

ASHERAT

Thank You

With this novel, I pay tribute to my best friend, God.

You know Him; it doesn't matter if by name, position, or the effects of His work. He is One and Only. Creator. The Source of Everything. Never Dying.

Further, I would like to thank the people who shaped me with their love, wisdom, and patience. They know my flaws and, despite that, still love me. They, by not accepting my weaknesses, make me work on them. Thank you for that!

Next, I want to honor all my spiritual teachers; all people who have had an influence on my spiritual development. You have enriched my life!

Thanks go to my mom, Marie, an ordinary woman with an extraordinary heart, who taught me timeless values. At the same, because of our absolute different characters, she showed me how varied people can be, how differences are wonderful, and how much we can gain from that. Even better, she taught me that, with those timeless values, we can find a common language. Keep it up, Mom!

I want to thank my husband, Michael, an amazing man and loyal friend during our nineteen-year journey together. We have discovered that life is like an ocean; it has its ebbs and flows, it has drowned cities and shattered ships. It also has treasure chests of gold and pearls, though they sometimes lay deep in the depths. I, myself, thank my husband and his ability to forgive, learned (after many years!), and embrace not going on a cruise during a storm. Darling, keep being at the helm!

Thank you, my incredible children. Each day, you challenge me! Jacob and Sophia, my life without you wouldn't be as colorful.

I'm also thankful to many special creators and artists who I don't know, but who inspired me; all the musicians, painters, sculptors, poets, writers, architects, and builders...

Without God, without my family, and without my friends, I wouldn't be who I am and I wouldn't be where I am.

Thank you all. For everything.

A Few Words About The Collaboration

Aldona Knysiak – translator of the book

I'm a young woman who currently lives in London. I'm very privileged to work on "Asherat" both with Lance and Alex. Thank you for trusting me with the translation, since it was my debut and I know how important it is for Alex to do the job the right way. It was a very educational and exploratory journey. Thank you one more time for entrusting me with your book! Thank you, Lance, for always being patient and correcting my mistakes.

Aldona Knysiak
London, 2020

Lance Nutter – proofreader of the book

Devoted husband of thirty-three years, a father to two amazing young men, and an educator of eighteen years. His passions are good books, motorcycles, and coaching track and basketball.

Through God's hand and timing, he met a young lady from Poland named Aldona Knysiak. She was his student for several years, who eventually went on to attend college in England. However, they kept in touch.

Aldona was instrumental in connecting with Alex, the author of the book "Asherat." Between Aldona's translating and Lance's proofreading, they were able to help Alex get her story translated into English.

We are all amateurs, so forgive us the mistakes that are possibly still in the book. Enjoy!

Many thanks to both Alex and Aldona for letting me work on this project. I've learned a lot and made some friends.

Blessings,
Lance Nutter
Myrtle Creek, Oregon, 2020

Cheyenne DeBorde – editor of the book

Tucson, Arizona, 2020
<http://novemberink.co/>

Aldona and Lance!

Thank you for the good word ;-) (Aldona) and for the critique ;-) (Lance). It was a challenge to work with you ;-)

Mrs. Cheyenne DeBorde, thank you very much for your commitment and all valuable comments.

My last thank you is for Mrs. K. Lastimososa, who – believing in the success of this project – symbolically but straight from the heart made a financial contribution.

Thank you all.
Alex

Chapter 1

“Asherat! Asherat! Bring me clean water, olive oil, and linen! Quickly!” Mother called out. “It’s started.”

She was standing in the middle of the room with her tunic rolled up. Her broken water mixed with her blood and streamed down to the floor. She sighed, dried her legs, and wearily walked over. Banking the fire in the stove, she covered a steaming cauldron with a lid. A sudden cramp made her double over.

“I’ve got everything, Mommy,” said the petite girl, helplessly looking at Mother.

“Put it here and run. Illithya should be home.”

“But... Mother. She is... cursed.”

