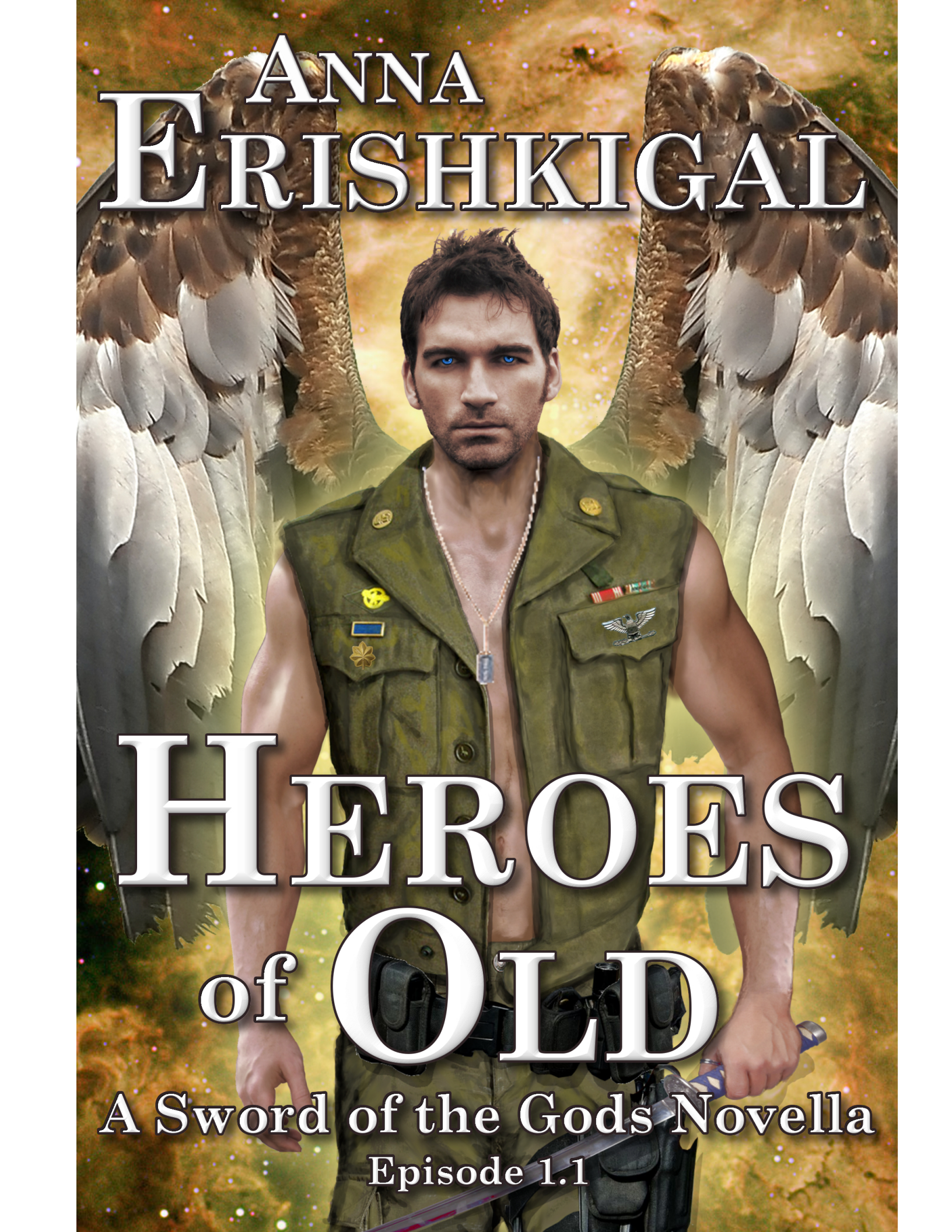


A man with brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a green military vest over a black shirt, stands against a golden, ethereal background. He has large, white and brown feathered angel wings. He is holding a sword with a blue hilt. The vest has several patches, including a yellow one with a skull, a blue one with a star, and a red one with a winged figure. A dog tag hangs from a chain around his neck.

ANNA  
ERISHKIGAL

HEROES  
of OLD

A Sword of the Gods Novella  
Episode 1.1

## Description

*At the dawn of time, two ancient adversaries battled for control of Earth. One man rose to stand at humanity's side. A soldier whose name we still remember today...*

Angelic Special Forces Colonel Mikhail Mannuki'ili awakens, mortally wounded, in his crashed ship. The woman who saves his life has an uncanny ability to heal. But who shot Mikhail down? And why?

Ninsianna has always had a special relationship with the goddess. She comes from a long line of shamans and healers. When she flees into the desert to escape forced marriage to the Chief's overbearing son, the *last* thing she expects is a winged man to fall from the sky!

Meanwhile, in heaven, Prime Minister Lucifer, the Eternal Emperor's adopted son, hatches a plan to override his immortal father's wishes.

It's life or death in this first installment of the epic sci-fantasy retelling of the myth of fallen angels, *Sword of the Gods*.

**This book is NOT religious fiction!**

# HEROES OF OLD



by

Anna Erishkigal

## **Sword of the Gods Episode 1x01**

SERAPHIM PRESS



CAPE COD, MA

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this book to all the brave men and women who serve in the armed forces. To you I dedicate the biggest, baddest superhero to ever walk the earth. The Archangel Michael. A soldier ... like you.

You are the wind beneath our wings. Thank you!



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## **A note about time...**

All times in this novel occur chronologically or concurrently unless specifically stated otherwise (i.e., *three hours ago*, or *the present time*). Because the story is told through the point of view of different characters, sometimes there may be a minor time-overlap to get the reader caught up, but all times should otherwise be treated as sequential.

Both the Galactic Alliance and the Sata'anic Empire compute time from the day the Eternal Emperor ascended to the Alliance throne and signed the current Galactic Agreement which divides the Milky Way between the two empires (i.e., 152,000+ years). A.E. stands for '*After Emperors*.' The decimal point after the year is the month, i.e., 02=February. All Galactic Standard dates run concurrently with time as it occurs on Earth unless specifically noted otherwise.

152,323.02 = February 2, 3390 B.C.

## Heroes of Old



*When men began to increase in number  
on the earth  
And daughters were born to them,  
The sons of God saw that the  
daughters of men were beautiful,  
And they married any of them they chose. [...]  
The Nephilim were on the earth in those days —  
And also afterward — when the sons of God  
Went to the daughters of men  
And had children by them.  
They were the heroes of old, men of renown.*

*Genesis 1-6*

## Prologue



Ascended Realms  
Emperor Shay'tan

### SHAY'TAN

The two old gods bent over the sparkling silver galaxy which spun in space, contemplating their next move. So they had done since time immemorial, god and the devil, two ancient adversaries locked forever in a game of chess.

The larger of the two deities, an enormous red dragon, moved a black pawn into the path of a white rook.

"You're out of pawns!" Shay'tan rumbled.

"Court pieces are worth more than pawns!" His white-robed adversary easily overtook it. "They can outmaneuver them."

"Ahh...." Shay'tan's snout transformed into a predatory grin. "You don't have enough respect for your pawns. No matter how powerful your court pieces—" he moved a second black pawn to overtake the rook "—you will never have enough of them. Especially if you keep throwing them away on trivial moves."

He dropped the unfortunate rook into his growing pile of conquests which lay scattered around his throne like broken toys. The Eternal Emperor Hashem feigned an indignant expression.

"I'm using superior pieces to employ a superior strategy!" he said. "Really, Shay'tan. You think too short-term to grasp the subtleties!"

"Winning is about the numbers!" Shay'tan laughed. "He, who has the most chess pieces, wins."

The Emperor's bushy eyebrows bunched together in concentration. He scrutinized a black rook orbiting a planet deep in the uncharted territories.

"What are you up to, you old devil?"

Shay'tan feigned his most innocent smirk, his long red tail twitching like a cat stalking a mouse. Hashem picked up a white knight and considered his next move. Shay'tan's grin disappeared as he recognized which chess piece his opponent intended



to bring into play. His leathery wings jutted outward as Hashem moved the white knight towards his greatest prize.

"White knight to Zulu Sector three..."

"Oh no you don't!"

Shay'tan grabbed his black rook and slammed it down onto the galaxy, knocking the white knight out of the sky.

The room convulsed.

The ceiling disappeared into a canopy of blinding white light.

"Shay'tan!" a woman shrieked. "You were supposed to wait your turn!"

A vague golden shape became visible in the heavens, looming over them as though they, themselves were chess pieces on a much larger board. With a twist of her wrist, She-Who-Is stripped them of their foreknowledge and cast them back into the galaxy to see how their manipulations played out in the galactic empires they both ruled.

# Chapter 1



February – 3,390 BC

Pain.

Metal pierced his flesh in a gyrating, burning, shrieking ball of sparks. He gurgled in agony as a steel rod impaled his chest, pinning him to the deck of his ship like a butterfly. Blood welled in his lungs, burning and gagging. Its sweet, coppery stench filled the air; the scent of his own impending death.

He tried to remember his name; but there were no memories, only the sensation of falling.

*'So this is it? The end...'*

A single tear escaped as the ship hit the atmosphere and began to burn; the sting of salt as it passed over a cut oddly sharp even through the heat and pain of his other injuries. *Alone.* He had always known that he would die alone.

The ship shrieked a warning.

He closed his eyes and prayed to pass quietly into the void, to feel his life slip from his body so his pain would end. But even close to death, the part that remembered who he was whispered:

*Fight!*

*Survive!*

*Live another day.*

He clenched his fist around the small, dark figurine he always kept next to his heart. He would complete the mission. He would smite those who had done this; even though he had no recollection of who he fought or what he was fighting for.

Long after he should have passed from this world, he continued to fight for each and every breath.

## Chapter 2



February – 3,390 BC  
Earth: 12 hours earlier

### NINSIANNA

The desert which lay between the two great rivers was an inhospitable place, even during the rainy season. There was little cover here. Only rubble and the occasional desiccated clump of brush, the skeletal remains of long-dead streams, and the distant mountain which their enemies claimed was the sacred adobe of their god.

Ninsianna, whose name meant *She-who-serves-the-goddess*, crouched behind a pile of rocks, her heart pounding as three kilt-clad warriors moved dangerously close to where she hid, gathering dried bits of brush to build a fire.

"Why would she come this way?" Tirdard asked.

"She wanted to get away from *him*." Dadbeh said.

"Don't let *him* hear you say that," Firouz said. "He fancies himself in love with her."

"I should hope so!" Tirdard said. "They're supposed to marry at the summer solstice."

"Not if he can't catch her," Firouz said.

"If you ask *me*," Dadbeh snorted, "she ran off with another man."

Ninsianna clamped her hand over her mouth to quell her urge to shout: '*Can't you understand I just don't want to marry him?*' She'd voiced that protest, vociferously, many times, but nobody cared about the wishes of a woman.

