

The drums beat, slow and heavy, the throb of distant thunder in tense humid air. The bitter smell of incense and the heady odor of ritual oils, saturated with lush, tropical flowers wafted on the breeze. At the top of a narrow platform, a woman stood, naked, her hands crossed over her heart. Her eyes were closed and her warm sienna-umber hair gathered forward over her shoulder, leaving the honey gold skin of her back and shoulder blades bare. The platform was in the center of a stone courtyard, under a tall wooden frame rather like a gallows. People crowded the square, standing shoulder to shoulder, pressed close around the platform in a tight circle, each one craning his neck to get the best view possible.

A second woman mounted the steps, resplendent in midnight blue lapis, iridescent feathers as long as her arm, and huge gold hoops in her ears. "I know you all fear the sickness that has been sweeping through our city," she proclaimed in a strong, clear voice. "But now Shebolba will hold Her hand over you. The Goddess will wash you clean with sacred blood." Reaching to the side, she retrieved a bundle of rope tied to the frame and unwound it. Four heavy ropes hung down from the cross bar, making the contraption look even more like a gallows. But they ended, not in nooses, but in heavy metal hooks that were too close together to hang four people, even if they had been nooses. In fact, the hooks on either end were only one narrow shoulder's breadth apart.

The drum's pace quickened and the naked woman bent forward still more, arching and opening her back. Gold and lapis flashing, the second woman moved so swiftly and fluidly it was hard for even a trained eye to follow her. The uninitiated in the crowd below saw only a glinting blur as she grasped the first of the hooks and threaded it through the skin of the other's back. Despite the racing drums, both women breathed slow and steady and, as they did so, the other three hooks leaped, lighting swift, to follow the first. The naked woman raised her head and stood straight, blood running down her bare back. Slowly, she lifted her arms and held them out, like an angel spreading its wings to fly, as she stepped to the edge of the platform and then off into the air. The drums stopped abruptly and all the vast square felt silent, the air tight with held breath as she hung there, swaying gently. The only sound in all that vast city was the cry of distant birds and the faint creakings and scrapings as the be-feathered priestess and another, similarly clad, slid the platform out of the way.

Then, as the drums began again, they each took one of the woman's legs and pushed gently, causing the hanging figure to swing forward. Several more times they did this as the movement gained momentum and the woman herself pumped her legs back and forth to increase the arc of her swing as well, her long hair flying about wildly in the wind of her speed. The crowd surged forward, pressing as close as they could in desperate hunger to be touched by the sacred blessing of the Goddess. And many were for, as she swung by them, the priestesses handed the woman basins of holy water and armfuls of pale flowers which she rained down over the spectators. But what they coveted most were the drops of blood that occasionally came falling down like globs of sticky red rain.

Above the heavy boom of the drum rose a cold, brittle sound, like the crack of ice or the fall of a freezing spring high in the mountains. The woman sang as she swooped above them, her voice shrill and alien as the wild call of the birds she almost resembled. "I am the angel of pain. I am the angle of death. I take all into myself and leave you free. Shebolba's messenger, I ride on wings of blood to bring your words to Her. This beautiful pain makes me soar. I am the vessel. I am holy." She spread her arms wide and felt the air rush over her, caressing all her bared skin. Shivers ran over her at its eager touch and she imagined it as the fingers of the Goddess, felt like a mighty eagle riding on a sunbeam, ready to turn and plunge down, down to the underworld.

This flight was supposed to be a sacrifice. Sometimes it seemed wrong that it filled her with such joy. The white hot claws in her back were such a small price for the glorious freedom and transcendence up here alone with the wind. She, naked and bleeding, was the high priestess of Shebolba, Goddess of the underworld. The maiden, adorned with gold and feathers, who had strung her up like this was only an under priestess, required to bow before her. She was Xtaj. The Xtaj of the high Goddess. Xtaj, lust woman, she who takes from man to feed the Goddess's longing. Every year, a man was chosen as the sacred victim, given every luxury, and trained in the secrets of sacred rituals and lore of the temple. Then, on the night of the equinox, at

the start of the rainy season, he would lie down with the lust woman as Shebolba incarnate and, as the sun rose, she would cut his throat before the door of Her temple.

Four times now Xtaj had performed this sacred duty and, for four years, all her people had prospered. There had been no war or hunger in the land and Xtaj knew it was because she had done so well at performing her duty and Shebolba was pleased. Then the sickness had come and she had gone forth to offer this additional safeguard with a good will. This sickness was a dire pestilence where the skin would swell with great abscesses, bringing fever and horrible agony, until at last they burst, running with pus and blood. Some who reached this stage recovered afterwards but most sank into ranting delirium and died. Then, there were the cursed few whose swellings never burst and, instead, became filled with black rot. The stench of all three substances was heavy on the air, as well as the odor of charred flesh as people burned the bodies they did not dare bury. But, in spite of this, Xtaj felt no fear as she soared above the infected crowd, never doubting that Shebolba would shield her, and through her, the people.

At last, she was lowered back down to the platform where the under priestess was waiting to remove the hooks and offer her a clean robe to wrap her nakedness and her bloody back, as well as salt to place on her tongue to ground her back in the mortal world. But, despite this precaution, the rich golden glow lingered on. She felt dizzy and had to lean on the under priestess to steady herself as she descended the stairs while the people she had blessed cheered for her and she inclined her head to them in acknowledgment. But she did not perform the rituals to please the people. She did so because they filled her with the wonderful surge of pain born glory and needed no reward more. But knowing that the people loved her, that she made life better for them did matter greatly to her.

Three days later, Xtaj was in the grinding house, crushing corn kernels into yellow and white powder. All the priestesses, even the lust woman herself, were expected to do humble chores from time to time and grinding corn was one of the most hated. It was brutally painful if done too long or too frequently. Kneeling on the hard floor while jerking the heavy stone rolling pin back and forth was hard on the back, hard on the knees, hard on the shoulders, and hard on the hands and, for this reason, Xtaj was rarely allowed to perform it. Her body must remain in peak condition so that she could soar like a bird or lie down with a man whenever Shebolba might decree. She could not risk having aching shoulders or a pulled knee put her out of commission. Perhaps for this reason, on the rare occasions when she did grind corn, she found the activity peaceful and meditative, instead of the drudgery others saw it as. She enjoyed the rhythmic motion of the grinding, which lulled her into a kind of light trance and the soft, clean smell of the crushed kernels was soothing to her. The light, airy feel of the powder against her fingers and the crispness of the colors against the dull stone of the grinding slab, she loved as well. Even in the dim light of the grinding hut, the yellow, white, and, on occasion, red or blue, looked fresh and vivid.

Corn was the very substance of life so it was no wonder it was bright in the darkness or that its smell and texture were pleasing. Corn came from the womb of the earth, brought forth by Shebolba from Her own belly with labor and suffering and so, in return, She took the living back into Her belly to feed on. Most would not consider this a pleasant thought to contemplate as they ground the corn. But it was unavoidable for it was written above the door in the elaborate pictographs of Xtaj's people and all the grinding stones were turned so the workers must kneel facing it. Perhaps this was another reason few cared for the task. But Xtaj was untroubled. As Shebolba's special handmaiden, she had great confidence in the rightness of the order She had imposed on the world. In this life, Xtaj was treated well and, after it, she had no reason to doubt she would be well received by the One she had served so faithfully.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the cloth over the door was lifted, letting in a shaft of sunlight that dazzled her eyes in the dimly lit room. A dark shape ducked under the lintel, letting the cloth fall behind it and, as the dark returned, resolved into the form of under priestess Shona. "He has arrived finally," she reported, touching one knee to the ground as she approached Xtaj.

"This year's sacred victim?"

"Yes, we did not dare bring him to the city in the midst of the sickness but, now that you have cleansed it, he should be safe."

"This is at least a month later than normal. Has his instruction begun?"

"Only in the most basic fundamentals of ritual, or so I was led to understand. The rural priestesses felt that only you could do it properly. Would you please come down to see him?"

"Right now?" Xtaj rose reluctantly from the flat stone where she had been kneeling, straightening her stiff legs with difficulty.

"Yes, begging your pardon, now. You'll need to spend a lot of time with him to make up for what we lost in the sickness."

Xtaj nodded and followed Shona out of the grinding room. "They're down at the main gate, no?" she asked as they moved out onto the main city street. "Then return to the temple and prepare for the rite of Shebolba's blessing. Unless I sense a strong reason to the contrary, I will perform the official consecration as soon as we have spoken." Shona nodded and was gone, fading back into the crowd which respectfully made way for her, while Xtaj turned in the opposite direction, towards the city's outer walls. Upon reaching the gates she found the small group of rural priestesses, easy to spot amid the crowd of merchants, beggars, and other typical city dwellers. Not being able to afford the shimmering rainbow plums of exotic birds, their feathers were mostly white, with a blue one here and there, looking thin and moth eaten. There was little gold, turquoise, or lapis among them and they had to make do with cheap imitations of copper and colored glass. Many of these women did not worship Shebolba, being consecrated to other lesser deities, but they all acknowledged the preeminence of Her powers of life and death and delivered the chosen sacrifice with no grudging. In their midst of the group a single figure walked steady and straight, noticeably taller than any of the women despite their plumed headdresses and Xtaj knew this must be the one she had come to find, the sacred victim. When they saw her approach, the priestesses all sank down upon their knees. The chosen one did not kneel, although he was supposed to, but he bowed his head to her with such grace and graciousness that it was hard to imagine any affront was intended.

"You may rise," said Xtaj with the proper disdain expected of her rank.