“Do what I tell you.” Mother kneeled, holding her belly.

She hadn’t been doing so well during this pregnancy and had been feeling weak for the last few days. All she wanted was to give birth to this child. She wanted it now more than ever.

Asherat put the things she brought onto the bed. Father came into the room.

“I’m hungry,” he barked.

He looked with barely concealed disgust at the wet floor and his wife.

“You had to choose this time to do this?”

The woman got up from her knees to serve the dinner to her husband.

“I will go eat with the judges. If you give birth to a girl, get rid of it,” he said as he stalked out of the room.

“Mom, what’s the matter with father?” Asherat asked, frightened. Mother didn’t raise her head but said quietly, “I’ll tell you later. Now go, go, I beg you.” ‘Or it will be too late’ – she thought to herself.

She wrapped her hands around her belly, as if she was concealing the whole world in there. Her body was seized by an attack of another cramp.

“If you’re born a girl, I’ll save you, my dear.” She lifted her tear-stained face. “I promise you. I swear to the Only God.”

Tyre, a seaside town of Phoenicia, had been vibrant with life for several days now. Spring had come and together with it the *egersis*, the festival of Melqart’s Awakening. Every year, the most important holiday in the calendar of the Tyrian Phoenician caused followers from the King of the City to gather, huddling around the rituals, spells, and sacrifices of the awakening. It wouldn’t be very different this time. All citizens of the town were preparing for celebrations that would last many hours, designed to ensure a rich and favorable harvest.

Streets and houses were being tidied up, parade robes were being prepared, and offerings were being collected. Priests were calling worshipers to bring grain and wine to the temple, while they practiced poems that would be performed during the ceremonies. Stallholders were busy with their booths full of fruits, cheese, and fish. Colorful jugglers were entertaining the crowds and

itinerant merchants were selling amulets and magic potions. Beautiful girls decorated the stairs leading to the old town with flowers. They giggled while glancing, again and again, at the group of young bruisers, who were building the special platform in front of the temple entrance, as had been done every year.

Women were baking bread of fine flour, preparing sweets and perfumes. Slaves were lugging demijohns with wine, skinning birds and animals for their masters, believing that, on the day of Melqart's Awakening, the new year's fate would be more favorable - even for them.

The holiday also provided a comforting respite to the homeless and beggars. The respectable men were sitting in taverns and drinking fresh wine, talking more and more loudly – about the future harvest, a new Roman prefect, and the *kedeshah*; the women who indulged in sexual pleasures in the temples. Obscene taunts and coarse jokes were mixing with fragments of ritual poems. It was loud, crowded, colorful, and quite warm for this time of year.

Tyre was also welcoming a lot of pilgrims from the nearby villages and settlements, who wanted to participate in the celebrations of the holiday. All this for the Great Melqart, the God of Tyre and the King of the City!

At that moment, the beautiful views, joyful rumblings, and amazing smells coming from everywhere meant nothing to Asherat. She ran through narrow alleys to the house of the cursed Greek woman; cursed, but the only hope for her beloved mother to survive the birth.

Asherat ran into the midwife's yard.

"Illithya! Where are you?" she called out, gasping heavily for air. Because of her fear, she forgot about being polite, despite what mother taught her. She looked around. Except for small, domestic fowl searching for something to eat on the dry ground, the yard was empty. An enormous tomcat was sleeping on the roof. Some old rags and shattered pots were scattered about the yard. A decaying basket with weeds growing in it stood next to the threshold. There was filth everywhere. Even though the cottage was made of stones, it looked like it could be shattered by a strong blast of wind. Asherat pulled back a tattered curtain serving as a door. A beam of light broke inside and illuminated a dusty room without windows. She had to squint her eyes to spot an old woman in the corner. The granny sat on a wooden stool, picking some grain from a bowl with her arthritic fingers. She was eating.

"Who is it?" she asked without raising her eyes from the bowl.