*'Just think what fine sons you'll have?'* Papa had scoffed at her hesitation. *'She-Who-Is looks favorably upon this union. He's the son of a chief. Think what prestige it will bring to merge our two houses together?'*

Well she didn't *want* to be anybody's brood goat! Not for the village. Not even for She-Who-Is!

The conversation cut off as Jamin strode back into the campsite carrying a dead gazelle slung over his muscular shoulders. He was a beautiful man, with a swarthy complexion, a fine straight nose, and the blackest eyes she'd ever seen. Every woman in the village swooned at his sexual prowess.

Every woman except for *her*...

*She* was the only prey he'd never been able to lure into his bed!

His best friend, Siamek, a tall, competent man, set down their obsidian-tipped spears and Jamin's cape.

"You see any sign of her?" Firouz asked.

"Just footprints—" Jamin pointed north-east "—a few thousand cubits *that* way."

"Why would she head straight towards our enemies?" Firouz asked. "Doesn't she realize the Halifians will take her in-hand?"

"Because she's a *woman*," Jamin laughed. "The gods only know what flutters through her pretty head."

Ninsianna picked up a stone, resisting the urge to throw it at the arrogant son-of-a-Chief's head. If not for her 'mental faculties,' he'd be dead right now!

"That's what you get for chasing after the shaman's daughter," Firouz said.

"We all warned you," Siamek said, "Ninsianna is fickle."

Dadbeh laughed.

"Oh, Jamin!" I want you!" The small man spoke in a high, falsetto voice. He turned his head, pretending to be his other self. "No I don't!" He turned it back. "Yes, I do!" He turned back again. "No, I don't!"

Tirdard clamped his hand over his mouth, trying not to laugh.

"The whole while—" Firouz joined in, thrusting out his hips in a woman's walk "—spinning her father's magic."

"Shazam!" Dadbeh wiggled his fingers. "Jamin falls under her spell."

"Falls?" Jamin snorted. "Hardly. My father favors the match." He stared at the rock where Ninsianna hid. "Typical woman! Too foolish to know her own mind."

He knelt next to the dead gazelle, took out his waterskin and sprinkled a few drops of water onto its head.

"Thank you, brother," he murmured, "for the gift of your life."

The wind picked up and answered in a voice only Ninsianna could hear.

*'You're welcome, favored son...'*

He sliced into its belly with an obsidian blade, expertly separating the inner organs from the entrails they would leave for the hyenas to eat.

Siamek crouched down next to him and pointed at the scar in Jamin's belly.

"You looked like that gazelle when I carried you back with your guts hanging out from the auroch hunt—" he spoke low so the other men couldn't hear him. "If she hadn't

stitched you back together, you'd be dead. Perhaps you mistook her ministrations for love?"

Behind the rock, Ninsianna held her breath.

*Please? Make him listen?*

Jamin stabbed his knife into the dead gazelle.

"Which is why we need to bring her back!" he said. "Assur needs its apprentice healer."

He dislocated a leg and handed Siamek the meat. His black eyes bore into his second-in-command.

Siamek nodded. He *never* contradicted Jamin in front of the other men, but they'd been friends long enough that he often spoke up in private. Siamek strode over and placed the meat into the fire.

Jamin stood and faced the distant mountain, his expression vulnerable as the sun raced towards the horizon.

"Where are you?" he murmured.

He placed his leather-wrapped foot on the rock Ninsianna hid behind, studying the horizon, and fastened his cape using an elaborately carved bone pin.

Ninsianna crouched like a prey animal, hidden among the rocks. The wind shifted. Smoke wafted in her direction, carrying with it the luscious scent of roasting meat, spiced with wild garlic and a bit of desert ajwain herb. Her stomach growled, reminding her she'd had nothing but *bastirma*; dried, salted meat, for the last three days.

Where would she live? A woman without a village?

No other tribe would dare take her in.

The wind whispered:

*'Will it really be so bad? To be the wife of a future chief?'*

She gripped her hem, torn with indecision. She'd always resisted him, the seduction and the gifts; the way he'd always sought her out like a lion stalking prey. But after he'd gotten injured, a whole, new vulnerable side of Jamin had emerged. Each day, as she'd gone to change his bandages, he would tell her stories about all the places he had traveled, the people he had met, and the wild and beautiful things he had seen.

He'd promised, if she became his wife, she would travel with him.

She'd finally told him "yes."

But then he'd recovered and gone back to being—him!

He'd been in a terrible temper, when she'd broken off their engagement. Maybe, if she explained she'd been frightened? Perhaps he had learned his lesson?

All she had to do was stand up and say, 'here I am.'

"Hey, Jamin?" Firouz called out. "What are you going to do with her once we catch her?"

"Put her over my knee and spank her," Jamin said, "like her father should have done long ago."

The warriors laughed.

Ninsianna's doubts froze within her chest. Typical man! Say one thing to woo a woman, another thing entirely to impress his friends. She'd been taken in by him once. She would *not* have her better judgment compromised a second time!

She waited until they all sat down to eat and then, very carefully, began to crawl backwards. A tiny pebble skittered and hit another one.

Crack!

Ninsianna froze.

All five warriors looked in her direction. Her heart pounded. She pressed her body into the ground.

*Please don't see me!*

If they stood up, she'd be exposed.

She whispered the prayer her father used whenever they needed to start a fire and the wood was damp, picturing the solstice fire they lit twice a year. The fire flared up in a great, gusty puff of flame, causing the meat to sizzle and catch on fire. The men scrambled to contain it before the meat turned into charcoal.

*Thank you, Mother!*

She waited until they sat back down to eat, and then crept backward until she reached a *wadi*, a dry desert stream that only carried water after the most torrential rain. At the bottom lay a dark, moist hole where Dadbeh and Firouz had dug for water. Here, in the desert, water evaporated quickly. Not only had the hole already dried up, but the soil bore a sick, malodorous air.

That sense of *seeing* she'd inherited from her father warned of evil spirits. Anyone who drank this water would be gripped with belly pain and explosive diarrhea.

Ninsianna giggled. Maybe *that* would deter Jamin and his men?



She hurried west, away from Ubaid territory, away from Assur, away from her parents who spoke of obligation and duty. Here in the desert, a single traveler might pass unnoticed, but a band of warriors would arouse the attention of their enemies.

Not even Jamin dared risk a war with the fierce Halifian tribe!

The sun dipped behind the mountain which the Ubaid called 'Hyena's Teeth.' The Halifian tribe considered the mountain sacred. If Jamin got caught there, they would draw him off in battle for certain.

The *wadi* grew dark as the land slipped into darkness, but that sense of *knowing* she'd inherited from her shaman father illuminated her path. Every living thing gave off a faint spirit-light, from the smallest blade of grass to the scorpions which skittered among the rocks. Her father claimed women were not supposed to *see*, but she could sense far more than he believed.

She tripped on a rock.

With a cry, she found herself face-down on the ground. Hyperventilating, she picked herself back up and dusted the ochre yellow dust out of her dress. She needed to find shelter. This far into the desert, there was barely any spirit-light.

Oh! How she *hated* the dark!

She squeezed a sip out of her goatskin bladder, now flaccid and limp. If she didn't find water soon, she'd have no choice but to return to the river.

She closed her eyes and raised her palms to the sky.

*Great Mother? I am thirsty...*

Just to her left, the soil glowed with a faint hint of life. Subterranean water? If she hadn't fallen, she probably would have missed it.

She followed the side-wadi straight towards the sacred mountain. A faint, earthy scent carried in the wind. Ninsianna stopped and sniffed.

Water?

She rushed towards a rock so big the *wadi* had been forced to route around it. Trickling down from a crack, a tiny spring seeped life-giving water.

"Thank you, Mother!" She scooped up a handful and offered her first drink to the earth before dipping her hand into the tiny pool which gathered at its base. It was cold and sweet, with none of the murky stench which indicated evil spirits.

She pulled a wool blanket out of her leather satchel. Out here in the desert, a man could die from heat sickness during the day, and then freeze to death at night, but

lighting a fire was the surest way to draw unwanted attention. She leaned against the rock, contemplating her sorry predicament.

Betrothed! To a man she did not love!

The night grew frigid. Ninsianna began to shiver. A pack of hyenas moved closer with their disquieting, laughing bark. She dug out her obsidian blade and clutched it to her chest. A snake slithered out of its burrow and hissed. Out in the desert, an animal gave its death scream.

"Mother?" Her voice warbled. "I know you favor Jamin, but he has a terrible temper. Couldn't you make him fall in love with somebody else?"

What would make the goddess spurn her favorite son? She stared up at the stars.

*Shazam! Ninsianna performed her father's magic...*

Well she hadn't. Not really. Well, maybe just a little... She'd been stuck caring for him, and he'd been such an insufferable bore.

What if?

"Maybe I could perform a love ritual for him?"

Ninsianna giggled as she rummaged through her satchel for the sacred relics she'd stolen from her father. A sack of bones to divine the future. Dried parrotia to symbolize the spirit. A piece of lapis to symbolize the Earth. Her hand trembled as she touched the last item; a small, clay flask containing a tincture of belladonna berries and poppy pods. *He* claimed, if a woman drank the potion, she'd become lost in the dreamtime. But without it, not even Papa could hear messages from the gods.

"Why should men dictate the fate of women when a *goddess* created all that is?"

She pried the stopper out of the flask and gave it a wary sniff. It wasn't like she could make the situation any worse. Pinching her nose, she gagged down the entire bottle.

Ugh! It tasted like goat urine!

She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep the vile substance down.

A sound like roaring water grew inside her ears. She crawled to the sacred spring and gulped down handfuls of water, trying to force the taste out of her mouth, but the roaring grew louder as the world around her spun. She curled up into a ball, clenching her stomach. Why, oh why, had she performed forbidden magic?

At last the noise began to grow quiet. No. Not silent. Thoughts flowed around her like a gentle river of information. She held her palms up to the heavens and began to chant a prayer:

O Great Mother!  
You have the power to alter fate.  
At your benevolent hands,  
An ill event becomes good.  
At your right is Justice,  
At your left is Goodness.  
To you, I turn to make entreaty.

As she chanted, the spirit light which flowed through every living creature began to glow brighter. Gerbils spoke. Scorpions clicked out messages. Even the dung-beetles had something important to say. She picked up her obsidian blade and sliced the black volcanic glass through her palm.

She squeezed three drops of blood onto the small, clay flask; she picked it up and held it up to the sky.

"O Great Mother!" she shouted. "Find Jamin a mate strong-willed enough to put him back into his place? And bring *me* somebody powerful enough to make him back off!"

Out in the desert, a pack of jackals howled, but this time they didn't sound threatening. It felt as though she'd become one with the pack.

A paralyzing numbness crept into her limbs. The chirp-chirp-chirp of insects took on the eerie percussion of a shamanic rattle. Grass and shrubbery glowed brilliantly bright, ringed with phosphorescent green. Slender threads of spirit-light stretched between everything she saw, revealing it was all connected. Even the rocks glowed with a soporific, sleepy light, very much alive.