"My humble greetings to you, great Xtaj of Shebolba," stammered the head priestess as she heaved herself to her feet. "We are most honored that you have received us on such short notice..." But Xtaj was barely even listening to her for, when they had risen, the chosen had lifted his head as well. In his face, in his ice blue eyes, she saw no fear or reverence, not even the faintest averting of the glance from natural nerves. He faced her straight, even looking slightly down, thought this may have been no more than the practical necessity of their different heights. But there was no defiance or anger in the expression either. Those were the ones you needed to watch out for. They might try to escape or even disrupt the rituals and attack priestesses. It was considered a horribly bad omen and a recourse of desperation to dismiss a candidate but, as the previous lust woman, Xtaj's mentor had said, "If you can see murder in their eyes, you have to let them go." And, by let them go, she meant kill them immediately. But there was no murder in this one's eyes. In fact, as she searched his face in puzzlement, he smiled at her, a casual friendly smile, meant for an equal. Again, like his lack of a bow, this was insulting...but not threatening.

"I hope you, and our Lady, find our service acceptable." The nasal, pleading voice of the priestess cut into her thoughts.

"You have discharged your duty without fault," she replied without interest. "Follow us to the temple, where you will receive food and lodging before your journey home. Come." She gestured crisply to the chosen, then turned and strode away, not bothering to look back and see if he would follow. A moment later, she glanced behind her and saw he was easily keeping pace at her shoulder. "Your conduct is displeasing to me," she muttered fiercely.

"How have I offended?" He sounded genuinely confused as he pushed his deep chocolate hair back out of his face to peer questioningly at her.

"You treat me like an equal," she replied, keeping her voice lowered and glancing about anxiously. This was not a conversation she wanted overheard.

"Is that so horrible? After all Shebolba specially chose both of us to serve Her." This stopped Xtaj's angry retort abruptly, as if she had been slapped in the face. It was true what he said and yet no one else saw it

that way. It just wasn't done.

"I do not like it," she muttered sourly, refusing to look in his direction.

"Perhaps this would please you more." The next thing she knew, he was kneeling on the street in front of her. "Oh great and royal priestess of the mighty Shebolba, I am honored beyond words to be permitted this year of service to you." And then, before she could stop him, he seized her hand and planted an exceedingly exaggerated and sloppy kiss on the back of it. With a snarl, Xtaj pulled her hand away and strode rapidly off down the street. Almost at once, he was at her side again. "Aren't you going to ask my name?" he inquired inanely and the thought of having to put up with him for an entire year made Xtaj feel she was about to go mad. This was not good at all. The sacrifice should not be corrupted by vindictive emotions. If she were glad to be rid of him, the whole thing became a murder, not an offering and this reminder that she must not be angry with him made her all the more so.

"No, I don't care about your name," she snapped. "I don't need to know the name of a chicken before I eat it and you are nothing but a delicious tidbit for Shebolba to devour."

"Thank you for asking," he said pleasantly, as if he hadn't heard. "I'm called Zedaven. And you?" She gave her name without thinking then sullenly bit her tongue too late. "Really?" He laughed. "Your mother named you that?"

"No. It is a title. What I have become for the honor of Shebolba. My birth name no longer exists. I am nothing but my service to the Goddess and will answer to nothing else." Before things could deteriorate further they arrived at the temple and began ascending the great stair, apparently hard work for Zedaven because he, thankfully, fell silent to save his breath for climbing. Even so, he was winded by the time they reached the top, his face flushed and his breathing ragged, Xtaj noted smugly. She, on the other hand, hadn't even broken a sweat and her breathing was hardly elevated at all. Years of going up and down these stairs at least once a day had left her body very used to the climb and she sneered at his comparative weakness.

Inside the temple, the smell of incense was smothering. Before the Goddess, the holy substance was burned day and night. In the enclosed space with no movement of air to dissipate it, it hung in choking clouds and settled on every surface, thick and stale as the dust of years. But even this could not wholly mask the *other* smells, the odor of sex and of dried blood from the sacred rites performed before the idol of the Goddess. And, underneath, the rank smell of terror, the sweat and piss of those who had been dragged to those rites against their will. Xtaj glanced, almost eagerly, over at Zedaven to see how he was reacting when confronted with the reality of his fate. But he appeared completely unfazed. As a priestess, she had been trained to read the moods of others by subtle cues and she could see that Zedaven walked into the darkness with every muscle of his face relaxed and was disgusted, both by his reaction and by how badly she wanted to see a sign of distress from him.

As they moved further from the doorway, the dishes of smoldering incense that lined the path to the altar glowed redder. At last, reaching the center of the chamber, they stood before the Goddess Herself. Lesser Gods were cast from clay and, if They were lucky, were coated in thin plates of beaten gold or had lapis stones for eyes. Shebolba needed no such adornment. Her image was a rough hewn slab of rock, made from the very bones of the earth. At least three times the height of a man, She stood and, as always, Xtaj found herself wondering at the force of strength or sorcery that must have been needed to lift a statue of such dimensions up so many steep stairs to this high altar. The form and features of the statue were indistinct, both because of the low light and the crudeness of the carving, giving only the faintest hint of huge, rounded breasts and lithe, muscled legs supporting the wide hips. But it was said that Shebolba was the most beautiful and desirable of all women, the prototype from which all other lovers came and it was this essence with infused the lust woman on her appointed night—to make her bed mate forget the coming dawn.

At that thought, Xtaj felt her throat tighten. It was this one here beside her now who would lie with her on that night. Could she make *him* forget the morning? Perhaps more relevantly, could she make herself forget it? Fiercely, she reminded herself that her actions were not her own. On that night, she would be the vessel of Shebolba's power. Thinking that, by her own volition, she could make the event a success or failure was nothing but sheer arrogance. But this could not offer her the comfort of not actually having to sleep with Zedaven. Although the Goddess, might be within her, she would still be wholly present and conscious, her

emotions and physical responses fully engaged.

Beside her, Zedaven's gaze traveled down the statue, taking in the carvings of bats on her shoulders and scorpions at her feet, as well as the real human skulls heaped on the floor about the pedestal. There were hundreds of them, some ancient, yellowed, and cracking, others only just bleached and picked clean. His skull would not rest here but be taken to the fields to nourish the crops. Still, the same skinless, eyeless fate awaited him and he was about to take his first steps towards it willingly for now two priestesses came forward and stopped before them, one carrying the ritual box, the other a plumbed headdress and ritual jewelry to adorn Xtaj in place of her dusty corn grinding clothes.

"We come to bind you, body and soul, to the Xtaj," they said in their high, clear voices, so perfectly in unison that they seemed almost one voice. "And through her, to Lady Shebolba Herself. Will you accept this willingly?"

"I will," Zedaven replied. There was no mockery in his eyes or voice now, just steady certainty and, for the first time, Xtaj felt a grudging respect for him. Whatever else he might be, the man had courage. If he had said no, the ceremony would have continued all the same, just in a slightly different form but it was the very best of omens to have the sacred victim consent willingly, especially when, as now, he did so with no sign of fear and an appreciative murmured rippled through the temple. Although only the two priestesses on either side of them had come forward into the light, such as it was, Xtaj knew the shadows along the side walls and behind the statue were crowded with hidden figures: all the priestesses and temple girls who had gotten the news in time and could be spared from their duties, or who thought they could slip away from them without being missed would be gathered there. Some were truly devout and wanted to witness the most sacred of rituals but many had other motives.

Since the Xtaj was off limits until the great rite itself, it was common for the sacred victim to sate his physical needs with the other priestesses, so they wanted to get a look at him, to see if he were handsome or no—not that this sentiment was in any way incompatible with devotion for a priestess of Shebolba. Now the two of them stood directly before the statue and the attendants helped Xtaj out of her work clothes, adorning her in ritual finery. This costume left her upper body bare except for the jewelry, though she spared hardly a thought on this for she was deeply familiar with ritual nudity. However, judging from by his reaction, Zedaven was not. His proper poise did not falter, but she could see his glance shift subtly to the side and the corner of his lip curl with an almost smug pleasure as his eyes rested on her breasts.

"Are you ready to make the descent?" the priestesses intoned, stepping aside to let them face the pile of skulls and the towering statue.

"Yes I am." Zedaven spoke in a commanding voice that made the chamber echo and she could guess that many of the hidden watchers were now feeling their hearts contract with longing. "I will go down, down through the canyons, down through the scorpions, down through the flocking bats, down, down to Shebolba." So he *had* received at least some basic training. More than basic...unless he had some very serious natural talent. But then she saw the look in his eyes. Even as he was delivering this perfect rendition of the ritual he was still paying attention to the fact that she was topless. She wanted to scream and strike him in the face, see the blood from his mouth, or even grab a knife and cut his throat right now. But not the sacred sacrificial blade. He was no fit offering for the Goddess. But there was nothing she could do. Although it was proper to be more subtle, it was no crime for him to lust after her. In fact, it would be sacrilege for him *not* to.

They knelt before Shebolba, knee to knee and shoulder to shoulder, as one of the priestesses took a needle, curved like a crescent moon, out of the ritual box and threaded it with a long strand of thick linen. "Will you be the mate of the Goddess, if She so wishes?" the other asked.

"I will."

"Then take the hand of Her earthly surrogate and do not release it until given permission, whatever may happen." Xtaj felt the warmth and pressure as he closed his hand around hers and moved his arm closer to her. As he did so, part of his upper arm gazed against her nipple. Almost, she flinched away but managed to hold herself steady. Even so, a shuddering wave of hot and cold passed through her. But, before she could feel any more awkwardness, the priestess with the needle and thread knelt beside them. Steadying their now joined

arms with one hand, she raised the needle in the other and swiftly sewed the tender inner flesh of their arms together.

Of course, the pain was excruciating but the skilled priestess did it so fast that there was almost no chance to feel it while it was happening. That would come latter. Having undergone this rite four times already, Xtaj knew that fact well. They would have to spend the rest of the ritual like this, forced to move and act as one. Even between the two most coordinated people there were bound to be some misjudgments which would pull on the thread, deepening and aggravating the wounds. By the end of the time, the thin line of thread would burn like a strand of fire. Not that she imagined she and Zedaven would be particularly in sync.