"I am Asherat, Legar's daughter. He's one of the judges of the Great Council," the girl said urgently, gasping for breath. "My mother, Taida, is in labor!"

The old woman put another grain in her mouth, gumming it without a word. The silence was deafening.

“My mom is in labor!” Asherat shouted out with resignation in her voice. “Do you hear me?”

“My birdie, you have to find someone else, I’m no longer...” The old dame couldn’t finish her sentence, because Asherat threw herself at her feet and burst into tears.

“I beg you... with all my heart... come with me. I’m begging you,” she sobbed, still on her knees.

Asherat knew that if she didn’t convince the woman and bring her to help, mother could die. She wrapped her arms tightly around the old midwife’s legs.

“Taida, you say...”

Asherat raised her head and looked at the old woman. She felt a spark of hope.

“Get up, let’s go,” the old woman said. “I have nothing to lose.”

She stood up and smacked her lips, picking grain from a rotten tooth. She put the bowl on the mat in front of her and wiped her slobbery fingers on a dirty apron. She brushed aside her matted hair and took a linen bag from the wall. With her eyes, she gestured to a wooden piece of furniture abandoned in the corner of the room. It looked like a huge armchair with a hole in the shape of a crescent on its seat.

“Do you know what that is?”

Asherat shook her head.

“It’s the chair for a woman in labor. I don’t know how many babies it has delivered. And only several died.” Illithya smiled to herself, remembering the times when she was one of the most important midwives in the city - if not the most important - and, at the same time, the most highly paid.

She closed her eyes and, in her thoughts, she went back to those moments of great prosperity and respect. She had been good at her job and she wasn’t greedy. She could help a woman in labor and a woman who was having problems giving birth. She knew how to relieve pain and how to induce an abortion. Women also came to her for magic herbs and potions to prevent their pregnancy. Many eminent Tyrian houses owed her their healthy offspring; many poorer families were indebted to her for not having another mouth to feed. For many years, everything was going great, until one day, one of the newly appointed municipal judges proposed that the Great Council create the city code; the collection of rights and obligations for its citizens. This initiative - and the beginning of this man’s career - was the end of Illithya’s career. At least the legal one...

“And your father? Is he alright?” the old woman asked.

Asherat was looking at the chair, thinking about its importance. But today it seemed disgusting, like every other item in this poverty-stricken house.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Puh,” the old dame spat. “His putz should wither once and for all. Come! Nothing left for us here.” She pushed Asherat lightly toward the door. On the doorsteps, the old woman nearly lost her balance as the setting sun blinded her.

The cat was lazing on a roof. Suddenly, it sprang to its feet and, with one leap, seized a young chicken. In a single moment, there were only a few feathers left.

In silence, Asherat and Illithya walked the many-hued alleys of the city. If the girl could, she would run home, to her mother, but she didn't want to leave the midwife alone. She was also worried that the old woman would change her mind and turn around. So Asherat was mentally urging: faster, faster...

“I can't go any faster, my legs aren't what they used to be,” said the granny, as if reading the girl's thoughts.

After a short while, which felt like an eternity for Asherat, they reached the house.

“Where is the one in labor?” the midwife asked.

“Right there,” said the girl, pointing at one of the farm buildings.

“That's a servant house. If my memory serves me right.”

It was the truth; Asherat and her mother were sharing the house with the servants. Sure, they had their own rooms, kitchen, and a separate entrance, but they were still living with the servants. Asherat never asked her mother about that, but she also never really thought about it. She lived modestly, surrounded by her mother's and the servants' love. She played with their children in the same yard and never thought about what that meant. Right now, she didn't have time to think about it as they moved toward the home.

“My Good God, you heard my prayers. Thank you for coming, Illithya,” Taida welcomed her guest with a weak but grateful voice.

“You don't have anything to thank me for, not yet,” the midwife answered and put her bag down.

She took out several bottles, a few little jars, and a bundle of fabric.