Up in the heavens, the stars spun in a slow, graceful dance. Tears streamed down her cheeks as they sang a wordless song.

*Sister! Join us...*

She reached up to touch them.

"So beautiful," she whispered. "When can I join them?"

Time and space became meaningless as images floated towards her on the vast, wide river; a white-robed man seated upon a throne. Behind him rose a magnificent tree out of a lush, green garden, surrounded by a city with three golden suns. In and out of the city, strange creatures traversed between the stars in strange, enclosed sky canoes.

The song changed.

A terrifying darkness slithered towards the center.

'Mother! Help us!' the stars cried out.

The wind picked up.

'Ninsianna...' She-Who-Is whispered. '*I need your help.*'

The goddess drew her eyes to a silver sky canoe. A man unlike any other battled the terrible cancer, beautiful and deadly. A flash of lightning smote the man's sky canoe. It tumbled through the heavens, towards a round, blue stone she understood to be her home.

'Will you help him?' She-Who-Is asked.

A thrill of excitement rippled through Ninsianna's body.

Would she get to see the heavens?

"Yes, Great Mother," she swore eagerly. "I will help him."

The wind grew brisker, picking up her hair and casting its' cold breath onto her skin. In the eastern sky, a shooting star illuminated the desert as it hurtled out of the heavens. It grew closer and closer, so large it dominated the horizon.

"Mother?"

The star bore down on her, a terrible, burning, hellish object.

It grew larger and larger.

A high-pitched whine split the air.

"Ack!"

The earth shuddered as the fireball passed directly overhead. She threw herself down onto the ground.

WHAM!!!

The shooting star slammed into the earth. A pillar of flame shot straight into the air, mushrooming outwards and covering her with rocks and debris. Rocks the size of fists rained down like hail from an angry god. Her heart beat so fast, she feared it might leap right out of her chest.

Ninsianna covered her head and screamed.

Gradually the rocks turned into dust. Ninsianna stood up and faced the bright, red glow. Was she in heaven, or a strange, fiery hell dimension?

'Go,' She-Who-Is whispered, '*and do as we agreed.*'

Ninsianna picked up her satchel and headed towards the mysterious, glowing object. She reached a place where a landslide blocked off the *wadi*. Just beyond, the

stream backed up to form an oasis. Two paths of fire stretched across a bowl-shaped valley towards a glowing shape embedded in the foot of the sacred mountain.

The first ray of light shot above the horizon.

*'Here,' She-Who-Is whispered. 'Here you shall teach our champion to become mortal.'*

## Chapter 3



February 3,390 BC

Sparks crackled in the smoke, giving everything an unearthly, hellish appearance. The rod scraped through his chest, threatening to drown him in his own blood. Gasping like a fish, he panted small, painful breaths, trying to get enough oxygen into his brain to clear the fog. He couldn't remember his name, but if he didn't extricate himself from this wreckage, he was a dead man!

Crepuscular rays of golden sunlight burst down through a crack in the ceiling, illuminating a beautiful, dark-haired spirit. Light reflected off her skin as she kneeled next to him, wearing the form of a creature of legend.

The source race?

A sense of awe flit into his mind and was gone before he had time to contemplate what 'source race' meant.

*"O-kim-oldugunu yardim etmek icin beni buraya gonderdi ise," the spirit said. "Ben sana zarar demek."*

The hand which touched his cheek and sympathetic look in her golden eyes was understood. There was no surviving such a wound. The spirit had come to guide him into the dreamtime.

An overwhelming sense of relief flooded his body.

*Not alone.*

Despite his pain, he smiled as he placed his fate into the spirit's hands.

## Chapter 4



February - 3,390 BC

Earth: Crash site

### NINSIANNA

What at first appeared to be a burning rock transformed into a spearhead the closer she got to the fallen star. Even half-buried, she recognized the sky canoe she'd seen in her vision. It glowed bright red like a bed of coals, but the vessel itself did not burn except for smoke which billowed from one of its two chimneys. While she could not find a discernable doorway, a massive crack split the vessel from the ground all the way up to the ceiling right where it disappeared into a landslide.

'Hurry!' She-Who-Is whispered.

Ninsianna squeezed through the crack into a room filled with smoke. The only light came from hundreds of sparks which spat out of spiderwebs dangling from the ceiling. The rising sun shot through the crack, illuminating a bloody man who lay buried beneath a pile of rubble. Through his chest, he'd been impaled with a spear.

"No!"

Sharp edges tore at her hands and knees as she scrambled towards the dying man. A copper stench filled her nostrils, the scent of impending death.

The man reached for her. Blood poured out of his mouth and nose.

"*An rás fhoinse?*" he said.

She placed one hand onto the man's pale cheek, praying he didn't see her terror. Their eyes met in the murky light, a frightened, dying creature and a stranger. His expression turned grateful.

"*Neo-aonar?*"

His eyes fluttered shut.

Ninsianna pressed her fingers against his throat. *Please don't die!* Sobs wracked her lungs when a faint heartbeat fluttered against her fingertips.

'Here—' a whisper of intuition drew her attention to the spear which pinned him to the floor '—*attend to the deadliest object first.*'

He wore a peculiar garment fastened to his chest, neither a cape nor a robe. She used her obsidian knife to slice the fabric away from the spear. Once removed, he'd bleed out in a matter of heartbeats, so she had to work fast.

Rummaging through her satchel, she pulled out a bone needle and a bundle of hair plucked from the tail of a wild horse. She'd helped Mama tend to many terrible wounds, including Jamin's, but never had she treated so grievous an injury without the benefit of her mother's guiding hand.

She rinsed her hands with water from the goatskin, and then planted her feet on either side of his torso. She sang the song Mama sang whenever she needed strength, usually when an entire band of warriors came in injured from a skirmish.

She gathers the divine powers,  
She announces the sacred rites.  
She works with intricate skill,  
As she ministers the injured.

She pictured white light flowing from the top of her head all the way down into her fingers, and then into her feet rooted deeply in the ground. It was forbidden for a woman to use magic for anything but healing, but she'd spied on Papa when the shamans came together and talked. It flowed around her, an exhilarating tingle, like water pouring into an urn until the power wouldn't rise any further.

She gripped both fists around the shaft and yanked.

"Hiyah!!!"

The man groaned, but the spear would not release.

She pulled harder, praying and chanting, until the energy grew so powerful her entire body began to hum. She pulled so hard his torso lifted right up off the floor. The spear made a horrible sucking sound as it slid from his chest.

Ninsianna dropped to her knees, still chanting:

She takes the bandages and wipes them;  
She treats the bandages with embrocation,  
She mops up the blood and suppuration,  
And places a warm hand on the horrid wound.



That river of information she'd seen in the vision flowed around her now, more clear and powerful than the tentative spells she'd cast away from her father's disapproving eyes.

The man's breath became more labored. Just left of his heart, the flesh sank into his ribcage where the shaft had shattered several ribs. She pressed two fingers into the hole, past mangled flesh until she hit a hollow cavity. Her heart sank. The shaft had pierced a lung.

She ran her fingers inside his chest, gauging the extent of the damage. Something pulsed against her fingertips. Ninsianna paused, awestruck as the man's heart fluttered through the delicate lung tissue.

"O Great Mother!" she said, awed "—not even Mama has ever touched a still-beating heart."

Was this what it felt like to be a goddess?

She picked up the bone needle she'd threaded moments before. This wasn't the first time she'd stitched a punctured lung, though in both cases, the patient had died. She stitched in and out of the tender flesh, tuning into that whisper of information which told her what to do. Pulling the flesh shut like a goatskin pampootie, she cut the thread, and then moved on to sew the outer layer of muscle and skin.

As she stitched, she continued to sing:

She gathers up the divine powers,  
She takes his life into her hands.  
She attaches them to the great garment,  
While speaking favorable words.

She tests the surgical lancet;  
As she sharpens her scalpel.  
She makes perfect the divine powers of medicine,  
She places them into my hands.

The stranger reopened his eyes.

He watched her stitch, his expression strangely calm given the fact her fingers were buried deep inside his chest.

*"An bhfuil tú spiorad, teacht a chur mé go harm an réimse an aisling?"* he said.

"Don't be afraid. She-Who-Is sent me here to help you."

Since both hands were bloody, she kissed his cheek, hoping he would understand the gesture of comfort. She tied off the thread. He spoke in a language she felt she should recognize.

*"Ní raibh mé riamh eagla bás, ach go bás ina n-aonar," he said. "Tá áthas orm tú ag teacht a thabhairt dom ar an aistear."*

Chills tingled throughout her body. But each word he spoke came with a terrible, wheezing sound.

"I think the shaft came out the other side." She pointed at her own back. "I have to roll you over. Okay?"

She made a rolling gesture with her hands so he'd understand.

The man nodded, *"Is ea."*

She tried to push him sideways, but a heavy cabinet had come down on top of his legs. She tried to lift the wreckage, but her feet kept slipping on the slippery, bloody floor. She wedged a piece of debris underneath the cabinet. If he could pull his own legs out, maybe she could roll him to see what had happened in the back?

She crawled back next to him. Her hand came down in a pile of bloody feathers.

"What is this?" She tugged at the feathers. "Some kind of cape?"

The 'cape' flapped upward, scattering debris.

"Ack!"

Ninsianna skittered backwards.

A dark shape rose up in the darkened sky canoe. Vaguely wedge-shaped, hundreds of spear-like tips jutted out of the edge as it flapped. It settled back upon the floor, trembling. She stared with disbelief at the enormous brown feathers which had come to rest against her foot.

"You have wings?"

She touched the bloodied feathers and traced them to their origin beneath his back. She stared up at the ceiling.

"You sent me to save a living god?"

The man's brows knit together in confusion, as though he wished to figure out why she wished to hurt him. She glanced at the handful of dark feathers she'd just ripped out of his living flesh.

"Oh! Sorry!"

She touched his cheek to convey she hadn't meant to cause him any pain. His skin felt cold, the pallor of death. With her enhanced vision, she could see his spirit light float halfway between the world of the living and the dead. With each gasp for breath, his spirit-light grew dimmer.

She touched the place where his legs disappeared beneath the heavy wreckage.

"You're too heavy for me to roll all by myself—" she moved her hands to communicate what he needed to do "—I will pull—" she mimicked pulling with both hands "—but you must pull out your own legs. Okay?"

The stranger nodded. *"Is ea."*

She kneeled behind his head and threaded her forearms through his armpits.

"Pull!"

Ninsianna pulled with every ounce of her strength. The man moved his legs just far enough to free them before he lost consciousness. She rolled him onto his side.

Protruding from his back, a pair of enormous, muscular brown wings lay trapped beneath the debris. The wing which had flapped upward appeared to be intact, but the other wing bent backwards at an ominous angle.

"When you sent me a vision of a man with wings," she spoke to the goddess, "I had no idea you were being literal!"

She stitched the exit wound where the shaft had come out the other side, and then moved on to attend to the next most critical injury, his broken wing.