"I accept my binding to my divine guide," he said, again using that voice of power. He looked over at Xtaj, his eyes dilated from the pain and ritual fumes. "Lead me through the trials of Shebolba, through the House of Darkness, the House of Bats, and the House of Knives, to stand before the Goddess in all Her glory."

"Then seal the bond with food and drink." The priestess set before them a cup of water and a cake of baked cornmeal and their first task was to feed these to each other while joined. As Xtaj predicted, Zedaven was too impatient, raising his arm too quickly before she was ready and almost ripping out the stitches in the process. She saw the bloody thread strain against her flesh and bit back a cry of pain. Normally, Xtaj could escape her suffering by going into a ritual trance and letting the adrenaline rush of exhilaration fill her. But now she could not. Every time she tried to raise her mind her aggravation and frustration at Zedaven dragged her back down.

Once this awkward and agonizing task was completed, they had to rise together and descend to the foot of the temple where a great crowd had gathered. And there they must bless those who were ill...by laying on of hands. Zedaven still had not gotten the rhythm correct. Time and again her arm was cruelly jerked. Blood ran down her skin and made her hand sticky so that she left many of those she blessed with sensory proof of the event. By the time they were cut free at the end of the ritual, Xtaj had broken out in a cold sweat from struggling to hold in the pain. Her wounds ached for several days thereafter and, when they finally closed, they left thin white scars all along her arm. So, even when the year was ended, she would not be rid of him. She would carry his mark on her body forever, a constant reminder of how he had, literally, gotten under her skin. Considering this, she was none too eager to see Zedaven again but that meeting could not be long delayed. Although he had performed so well at the dedication ceremony, her arm notwithstanding, it was only the first step.

Three days later, when her wounds had not even fully closed up, they met again in one of the huts of the temple complex. Xtaj had insisted the meeting be private, not wanting any more questionable or embarrassing public displays. All through the walk to the house, she tried fiercely to believe that he wasn't really as bad as she had imagined. But, whenever she managed to half convince herself, her arm would brush against her as she moved and the resulting heavy throb would bring all her doubts rushing back. Ducking under the door, she saw him sitting on the floor, almost completely motionless, head bowed, the very picture of reverence. His hair fell forward over his face, making deep shadows in the dim light of room. Xtaj drew a deep, ragged breath. It was all right. He was doing exactly what he should do.

"You may rise, Zedaven," she said, her voice commanding yet generous, now that her composure had been restored. "Your reverent behavior does you credit."

"Yes," he replied, head still bowed as he rose to his feet. "I hope I have learned the proper way to treat a Priestess." And Xtaj gloated inwardly, reveling in her victory. But then he repeated the messy kiss on her hand he had performed before and, even as she was frozen with shock at the brazen affront, she caught a glimpse of the light in his still lowered eyes as he glanced at her sidelong. With a cry of rage, Xtaj struck him across the mouth. It was not a gentle blow and, even in the dim light, she could see the pain register on his face. But he grinned even more wildly, the expression looking distorted and lopsided for his bottom lip was already beginning to swell. He liked it! In some perverse way, he derived enjoyment from her anger. At that, she grew cold, locking her feelings away behind a screen of frost, desperate that he should have no more such pleasure. But one look at his face told her the attempt was futile. This man had taken her measure and he could read her anger in the little lines of tension that showed around her mouth and eyes. She felt something shrink inside her

for never before had the Xtaj known defeat. Even during her apprenticeship as an under priestess, most things had come easy to her. And now she was trapped, her very emotions betrayed her, dug the pit of her shame deeper. But there was nothing for it. For the sake of her people, she must brazen through it to the best of her ability.

So she began to question him on the basic tenants of religion and the rudiments of ritual to see how much he had yet to learn, but the answers to all her questions were pat and flawless. Zedaven had learned well all the rural priests and priestesses had to teach, better than any of the previous sacred victims who had been under Xtaj's care, and she tried to ignore the part of her that wanted desperately for him to make an error, to give her an excuse to reprimand him. And yet...there was something. Despite his perfect responses, his voice lacked that certain edge of sacred fervor. He was too casual as he spoke of such deep things. He was not mocking the Goddess but, she could tell, he did not feel any particular reverence for Her either. Not enough for her to criticize but enough to peek her interest. In the days that followed, as the lessons moved forward, it was always the same. He learned well and easily, though he did not always perform well. As the scars on her arm could attest, he was impatient and careless, which made some of the manual tasks more difficult. Those were Xtaj's favorite days. But he never failed out of lack of understanding. Never did he display fear, though the faith that would have made him eager to learn, given him the courage to face his fate, was simply not there. Xtaj spent many hours attempting to unravel what was going on in his head and his heart. If the ritual meant nothing to him, why, in the name of Shebolba, was he not afraid? What did he think would happen? What did he hope to gain?

Considering his, obviously, less than stellar background, he might be happy just to be getting fed...or, perhaps, he was drunk on all the female attention he was getting. Already, Xtaj had begun hearing stories whispered among the other priestesses and temple girls—it would be foolish to assume any of them were still maidens with Zedaven on the loose. The word in temple gossip was that he was setting to work with a good will and at a pace fit to make up for the time lost in the plague...and that he was very, very good. Xtaj clenched her hand into a fist, the thought made her so angry. It wasn't that the chosen shouldn't take pleasure in things of the flesh. Absolutely, he should but not to the exclusion of the spiritual aspects of his position. The suspicions that Zedaven was simply indulging in food too fine for his back water origins and dallying with well born girls who would never have given him a second glance was both infuriating and perversely pleasing and she resolved to question him closely at their next meeting in order to learn the truth.

Today, he would be practicing to play the sacred flute so that Zedaven could use its intricate melodies to convey the unutterable words of the divinities to the people, half understood stirrings and emotions guiding in a way dry, limited words could not. Xtaj liked these days. Playing the flute was one of those tasks, requiring patience and precision, in which Zedaven lacked skill. The strident, off key notes he usually produced made her skull throb and her teeth ache but, at the same time, they gave her grim satisfaction. Zedaven never complained, never became frustrated. No matter how many times he floundered and had to start over or how harshly she corrected him when he did so, he kept his eyes down, frequently closed or half closed in concentration as he continued to play doggedly, his large clumsy fingers sliding messily on the holes but still appearing the very picture of reverence to the outside observer.

“Why did you agree to this?” she asked finally, when he laid aside the flute to recover his breath.

“Did I have a choice to not agree?” He raised an eyebrow at her, truly cheeky for someone in this position.

“You would have been overpowered, yes. But that hasn't stopped others from resisting,” she sniffed scornfully.

“Then I don't call that much of a choice. But I would not choose otherwise.” He laughed. “It's very nice here. The food, the wine, the female attention. I wouldn't give that up.”

“Not even to save your life? Then it must have been grim indeed where you came from.”

But Zedaven didn't take the bait, ignored her lead. “The value of life lies not in the number of moments but in the savor and sweetness of each moment.” So now he had gone philosophical on her! This was utterly intolerable.

“And where did you come from?” she asked coldly, ignoring him in her turn, but he remained silent, a smile twisting at the corner of his mouth. “Who were you before you became the possession of me and my Lady?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

“That isn’t your choice to make. I command you to answer.”

“My highest charge is to serve you, oh great Xtaj.” Quickly she tucked her hands into her lap, safely out of reach, before he could attempt to kiss them again. “I know it gratifies you to imagine me as some vagrant hooligan, maybe even on the run from the law, who’s accepting this fate merely as a means of filling my belly.” He paused and gave her a look. “Why should I deny you the pleasure? If I never tell you my origin, I can always be exactly who you want me to be.” Xtaj felt her face go crimson and her throat spasmed so she could not even speak her affront. But Zedaven did not wait for her to compose herself. “And you?” he asked. “Why are you here? If we can’t talk about my past, we can still have the enjoyment of talking about yours.”

“Have you learned nothing in all these weeks?” cried Xtaj in exasperation. “Surely you must know by now what makes one a priestess and another not.”

“Yes, yes, the Goddess chose you,” he said impatiently, the tone in his voice making her glance up sharply, thinking he was rolling his eyes, but she was not fast enough to catch him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Oh?” Xtaj’s voice was icy. “What *did* you mean?”

“Did they drag you to the altar, kicking and screaming?”

Now Xtaj was offended. “Of course not. No more than they did you.”

“Being chose can make you a priestess...or a scared victim.” He twirled the flute in his hands casually as he spoke of his impending death. “But it can’t make you want it. If you consent to the choosing there must be a reason.” He looked directly in her eyes. “What is the reason?”

Acute discomfort slithered through Xtaj’s body and she wanted very much to look away but could not allow herself to look weak. In truth, she had begged her family to offer her as a priestess and prayed for it every day until they had...though she had always chosen to interpret this powerful longing in the conventional way, as the call of the Goddess within her. She remembered her chill dry seasons as a child, huddling around the the hearth of the family’s hut, cramped with cold on the dirt floor, and listening to her grandmother tell stories about Gods and Goddesses, talking animals and fantastic creatures. But, most of all, she loved the stories about heroes who faced the trials of Shebolba. She loved the descriptions of the House of Darkness, the House of Bats, and the House of Knives, though they were usually told as a means of frightening naughty children. These were always the stories she requested, until her parents and uncles and aunts began to complain of the constant nightmares of the other children. Then her grandmother would take her aside and tell her the stories privately, leering at her through the flickering firelight as it made weird shadows across their faces, making the trials of the Houses still more fearsome, the blood and torture of the sacrifices still more horrible. But the young Xtaj never flinched, ate up every bit of it and begged for more. But she was not about to share any of this with Zedaven. Of course, it was never so simple. When she had first entered her training, she had learned that the true worship of Shebolba was set out in the holy ritual codex and there alone and much of what she had heard before were “fables of the common people,” no longer to be credited. Not that any of this had to do with Zedaven either. There was nothing like him in either the ritual codex, or in the common fables.

