

“We do not have slaves here,” said Urmah firmly. “For very important reasons.”

“Slaves gossip,” said the other military man. “He’s right. Bring him back home and come back.”

“Send him upstairs until you’re done,” said Girtab. “I don’t have time to wait all night while you reapply your makeup after you fuck him.”

The big man narrowed his eyes at Girtab. “You’re getting close.”

Urmah slipped out of the room. Allul squeezed Girtab’s waist to try and get him to calm down, because Girtab’s entire body had gone rigid, preparing for a fight, at that one look from Gud.

The flaxen-haired young man did not move from the doorway, until two men in robes just like Urmah grabbed him and frog-marched him out of the room. He glanced back at Gud, a look of fear on his face.

Gud reassured him, “I’ll come get you as soon as I’m done.”

“Oh, he didn’t understand that,” said the military man.

“Shut up, Lahunga.”

Lahunga just shrugged.

“Now, you see why I called this meeting,” said Girtab, stepping out of Allul’s embrace. “We drew lots, in the desert, when the Lady first called us back from the dead. Do you remember that?”

They all nodded.

“And you, Gud, drew the largest lot. And you, Gud, were going to be the one to land the killing blow on the Murderer.” Girtab walked up to the big man, and stared up at him. “What have you done for three years?”

“Don’t blame me —”

“Saj and Lahunga joined the military and have access to the palace as guards. Urmah became a priest of the

Lady and can go to the palace whenever he wishes. Allul is a fishmonger and has access to the palace kitchens. I am a slave-seller who can go to the palace at will with new slaves. And you, Gud? What access does a bullfighter have to the palace?”

“For your information, I have been working toward exactly that.”

“Prove it.”

“Gilgamesh has asked me to a banquet in honor of my defeating their Bull of Heaven.” He looked to each of the men. “You will all come with me as my servants.”

“Over my dead body,” snarled Girtab.

“No,” added Lahunga.

“I will go,” said Allul.

“No,” said Urmah. “I will not debase myself.”

Everyone looked to Saj. Saj shrugged. “I am known in the Army now. If I go to a banquet disguised as a slave, they’ll know me.”

“That was a stupid idea!” Girtab said. “What happened to our original idea, that we would go into the palace under cover of night, and then we would go to his bedchamber and attack? How hard is that?”

“There are six of us. We won’t be able to get through the cordon,” said Lahunga.

“We can’t die.”

They looked at each other.

“You forget that, don’t you? We live by the grace of the Lady, praise be Her name. If She chooses to claim us, then we will return to Erishkigal’s realm willingly. We live our lives for Her.”

“Then why are you in such a rush to get rid of it?” asked Gud.

Allul exhaled sharply, as if he'd been hit. Girtab rocked back. "We have ... a quest."

"You're so worried about the quest, did you ever think that the Lady gave us this life to live? We were taken too soon by that Murderer, and now we have a chance to live our lives again."

Saj said, "Let us ask the Lady what she wants of us."

Now all the heads turned to Urmah. He nodded.

"We will use the sacrificial temple. No one is there."

The six men followed Urmah up a set of winding stairs. He led them into a chamber, decorated with blue and white stones, showing the winged bulls in relief. At the end of the chamber was a figure of a woman, her eyes painted black, her black hair long past her shoulders. This was an older temple than the ones above, and meant for smaller gatherings. The altar was unlit, though it would be for the private use of those who meant to sacrifice.

The six men disrobed, hanging their clothes on hooks located outside of the chamber. Even Urmah took off his fringed robes. Girtab nodded, remembering far back to his childhood when his mother took him to Innana a long time ago: "All are naked before the gods, for all are equal in their eyes."

They crowded into the hot room, dimly lit by one torch and a high window to the outside. Urmah began the chant, the hymn to the goddess, and the men joined in one by one as each line was sung. Girtab swayed with the men, with the music of their voices, finding himself in a half-trance.

The altar fires burst forth. Urmah stepped back, bumping into the men behind him. He stared, wide-eyed into the flame. Then it dampened, and slowly went out. He turned to face the men.

“Well?” asked Girtab.

“We attack. Tonight.”

Gud stammered, “I’m not ready!”

Urmah said coldly, “You will be.”

The rest of the men exited the small chamber, and quietly got dressed. They were soldiers now, and they had their orders.

“You’ve gotten soft with your easy living,” said Girtab. “Was she angry with us?”