Once, when she'd been little, Mama had saved a hawk. Raptors were sacred to the Ubaid, favorable omens. Papa claimed raptors were the eyes of She-Who-Is. She felt along the bones hidden beneath the feathers. Just below the knee joint, a slender bone had snapped and punctured through his skin.

"It's a good thing you're not awake," she said, "or I don't think you'd let me do this."

She slid the delicate bone back beneath his skin and winced as she ground the bone into place. Lying next to her, the spear she'd just ripped from his chest would make a respectable splint. Now all she needed was some rope. Where, in this temple, would a man keep rope?

Dozens of colorful spiderwebs dangled from the ceiling like roots inside a cave, no doubt dislodged when the sky canoe had slammed into the valley wall. She ripped down several long, colorful strands. While thinner than a rope, the peculiar threads bent and held their shape. She wrapped them around the spear and his broken wing.

What next? Mother! The man is bloody and broken!

His left wrist bent at an unnatural angle. *This* injury was at least familiar. She braced her feet against his side to gain leverage and rammed his elbow between her knees, yanking until his wrist made a cracking noise.

"Mama would do a better job—" she chattered to keep his spirit light from trying to escape his body "—but it's a two-day run back to my village. If I leave you alone, the death-sleep will take you."

At last she had done all she could. Either he would live, or choose to pass into the dreamtime. All she could do was encourage him to stay.

The man's flesh felt pale and clammy; his heart beat unevenly and far too light. To fend off the death-sleep, she needed to keep him warm. She grabbed the blanket she'd brought with her in her satchel and covered him.

The man shivered.

She curled against his side to share her warmth.

Exhausted, she fell fast asleep.

## Chapter 5



Galactic Standard Date: 152,323.02 AE  
Earth Orbit: SRN 'Jamaran'  
Lieutenant Kasib

### LT. KASIB

The *SRN Jamaran* orbited the blue resource planet which Shay'tan (a thousand blessings upon his name) had sent this battle cruiser to secure. Sata'anic Royal Navy Lieutenant Kasib stared at ship's communications console, a no-frills black and white flatscreen just like the others which ringed the command center, flicking the air with his long, forked tongue as he scanned the reports scrolling in from the planet's surface.

In the commander's chair behind him, shaped remarkably like the pedestal of a black rook, General Hudhafah's sharp dorsal ridge reared in irritation.

"Any word on that Angelic scout ship?" he hissed.

Kasib eyed the reports with his gold-green serpentine eyes.

"We can detect no energy signatures emanating from the planet, Sir," Kasib said. "It appears to have broken up during reentry."

"And what about the wreckage?"

Kasib tasted the air for pheromones indicating General Hudhafah's level of irritation. Like all low-ranking males who served in Shay'tan's armies, he was hyper-alert to the slightest reddening of his commanding officer's dewlap.

"It broke up here."

He pointed at a part of the map, a narrow sea fed by two great rivers in the middle of a desolate swath of ochre yellow desert.

"Calculate the most likely crash area and find the wreckage." General Hudhafah bared his fangs. "The last thing we want is the Alliance knowing what we've found."

## Chapter 6



February - 3,390 BC

Earth: Crash site

Pain ... but duller than before. Hadn't a spirit come to guide him into the dreamtime? He found her soft, warm form nestled into his side, her cheek resting on his bicep as her chest rose and fell in the gentle rhythm of a peaceful, *mortal* sleep. He took a deep breath and realized he was still alive.

"Are you my mate?"

He touched the long, dark tresses which had fallen across the woman's face and fished a strand out of her lush, pink lips. The woman had kissed him as he'd stood at the entrance to the void.

If this was the dreamtime, it sure hurt like Hades.

He lifted his arm and studied the splint she'd fashioned with debris and bits of wire. Moving his legs to reassure himself he still possessed them, he turned his head to examine his broken wing. Would he ever be able to fly again? That depended upon this planet's gravity.

Information flitted through his mind. There was something urgent about this planet, but the image departed as fleetingly as it had appeared.

Who was he? What was his name? All he knew was that this woman had taken heroic measures to save his life and now she slept curled up beside him in a manner that felt both alien, and also heart-yearningly familiar. Something about her scent tugged at an instinct, deep within his loins.

Maybe she *was* a spirit? If this was death, it wasn't half bad.

Curling his good wing so as not to wake her, he pulled her closer, wrapping the limb around her like a blanket before allowing himself to drift back to sleep.

\*

*"O-kim-hayatini bagislamasi icin uygun gordum."*

He awoke to find the woman kneeling at his side. Her hands accentuated her words as she poured droplets from a waterskin onto a rough cloth and dabbed blood off of his

skin. He watched her work, fascinated by her wavy dark hair, olive skin, and unusual tawny beige eyes.

Urgency clawed at his belly with drunken glee.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The woman smiled and said something unintelligible.

Every nuance of her behavior gnawed at his subconscious. Her shapeless beige dress was little more than a length of cloth belted around her waist and thrown over one shoulder to cover the lush fullness of her breasts. The fabric appeared crude, as were the implements she used to tend his wounds; the tools of a stone-age culture.

By gods! How had she saved his life?

"Who?" He crossed his hands palms-up in the sign of asking a question. "Are you?" He pointed to her chest.

"Nin-si-anna." She held her palms up. "Who. Are. You?" She repeated, word for word.

He wracked his brain, but his mind remained frustratingly blank. Ninsianna repeated the question. How could he explain to someone who didn't speak his language that he couldn't remember who he was?

"I don't know."

"Ninsianna—" she pointed to her own chest. "Idonno—" she pointed at him.

"No—" he shook his head. "I don't remember."

"Ninsianna—" the woman pointed to her chest. "Idonremember," she pointed at him.

"No! I don't know who I am! I don't remember!"

He hit his forehead to emphasize it wasn't working. A stab of pain shot into his skull. He closed his eyes until the vertigo subsided.

The woman frowned until it dawned on her what he was trying to say. She touched his head, the place where it hurt the worst. Underneath his hair, a terrible lump attested he'd hit his head.

Ninsianna resumed her ministrations, dabbing dried blood from his scalp. Every now and again, she paused to pat his wings as though she'd never seen such limbs before. He suspected she explained his injuries to him, but he couldn't understand a single word.

He avoided wincing, not wishing to see her expression of dismay every time he flinched. When she got to his chest wound, she pointed at a pair of silver, hexagonal tags strung around his neck with a sturdy chain.

Pulling the chain from beneath his shirt, he read the information etched into the dog tags in boxy cuneiform.

Colonel Mikhail Mannuki'ili

352d SOG

Angelic Air Force

Second Galactic Alliance

Although the information failed to jog any personal recollection, he understood what it meant. The only reason a soldier wore dog tags was so his fellow soldiers could identify his body for burial. While he couldn't *remember* anything, it meant he was part of something bigger.

"I'm a soldier," he said. "A soldier in the Galactic Alliance."

He pointed at Ninsianna.

"You are Ninsianna."

He pointed at his own chest.

"I am Mikhail."

Ninsianna smiled.

"Mikhail?"

"Yes."

She repeated his name several times, and then held out her primitive waterskin and pressed it against his lips.

"*Icki*," she said. The rest was unintelligible except for the word at the end. "Okay?"

Drink, maybe?

"Oh-kay," he repeated.

He gulped down the water until it was empty.

Ninsianna pointed at a crack which split the hull. She tucked the blanket up to his neck and communicated, using her hands, that she wished for him to sleep.

"Oh-kay," he said, uncertain. Was she going to fetch more water?

Ninsianna slipped out of the crack.

As he lay there, it occurred to him just how very vulnerable he was.



## Chapter 7



February - 3,390 BC

Earth: Crash site

### NINSIANNA

The stream tumbled down from the mountain into the bowl-shaped oasis, a small island of paradise in the middle of the desert, with a thick strip of vegetation which grew on either side of the stream. Unlike the barren desert, it smelled rich and filled with life.

No wonder the Halifian tribe considered this area sacred!

Ninsianna whirled in a dance, formulating clever things to say to her newest patient using nothing but sign language.

"Free! I am free!"

And not only that, a creature of heaven was now forever in her debt!

Her gait turned into a girlish skip as a small shadow fell across her path. An enormous golden eagle swooped into the stream which widened into a pond behind the rock fall which blocked it.

"An omen!"

The eagle dove beneath the surface, its wings splashing water as it came up carrying a nice, fat fish. She laughed as it carried its squirming dinner up into the sky.

She wracked her memory for what little she knew about amnesia. Mama had spoken of such after a warrior suffered a blow to the head. Usually a few hours would pass and then the memories would return, although Mikhail (she said his name several times and decided she liked the way it rolled across her tongue) appeared to be unusually lucid for someone who couldn't remember his own name. Perhaps he'd misunderstood her question? Or was he withholding information? It didn't matter. Either way, She-Who-Is had answered her prayer.

She reached the brook, swollen with late winter rain which tumbled down from the sacred mountain, and refilled her waterskin. Her reflection shone back at her, smeared with Mikhail's blood.

He wouldn't carry her into the heavens if she looked ugly, would he?

She waded into the water and sat down in the spot where the eagle had snatched the fish. It was just deep enough to sink up to her neck. She scrubbed the blood from her hands, and then her body, and then ducked beneath the surface to get her head wet. She stood back up, singing a song of freedom as she ran her fingers through her hair to wash out the dried, clumped blood.

Man comes from the sky,  
He's going to carry me up into the heavens.  
Take me away from here!  
Away from the machinations of men.

All of a sudden, the birds fell silent. She flipped back her sopping wet hair. At the edge of the oasis stood Jamin and the warriors, leaning over their spears.

A tremor gripped her lower gut.

"Ninsianna!" Jamin beckoned. "I've come to take you home."

Ninsianna stood defiantly.

"Home?" she said. "I don't have a home, remember? You ran to your father like a spoiled brat and made him declare I either marry you, or be banished from the village." She gestured at the oasis. "As you can see, I choose banishment. Now go away!"

The warriors gaped at the silver sky canoe which still streamed smoke from one of the ruined chimneys, though at least it no longer glowed red with fire.

"It's an evil omen," Jamin said. "The gods have cast this object down from the heavens."

"And what would *you* know of the gods? Oh he who swore on the goddess he would take me to Nineveh? And then, when his friends laughed, cared more for his own prestige than his future bride!"

Jamin flinched.

"You don't understand. My father—"

"Didn't want you to be seen as taking orders from a woman!" she shrieked. "So instead, you broke your promise. So *I* have broken off our engagement!"

She luxuriated in Jamin's wounded expression as she turned her back on him and crossed her arms. Jamin made a sound like a duck that was having its neck wrung.

The warriors laughed.

"We warned you this would happen!" Firouz said.

"The women in Immanu's house have *always* worn the kilts," Dadbeh said.

"Ninsianna's just angry you won't let her boss you around," Tirdard said.

Jamin's cheek twitched as he glanced down at his luxurious four-layered kilt, demarcating him as a person of prestige.