Aloud, she said, “Who *wouldn’t* want to be a priestess? Wealth, power, pleasures of the flesh?”

“But you also have to give your blood to the Goddess, stick yourself with pins and hang from hooks. Some might consider that reason enough to beg off.”

Xtaj tossed her head contemptuously. “You wouldn’t understand,” she said, conveniently forgetting the courage he had shown at their own blood rite and, though it had been his fault, it must have hurt just as much for him as it had for her. “We’ve delayed your lessons long enough.” She gestured impatiently to the flute and, though she had been the one who had begun the conversation, he bowed his head submissively, accepting her chiding as he lifted the instrument to his lips. As he played on, the notes would still come harsh and discordant most of the time but he was definitely improving. Occasionally, he did manage to produce the high, wailing notes, like the the cries of distant birds, and Xtaj felt an icy corkscrew travel up her spine. The sounds of the



flute, hard and bright like crystal, were similar to what she felt when she flew, the ethereal connection to the divine and she could not help but be moved by them. But then he would hit another wrong note, the strident discord shattering her lifted state and then she hated herself for allowing him such influence over her.

After this incident, Xtaj was even more cranky and put out than before, feeling distinctly that she had come out the worse in their most recent exchange. Not only has she failed to learn the information she had sought but he had managed to make her feel vulnerable instead. She had been avoiding him again, keeping to the paths and chambers of the women's portion of the temple complex where he would be unlikely to go and dreading the next time she would have to see him. But it could not be long delayed for his training could not wait on her emotions. She had already transferred as much of the responsibility as possible to under priestesses like Shona and Ictala, and didn't they love it too? But most things had to be done by the Xtaj in person to insure the chosen was indeed a fit offering for her Lady. A high ritual was due at the next full moon and Zedaven was slated to take part--his first appearance to the people at large since his consecration. And, if anything went wrong, Xtaj would be the one held responsible in both the physical and spiritual realms. Which is why, only a few short days after her last humiliation, she was back, sitting across from him in one of the temple huts as she walked him through the intricacies of the ritual. At least he made no reference to the previous incident. But, then, he never did. She would have liked to think it was because he was too stupid to remember but she couldn't convince even herself of that, not with the near perfect memory he showed in other areas—right now for example.

“Forgive me, great Priestess,” he said, almost sweetly. “But I thought you said we should carry the incense around the altar before we consecrate the sacrifices.” Yes, she *had* said that but he had corrected her so meekly there was no justification for anger.

“You are correct,” she said with false graciousness. “I misspoke only to test you and you passed admirably.”

“I could not be more honored.” He lowered his head and even, somehow, managed to blush with embarrassed pride. But she saw the light in his eyes, even as he averted them and knew he had seen through her sham, so that her own color rose for a far different reason. Unlike the playing of the flute, this was *not* the kind of lesson Xtaj enjoyed. Memorization and dramatic presentation were Zedaven's greatest strengths. Perhaps he was even better than she and it was humiliating. Now he was sketching the rout of the ritual procession he would have to lead in the dirt floor of the hut and, far from having to concentrate, was actually whistling to himself as he did so.

“Why are you so happy?” she snapped, raising her face from the marks on the ground to glare at him. Those pale blue eyes looked confused, hurt by her anger, but not frightened. In the past, the sacred victims had cowered before their executioner's wrath, as if believing she could have them slain before their time. Or they would bow their heads in mute humility at the shame of having angered a holy woman.

Zedaven did neither. He shrugged his shoulders and gave her a smile full of big white teeth like perfect corn kernels. “The sun shines and the air is sweet,” he said. “My stomach is full of good food and a friendly dog played fetch with me this morning. Why shouldn't I be happy?”

Xtaj's face burned as if she had been struck a blow on the cheek. White searing shock and effrontery coursed through her skin. “Because you will die,” she snarled, her lips curled back to show her teeth. “I will kill you. I will cut your throat with a ritual knife and let your blood run down the steps of the sacred pyramid.”

“Your Goddess chose me for that honor. Is that not, itself, a reason to rejoice?” This was the proper response, what every victim was trained to believe, though many never succeeded in fully internalizing it. But, he spoke the words so casually, with an almost teasing smile, that she could see no connection between him and the few blind fanatics who had gone willingly to their deaths with an air of grim triumph.

“Do you really believe that?” she asked suspiciously. “That she chose you?”

“Not particularly. But it always *might* be true. I have no cause to *disbelieve* it either. Besides, it's a long time in the future, the dying. A lot might happen in that time.”

Now Xtaj's head hurt, the dull drum beat of pain throbbed under her brow. A fresh aching jab of pain surged in the partially healed ritual cut behind her right eye. “What are you talking about now?” she asked in a

strained voice.

“Well, I might die anyway before the year is out, from an accident or illness, or the Goddess might send a sign that I be let go. I might save the life of someone important and become too valuable to kill. The city could even have a religious conversion and give up sacrifices. Anything could happen, so why worry about it?”

“You are an ignorant fool to naively believe in such things.”

“I don't believe, I merely accept the possibility. I don't really think about it much.”

“Then what do you think about?”

“This.” Out of the pouch at his belt, he took a peach, picked doubtless as he passed through the orchard on his way here. He took a deep breath, inhaling the rich fragrance of its skin, then bit in to it and she heard the squelching sound as his teeth pierced the succulent flesh. A bit of sticky juice, like a drop of liquid gold, slipped from his mouth and hung on the side of his cheek, translucent and glistening. “It's absolutely delicious,” he said, pausing for a moment and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “Here, you try.” Grinning at her, he fished another fruit out of his pouch and tossed it to her. “When you taste this you'll agree it's as good a reason as any to be happy.”

Xtaj only glanced at him and sternly directed their attention back to the arrangement of the altar on the ground. But, later, after Zedaven had left, she noticed the peach was still lying there, almost brushing her knee, where it had come to rest after he threw it. Cautiously, she picked it up, glancing around almost guiltily, as if she did something wrong. At once, she was struck by how soft and velvety its skin felt, almost like a caress. As she lifted it to her face, the strong, ripe odor was clearly discernible. She breathed deep, finding in that smell all the sweetness of life for which she had mocked Zedaven. With another furtive glance, she brought the fruit to her mouth. The fuzz on the peach's surface tickled the inside of her lips and her tongue, making a shudder pass through her body. Then, her teeth sank into the golden flesh and the nectar, sweet as sunlight, thick as sugar sap, came oozing out. All her senses were alive and humming from this glut of pleasure. As she bit deeper, the bleeding juice overflowed her mouth and sticky trails spilled from her lips and spread across her face. She felt her cheeks flush and her whole body heat from embarrassment and more than that. It had been months since she had been permitted any sort of carnal pleasure and now her body was responding...to a fruit. With each bite she felt a surge go through her, until all her muscles loosened and a haze of pleasure, like the pink of dawn, clouded her brain.

Afterwards, she sat limply, her breathing ragged and a dark plague of disgust spreading steadily through her. There was nothing shameful about desire. The lust woman was expected, *required*, to feel lust. One of the reasons Xtaj had been chosen for the position was her highly sensual nature. If you did not have great hunger of the flesh you could not succeed as the Xtaj, since you had to want it whenever the Goddess told you to. Otherwise, you were a failure. But not because of a fruit. Something about having this response to a non-human thing made her feel dirty, as if she had lain down with a pig or a goat. But also because Zedaven had given her the peach. The fact that she had taken such pleasure from something of his seemed distinctly like letting him win. Especially because he had wanted her to enjoy it. In anger she flung the pit as far from her as she could and strode swiftly out of the courtyard, stopping at the first fountain she encountered to scour every trace of the stickiness from her face and hands. For several nights after, when she laid down to sleep, she feared she would have dreams in which she would relieve the experience. This fear did not come to pass but, even so, she felt more wary than ever now around Zedaven. Nor were her fears entirely unfounded. From time to time, some look of gesture of his, especially the sight of him eating, would wake some subconscious memory of the event so that her body quivered in response for a brief second before she obliterated the feelings. Needless to say, such events made her even more hostile towards her charge. And so the moons passed, the tensions ever increasing until it came time for the final festival of harvest, before the start of the dry season.

Round and round the dancers whirled, their feathered capes spread wide like wings, the flames highlighting their iridescence as if they were already burning. Xtaj threw back her head, her hair streaking after her, a blazing comet. When she had first danced this dance, the wild whirling had made her vomit, a horrible wrenching, over and over, long after her stomach was empty, as she rose up and endeavored to keep dancing again and again. But, eventually, she had learned the trick of meditating as she twirled, floating as serenely as

if she were in a boat on a gentle lake. She was in the trance now, spiraling around the fire, her arms flung wide. But her place here was not that of her sisters. After working themselves into a frenzy with their spinning, the pulsing rhythm of the drums, and the lust drugged bowls of honey wine, they would go to lie down with men who had come to watch the dance. Xtaj was forbidden this release. She must take her desire back into herself and send it earthwards, down to Shebolba. Being a lust woman did not make her wanton. Rather, she was normally permitted to indulge herself but once a year, to insure she was in the proper state of mind for the sacrifice.

Zedaven, of course, was not similarly restricted. Only for the last three months of his life was he required to be celibate, to insure he too anticipated the night sufficiently. Before that time, he was actually encouraged to spread his blessing as widely as possible. This thought brought a scowl to her face even in the ecstasy of her dance. It was strange for she had never begrudged her sacred mate this freedom before. Yes, celibacy was hard to endure, but it was holy and she could feel the power it bestowed on her. But now...she ground her teeth. It was Zedaven's easy arrogance she hated and this was another way he would, she knew, exult unduly in himself. There he was now, she saw as there came a stay in the dance, lounging on one side of the pavilion, with several of the under priestesses clinging to him. He tilted back his head to kiss dark skinned Ictala who sat close behind him and she twined her fingers into the smoked honey of his hair.