“Come here, little birdie, I will need you,” the old woman said to Asherat. “Wrap my hands with clean fabric, tightly, but I have to be able to move my fingers. That's right. Now boil some water in a little pot and put everything from this jar in it. No, not this one, the bigger one. Be careful, don't scald yourself. It's hyena's fat; its fumes will speed up the labor. Come on, come on,” she ordered. “A gander's semen would be useful to help with the pain, but it has to be fresh. We don't have that, so take a pinch of powder from this little bottle, sprinkle it into the wine, and give it to your mother, right now!” the midwife instructed the girl. “It's powdered sow's dung; it won't help, it won't harm, but it has its power.”

Asherat obediently followed the old Greek woman's instructions, believing that the granny knew what she was doing and that her mother really was in good hands. Illithya was in her element. Like the good old days.

“Open your legs,” Illithya told Taida. “The water broke, the crevice is too small, and the baby is in the wrong position.” The midwife evaluated the situation. “It won’t be easy... Birdie, bring me hot olive oil and a sharp knife,” she said to the girl. “Taida, drink this wine, come on...”

Asherat laid out the olive oil and the knife. She waited for further instructions. With her head, Illithya gestured to the olive oil and the scraps of clean linen prepared earlier by the girl.

“Roll it up, make a bundle, soak it in the olive oil, and wipe your mother’s opening. Once again. Now take your mother by the hand.”

Illithya took the knife and cut into Taida’s crotch. She put her hands, wrapped in the material, into the woman’s vagina. The blood heavily stained the bedding. Asherat looked pale, held her breath, and clasped her mother’s hand very hard. The suffocating fumes of hyena’s fat were filling the air. Mother, damp with the sweat of pain and terror, was screaming. Her cries attracted the slaves’ attention and several of them appeared in the doorway. The kids, eager for any entertainment, were pushing through the adults’ legs.

“Get out of here!” the midwife shouted at the unwelcome guests. After that, she started to mumble some monotonous prayer as she very slowly changed the baby’s position. Taida lurched up, howling with pain, and sank back into the bed, unconscious. Tears streamed down Asherat’s cheeks.

“Mommy?” She gently brushed aside the strands of hair stuck together from her mother’s forehead. “Mommy, are you alive?”

“She’s alive, she’ll be fine. Don’t fret, birdie, but help me.” Illithya held onto the girl and sat astride Taida’s belly. “Stand behind your mother. Lift her and hold her in the way she would be when sitting up. Good. When I give you a sign, push her forward as hard as you can.”

Asherat, with all her might, bent her mother’s body. At the same time, the midwife pressed Taida’s belly with her whole body.

“Now! Push!”

The girl clung to her bent mother and the old midwife laid on her with all her weight.

“Come out, baby... you’re out of time!”

She pulled the unconscious Taida’s legs to her belly.

The child fell out.

“Why are you standing there? Take care of your mother. Come on, slap her face! She has to wake up. Come on, wake her! Now! Do you hear me? Quick! I will take care of this mite. Melqart’s servants! How blue it is...”

The midwife tore the knots of the fabric wrapped around her hands with her teeth, then cut the umbilical cord and tied it up. She reached for a clean scrap of linen and, with efficient movement, enclosed the baby while wiping off the mucus and blood. Then, she quickly wove a smaller scrap of material around her finger and cleaned up the baby’s nose and mouth. The infant was still blue and wasn’t breathing. The woman grasped it by both legs and lifted it up high,

upside down. The flabby little body was hanging inertly, without any signs of life. Asherat stood next to her mother's bed, horror-stricken by the old woman's actions.

"What are you doing? Save our baby!" Even Asherat was surprised by the strident tone of her voice.

"Be quiet, I'm doing what I can."

The midwife put the bundle on the carpet and unfolded the material. With her crooked fingers, she gently tapped on the chest of the fragile body of the infant. The baby was lying motionless. She brought her old face closer to the child's blue lips. She took a breath, opened its little mouth and puffed some air in. She pressed its chest with her two fingers. She took another breath... She repeated that several times. Then she turned her face to the girl, sad resignation visible in her eyes.