"Perhaps that's why you find her so attractive?" Firouz teased. "You wish *her* to assume your chiefly duties?"

Dadbeh held his hand out by his groin.

"Oh! Jamin—" Dadbeh said in a high falsetto voice. "Empty out the chamber pots, and then I wish you to service me with your tongue."

"Oh, Ninsianna—" Firouz sidled up to him with a false bass voice "—I am your slave!"

He pretended to lick Dadbeh's hand.

"Oh! Oh! Oo-oh!" Dadbeh groaned with fake pleasure. "Don't stop! Oh! Jamin! Next you shall kiss my toes!"

Tirdard bent over, holding his sides as he laughed.

Jamin's eyes grew black with fury. He pointed at Ninsianna.

"You will come away from this accursed fallen star!"

She jutted out her chin.

"No I won't!"

"Oh, yes you will!"

The water splashed around him as he waded into the oasis, as though the water itself wished to flee. Ninsianna ran for the opposite shore, her heart racing as Jamin caught up with her. He grabbed her by the arm.

"Let me go!"

"Your father sent me to—"

"No!" She kicked and slapped him. "You are *NOT* my chief! And I *will not* marry you!"

The warriors laughed.

Jamin grabbed her by the hair.

"You *will* treat me with respect!"

"I will n—"

Her shriek was cut short as he shoved her face beneath the water. With a panicked shriek, Ninsianna fought to break his grip, but he kept his fingers wrapped securely in her hair. With an ungentle yank, he pulled her back above the surface.

"Do you yield?"

"No!" she sputtered. "I'd rather marry a goat!"

The warriors taunted him.

"Do you need help wrangling that she-goat?" Siamek laughed.

"No," Jamin said. "There's nothing wrong a good beating won't cure."

Ninsianna's blood boiled. How *dare* he treat her with such disrespect? Not only was she the daughter of a shaman, but she was Lugalbanda's granddaughter! A warrior-shaman so powerful he'd stopped the hearts of their enemies!

She pictured all the terrible things she wanted to do to him. The things they'd whispered her grandfather could do, things Mama forbade of her father. The energy she'd felt earlier when she'd pulled the spear from Mikhail's chest surged through her body. Forming a fist, she hit Jamin as hard as she could.

"I'd rather die!" she shrieked.

As she hit him, she pictured hitting him with a rock.

Jamin's head snapped back.

"You, bi—" Jamin shouted.

The rest of what he said cut off as he shoved her face beneath the water again.

Water rushed up into her nose. She kicked and hit with all of her might, but Jamin was more than twice her weight and had her by the hair. With a yank, he pulled her back above the surface.

"Do you yield?"

"Never!" she gasped for breath.

She landed her heel in his testicles.

"Ow!" Jamin doubled over.

The warriors laughed.

"Hey, Jamin," Firouz said. "I think you met your match!"

Jamin's spirit-light turned a furious shade of crimson.

"I will teach you some respect, woman!"

He shoved her head beneath the water, and this time he held her, until it felt as though her lungs might explode. Her limbs grew weak as her body used up its breath. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. The world grew dark and far away.

*'Mother? Help me...' she prayed. 'I'm not strong enough to fight him on my own...'*

Suddenly Jamin loosened his grip. She popped back above the surface, gasping for precious air. All five men stared at the sky canoe. Walking towards them, Mikhail came with his one good wing outstretched, the other dragging uselessly behind him.

"Winged demon!" they all shrieked.

The warriors lifted up their spears.

Down the front of Mikhail's shirt, his blood had dried into a dark brown stain.

"He is my protector," she shouted, hoping to panic them before they noticed how badly injured he was. "Run, before he smites you!"

Mikhail held up some kind of stick. Solid black. Larger than a knife. A bolt of blue lightning shot out of the end like a fireball. Rocks exploded near the warrior's feet, tossing them backwards as though they'd just been rammed by a herd of aurochs. Smoke and a scent like a thunderstorm drifted in the wind. With a shout, the warriors ran away.

Jamin grabbed her and shoved her behind his back. He eyed the spear he'd left on the banks of the stream, no doubt calculating his best chance to regain the high ground.

Mikhail gestured towards them with the strange, black firestick.

"*Lig di dul*," he growled.

A second bolt of lightning landed perilously close to Jamin's side. A burst of water geysered up into the air, and then showered down, jolting them with an unpleasant sensation as though they'd both been stung by a hive of bees. Jamin yelped, but he did not let go of her.

"Get behind me," Jamin said. "I'll protect you."

Mikhail pointed the firestick at Jamin's chest.

"Ninsianna, *teacht anseo!*" He gestured for her to come to shore.

"Over my dead body!" Jamin shouted.

He broadened his stance to appear as threatening as a man could possibly appear whilst standing waist deep in water with no weapon and nowhere to run.

The two alpha-predators stared one another down, both of them eager to claim *her* to be their prize. A thrill of excitement rippled through Ninsianna's body. Which combatant would win? Mikhail had the high ground, but he was also badly injured, while Jamin was in top physical form. She needed to distract him before he realized the dark coloring of Mikhail's shirt was blood.

Forming a fist, she punched Jamin in the face.

She broke free.

Splashing water, she skittered up the banks of the stream. Beads of cold sweat glittered above blue lips as Mikhail swayed, barely able to stand with his injuries. If he lost consciousness, Jamin would surely kill him. She ran into his arms and snaked her arms around his waist as though she embraced her lover.

"Hang on," she whispered.

Using every ounce of healing energy she'd ever possessed, she called upon it now and fed it through her hands. A warm, pleasant tingle rippled through her body. Mikhail stopped swaying.

Jamin looked from her to Mikhail, his black eyes filled with dismay, and then hatred as he jumped to the conclusion Ninsianna *intended* for him to jump to.

"You said that you loved me?"

The chief's son stepped towards her, his hand outstretched like a common beggar. Ninsianna lifted her chin and hugged Mikhail in a universal, feminine symbol of *mine*.

"I *never* said I loved you," Ninsianna hissed. "I told you I would marry you because you promised to treat me like an equal! But then you reneged, so I found somebody *better!*"

Jamin stiffened.

Mikhail's firestick hummed next to her ear, higher and higher pitched, like a pack of jackals working itself up into a killing frenzy. He held it out, a shrieking, angry raptor about to go in for the kill.

"*Téigh ar!*" Mikhail growled. "*Faigh an ifreann as anseo!*"

"You'll regret this!" Jamin said

He bolted out of the stream and grabbed his spear. Without looking back, he stalked off in the same direction his compatriots had gone, his expression so dark it gave her chills.

As soon as Jamin climbed up out of the valley, Mikhail collapsed, dragging her down with him. Wiggling to extricate herself from his enormous wings, she spat out a mouthful of black-brown feathers.

She looked at the landslide where Jamin had just disappeared. She *should* feel something. Maybe regret? But she felt nothing. Only relief that their engagement was at an end.

She kneeled on the ground next to her patient. The ground was hard and rocky, so she wiggled her lap beneath his head.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Jamin is gone."

She touched the base of his throat. Although deathly pale, a steady throb greeted her sensitive fingertips. With a sigh, she shut her eyes as the energy she'd felt earlier abandoned her, leaving her as tired and weak as a newborn lamb.

Out here in the daylight, she studied his magnificent, twenty-cubit wings, brownish-black, with sable stripes which grew paler the closer you got to his skin. She ran her fingers through his feathers, relishing the contrast between the long, stiff primary feathers and the soft, downy under feathers.

Wings! The goddess had sent her a man with wings!

She ran her fingers through hair the color of roasted hazelnuts, a sharp contrast to his flesh which was as pale and creamy as goat's milk. Her fingers memorized each exquisite detail. His chiseled features were not those of the Ubaid, but the flint warriors shaped to adorn their spears: sharp, beautiful and deadly. She ran her fingers over his muscular chest and relished each striation, the body of a warrior in peak condition.

Her very own demi-god!

"Thank you for sending a champion to rescue me," she prayed.

She closed her eyes and focused the healing light of She-Who-Is through her hands to speed his recovery, raising the forbidden magic with the sing-song voice of a shaman. Her hands tingled; warmer, even, than when she had prayed to heal the Chief's son.

Oh, thank the goddess! She-Who-Is had answered her prayers!

The birds began to sing again. A frog croaked. Locusts buzzed. The eagle returned and snatched another fish. As it carried its dinner up to the sky, she raised her face up to the sun.

"Can I keep him? I'd *really* like to keep him."

She touched his black-brown wings and frowned.

"But what would a creature of heaven want with *me*?"

## Chapter 8



*But you said in your heart,  
I'll ascend to heaven;  
I'll raise my throne above the stars of God,  
And I'll sit on the mount of assembly  
In the recesses of the north.  
I'll ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
I'll make myself like the Most High.  
Isaiah 14:13-14*

Galactic Standard Date: 152,323.02 AE  
Haven-3: Alliance Hall of Parliament  
Prime Minister Lucifer

### LUCIFER

Haven-3 was the third planet in an artificially crafted solar system of one natural sun and two smaller artificial ones so the sun never set in the Alliance capital. Fairy tale spires twisted gracefully towards the sky, sleek, modern buildings of glass and steel and composite plastic so strong, not even an earthquake could shake them from their pillars. From her spaceport, traffic ebbed and flowed to every planet and solar system in the galaxy. At its center stood a massive building, round, so that no delegate ever sat closer to the empty throne than any other.

A tall, serpentine creature which vaguely resembled a dragon ascended the steps, leaning heavily upon his cane. The Speaker of the Commons was a Muqqibat dragon, not a *real* dragon, like Shay'tan was, but one of the species which preceded the formation of the Alliance. He stopped in front of the podium and fished out his spectacles before taking out his gavel.

"The Prime Minister will now address Parliament," he said in a formal voice.

Lucifer ascended the central platform, his niveous white wings draped artfully behind his back like the Eternal Emperor's mantle. Balcony after balcony cascaded upwards towards the dome; each delegate representing a homeworld in an empire which spanned almost half the galaxy. The delegates were as varied as the worlds they represented: mammals, insectoids, amphibians and other life forms. Each species had a homeworld where they'd evolved naturally under the protection of the Eternal Emperor



until they'd achieved a level of sentience sufficient to earn membership in the Galactic Alliance. Each species had a voice to assert their rights; every species except for one...

His...

The delegates chattered, cutting deals as elected officials were wont to do.

"Didn't we already vote on this deal?" a delegate asked.

The Emperor vetoed it," the delegate next to him replied. "Stabbed his own son in the back."

"I'm not about to override the Eternal Emperor!" the first one said.

"Why not?" the second delegate said. "The sonofabitch abandoned us for two hundred years, and *now* he shows up and wants to be our god?"

Lucifer pressed his lips together, waiting for the General Assembly to quiet down. The cacophony continued; a feeding frenzy of back-room deals; this vote for that one; cast your vote for this pet project and I'll release your bill from committee. Lucifer closed his eyes and focused on the flow of self-interest which, due to the gift of empathy bestowed upon him by a half-Seraphim mother, allowed him to visualize the delegate's desires.