After the dance and the drug, Xtaj could expect to feel aroused, then jealous, then bitter at such a sight. It was natural and had happened to her at such events before. But the fire down her thighs, the almost savage rage she felt towards Ictala, passed all such reason. And she knew then that, though she hated him, she desired Zedaven as she had never desired before. It was not the simple hunger born of the fact that it had been over five months since she had last known satisfaction (unmentionable fruit incidents notwithstanding). At this moment, if there were another man before her, willing and sanctioned, she would have spurned him for the solitude to better nurse her bitter anger. Zedaven was no mere physical comfort to her. She wanted his body, wanted to gut it and turn it inside out to reach the soul beneath.

The realization shook her to the core. Quickly, she slipped from the dance, withdrawing to the outer circle of the gathering to compose herself. Her forehead against the cool stone of the wall, she took several ragged breaths until she felt the hammering of her heart start to slow slightly. Then, daring another glance back into the glare of the leaping flames, she saw Zedaven's black silhouette writhe slowly with that of Ictala. No, she had not been mistaken. The resulting jealous rage was near murderous. At once, she turned and slipped from the place of celebration, fearful of what she might do if she stayed, then melted into the surrounding darkness, hoping the festivities were too far gone for her absence to be noticed. Zedaven, at least, was clearly in no position to notice anything, she thought with vindictive bitterness.

The next time she saw Zedaven, she was prepared for things to be awkward. It was hopeless to fight this baying hunger inside her. As soon as she set eyes on him, she found herself engrossed in his hair, his skin, imagining what it would be like to see him naked. As they spoke together of the trials of Shebolba, she could almost feel him caress her, palms driving hard against skin like trails of liquid fire.

"Forgive me, Great Priestess." His sweet razor voice broke into her reverie, as always letter perfect but not entirely sincere in tone. "I asked you what I should do if the blood in the bowl congeals and will not spread to form an image."

"Call for blessed oil," she snapped. "Pray for the Goddess to make Her will known to you as you add it to the blood, which should loosen it." Part of her still hated Zedaven as much as ever, indeed hated him more the more she wanted him, incensed by her feelings of vulnerability before him. But another part was now filled with a delirious delight to be in his presence, found his irreverence and high spirits wonderfully infectious. As he regarded her with exaggerated disapproval for her outburst, she was struck by a very un-Xtaj like impulse. She had the urge to giggle wildly and stifled it as best she could though something of a strangled snort still managed to escape. That was not the only time Zedaven had to repeat himself to her that day, as she was constantly thinking about all the length of his warm, naked skin pressed against hers, as their bodies twisted wildly together like a pair of mating snakes. She imagined the proud shaft of his manhood, its velvety skin stretched taught like that of a berry ripened to bursting, feeling it pierce her, its fevered flesh searing her so that

all within her was consumed in flames.

Long after the lesson had ended, she sat, staring after the door where he had gone out, feeling her insides contract as they squeezed the desire through her body like wringing water from a piece of wet cloth. And then it came to her, her cayenne and honey dream would not remain a dream forever. In seven months, she would be required to lie down with him, to do all her aching flesh was begging her to do. And that thought made her dizzy with relief and yet more ravenous than ever. The fact that she would get to experience this only once was of less concern to her at the moment than how she could possibly wait that long. Unlike after the incident with the peach, she did dream. Every night she dreamed about Zedaven in bed with her and her waking hours were little better. Sometimes, even during ritual, her wits would wander and she would see his face, hear his voice, even as she performed the holy rites. Dreaming, always dreaming, eyes open and mind asleep. Fortunately, all these things had been drilled into her so deeply that, even when her wits wandered and her hands strayed, she spoke the words by rote so no one knew her condition. Almost no one that is.

When meeting with Zedaven, she was past help. Even as they spoke, she would realize, to her horror, that she was filled with a burning compulsion to reach out and touch him, the resisting of which took every ounce of will she had. Did Zedaven know? It was, as always, impossible to say with certainty what, if anything, he did or did not know. But there was no way he could miss that she was almost almost fawningly eager to please one moment and shrieking with murderous rage the next. He never complained, suffered all her wild moods but, in a way, managed to make his acceptance a form of chiding, of mockery even, just as he had done with the kissing of her hand. But he never spoke of it and she could not know if he were aware how she was groaning with lust for him or if he just attributed her strange behavior to a belief that she was mad. In some ways, she preferred not to know.

And so things went on, as they advanced into the dry season, when the sun baked the earth and growing things turned brown and withered. They walked beneath the trees in the peach orchard, the under priestesses several paces behind, gathering the final harvest of fruit. The peaches were no longer firm and juicy but slightly shrunken and wrinkled. But they would still be satisfying fried with honey and the pungent powder of ground cinnamon bark. Beside her, Zedaven walked loosely, his arms singing, using a long pole to knock down some of the browned peaches. He was like the fiery cinnamon dust, his hair a few shades darker and his skin a few shades lighter. They were supposed to be discussing the proper performance of ritual in the days leading up to the ceremony but, instead, the talk had turned to casual things, what Zedaven did in his spare time, the fine foods he was privileged to sample this one time in his life, the stray dogs he liked to play with. He casually tossed a dark, shriveled peach in a hand soft and firm as the fruit had once been and Xtaj suddenly had a vision of his hand shrinking to match, drying, blackening, cracking once the life had left his body.

Great distress filled her at the thought but, before she could follow it further, he cocked his head towards her and smiled. It was a flirtation, something unknown to her. Everyone knew she was forbidden, except to the chosen few and, to them, she was assured as a duty so why bother to entice? And yet, despite her mantle of divinity, she was human and the flattery stirred her. She felt her knees loosen and cast back a glance, somewhat awkwardly through never having done it before. Zedaven's grin deepened in response as he stepped toward her and, suddenly, she was afraid he would try to touch her. Her longing for him being what it was, she could not risk the temptation to violate her sacred duty. But, instead, he playfully tossed the withered peach at her. Ducking swiftly, she managed to evade the missile and it smashed against the tree behind her.

The skin split open and graying, meaty flesh oozed out. Sticky brown juice, almost like blood, seeped down the trunk of the tree. Xtaj glanced from this macabre sight to Zedaven, laughing and full of energy, and back again as a horror filled her so deep that her stomach clenched and began to heave. They were so close, the vibrant, breathing life and the dead rotting thing. Only a single, fragile thread separated them, a thread that could snap or blow away in the blink of an eye. And it was her hand that would turn the one into the other. She would shut those eyes, silence that laughter, rip out that soul she hungered for and cast it beyond her reach forever. She could see the blade split flesh, the blood pour out. Suddenly, she was done on her knees in the earth, choking, vomiting. Bile seared her throat, her eyes and nose filled and gushed as her whole body surged in protest. The image sickened her but what disgusted her most of all was herself. What must she be to be able

to do such a thing?

The other girls were racing to her side, holding her, wiping her face clean, as they babbled wildly in fear, fussing over her. "What's wrong? Are you ill? Is the Lady displeased in any way?" Gently, they helped her to her feet and she swayed slightly, not in the glorious dizzy height of ritual consciousness, but in a sick feebleness. She was afraid she might faint or spew again, if she had anything left to cast out. In a great effort of will, she drew the slow ritual breath, summoning her strength, and managed to stay upright and open eyed as the girls fluttered around her, fanning her and dabbing her brow and hands with damp cloths.

Mortified and enraged by her outburst, Xtaj was also stunned. She had taken life many times as a priestess, seen blood and human innards of all kinds, pierced eyes, flayed skin, dismembered breasts, and none of it had ever troubled her. Even the sacred victims of the past four years, whom she had known personally for a full year, she had felt no guilt about killing. She was doing her duty as they were doing theirs. All was right. She steadied herself and managed to lift her head. There was Zedaven watching her, full of concern but standing well back so as not to crowd, worried about the well being of his murderer. And, at that thought, she did spew again though in a different way, bursting into hysterical sobs, her eyes vomiting out tears as she staggered from the orchard as quickly as she could. Running through the thankfully empty corridors of the temple complex, her mind raced as swiftly as her heart. How, above all, was she to avoid a repetition of this shameful scene when she knew, beyond a doubt, she could not bear the thought of killing him?

Like a stab of ice cold water from a mountain stream, an idea whispered in her heart. She could not bear the thought of killing him? Well then, who said she had to? If her hand refused to lift the knife, grabbed it and flung it from the sacred pyramid with all her strength, what could anyone do about it? She would be excommunicated from Shebolba, forever, denied Her blessing in this world and the next. Very likely, she herself would not live long. If they could manage to lay hands on her, they would probably rip her to shreds for her sacrilege. But Zedaven would live. Even if they managed to kill him too, not an unlikely possibility, still his blood would not be on her hands or her soul. No, no one could *make* her kill him, not unless they held her hand with the knife in it and physically forced her to cut his throat. And, even then, if she fought against it, she wouldn't be fully responsible, not in the same way as if she initiated the deed herself. Xtaj shivered. This was a dangerous place her thoughts were turning. The possibility of acting against Shebolba's will should not even be an idea her brain was able to entertain. Her duty should be so deeply ingrained that her arm would rise of itself. This was more terrible than dying. She was looking into a black abyss of nothing where her very identity, all she had ever known of herself, was in danger of being destroyed. And so, in desperation, she turned for help to the One who had, in the past, always held Her sheltering arms over her, who, until recently, had been Xtaj's sole love and loyalty.

The great chamber of the temple was hung in shadow, the smell of incense rich and bitter on the air. Xtaj felt it almost like a powder on the tongue as she fell to her knees before Shebolba, the cold, rough, stones of the floor biting into her legs. With head bowed, her sandy hair hanging in her face, she slid back the lid of the finely carved cinnamon wood box, her hands shaking as she unwound the roll of fine white linen inside, or linen that would have been fine and white had it not been crusted with dark flakes of metallic red, like the remains of rusted iron.