"Nooo!" Asherat howled.

The Greek woman reached into her bag, took out a small wooden amulet, and put it on the infant's belly. She dipped her fingers in the blood from the birth and drew some signs on the baby's body. She raised her hands and started to mumble some spells. Time stopped.

Suddenly, the baby shuddered, took a deep breath and screamed. The semiconscious Taida opened her eyes.

"You have a son. Take care of him." The midwife put the bundle on Taida's chest and the baby's cries settled down as it found a breast to suckle. "Clean under your mother. She will tell you what to do now, come on, hurry up," she said to the bewildered girl. "Make sure she eats the placenta."

Illithya wiped her hands and reached for a package lying next to the jars and bottles. She approached Taida and tied a snake skin on her thigh.

"It will help you get better sooner."

Exhausted by the labor, Taida wasn't objecting. Asherat knelt beside her mother.

"Birdie, give me a drink of wine and I'll be on my way."

"Wait, Illithya," Taida whispered. "Thank you for everything you've done for me. You've saved me, you've saved my baby. I won't forget that until the end of my life. Let me pay you for your work, like it used to be, although I know no money can settle my debt of gratitude. My dear daughter", she turned to Asherat, "get the pouch from the chest."

"The debt has already been settled. I don't want any money. Give me some wine and I'll go."

Illithya put her things into the bag and drank the wine given to her by Asherat.

"Farewell."

"My dear, one more thing..." Taida said. She was holding the amulet in her hand. "...you might want this." She smiled weakly at the midwife.

"Melqart is great." Illithya grasped the amulet.

‘He’s great for you... It was my God who saved my baby’ – Taida thought to herself.

Asherat approached the old woman, wrapped her hands around her waist, and clung close to her breast.

“Thank you for my mother and my little brother.”

“It’s all good, birdie. You both take care of the little one, he needs your love. Let me go or you’ll strangle me. How much strength you have in this small body! When I was delivering you, you were weak like a sick pigeon. And now look at you, what a maiden! And beautiful, like your mother. Have you started bleeding already?” The wine loosened the old woman’s tongue. “Maybe we’ll see each other again soon, birdie...”

Walking unsteadily, her gown blood-stained, holding her bag tightly, Illithya set off toward the door.

“My dear daughter, see the lady home.”

“There’s no need, I’ll go by myself,” the Greek woman murmured without turning her head.

Taida and Asherat watched the midwife depart. Then Asherat hugged her mother and glanced at the bundle on Mother’s chest. She gently moved aside a piece of the fabric and looked at the baby. The boy was sleeping, tired by the labor. He was small and wrinkled, but not as blue as he was a while ago. He looked like a dried grape.

“What do we call him, Mommy?” Asherat was already forgetting the fear of the past few hours.

“My dear, I think that your father will name him, according to our custom,” the mother answered. “The name is not important. What’s important is that the baby is alive and that we’re alive...”

“I love you very much, Mommy, you know that?”

Mother smiled weakly, grasping her hand and gently squeezing, then closed her eyes. They stayed that way for a time and then Taida asked her daughter to help clean her up. Asherat took the dirty sheets away, brought her mother a clean nightdress and fresh bed linen, and also fresh strips of material to dress the wound. She aired the room by opening windows and the door, and cleaned up the mess on the floor. She gave her mother water and gently picked up the infant, wrapped in cloth, setting him beside her mother’s bed in a small cradle.

“And what should I do with that?” She pointed her finger at the placenta lying on the floor.

“Wash it as carefully as you can, put it in a bowl, cover it, and place it in the kitchen niche. I will take care of that later.”

Asherat obediently followed all her mother’s instructions. Taida attended to her bleeding. The baby was asleep.

Mother handed the girl the snake skin that she had removed. “Burn it.”

Asherat, pretending to throw the skin into the fire, hid it in her tunic.