Enhanced Angelic senses registered the sybaritic tickle of expensive aftershave, aged brandy, and the lingering scent of *todóg*. The acoustics were such that the slightest whisper carried across the chamber. His eerie platinum eyes scanned the coliseum; perceptive, cynical, reflective as he put a name to the strongest of those desires and noted the places he might bring persuasion to bear. At last he signaled the Speaker to begin the show.

"In the name of the Eternal Emperor—" the tall, serpent-like Speaker pounded his gavel "—I hereby call this joint session of Parliament to order!"

The delegates stared down from their lofty balconies. Once already he'd passed this measure by the slenderest of margins. It had ignited such a firestorm that the Eternal Emperor *himself* had intervened to slap it down with a rare imperial veto.

Determination stiffened Lucifer's spine as he ruffled his snow white feathers. He turned his good side towards the cameras which broadcast these proceedings to every television network in the Alliance.

"Today I come to you not as the adopted son of the Eternal Emperor," Lucifer said, "a man who by virtue of an accident of fortune had a voice bestowed upon him because my father appointed *me* to represent your interests—" he lowered his wings into a

gesture of humility "—but as an Angelic, a species whose only purpose is to lay down our lives to protect *you*, the naturally evolved races."

He moved to position himself before an enormous, golden Leonid and an even burlier bay Centauri who he'd appointed to stand guard just at the edge of the stage. He turned back to face the cameras which panned like greedy vulture's beaks to follow him, cognizant of the fact their refractive lenses would make it appear the two hybrids stood directly behind him.

"For as long as the Alliance has existed—" Lucifer spoke into the cameras "—the Emperor has relied upon the stick of military might to keep the Sata'an Empire in check."

He gestured towards the lion-man and half-horse-human hybrid.

"To achieve this end, he created four species of genetically engineered super-soldiers: the Angelic Air Force, Leonid Multi-Purpose Fighters, the Centauri Cavalry, and the Merfolk Navy."

He made eye contact with the delegates he'd tagged earlier as impressionable, the ones who stared down from their lofty perches like the ascended beings who forever dabbled in the affairs of mortals. Sunlight streamed down from the atrium like an omen from She-Who-Is, creating a brilliant golden halo around his white-blond hair and framing the perfection of his too-symmetrical features, reminding the delegates he was the adopted son of their emperor and god.

"For 150,000 years, our military superiority has kept an uneasy balance between the Sata'anic Empire and our own Galactic Alliance," he continued. "But now a new threat has dawned against our Alliance. Not the external threat of Shay'tan, but one of our own making."

He paused to make eye contact with a delegate to his left, and then to his right, before turning back to face the cameras. He lowered his voice as if he revealed a secret, just low enough to force the delegates to all lean forward to hear.

"The armies that defend us, ladies and gentlemen, are a dying species."

A gasp rippled through the assembly, to hear him speak their shame before the cameras, making it official, making their weakness *real*. The perpetual cacophony of self-interest began anew:

"My constituents were angry I voted to outsource our jobs."

"Who cares if the hybrids die?"

"What does that have to do with -me-?"

A feisty young Spiderid Lord stood up, a freshman delegate who had not yet learned that when there were cameras present, it was always prudent to exercise restraint.

"YOUR race is dying!" the Spiderid shouted. "Our race is doing just fine!" He turned to the delegates on either side of him as they chortled back a snigger. "So tell Shay'tan he can take his trade deal and shove it up his scaly tail!"

The discord grew chaotic as Parliament twittered like magpies coveting a shiny golden trinket. Such forthrightness on the record was a political blunder, but the freshman lord voiced a sentiment which many not-so-secretly shared.

Lucifer's silver eyes bored into the Spiderid's compound ones as he brought both hands to his heart and allowed his expression to soften.

"Yes," Lucifer said gently. "My race is dying. My race, that protected *your* race until it evolved enough to join this Alliance, is dying."

He drew his hand into a fist and stared at it, as though he were making a decision. In the pause, the cameras shifted, zooming inwards, zooming outwards, placing the dispute between himself and the sentiment the Spiderid lord had dared voice into the public eye of a centillion television viewers.

"My race, which kicked Shay'tan off of *your* planet when he tried to annex it, and you came running to *us* for help, is DYING!"

He raised his voice into a shout as he shook his fist at the mouthy Spiderid lord.

"And now that millennia of constant warfare has reduced our numbers *so low* that we now have more pieces of equipment than hybrids in existence to *man* that equipment, my race is coming to *your* race to beg for help so we don't all go extinct!"

He slammed his fist onto the podium, his eerie silver eyes flashing in fury. The Spiderid delegate squirmed in his seat while the others who only moments before sniggered now glared at the young lord, publicly distancing themselves from the foolish upstart. Lucifer gave the mouthy Spiderid a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"It is *good* that the Spiderid species is thriving," Lucifer said. "It means the hybrids didn't sacrifice their lives in vain."

He stared up at the delegates perched upon their balconies like vultures.

"When the Emperor created us," he said, "he declared our sole purpose was to serve the naturally evolved species. We were denied Alliance citizenship because you feared we might abuse the genetic enhancements he grafted onto our DNA."

He gestured towards an empty seat, left ceremonially empty to commemorate a planet no longer with the Alliance.

"Once upon a time, the source race which spawned our species still walked among us. Because they saw us as their children, they made sure we hybrids didn't languish without a voice."

"But then, 74,000 years ago, an asteroid hit Nibiru. And just like that—" he snapped his fingers "—all of humanity was destroyed."

He gave his deceased progenitors a moment of silence.

"When humans went extinct, they took with them the closest thing we hybrids had to a homeworld. They took away our voice. And they took with them the genetic diversity we needed to survive."

He spread his arms in the T-like posture of a victim strapped to a Tokoloshe feeding pole. His wings drooped as though they were too heavy for him to lift. He bowed his head, a martyr offering himself as a sacrifice for the greater good.

"As the Alliance expanded, the galaxy looked to *us* to police their problems. So you took our species *off* of your homeworlds and put us into ships in space. "Then you declared hybrids have to serve 500 years in the military, not just 20 like the volunteers, because if we don't get killed in battle, we can live that long."

His voice rose in anger.

"But it didn't end there!" he shouted. "When hybrid birthrates dropped even further, you pulled our females off of your planets and made *them* start fighting, as well!"

He whirled to face the ancient races that had been in existence longer than there had been an Alliance, his wings flared like a raptor. Their base of power depended upon maintaining a slave army.

"And then six hundred years ago you told us it was forbidden to form relations for any reason except to begat offspring to perpetuate the glory of the Alliance!" he shouted. "Or even sire offspring with the same partner twice! Because we've become so inbred that genetic diversity is now an issue!"

He flapped his wings. His beautiful, white wings that meant his species could never have a voice because those wings had not evolved naturally onto his back.

"All because the genetic modifications the Emperor gave us to maintain these—" he yanked out a snowy white feather "—these wings. And the other genetic modifications which enslave our species to serve the rest of you are a *recessive gene*!"

He threw the feather into the air. A ray of sunlight caught it from the atrium above as though She-Who-Is herself wished to say, '*see!*' The feather floated down in silence. Only the shuffling of feet and an occasional cough broke the silence in the great hall as the feather hit the ground.

"These improvements—" Lucifer flapped his wings "—require so much selective breeding to maintain that we've INBRED OURSELVES INTO EXTINCTION!"

He stepped over to an Electrophori delegate and stared down the conservative religious leader from an ancient world of sentient eels which loathed all hybrids as 'manufactured abominations.'

"*You* can get married?" Lucifer shouted at him. "But *we* can't? Because you need us to make lots of babies who have *these* for your enemies to shoot at without the inconvenience of voting rights?"

Lucifer flapped his wings again. The wind they made blew the delegate's paperwork off of his desk.

"What are we? Animals you breed for slaughter?"

A blue jolt of electricity lit up that section of the chamber as the Electrophori's deadly tail sparked with fanatical indignation. The delegates on either side of the eel hissed at him in disapproval. Several delegates whispered 'hypocrite' just loud enough to be picked up by the cameras.

Lucifer slammed his fist down upon the railing. "Even Shay'tan doesn't do that to his own citizens!"

He whirled to face the cameras.

"And now..." Lucifer's voice choked up as a lump rose into his throat. "Now, the moment a hybrid baby is born, before his umbilical cord is even cut, a representative from the Emperor's youth training academy is there to whisk him away from his mother, whether or not she agrees."

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Babies. We indoctrinate babies less than a minute old to defend you because we can't afford to have their parents take a few years off to raise their offspring."

His white wings drooped, trembling with emotion. He turned, eyes shut, away from the cameras and tried to quell the raw emotion which threatened to overtake him. The hall was so quiet you could have heard a pin-feather drop. He coughed and rubbed his cheek, determined not to let them see him weep. His legislative aide rushed out with

a glass of water. Lucifer gulped down the liquid and composed his features back into the mask of a professional politician.

"We give all these great speeches about free will—" Lucifer's voice sounded weary "—but from the moment a hybrid takes their first breath, we brainwash them into believing their only purpose is to die supporting the Emperor. And now we can't even give you that anymore, for our species has lost the ability to reproduce."

Total silence reigned in Parliament. A nervous cough broke the air. Lucifer made eye contact with key delegates from the old block that would otherwise oppose him and watched them squirm. Money. It all came down to money. He'd just laid out a moral justification the younger delegates could take back to their constituents and justify voting for the override. Now he needed to spell things out in terms the older delegates cared about.

"Only consider this question, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "If the hybrids die out and are no longer here to protect you, then who will? Who will protect the Alliance when all of the hybrids are gone?"

He let the question hang before them like a bad odor before reciting a famous Alliance slogan.

"As the hybrid races that defend us go, so shall the Alliance."

In the back of his subconscious, a voice whispered:

*Guilt. Guilt. Guilt.*

*Fear.*

*Just like a well-crafted television commercial.*

He could practically *hear* violins playing in the background as that small, sarcastic voice which had whispered to his subconscious for as long as he could remember whispered to ram this veto override through Parliament and overrule his immortal father's objections. It was time to end the stranglehold the eternal bickering between the two ascended emperor-gods had upon the citizens of *both* empires. It whispered to save his species. It whispered to save *himself*.

"Never-ending war is not the answer." Lucifer held out his hand. "I am here to offer a better way to achieve peace."

He lifted his wings from their dejected slump. His demeanor shifted from sorrowful repentant to television preacher peddling absolution to a circus-tent full of sinners. He'd pointed out the ugly reality. Now it was time to sell redemption.

"Over the past decade—" Lucifer's wings gave a hopeful flutter "—border skirmishes in certain sectors are down. The Sata'an Empire has left those sectors alone, not because we patrol them with warships, but because those planets trade with the Sata'an Empire."