"Shebolba, Goddess, be with me," she whispered. The cloth roll fell open and inside was a bundle of metal pins, long as her finger, sharp as fishing hooks. "I need your strength, I need your guidance." Slowly, she undid the front of her robe, turning it back until she was as bare-breasted as the Goddess Herself. The cold air of the chamber was as liquid silver on her naked skin. It contracted into ridges like the flesh of a plucked bird, and her nipples puckered like scar tissue. The sight of them tightening, the dark skin pulling together suddenly made her think of Zedaven and she was horrified. Lustful thoughts were not displeasing to Shebolba in themselves but when, as in this case, they infringed on duty, they were as sinful and worthy of punishment as anything else that did the same. She had been right to decide to do this. It was sorely needed.

Lifting the first of the long pins, she held it with her thumb and middle finger, while steadying it with her first. "Lady, hear me. I offer you my blood, my life force. Accept my sacrifice and do not deny me what I seek." She laid the cold rod against the skin of her left breast, above the heart. The metal pierced her skin like a

tiny explosion of flame, slid beneath it, then emerged again, the shaft still gleaming, barely bloodied. In this rite, Xtaj's hands were sure and steady. After years of hard training in the skills and mental discipline of a priestess, she could pierce flesh in her sleep. But never before had she made a sacrifice when so desperate, so needing an answer. The second pin followed the first, at an angle and slightly overlapping with it. "Shebolba, hear me," she gasped as she felt her skin puncture beneath the point. She would make a ring around her heart as it was her heart that was in danger of committing betrayal.

And now there surged inside her a golden wave, the breath of the Goddess, a whirlwind of aching beauty. She had been heard. More pins were added to the circle and, instead of dealing pain, each one only increased the storm of energy pulsing within. "Shebolba, I need your aid," she pleaded, no longer needing to speak aloud as she felt the presence of the Goddess directly inside her mind. "I am afraid I am being tempted to betray You. I know the duty I have been taught but I also know that sometimes our calling is higher than the what is described in the sacred scrolls. My heart tells me I should not kill him but is that only because that is what I want to hear? I do not feel he deserves to die."

"Deserves to die?" The voice of the Goddess crackled like dead leaves. "How can human merits be measured beside the needs of the Gods? Besides, the more worthy the victim, the more pleasing the sacrifice. Would you keep the best for yourself and buy Us off with inferior goods?"

"No." Xtaj's fully audible scream of agony came from her implied lack of reverence and not from the final metal rod she was driving through her skin as she spoke. Any physical pain she felt now seemed paltry beside the magnitude of her offense. "He could do so much if he lived." The words poured from her without her fully understanding where they came from. "I know he could. He might become a hero and perform deeds for the glory of Your name."

"What better deed can he do than to make the rain fall and the crops grow. Without blood to wet them, the fields will dry up, the earth crack and split in the brutal summer heat. Without flesh to eat, the plants will starve and wither."

"Because You would have it so." The thought leapt unbidden into Xtaj's mind before she could stop it. The metal ached beneath her skin, but the magnitude of her affront left her too stunned to feel much real fear.

"I will not strike you down." The dry voice of Shebolba came into her mind again. "If I were to kill for such a thing, I would have no priestess left. Even the great one who raised you has had such thoughts. You are not alone."

"Oh Lady, thank you," Xtaj gasped. No matter how lost and tortured she might feel, if someone as exulted as her mentor could survive it and grow strong, there was hope she could as well. Clasp her hands to her heart in gratitude, she felt the sharp points of the pins prick her palms. It was time. One by one, she pulled the rods back out of her flesh, laying them on the cloth again, where some added fresh stains. Finally emptied, the holes bled at last. She could feel the narrow streams of the hot sticky liquid snaking down her skin, tickling her breast as they passed over it. Shebolba's pleasure at the offering could be clearly discerned. Xtaj could almost feel the Goddess pulling more blood from the wounds. "This doubt, this resentment, is the trial all who serve Me must face and overcome...if they wish to be a true priestess. Now is your time of testing. May you emerge victorious."

The months that followed were hard for Xtaj, still tormented by the thought of sacrificing Zedaven—murdering, a cold voice whispered—but, after receiving such a direct command from the Goddess, what else could she do? But, in her heart of hearts, she knew it was not only love of Shebolba or fear of Her anger that moved her. It was pride as well. Having been told that every priestess since the dawn of time had faced such a trial and most had passed it, she could not bear to be less than her sisters, to fail where they had triumphed. And yet, every time she saw Zedaven, every time they talked and laughed and—why deny it now?—flirted the horror at what was to happen grew stronger. Her dreams became still more frequent and vivid. But, now, there were rarely pleasurable. Instead, she dreamed of blood and screaming agony. She dreamed Zedaven would resit the final gift, would not walk and have to be dragged forward, weeping and pleading, and pissing himself, so he would have to be held down, helpless, while she slaughtered him like a pig. The seasons turned, melting the snow on the peaks of the surrounding mountains so that the streams gushed full once more, bringing life back to

the low lands, filling the dry stream beds and sunken lakes so they could again rise as rain. It would not be long now.

One day, Xtaj went to the river to fill the heavy clay jars with water for the temple. She hoped the fresh air and new green, the time outside of the city's confining walls might ease some of her heaviness of spirit. But, when she reached the water, she saw a pile of clothes strewn haphazardly on a stone by the bank. Someone must be bathing in the river. Looking closer she could see the white of the churning water where they swam. Straight across the current the swimmer cut and Xtaj was somewhat impressed. She liked to swim here herself and, although she did not find the pull of the water strong enough to be dangerous, she knew just how difficult it was to swim in. She was also mildly irritated, as she had been hoping to at least dip her feet in the cool water and, perhaps, wade out to thigh height or further. But, from the discarded clothing, the swimmer appeared to be male and, considering who she was and, especially, how close the time of the Great Rite now loomed, it would be highly improper for her to swim here now.

At about the mid-point of the river, the figure surfaced, sending up a white fountain like shards of glittering crystal and revealing hair like burnt sugar, liquid caramel skin, and eyes like the river itself. Xtaj felt sick and put her hand to a young tree to steady herself. Of all the bizarre twists of fate, she should happen to arrive here alone at the same time as Zedaven. He saw her, raised his hand in greeting, and came towards her. Soon, the water was shallow enough for him to wade and he stood upright as it lapped against him like a warped and cracked sheet of the most beautiful crystal.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he called, pausing with the water just above his navel. "Have you come to swim too?"

"No, to fetch water." She shrugged her shoulders, hefting the jugs so they clanked together.

"Those look heavy. I'd better help you." He started towards her again, his wet hair hanging over his face.

"Really, there's no need for that. I've been carrying water for years." She was offended that he seemed to be implying she was weak.

"I'm being nice. You don't need to be so defensive." He kept walking and the liquid blue stone of the water was down around his hips now.

Xtaj's nerve broke. "I'm serious. You should stop." She held up his hand, dropping the jars with a clatter.

He laughed, a sound of golden honey, putting his hands on his hips. "Xtaj what are you afraid of? You'll have to see it all soon enough anyway."

"I just..." She felt the blood hot in her face. Why did she shy away now? She had seen enough men naked before, knew all about the stiff matted hairs, the sleeping serpent of flesh. Or was that what she feared: that it wouldn't be sleeping? Or even worse, her hands almost rose to her throat at the shame of the thought, that it would be? Yes, that was a large part of her shyness. She was afraid to learn that the wild searing desire she felt towards Zedaven, beyond all measure of what was sane, was not returned, that even simple physical satisfaction was beyond his interest, at least from her. But, at the fatal moment, an early mayfly flew close past Zedaven and he flailed to swat it away, sending up a glinting fountain of water droplets. The sun flashed back off the spray, blinding her for a moment so that he was able to scramble to the shore and wrap his loincloth closely around himself before she had a chance to see anything too clearly.

"Now that you no longer have any need to be squeamish," he said maliciously, "perhaps you'll let me help you." Coming over, he began to pick up the jars she had dropped and, too proud to make further objections, Xtaj followed him back to the river, watching the sun sparkle on the damp skin of his back. Side by side, they knelt on the wet rushes to fill the jars, while frogs called, their jewel like voices vibrating in the still air, and a long legged water bird settled in one of the nearby trees over hanging the river, from which trailing vines hung like the hair of a weeping woman.

Although the plain fabric of his loincloth was pulled around his hips, he was still naked otherwise, sun polished skin shining like amber sap. It was flawless, smooth with a faint velvet nap, like the skin of that accursed peach he had given her many months before. One thin white scar crossed his shoulder and ran down

his left shoulder blade and she wanted to ask where it had come from, but her mouth was a swamp, the tongue buried under the weight of rot and decay. Zedaven reached towards her to pick up another jar and, without even realizing it, she flinched away.

“Do you think I'm going to bite you?” he taunted, moving closer just to rile her more. Now their faces almost touched. The bare skin of his chest was within easy reach. She could see the pores on his face, smell his skin, his breath. Her head reeled as if she were breathing spices and wine, the numbing fumes of ritual incense.

“It is forbidden,” she forced, her voice a raw croak like the least jewel toned of the calling frogs. “Before the appointed time, we may not...”

“I know you think me ignorant.” He sounded slightly put out. “But I know the rules as well as you, Xtaj. We may not lie together. That is not open to question. But a simple touch will not defile you.” Before she could react, he reached out and laid his hot, damp fingers against the vulnerable skin of her inner arm, grazing the scars he had given her, so long ago it now seemed. Xtaj felt a bolt of lightning stab through her, exactly as if she had pierced herself with one of Shebolba's sacred pins. “See, the Goddess has not stricken you down.” His pale crystal eyes laughed a challenge at her. “And a kiss is not forbidden to us.” Bending his head, he leaned forward ever so slightly and put his mouth to hers. Xtaj felt her chest crushed in as if rocks pressed on it from every side and, within the constriction, her heart beat wildly, each pulse flat and sharp as a knife blade under the pressure. Like a conqueror, he entered her mouth, claiming as he tasted her, til she felt her will fold and sag like a crushed reed and knew he could feel it as well. His hand clamped hard to the side of her face and his thumb pressed into her jawline, forcing her to tilt her head and open herself more fully to him. And she knew that, Lust Woman that she was, true lust had eluded her til now. She had been the vessel, a conduit for the Goddess to sate Her desires and, pleasant as that role might have been, she had always been in control, held a part of herself back, in the ritual and not in the moment, without even realizing it. Now, she knew what the Sacred Victim felt, or should feel, to be devoured alive and love every second of it beyond all bliss.