Urmah shook his head. “We are to attack him now, that’s all she said. I will get robes for us all, to go to the palace.” He turned to Gud. “And a sword, for you.”

They all followed Urmah again to another chamber. Here were weapons, and each of the men selected some. Saj, a bow, but Luhunga kept his spear. Girtab took the throwing knives out of his fur skirt. Allul took two short swords. Gud looked through the weapons without choosing one. Urmah returned, his arms full of robes. He plucked a sword off the wall and shoved it at Gud.

Gud made a noise, something like fear, and took the blade. Allul took a robe, and put it on. Girtab took a robe, and the rest took theirs, Gud taking his last.

“Now we go,” said Urmah.

He led them out of the chambers, down a couple of stairs, to the base of the ziggurat. They crossed the plaza to the palace, and walked through the gate. They were let inside without anyone stopping them.

It wasn’t until they got into the courtyard inside the palace that they didn’t know where to go. Saj looked up at the sky, and pointed down the hall. “In there.”

They walked in a single line toward the entrance. They all kept their hands near the blades or at the ready as they

walked in single file through the halls, passing exposed chambers. Saj led, an arrow nocked.

He turned another corner and stepped aside. Urmah went into the room. The rest of the men spread out in the room, and saw two large men, Gilgamesh with Enkidu, both alone in the bath.

No guards. No women. No weapons.

All six men at the same time bared their weapons. Gilgamesh turned toward them. "What is —"

With a roar, Gud raised his sword and went at Gilgamesh. At the same time, Saj let loose an arrow, Girtab a throwing blade. Both hit a mark, but not the mark that was meant, because Enkidu stepped between Gilgamesh, the rushing man and the weapons.

The sword bit deep into Enkidu's neck and shoulder. The arrow pierced his other shoulder, while the blade caught the right side of his breast. Luhunga rushed forward with his spear, and impaling Enkidu through his side.

Seeing that they had not hit Gilgamesh, Girtab took aim again, this time at Gilgamesh's neck, and threw the blade. He watched with disbelief as the blade changed its trajectory, all on its own, and slammed into the neck of Enkidu.

Urmah turned around to face the guards that were coming into the chamber. Girtab, knowing something was stopping him from killing Gilgamesh, turned and fought side by side with Urmah. Allul, a whirling mass of swords, sliced through the guards.

Saj was the first one to say it: "I can't hit him!"

Gilgamesh got out of the bloody bath as Gud went toward him again. This time, Gilgamesh was ready, and

dodged out of the way of the swinging blade. “Go out, go out!” yelled Urmah.

Luhunga retrieved his spear, and held it before him. Like a machine, Saj sent arrows off into the crowd of guards at the door, who went down like wheat.

“Gud!”

“I will kill you!” Gud roared, and went at Gilgamesh again. Girtab turned back around to see Gilgamesh grab Gud and throw him into the pool. The robe took on water, and Gilgamesh jumped back into the bloody mess.

Saj yelled, “It’s clear, let’s GO.”

“We’re not leaving Gud!” cried Girtab, starting to head back.

Gilgamesh had grabbed Gud by the hair and shoved him head first into the pool.

“OUT, NOW!” yelled Luhunga, shoving Girtab through the doorway. They ran at a breakneck speed down some hallways; Saj leading the way to the palace’s outer edge and the water.

“Allul!” Saj called.

Allul came forward. He looked out into the night, then said, “I see one.”

He ran down toward the edge of the stairs, and there was a moored boat. Allul undid the ties while Urmah jumped into the boat. They heard the noise of the palace awakening, lights being lit throughout it.

When everyone was on the boat, Allul put his hand in the water. A great rush of water came from his hand, and the boat pushed away from the palace steps. Girtab stared up at the palace as the boat jerked out into the Euphrates.

“Gud is dead,” said Urmah, “May the Lady accept Her to Her bosom again.”

“Gud can’t be dead,” said Luhunga. “Only the Lady takes us in death. So She promised.”

“I’ve drowned numerous times,” said Allul, as he let the boat lazily drift downriver. “It isn’t pleasant, but I haven’t died.”

“This is all my fault,” said Girtab, staring at the bottom of the boat.

“Yes,” said Saj, “It is.”

“That’s why you’re going to stop him from getting buried alive.” Lahunga said.

Girtab looked to his brothers. None looked sympathetic to him; this meant he was going to have to do this alone.

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Allul brought them downstream to the wharf where he lived. They all disembarked, and he sent the boat to drift further downstream, where it would either be picked up by someone else or break up in the water.