Lucifer paced, looking each delegate in the eye. He was selling a solution to an ugly problem that nobody wanted to face. He was a contact team sports coach cheering on his team. He spoke quickly so the opposition wouldn't interrupt him.

"If the Alliance expanded this partnership, everyone would win. We win, the manufacturers win, and the Empire wins. Win-win-win. Everybody's happy. Everybody's rich. And nobody will go to war because their economies are too closely tied to risk upsetting the fruit cart."

The Spiderid who had interrupted him earlier heckled him from his balcony. "That's the rhetoric Shay'tan gave the 51-Pegasi-4 colony! And look what it got them. Shay'tan slaughtered the whole planet!!! *And* the entire race of Seraphim Angelics along with it!"

Lucifer's white wings shuddered with anger and loss. *The Seraphim...* He hid the emotion behind the mask he had built to hide his true self from the world.

"That was 25 years ago." Lucifer spoke solemnly. "It was not Shay'tan's doing. Hashem himself verified it was pirates acting on their own accord."

"So claims Shay'tan!!!" the Spiderid lord rebutted. "An eyewitness reported soldiers wearing Sata'anic uniforms invaded the planet. Not a disorganized band of pirates."

That small, sarcastic voice whispered into his mind: *'He is drunk with power at the thought of snatching the vote. You must treat him like the child he is...'*

"So said one frightened 9-year-old boy!"

Lucifer turned his back on the Spiderid and appealed, instead, to the ancient races who were so close to genetic perfection that they identified more closely than any species with his father.

The Muqqibat delegate hit his staff against the floor. Old money. Power. The block of ancient races immediately grew silent. The power brokers would not allow a silly upstart to steal the show. The ripple of silence which moved through the great assembly was unspoken, but it was complete. Lucifer had spelled out the tragedy in terms they cared about ... money and power. They would allow him to finish his speech.

"Shay'tan is willing to give peaceful trading companies access to sell products his people need. All he asks in return is that we do the same." He paused to let his words sink in. "Fair is square."

The notion of fundamental fairness was one of the basic underpinnings of Alliance society.

That nasty voice whispered:

*'They don't -really- care about fairness. Spell it out in the only terms they'll understand. What it will cost them if they -don't- vote for this trade deal...'*

"It's either that," Lucifer swept his wings upwards like a raptor swooping in for the kill and gestured towards the cameras as though he was the *Devourer of Children*, "or we need to figure out whose children we'll draft into the military to defend us. Because at the rate the hybrids are dying out, within ten years there won't be enough of us left to defend you anymore."

He pointed at the ancient races.

"It takes six naturally evolved humanoids to fill the shoes of a single hybrid, and those species all have voting rights. So compute *those* numbers when you figure out how much it will cost to reject Shay'tan's peace offering. It's trade agreements or the draft. Your choice."

Lucifer waited until the delegates who'd been blocking his trade proposal made eye contact. The Muqqibat dragon took his staff and thumped it solidly upon the floor. He had won them over.

"I hereby make a motion for Parliament to expand the existing Free Trade agreement to all Alliance territories," Lucifer said. "I move said motion to an immediate vote..."

The young Spiderid lord leaped up.

"Shay'tan conquers newer sentient planets and conscripts their citizens to be his labor force so he can undersell us," the Spidered shouted. "It's little more than slavery!"

That small sarcastic voice whispered:

*'It's convenient how they call what Shay'tan does slavery, but overlook the 500 years of forced military service required of hybrids.'*

"What Shay'tan does within the confines of his own empire is irrelevant," Lucifer said aloud. "We are ratifying a trade deal, not submitting to Sata'anic Rule."

The other delegates began to waffle. With his *gift*, Lucifer could hear the delegate's thoughts.



*"I'm up for re-election."*

*"Unemployment is up to 17%."*

*"Why should I support him when his own father voted against him?"*

Lucifer's wings drooped.

*'You're losing them,'* that small, nasty voice whispered. *'Promise them something they can bring back to their constituents and say they did the right thing...'*

Lucifer watched the energy in the room shift away from him. As much as he hated his own inner cynic, it was always right.

"It will give our besieged hybrid military a chance to replenish their ranks!" he shouted.

He could *feel* the moment the energy shifted back, but his victory rang hollow because death in battle was not the problem, but pure inability to reproduce. But fewer wasted lives would buy the hybrids time, and time was what he desperately sought.

The Spiderid lord shouted a losing challenge.

"If you open Alliance markets to unfettered trade, money will flow into Shay'tan's coffers. He will use it to build up his military. Our industry will be decimated and our standard of living will be reduced to poverty."

"Oh, shut up!" several delegates hissed at him. "Do you think we want *our* kids to be Hashem's cannon fodder?"

"Shay'tan won't *have* to defeat us in battle," the Spiderid shouted. "This resolution will allow him to simply bankrupt and buy us!"

Lucifer interrupted before things could get out of hand.

"We have a choice," Lucifer shouted. "Are we going to tell our hybrid soldiers we don't *care* if they go extinct so long as they continue to protect us while doing it? Or will we take charge of this situation and say NO MORE WAR!!!"

He swung his arms upward and gestured towards the cameras the way his immortal father did whenever he summoned lightening.

"Who wants to vote for peace?"

"Ay!!!" the delegates cheered.

"Any opposed?" the Speaker of the Commons asked.

"Nay!" The young Spiderid Lord's voice rang alone.

He was not the only delegate who opposed the measure, just the only one naive enough not to simply abstain.

"The Aye's have it!" the Speaker of the Commons shouted, banging on his podium with his gavel. "The free trade agreement passes!"

Lucifer bowed, thanking the legislators as they filed out past him, including delegates who had concerns they wanted addressed. He could *feel* the positive energy flowing off of the crowd, making his head buzz with power. *This* was what his father had trained him to do from birth, creating the position of Prime Minister and putting him in charge of the day-to-day politics of running the Alliance. Lucifer snorted with disgust. Hashem wouldn't deign to muddy his godlike consciousness dealing with the lesser affairs of mortals!

The mouthy Spiderid pushed his way through the crowd.

"I need to speak to you!" he said.

That small, sarcastic voice whispered: *'Get rid of him. If you don't, he'll keep raising his point until people listen.'*

Lucifer feigned friendliness.

"What can I do for you?"

He honed his gift to *listen* to what wasn't being said beneath the young Spiderid's voice. Images leaped into his mind. Concerned constituents. Impoverished families.

Lucifer formed an image, and then clapped the young Lord on the back.

"Make an appointment with my Chief of Staff," Lucifer said. "We'll see what we can do about filing an addendum."

Power flowed through his voice, into the gullible young Spiderid Lord's mind.

*'The Prime Minister is taking me seriously. If I work with him, he'll elevate me to a position of power.'*

The young Spiderid Lord's palps spread wide in a pleased grin.

"Yes, Sir! I'll have a proposal on your desk tomorrow morning."

A dirty-winged Angelic appeared at his side. Average height, with dishwater blue eyes and unremarkable wings, everything about Chief of Staff Zepar communicated obsequiousness except for the cruel sneer which sometimes graced his lips.

"Sire?" Zepar said.

Lucifer stared at the doorway, eager to escape.

"If you'll excuse me," he said to the young Spiderid, "I'll let you and Zepar discuss the particulars."

He forced his way past the cameras, smiling and waving to the cheering throngs. As soon as he got into the chapel, he leaned back against the wall and shut his eyes.

*'See? I told you we could do it.'*

"Oh! Shut up," he whispered to the small, sarcastic voice. "All we need is time."

He stared up at the statue of the Eternal Emperor which stood behind the empty throne which was theoretically occupied whenever Parliament needed a tie-breaker, but in reality had only been occupied *once* in the last 225 years, two weeks ago when the Emperor had appeared to veto his earlier trade deal.

"Try and veto *that*, father," Lucifer said.

His words rang hollow. Trade deals weren't going to *fix* his species' problem. He needed his father to *be* a father and start caring about the workings of his empire.

His Angelic Chief of Staff followed him into the room. Zepar glanced nervously at the statue of the Eternal Emperor which overlooked them.

"Sire," Zepar asked. "Shall I ask the Party to cut off all funding to that little Spiderid pain in the ass before the next election?"

"Do it," Lucifer sighed. "And see what dirt you can dig up on him, even if you have to make it up. I want negative reports leaked to the media by nightfall."

"Yes, Sire," Zepar clasped his hands together. "Consider it done. Now ... your next appointment is at 3:00 p.m. A cadet right out of the academy..."

## Chapter 9



February - 3,390 BC

Earth: Crash site

Colonel Mikhail Mannuki'ili

### MIKHAIL

The pleasant tingle of fingertips caressing his cheek sank deep into his subconscious, along with the hypnotic sound of Ninsianna's voice. Gods, it hurt to breathe! He couldn't remember what it felt like *not* to hurt. But so long as it hurt, he knew he was still alive.

Mikhail opened his eyes.

The harsh, golden sun had shifted to sit upon the western rim of the valley. Lengthy shadows indicated he'd been unconscious for quite some time. The scent of fresh-crushed leaves wafted up from the wound in his chest. Medicinal herbs? Yet more proof that this was the source race.

Source race. Source race?

The thought flitted through his mind and left before he could grab hold of it. What in Hades did *that* mean? He had the urgent feeling he was supposed to communicate that piece of information to *somebody*, but he couldn't remember who, or why it was so important!

He looked up into the face which stared at him upside down.

"Hello?" He searched her unusual tawny-beige eyes.

She murmured something which could be hello, or thank you, or I want to smash your skull in with a rock, but by her smile, it appeared to be gratitude.

"Who was that?" he asked, knowing she couldn't understand him.

"Who?" She pointed in the direction her assailant had run away. "Who? Jamin."

Her nose wrinkled up as she gave him a sheepish grin. A disgruntled former boyfriend, perhaps?

"Who—" he pointed in the direction the men had disappeared "—Jamin?"

Ninsianna nodded. "Jamin."

Mikhail studied the way her entire body became animated when she spoke. She appeared to share the same underlying non-verbal body language as his species. Not

wanting to make any assumptions, he nodded and said "*sua*, and then shook his head side to side and said "*aon*." He did this several more times until she understood he meant yes and no.

"Yes, *sua*, Jamin!" She pinched her nose as if blocking out a bad smell, and then she laughed, a delightful, musical sound.

Pleasant warmth tingled throughout his body; wherever she touched him, he could feel a lessening of pain.

"Let's get back to the ship?"

He attempted to sit up and groaned.

"Up," she said in her own language, pointing up.

He repeated the word and then said it in his own language, "*suas*."

Ninsianna helped him get to his feet, laughing with delight as she experimented with the unfamiliar words. He flared his good wing for balance. She propped herself beneath his armpit, a doll-like crutch, wrapping one arm around his waist to stabilize him as she turned him to face his ship.

A sick feeling settled into the pit of his stomach. Not that he could *remember* what his ship was supposed to look like, but it lay semi-buried against the valley wall, partially covered in rubble from a landslide. The nose cone disappeared completely into rocks, the back bent at a funny angle, causing the crack, and a long, dark weapons blast had burned off the name of his ship in the same shot which had taken out one of the engines.