When, at last, he released her, she looked in his face and saw she need not have feared earlier. His desire burned as strongly as hers. If nothing else, the rose hue darkening the sun bronzed skin of his cheeks would have betrayed it. But she could see it everywhere, the energy sparkling in his eyes, the way he held himself, not pulling back from her more than was absolutely necessary. His expression was exultant. “Xtaj, you are delicious.” He licked his lips.

And inside of her, everything came apart, limp wet rope falling to pieces under the slightest strain. Tears ran out of her eyes, liquid crystal scoring her face like claws. Her chest and stomach heaved, arching and jerking with long hollow sobs. “Zedaven, we are here alone.” The words poured from her mouth, fast and fluid as the tears coursing down her face. “No one need ever know about this.”

She felt his hand tighten on her arm. “But we've done nothing wrong.”

“No, not yet, but no one knows you're here. You can run. If you go fast, go now, they won't catch you.”

He gave her a chiding look. “Really, Xtaj, I'm surprised at you. If I left now, I wouldn't be able to help you carry all that water back.”

“This is no time for joking,” Her raw voice climbed almost to a screech as she fumbled among her clothes and brought out the bundle she had prepared for a quiet lunch by the river. “Here is food. With this, you can stay out of sight for several days, leave no trail, until you're far enough away to avoid being recognized. Take it. Take it!” She thrust the bundle violently at him and, when he still did not reach for it, tried to set it in his lap. Gently but firmly, he stayed her and, as he put her hands aside, he lifted one, grazing her knuckles with his lips and teeth so that her thighs loosened to milk and her throat closed anew. “Go,” she screamed. “Go, I command it!”

“Even a high priestesses cannot command me to disobey a Goddess.”

“Oh, you care nothing for Shebolba and we both know it.” In her anger and misery, she was now tempted to strike him, claw at him, anything to make him go, though she could not bear the thought of separation, of never having that night of bliss she now craved more than ever.

“That doesn't matter,” he said, looking her straight in the face, “because you do. We've talked of my



reasons for staying before and it's beyond you to change them.”

“But I don't want you to die,” she cried, clenching her fists in her lap. “I don't want to kill you. Have a little pity on me and don't make me always carry that burden on my conscience.”

“You're too strong to need pity. I wouldn't insult you by offering it. My choice to stay spares you the burden of always knowing you were false to yourself and everything you believe in. Now lighten up.” He gave her a condescending pat on the cheek. “Today is too beautiful a day to waste time being sad. Especially after a kiss like that.” He leaned close and whispered the last so that the heat of his breath on her face made her shiver despite her misery. Then he rose and shouldered the water jars, whistling a carefree tune as he walked back towards death and Xtaj followed behind, for there was nothing else she could do but, inside, she could feel her heart was breaking.

She had not seen him again since the day by river, had deliberately avoided it, not being able to face what he had condemned her to. Not that such evasion was difficult. With scant days left before the Great Rite, they both had a thousand ritual tasks to attend to that kept them more than sufficiently busy. But, every night before she retired to her sleeping chamber, Xtaj would look up at the stars and watch them inch closer to the equinox, towards the night she dreaded and burned for. And now it was here. She lay upon her bed, her body being massaged and oiled by two of the under priestesses, while a third combed a musky scent into her hair. Outside, she could hear the sounds of revelry coming closer, horns, drums, and wild shouting. It was the crowd of celebrants escorting Zedaven to his last night on earth. Xtaj knew the event well, having participated prominently in it back when her predecessor was still alive, before she took over the role of Lust Woman. The entire company of the priestesses would be there in full regalia, save those few who were here attending on her, as well as drummers and flute players, animals being taken to the temple to be blessed, and a great flat-bread of corn meal, wrapped around a mound of dried meats and fruits, carried ceremoniously on a platform decorated with colorful ribbons. These represented the last of the food stored for the dry season, which was being offered up in the hopes that it would soon be renewed. There was also an eerily realistic skeleton puppet, not quite life sized, with a disproportionately large phallus grafted onto its bony pelvis, who staggered about performing lewd dances and attempting to fondle or simulate copulation with as many girls in the audience as possible. This was not a celebration for the shy. It was a time for the renewal of life and no veil was put over the means by which that was to be achieved. Xtaj felt the muscles tighten inside her. This was her night, the night she had ached and thirsted for for months, the one night Zedaven was not forbidden to her. If her desire truly had power to set free the life blood of the earth, the land would bloom now as it never had before. Her attendants could feel her tense at the sounds of the procession approaching and she saw them exchange knowing looks, little guessing the true turmoil inside her.

In the midst of her thoughts, the door was flung open and Zedaven was shoved through by a horde of drunken and disheveled women who had been trying to cling to and paw at him all through the procession. He was naked except for his loincloth and a ceremonial headdress, which he tore from his head as soon as he was through the door, letting his chestnut hair tumble freely about his face. His skin glistened with sweat and, in a few places, blood, where some of his pursuers had clung too tightly. And, like the drugged women behind him, Zedaven's cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright but, as he came towards her, his step was steady and his gaze focused so she realized that his condition came only from physical exertion, desire, and the headiness of being worshiped. He had taken no intoxicants and was going into this open eyed. As he advanced, he grinned so wildly, he seemed like to split his face and his teeth flashed in the dim light of the oil lamps.

“Well, Xtaj, I've jumped through every hoop you and your priesthood have thrown in my way,” he said almost grimly, at least for Zedaven. “I think it's time you gave me what I want.” As he spoke, his hands were loosening the knot at his waist.

“How dare you?” The intense emotions warring inside Xtaj released outwards as rage. “You mean to imply you've performed a charade for the entire year, just so you could go to bed with me? With so little respect, you deserve...” His hands released the final knot and cast the piece of cloth away...and the words died in Xtaj's mouth as she saw his manhood, raised like a weapon, revealed to her: the sacrificial knife she, the sacrificer, must bow to. Before she could recover, he had climbed up onto the bed beside her, his movements as

fluid as those of a prowling cat, came crawling over the sheets towards her, the smell of his sweat and the oils with which he had been anointed like wine in her nostrils.

“This is no game, Xtaj,” he said, his voice heavy and thick. “I am in deadly earnest.” He reached her and his hands closed around her forearms with bruising force, around the white threads of the scars he had given her a year before, and desire went shooting through her, so intense and white hot that she was paralyzed. “Besides,” he went on, stooping down so his eyes locked with hers and his breath was in her face, “isn't that the whole focus of your ritual, for me to want you? Whatever my motivation, I'm doing and feeling exactly what I'm meant to.” He gave her a glance of blue fire, then whispered, “And I know what you're feeling as well.” The words broke the last feeble resistance in the dam of her emotions, and she flung herself on him, her hands knotting in his hair as she kissed and bit his mouth over and over with all the months worth of pent up rage and lust boiling inside her.

Zedaven was ready and waiting, matching her hunger and savagery inch for inch. Three times they came together before taking a pause. But, after the third time, Zedaven lay still for a moment, then pried himself loose. Their bodies were sticky with sweat, blood, and the nectars of life so that her skin was left tingling when he ripped himself free. Making his way to the side table, he poured himself a cup of wine and downed it in a single draft, his head flung back, then faced her with a wild grin. “Xtaj, you are thirsty work,” he said, all but licking his lips with relish. He poured himself another cup and swallowed it just as quickly, then flung himself upon her and grappled her down once again with unflagging energy.

Late into the night, Zedaven lay still at last. His breathing deepened and the sweat dried on his skin as he drifted off into a gentle sleep. Xtaj sat watching him, the strands of hair plastered across his brow, the shadows of his lashes against his cheek, the slow, steady expand and contract of his ribs. He was without anxiety of any sort though he was sleeping away his last hours of life. These hours were far more harrowing for the killer. Though weary as well, Xtaj would not allow herself to sleep. She could not afford to waste a single one of the precious moments left for her to be with Zedaven. And so she forced her eyes to stay open for what remained of the night, though they burned and her head throbbed with the need for rest. She watched him, trying to memorize his features, gliding her hand over his face, inches from his skin, lest actual contact wake him, and matching her inhale and exhale to his own as she breathed in the smell of his skin and hair that made her drowsy mind ever dizzier than before.

Eventually, she must have fallen asleep in spite of herself for she was wakened abruptly by a loud drum beat outside the door. The oil lamp had burned out, leaving the chamber in deep shadow but she could feel and half see Zedaven stirring beside her. The smell and chill in the air told her it was early morning. Dread seized her. It was time. They had come to take him away and... Zedaven found her hand in the dark and clasped it between his own, warm and solid. “You were strong enough when you hated me,” he whispered. “Prove how strong you are now. I challenge you.” And though she could have cared less by now whether he thought her weak or not—in truth, her desire for him had so weakened her long since that the entire debate was now ludicrous—the dare in his voice tapped her subconscious for a few brief seconds, long enough for her to lift the door curtain, letting in the watery gray light...and the hordes gathered outside.