Knowing they were now in the area of Ur where walking the streets at night meant you took your life in your own hands, they all switched to have their arms at hand.

“Guards will be walking the streets of the upper city,” said Allul.

“It’s best if we stay around here for tonight,” said Saj.

Lahunga sighed. “Looks like we’re not getting any sleep.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” said Urmah. “I was planning on getting away. I can’t go back to the temple.”

“Did you see what happened to our weapons?” said Girtab. “They didn’t touch the Murderer, but they —”

Allul made a hissing sound. Girtab fell silent.

“My home is among others. I will give you clothes, Urmah, but you must stay here.”

“We’ll return to the army,” said Saj, looking at Luhunga, who nodded.

Girtab said, “I guess I have a job to do. I’ll do it as soon as I take care of the slaves I have for auction tomorrow.”

“Of course, make your money before saving our brother,” snarled Saj.

“He’s right,” Allul said. “We must return to our jobs so that no one knows.”

Luhunga said, “We need to return to the army before first light, Saj.”

Saj glared at Girtab, a look of near hatred on his face. Then he turned from the group and strode out into the night, Luhunga jumping to follow him.

Allul turned to Urmah. “I will find a boat for you and we will go fishing this morning.”

Urmah frowned.

Allul laughed and put his arm around Urmah’s shoulders. “Come, I will make you feel better about it.”

Girtab knew what that meant, from knowing Allul in the past. Allul would let Urmah have his way with him. Knowing what Allul would do made him stir under the robes. But he didn’t have time to do that now.

He had to go back home and be ready for sunrise when the markets would open.

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“Five bushels of barley from the man in the center.”

The man in the center nodded. He stepped up and placed in Girtab’s hand five bronze coins. Girtab was the

third slaver today and had just finished selling off the last of his wares. He usually stuck around to try and buy other slaves, and then resell them later, or find particular slaves for certain patrons.

One of the young boys who frequented the upper city said that a traitor was captured and he was going to be put out in the desert. He had also heard that Enkidu, Gilgamesh's best friend, was found dead last night, and Gilgamesh was beside himself with grief. Some reports said he was killed defending Gilgamesh, others that he died of wounds suffered during the melee. Some said that the traitor did it; some said that a hundred men attacked the palace. All of them said that Gilgamesh wanted the whole city to go into mourning. As with all the slavers and all the workers, they waited for an actual decree from the palace. In the meantime, business went on as usual. For Girtab, he was going to go out into the desert and find his brother, and they would escape Ur together. Where they would go, he didn't know, but he did know that they weren't going to be able to kill Gilgamesh again.

What would the Goddess think of his cowardice? Would She strike him down? He deserved it, after all.

He travelled to the upper city, his heart heavy, just in time to see the cage containing Gud get pulled through the streets. People threw things at him. He had nothing to cover himself, but he stood proudly and let the objects hit him. Girtab could see thick welts across Gud's back — he had been whipped before being placed in the cage. A stone struck his head and Gud stumbled against the cage. People roared and threw even more things at him. Rotten food, excrement, stones — whatever came to hand.

"My brother," Girtab whispered, as the cage rattled down the street, heading toward the desert gate. Girtab

fought his way through the crowd until he got to the desert gate, where the crowd was too thick to get through. Here, people yelled instead of threw things. “Igibala, Igibala!” *Traitor, traitor!* “Ludaku!” *Murderer!*

Girtab fought back tears as the cage went through the gate and people crowded around it, while guards stopped them from following it out. They didn’t want other people to find him and possibly set him free. They would put him deep into the desert, and then return by nightfall.

Girtab watched the cage turn into a shimmering mirage and disappear over the dunes. It was late in the afternoon, and he found that he was hungry. But he would not eat — he would suffer like his brother was going to suffer. He would drink to keep his strength up, but he would fast for his brother.

Milling around the upper city, Girtab avoided guards and looked at merchant wares. He bought a large warm robe for Gud when he would release him. Three skins of beer he also bought, two to carry, and one to drink from throughout the day.

Girtab also avoided the temple to Ishtar, thought he wanted to go into it and pray for guidance and help. He paid a priest to make a sacrifice of a lamb for him instead.

The afternoon wore on, until finally it was nightfall. He stayed at the gate, waiting until the men who had taken the cage returned. He would follow them back into the city, and maybe ply one or two with some beer at a food stall to get an idea of what direction they went.