"I suppose that belongs to me?"

He glanced down at Ninsianna, who viewed the wrecked ship with eager, child-like eyes.

"Who else would it belong to? The question is—" he looked up "—who shot me down?"

## Chapter 10



Galactic Standard Date: 152,323.02 AE  
Earth Orbit: SRN 'Jamaran'  
Lieutenant Kasib

### LT. KASIB

Dozens of viewing screens surrounded the *SRN Jamaran's* bridge. Most displayed grainy black-and-white footage, some of it body cameras carried by Sata'anic soldiers, while other screens displayed bug-eye views from three suborbital drones. Lieutenant Kasib placed his clawed hand on the joystick and piloted one of the drones to circle a primitive mud-brick village surrounded by cultivated fields.

In the command chair behind him, General Hudhafah leaned forward, his gold-green eyes aglow with excitement.

"Is that...?"

"Grain, Sir," Kasib hissed with excitement. "You can *see* the seed heads ripening."

He piloted the drone to skim the meter-high grass. Cereal grain! Millions of light-years from the nearest known colony!

General Hudhafah's sharp dorsal ridge reared into a thoughtful, not threatening, crown.

"What's the status of the away parties?" he asked.

"Both report extensive stores of minerals, Sir." Kasib tapped one of the screens to pull up the latest report. "Cobalt. Iron. Pristine stores of uranium. Almost limitless water. And extensive flora and fauna."

Hudhafah's tail twisted around the edge of his commander's chair, thoughtful, calculating, aggressive, brilliant...

"And what about the grain?"

Kasib understood what the General did not voice in the presence of the lower ranking men. *How low are our supplies?*

Kasib dared make direct eye contact with his esteemed commanding officer, one of Shay'tan's most decorated, and highly-ranked generals.

"It appears the planet is fully habitable, Sir."

The other crewmen, lizards and other Sata'anic species, all stopped pretending not to listen and leaned inward, waiting to hear what the general had to say.

Hudhafah glanced at the first image the away party had radioed back. A wingless Angelic male. The broadcast had caused the Angelic to blow his cover when he'd increased power to spy on their scans. On any *other* planet, natural radio wave static would have masked his equipment, but out here in Zulu sector, there was little subspace interference and the planet had *no* advanced technology. Since then, the away teams had discovered thousands of the creatures, scattered across the planet in primitive tents, huts, and even villages. The Alliance would come for this planet, for sure.

The question was, could they hold it this far from the Sata'anic Empire?

This far from their supply chain.

This far from the next-nearest habitable world?

"Sir?" Kasib asked. They were all just *waiting* for the order.

General Hudhafah's dewlap reddened into a deep, dignified burgundy.

"Set up a Forward Operating Base," he said gruffly. "Someplace *warm*. And near productive fields."

"Yes, Sir!"

With a genuflection to his forehead, Kasib pushed the talk button. A thrill of pride rippled through his body as the P.A. system hummed. Hudhafah was giving this honor to *him*. A low-ranking nobody! He poured every ounce of veritas he possessed into his voice.

"Attention all crew," he spoke clearly and crisply. "General Hudhafah has ordered annexation. I repeat. Begin Earth annexation. We shall civilize this planet for the glory of our god."

He genuflected again.

"Shay'tan be praised."

Throughout the ship, the metal echoed with cheers. There would be glory, and plunder, and honor for certain! This was the kind of expedition every soldier dreamed of.

Metallic *thunks* resonated through the ship as the docking clamps which kept the smaller troop carriers attached during hyperspace disengaged. The display screens captured two dozen smaller, boxy shapes detach themselves from the *Jamaran's* hull and race towards the earth.

It now belonged to the Sata'anic Empire.



## Preview: Sword of the Gods



February – 3,390 BC

Earth: Assur

### JAMIN

A shooting star darted across the pre-dawn sky, illuminating the empty desert.

"Keep moving!" Jamin ordered.

The men continued jogging as the star shot overhead.

"How many does that make?" Firouz asked.

"Twenty-two," Siamek said.

"Where do you think they're all going?"

Jamin glanced over his shoulder, waiting to see if *this* star would crash, but it disappeared over the western horizon. They'd seen many shooting stars the last several hours, but none came down in the desert, at least not close enough for them to see the sky erupt in fire again.

"I have a bad feeling about this—" Siamek huffed through heavy breath. "Never have we seen so many all at once."

Jamin sped up, forcing the men to match his pace.

*To be continued...*

## The Chess Pieces



**Apausha:** a Lieutenant in the Sata'an Merchant Marine

**Baal Zebub:** Sata'anic political equivalent of Prime Minister

**Dadbeh:** a warrior of Assur. A prankster.

**Dahaka:** a sergeant in Shay'tan's army, General Hudhafah's right-hand man.

**Firouz:** a warrior of Assur, a bit of a prankster.

**Gita:** the black-eyed girl, Ninsianna's cousin.

**Glicki:** a Mantoid Major stationed on the *'Light Emerging.'* Raphael's second-in-command.

**Hashem:** the Eternal Emperor, an ascended being.

**He-who's-not:** primordial chaos, aka Dark Lord, guardian of She-who-is

**Hudhafah:** a general in the Sata'an infantry responsible for overseeing the Sata'anic annexation of Earth.

**Immanu:** Ninsianna's father, a shaman.

**Jamin:** Ninsianna's jealous ex-fiancé, Chief Kiyan's son.

**Jophiel:** Supreme Commander-General of the Alliance fleet.

**Kasib:** a lieutenant in the Sata'an infantry, Chief Acquisitions Officer for General Hudhafah.

**Ki:** mother goddess of She-who-is.

**Kiaresh:** a warrior of Assur from the Chief's generation.

**Kiyan:** Chief of Assur, Jamin's father.

**Little Nemesis:** the goat.

**Lucifer:** Alliance Prime Minister, Hashem's adopted son.

**Lugalbanda:** deceased warrior-shaman who had the ability to stop an enemy's heart.  
Immanu's father. Ninsianna and Gita's grandfather.

**Marwan:** shaykh of the rival Halifian tribe.

**Mikhail:** Colonel Mikhail Mannuki'ili, Angelic Special Forces. Trained by the Cherubim.

**Moloch:** Evil One, the Devourer of Children.

**Needa:** a healer of Assur. Ninsianna's mother.

**Ninsianna:** a young woman of Assur, has a special relationship with She-who-is.

**Raphael:** commander of the *Light Emerging*, Mikhail's best friend.

**Roshan:** a Halifian, Marwan's son-in-law. Heir to the powerful Baranuman River tent-group.

**Shahla:** Jamin's former girlfriend. A harlot.

**Shay'tan:** emperor of the Sata'an Empire. A 'real' dragon.

**She-who-is:** architect of the universe, the Goddess.

**Siamek:** a warrior of Assur. Jamin's second-in-command.

**Tinashe:** the ebony skinned woman.

**Tirdard:** a young warrior of Assur.

**Zepar:** Lucifer's chief of staff.

## List of Species

**Angelics:** genetically engineered super-soldiers spliced together from a genetic base of humans and the keen eyesight and wings of eagles. They act as the Alliance's air force. Due to inbreeding to maintain their animal features, fewer than 7,500 Angelics remain in existence today.

**Ascended Beings:** aka 'old gods.' Most are creatures which were born mortal but, after countless lifetimes, genetically evolved enough to become immortal. They possess various levels of ability, ranging from semi-mortal demigods who can merely heal themselves to 'elemental' gods who have learned to harness the laws of physics. A few such as She-who-is were born full-fledged gods by virtue of the fact they have gods for parents.

**Catoblebas:** a naturally evolved, boar-like species that makes up part of Shay'tan's armies. They are known for their pugnacious disposition.

**Centaurs:** genetically engineered super-soldiers spliced together from a genetic base of horses and humans. They act as the Alliance's cavalry. Due to inbreeding to maintain their animal features, fewer than 4,000 remain in existence today.

**Cherubim:** a naturally evolved species of fierce, ant-like creatures which dwell in hive-like colonies of monks ruled by a single queen. They are the personal guard of the Eternal Emperor and teeter at the threshold of becoming ascended beings.

**Delphiniums:** a naturally evolved species of sentient frog-like amphibians. They have almost totally replaced Merfolk as the Alliance's Navy.

**Grigori:** a species of elemental dragons which disappeared from the galaxy many millennia ago, all except for Emperor Shay'tan.

**Humans:** a species that went extinct after an asteroid hit Nibiru 74,000 years ago. All attempts to reseed humans onto other planets failed and they died out. It's rumored this is the species which spawned the Eternal Emperor, but the Eternal Palace has refused to comment.

**Leonids:** genetically engineered super-soldiers spliced together from a genetic base of lions and humans. They act as multi-purpose situational forces. When the going

gets tough, the Emperor says, 'Send in the Leonids!' Due to inbreeding to maintain their animal features, fewer than 3,500 Leonids remain in existence today.

**Mantoids:** a naturally evolved species of sentient six-legged insects. They have supplemented Angelics in the Alliance Air Force.

**Marid:** blue-skinned humanoids who were conquered, and incorporated into, Shay'tan's armies.

**Merfolk:** genetically engineered super-soldiers spliced together from a genetic base of humans and aquatic mammals. They were engineered to act as the Alliance's navy. Five hundred years ago their species merged with a sister-species, Leviathans. Only a handful of purebred Merfolk still exist today. The hybrids are known as Mer-Levi.

**Muqqibat:** a naturally evolved species of sentient serpent-like creatures with short arms and legs and a head that resembles a Chinese dragon. They are an 'ancient species' and many of their number teeter at the threshold of becoming ascended beings.

**Sata'anic Lizards:** a species of sentient lizard which make up the largest portion of Shay'tan's armies. They suddenly appeared 74,000 years ago to replace Shay'tan's predecessor species of soldier, the Nephilim, a species which is now extinct.

**Seraphim:** a sub-species of dark-winged Angelic which was wiped out 25 years ago by unknown aggressors. Only one member of this species survives, Colonel Mikhail Mannuki'ili. The Colonel went missing and is presumed dead.

**Spiderids:** a naturally evolved species of sentient eight-legged insects. They have supplemented Leonids in the Alliance Air Force.

## About the Author



Anna Erishkigal is a recovering attorney who writes fantasy fiction as an alternative to coming home from court and cross-examining her children. She writes under a pen-name so her colleagues do not question whether her legal pleadings are fantasy fiction as well. Much of law, it turns out, -is- fantasy fiction. Lawyers just prefer to call it 'zealously representing your client.'

Seeing the dark underbelly of life makes for some interesting fictional characters, the kind you either want to incarcerate, or run home and write about. In fiction, you can fudge facts without worrying too much about the truth. In legal pleadings, if your client lies to you, you look stupid in front of the judge.

At least in fiction, if a character becomes troublesome, you can always kill them off...

## **Other Books by Anna Erishkigal**

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