Soon, the procession had formed up and was moving through the street, everyone laughing and signing joyfully. Only Xtaj was miserable and struggled to hide her grief from the happy people around her. Many a time in the past she had raced from her sleeping chamber to Shebolba's temple on winged feet, thinking even the short distance far too long. So eager was she to reach her destination that she would take no pause, even running up the steep stairs to the high court. The mass of people in the procession made the journey far slower this time and yet it did not, could not, last long enough for her. Already, she could see the dark walls of the buildings on either side of the narrow streets give way to the open space of the great square beyond. In silence, they crossed the courtyard and began to climb the stairs to the temple. The drum still beat but, over it, she could hear the raw scuffling of her soles on the stones as she dragged her feet in desperate reluctance.

They had reached the top of the stairs now. The whole city swam beneath, the plain huts, the painted houses of the wealthy, the open stalls of the market, all looking diminished and removed, part of another world. Only he was real here beside her, with his hands that so recently had been hard and hot against her skin, his

firm warm flesh, his pores still breathing in and out. He was so *alive*. The vibrancy and energy could not just cease to be. The light in his eyes could not be put out. In the streets below all was still in shadow, the sun not having climbed high enough yet to shine down past the taller buildings or even over the tops of the surrounding hills. But up here on the sacred mound it was already striking the stones before the house of the Goddess full on. The air seemed to shine and the very act of breathing was charged from inhaling the sun's overflow.

Under cover of the flutes and drums, she heard Zedaven whisper to her, "It's a beautiful day...a beautiful day to follow a beautiful night." Desperate, she bit her lip to keep back the tears. She must not cry. It was completely inappropriate for a joyous festival of renewal, or for a strong willed priestess at anytime. To let a tear fall would be the worst of ill omens and although she could feel no care for herself now, the people were still her charge and she would not put that fear on them. Now the wailing of the flutes had stopped, leaving the drums to beat on alone, slow, heavy, measured, like a heart beat. Out of the corner of her eye, Xtaj could see an under-priestess standing at her shoulder, holding out the sacred knife. Zedaven knelt down before her and raised his head, his clear water eyes still sparkling like the sun on the surface of the river. "I put myself into your hands," he said softly. "I know they're very capable." The corner of his mouth curled in just the hint of a knowing smile. He *dared* to give cheek to the priestess of Shebolba right before she took his life and sent him to the Goddess. One or two of the under-priestesses who were close enough to hear gasped at the sheer boldness and irreverence of it. The outrage of it, as well as the memories of the previous night his statement invoked, exactly as he intended it to, gave her a final wrench of carnal longing in her guts. And then she was filled with horrified guilt to have such feelings at the very moment of taking his life. Though, according to the codex of ritual, this was the right and proper thing to do.

Having given her a final shock to remember him by, Zedaven closed his eyes and tipped back his head. Although his hands and face had been washed golden by the sun, the flesh of his throat was still creamy, emphasizing his vulnerability as it arched, quivering from his breath, a few inches away from her finger tips. She took up the knife in her right hand and the pace of the drum beats increased. Instantly, she broke out in a cold sweat, her palms slick so the knife almost slid from her grasp. Even though he must recognize the cue from his training, Zedaven did not move. His chest rose and fell with his relaxed breathing. He was already half in another world. All that remained now was for her to set the rest of him free to follow. But her mind screamed wildly that it didn't have to be this way. She could grab his shoulders and shake him, wake him, bring him back. She could make those beautiful blue eyes open again, those lips laugh and mock her again.

The drums accelerated to a wild frantic rate, the beat of a heart racing in panic or ecstasy. It was time. "I can't do it! I can't do it!" she cried to herself over and over. But her body seemed controlled by an outside force. Perhaps the Goddess had possessed her, or perhaps it was only force of habit. Even as her mind continued to refuse, her arms rose of themselves. Her left hand she laid against his brow, a gesture of blessing and a practical measure to guard against any sudden movements. For the last time, she felt his skin, soft and warm and living as she raised her right hand, the dagger still miraculously clutched in her sweaty grip. In a sudden blur, the knife slashed down, cleaving across the bared skin of his throat like the arc of a black rainbow. Despite her wandering wits, muscle memory still served her well. The vital artery was cleanly severed and, for the second time since last day fall, the hot, honey sticky, essence of his life came gushing out onto her.

Before the body could stiffen in death, she released her hold on his head, giving it a little push as she did so, so that the body fell over and sprawled at the head of the stairs, and the, now sluggishly flowing, blood trickled down the gray stone. She could see the skin, even the bronze on his cheeks and the backs of his hands, already turning pale and gray as the blood no longer flowed beneath it and, as his life essence still oozed away down the stairs, she knew its velvety warmth was fading to a clammy chill. She felt claws in her throat and wanted to scream in agony. There was a bitter taste in her mouth, almost as if her own throat was choked with blood and her eyes stung with the urge to weep but there was one last duty she must discharge before she was free to indulge her grief.

Raising her bloody hand over her head, she faced the throngs of people gathered below. Despite the torturous constriction of her throat, she pitched her voice, as well she knew how, so that it would reverberate out through the air, reaching all the masses gathered for the rite. "Behold the blessing of life's vital fluid, the

ultimate sacrifice, freely, given.” She thought with bitterness just how freely it truly had been given. “It will bring fertility and bounty to man, beast, and field, allowing them to live on another year. Through the gift of one who is mighty, the thousands of us common men are sustained.” She let her hand fall amidst wild cheering, so loud she could almost feel the stone beneath her shake. Her head bowed and her shoulders stooped. It was done. Her public role was fulfilled and now she could turn back into the dark doorway of the temple, for all anyone could tell to offer her own private thanks at Shebolba's altar, as she had many times before.

This time, however, she did not go to the altar. Instead, she turned aside and shut herself inside one of the small private cells for priestesses, located in the outer wall of the temple. There, she laid herself down on the narrow cot and wept until she had no tears left. Then she gave dry empty sobs until her stomach and ribs could no longer endure the wrenching motion. At last, she lay on her side, staring open-eyed but unseeing into the darkness in front of her, the clinging dampness of her pillow pressed into her cheek and the side of her face. All through the day she lay there, as the minutes fell dead and uncounted. At first, she could hear the sounds of celebration from the people in the square below the temple. But, at last, they dispersed and silence fell. The tear saturated pillow dried, sticking to her skin.

She might have lain here for ages. She felt a faint hunger but no desire for food. There was nothing left but blackness around her and the crushing empty ache inside of her. It would never change. It would never end. At last, she came almost to believe that, not only would there be nothing after it, but that there had never been anything before it either. All memories of sunlight, music, good food, had faded to translucent swirling images, only dreams. Her mind drifted in and out of consciousness. She may have slept fitfully and had genuine dreams or she may simply have hallucinated so that it seemed she walked with and kissed and made love to Zedaven again, not just once but always, as the moon waxed and then waned again. He stayed with her and these images combined with the dreamy memories of true life, tangling and blending inextricably.

Ages later it seemed, Xtaj rose at last from the bed. She had no idea why she did so. She had no more interest in the world outside then when she had first entered this dark place. She knew nothing had changed. Zedaven would still be dead. Everything would still be empty and bleak. And yet she went. She felt drawn and compelled. But why she did not know. She went without hope, not being foolish enough to take the strange pull as a sign of better things. And yet she went. Her heart was dead and she had no will left, including the will to resist the compulsion. Stumbling like one blind and lame, she made her way out into the main temple and towards the doorway, her hands held tentatively in front of her as if feeling the way. After so long in darkness, even the faint light in Shebolba's chamber stung her eyes. But, by the time she had reached the outer archway, her vision had cleared enough that she could make out vague shapes and colors.

Again, she stood on the platform of the sacred pyramid with the wind in her face and, again, it was sunrise. But she could not have said if one day or many had passed since the last sunrise she had seen. This time, the sun was paler and more watery, the wind was cold, and she stood alone. The high court of the temple was empty save for herself, the square below was deserted, though the refuse from the celebration had not yet been cleared away. Not many days could have passed then. She could not see the slightest motion. In all the city below, no human was stirring. Nor were there any birds on the wing to catch the last of the retreating night insects. The sky lay vast and empty about her and the earth dead and shadowed below. Xtaj felt as if she was the only thing left in a blasted and ravaged world.

She still could not bring herself to look down directly in front of her at the head of the stairs, even though she knew Zedaven's body was long gone by now, would have been taken almost at once to the fields, dismembered, and the chunks of flesh buried in the soil for the crops to feed on. Anything that was left would have been sliced and broken as the plow blades passed over it in the ritual cutting of the first furrows that followed. She knew all this but still did not want to look. There might still be some blood stains left. Of course, this was a foolish fear anyway. After all, there were still blood stains on her right hand. As she looked at the, now muddy brown, smears and spatters, her tears flowed once more after so many hours of drought, splashing down on the soiled hand as she tried to scrub it clean with the end of her sash.

As she looked up again, her gaze happened to fall on the very thing she had sought to avoid and was dazzled by a flash of brilliant scarlet. She could not make out all the details, her eyes not being fully adjusted

yet to the light of the dawn. But she did know that this was not the dull rusty hue of dried blood. Even blood gushing from a fresh wound could hardly be this bright. She felt the pull again and a faint flicker of human curiosity as well. Together, these were stronger than the apathy and pain and she stepped nearer to take a closer look. Hundreds of tiny crimson flowers sprouted from the cracks in the stones, their petals, thick and velvety as flesh, forming little stars like blood spatters. She looked over the lip of the platform and saw, for many feet down the steep stairs, streaks and clusters of flowers. Every place his blood had touched now bloomed.

Xtaj remembered the stories she had heard at her grandmother's house and how she had learned not to credit them when she had come to this place to begin her training as a priestess. The official purpose of the sacrifice was to bring life and growth into the world anew but seldom did Lady Shebolba oblige with such tangible evidence of her blessing. Miracles like this, while not recorded in the holy codex, were the stuff of legends told on long nights in the houses of the common people. Overcome with awe, she knelt at the head of the stairs, her knees sinking into the crimson flowers as into a pool, as the clouds cleared and the sun rose, flaming, finally clearing the surrounding hills and washing all the court around her in golden light.