“Slaver, what are you doing here?”

He turned to face a guard. Girtab only smiled. “I am waiting for my next shipment.”

“From here? Other slavers usually receive their goods from the gates.”

“I’m holding a spot.”

“You’ve been hanging around most of the day. You were expecting them?”

“Since this morning.”

The guard frowned. “You should not stay here.”

“Let me stay until dark.”

“Fine.”

Girtab let out a breath. Lies, but he had to tell them. Lies came easily to him at times, and this was one of them.

Eventually, in the distance, he saw men riding asses toward them. He waited until they came back, and then he followed them toward the palace. Girtab got a good look at them when they came in and memorized their faces.

Near the palace were some food stalls that were open late at night for the soldiers and guards. Girtab hung around there as well. Then full dark fell, and the men at the food stalls started packing up for the night.

A man bumped into Girtab, hard. He turned to look at him to give him a piece of his mind and saw that it was Luhunga. He said, cryptically, “Follow the sun until it is straight up above you.”

That meant he needed to go northwest. Girtab said nothing, but slunk back into the night. He did not go back to his home. He stayed with a holy prostitute in the temple of Ishtar, hoping for a dream.

After he performed his necessary act — he imagined that it was the Goddess that he was making love to, and the girl made too much noise — he settled down to sleep. He saw his brothers, each one: Saj asleep in his barracks, Luhunga on guard, Allul and Urmah entwined together on a straw pallet in Allul’s humble home. Last he saw Gud, in the cage, trying to sleep but shivering in the dark. Girtab moved closer to Gud, and put his hand on Gud’s shoulder.

Gud woke up, startled, then stared in the dark. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This is all my fault.”

Gud looked down. “No, it’s mine. I shouldn’t have gotten used to my life. I should have kept my eye on what we were there for.”

“I will come tomorrow to save you.”

“And then what? I can’t go back to Ur.”

“We’ll have to go somewhere else. Find a village and live out our days.”

“If the Lady will let us. We live on Her whim.”

Girtab knew that. It was a chance they were going to have to take. The brothers would be separated, possibly forever.

“Come get me,” said Gud. “Please.”

Girtab lost his hold on Gud, and he came back to himself, back to the pallet where the prostitute lay with him.

He remembered looking at Gud, his mountainous body, and thought of him taking him in “punishment”, ...

He groaned, turned and got up. The prostitute reached for him, but he shook her off. “No, I need to go.”

She said nothing more as she got up and put her robe on. “The Lady blesses you.”

“I hope so,” he said, and left the temple.

The sun was coming up, and he went to the desert gate. He had the robe, refilled his beer skin, and headed out into the desert alone.

He walked, heading northwest, following the sun as it traversed across the sky.

He trudged through the desert. A lone man, walking through the desert looked like a suicide. There were

animals in the desert, not only those of his namesake, but other animals that would attack him without any warning.

Then there were also bandits.

He should have taken a horse or an ass.

He crested a hill, and saw before him just desert, but in the distance he could see something other than the mirage. He looked up at the sun, and kept walking, since it wasn't above him. He finally came down into a bowl, and climbed down into it, then up at the other side. At the top, he saw the first box.

This box was old and had been broken apart. Inside was a human skeleton, or the remains of one. He looked out, and saw that boxes and cages were scattered all around — here was the graveyard of traitors, adultresses, thieves, left to the mercy of the desert.

The boxes had thieves, some obelisks existed too — these were the adultresses. Traitors were exposed to the elements, so that they would never rest.

He took a sip of beer and walked through the graveyard, checking inside the cages to see skeletons, decomposing bodies. A skinny wolf was worrying at a corpse in one of the cages. The wolf didn't even look up at him.

"Gud!" he yelled.

"Over here!" he heard.

He tried to follow the voice. He kept calling for him, listening to the response, checking all the cages. Finally, he saw a man standing in a cage, and he ran toward it. "Gud!"

Gud was naked in the cage, staying away from the bars which were hot in the sun. "Girtab," he called, his voice hoarse.

Girtab first handed over the wine skin of beer. Gud drank slowly while Girtab put the robe in the cage. Next, he looked at the lock. It had been snapped cleanly.

“You broke it.”

“Last night.”

Gud pulled on the robe and pushed open the door, his hand covered over with part of the robe. “Where are we going now?”

“To the caves,” said Girtab. “We’ll have to chase out the bandits that are there.”

“That won’t be too difficult.”

Girtab looked out into the desert. “We have to get there, first.”

As it happened, the caves came to them.

Δ

They walked out of the graveyard and into the desert, heading toward the caves, when Gud said, “There’s dust.”

Thinking it was a dust storm, Girtab looked frantically for somewhere where they could get some cover. “Run this way, maybe we can outrun it.”

They ran west, heading toward scrubland instead of the mountains. The storm followed them. Gud paused and looked out at the storm. “Girtab, it’s bandits.”

Girtab stopped, panting, and peered. Black riders were at the base of the dust, which lessened as they got into the scrubland. They had no weapons.

They stood their ground.

The bandits galloped up to them, five of them, their horses breathing heavily in the heat. One of them had a

spear, which he pointed at Girtab. Girtab thrust his chest out, as if daring him to impale him.

“Escaped from the grave,” said one man, holding onto a prancing horse. He had a thick beard and his eyes were black coals. “What do you think about having a new life?”

“Thought about it,” said Gud. “Are there slaves?”

The man laughed, “Only the ones that you choose to make your slaves. And you must be strong.”

“I am strong,” said Gud. “The strongest man alive.”

“Even stronger than Gilgamesh, that evil ruler?”

“I would have been,” he said. “I was strong enough to kill Enkidu.”

“The ruler’s bedmate,” said the man. “Do you repudiate your ties to that city? Will you live your life out as a member of my band? For they have done nothing for you.”

Girtab thought about it. They wouldn’t have to go very far, and they would be fed on the rich men of the city who dared to try and pass through to the city.

“Yes,” said Girtab. “Yes, I do.”

Gud said sadly, “But my slave?”

“Let it go, he’s been sold to someone else by this time, as has all of your property.”

“I want my gold-haired slave.”

“We’ll get him in due time,” said Girtab, and looked up at the man on the horse. “We will join you.”

“Good, because otherwise, I would have had to kill you. Can you ride?”

Gud shook his head. Girtab nodded.

One of the men dismounted and helped Gud get onto the horse, while Girtab easily mounted another man’s horse. They rode back slowly, so as to not put any undue strain on the animals carrying two.

Δ

Time passed. Months, then years. Girtab watched Gud gather slaves to him, but he always pined for that flaxen-haired young man. Many bandits took females to rape and then sent them back, but others took boys or men. So it wasn't surprising if Girtab went to Gud's bed, or if Gud went to Girtab.

Yet Girtab also watched Gud lose his strength. They learned quickly how to ride, but as the years went by, Girtab watched as Gud grew older, his hair graying, and his eyes losing their sight.

Girtab kept looking in pools of water to see if he also aged, but he had not. Bandit leaders came and went, defeated or killed by other, younger men. Girtab never took the reins of leadership, though many wanted him to; it was enough that he took care of his own. Gud eventually got too old and sore to sit a horse. Usually the bandits would have turned him out, sent him back into the city. Girtab took him as his own, and no one denied him that.

Then, one day, Gud did not wake up.

With tears in his eyes, Girtab had men take him out to bury him. He distributed his own wealth among his friends, and took a horse to head back to Ur.

When he got there, he noticed the walls had fallen into disrepair, and not half as many men were lining it. He was allowed to enter without a challenge.

The square where the markets had been was deserted. He nudged his horse down to the wharfs, and saw that the bustling business that had been while he was there had turned into a trickle. He went to Allul's shack, and found it gone.

He turned his horse around and headed back into the city, toward the temple of Ishtar. There, the prostitutes were old and ugly, and there were only a few priests. No one sold offerings outside of the temple, and he had only coin, which the Lady Ishtar did not like.

He went into the cool, dark temple, finding his way to the main prayer chamber, where the statue of Ishtar was there, but no priests. The fire at her feet had dwindled to embers.

She? Even she has left? He knelt with one knee and bowed his head.

“Lady, I beg of you, where have the people gone?”

Thy Brothers are scattered among the winds.

He stared wide-eyed at the floor. Something spoke, directly to him, filling his mind.

Gud has returned to the palace of Erishkigal and his eyes set as stars. But he shall return. Thou shalt live until thou finds my love in another man’s eyes. Men will need thee, and thou shalt have power to guide thee.

“Yes, my Lady,” he whispered, his eyes full of wonder and tears. He remembered the love she bore him, and could feel it now in this room. He got up and broke the rules by walking up to the statue. He hugged her leg, tears of love and desire flowing now, tears of his want of Her and of his brothers.

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