“Get some rest, Mother, I will watch my little brother.”

“My dear, thank you. You are very brave.” Taida stroked her daughter’s head. Asherat knelt beside the cradle.

“Where did Illithya get all those... you know...?”

“In the past, I know she bought them in the port. I think you can still buy them there.”

“And how long did Illithya have to study to be a midwife?”

“I don’t know how long she studied, but I know how it all began.”

“Can you tell me?” Asherat’s eyes became round with interest.

“It’s a very difficult and complicated story, but you are a big girl now, aren’t you?” Taida smiled warmly.

Then she told Asherat the midwife’s story, which she knew partly from Illithya herself and partly, as it usually happens, from rumors. Illithya was brought to Tyre a long time ago, when she was a young girl, as a slave. She grew up to be very beautiful and became a servant at a nobleman’s house. She was wise, bright, and very high spirited. One day, she was badly beaten by her master’s young son, in front of the other slaves. It was punishment for some minor offense. Later, he also raped her. Illithya, afraid that she might get pregnant, looked for help from the local midwives. She took some strange potions and performed some strange rituals and almost lost her life, but she didn’t get pregnant.

After all that, she became interested in the processes of midwifery. She was smart, so she quickly acquired basic knowledge. It was good to serve as a helper to the court midwife of her master. She came to realize that midwife skills were helpful anywhere and anytime. She eventually made her profession out of it. She gained her freedom when she saved a mother and her baby from a certain death. As a reward, she was freed by the same man who had raped her many years ago.

By the time Illithya was a full-grown woman, she had turned her misfortune into success. She learned how to read and write. She quickly gained wealth and position. She was respected because she was kind, reliable, and didn’t charge much for her work. Illithya meticulously wrote everything on scrolls – who came to her, what for, how she helped, who gave birth, who miscarried, whose child survived and whose did not. She also had many admirers; there were always men around her. But she never married.

Her rank was as high as the city councilors’ and she was more intelligent than most of them. She was taken as a witness for different disputes, even though, traditionally, a woman’s voice had no meaning. Illithya was special.

“So why is she living on the outskirts of the city, all alone and so poor?” Asherat asked.

“You see, my dear, we live in a world ruled by men. They establish the law and they enforce it. Maybe Illithya incurred a man’s wrath? She knew quite a lot about the city and the workings of the city leaders. She wasn’t afraid of men. She criticized them boldly and she spoke up about the things she didn’t like.”

“But what actually happened?” Asherat tried to get the information from Mother.

“It’s a completely different story. Now, I’m very tired and I have to get some rest.” Taida closed her eyes.

Asherat’s thoughts stayed on the midwife. She reached into her tunic’s folds. She squeezed the snake skin in her palm. Her little brother was sleeping soundly.

Legar, together with other judges of the Great Council, stood in the courtyard. The execution of a man accused of copulating with his daughter was taking place.

A deep pit, with depth of about four feet and a little less width, was flooded with human manure to its brim. The accused man was kneeling next to the pit with his hands tied behind his back. Four sturdy executioners stood beside him. He didn’t know what awaited him. However, he did feel that now was his last chance to convince the judges that he was innocent. The audience of the execution consisted of the judges and the closest friends of the accused. All of them were standing a safe distance from the convict, but close enough to talk with him. Legar spoke first.

“Citizen of the city of Tyre, you were proved to be guilty of your crime. You are sentenced to death. Is there anyone from the people present here today that would like to say something on your behalf?”

The judges, as was their habit, looked around at the attendees. The crowd was silent. But the accused himself dared to speak.

“Great Council, I swear to all old and new gods, I’m innocent. You are sentencing me wrongly, because I didn’t do the thing you’re accusing me of. I swear!”

“Do you hear that?” Legar roared. “How dare you accuse the Great Council of mistakes or falsehood?” He turned to the convict. “You are insane, and it only consolidates your guilt and the rightness of our sentence.”

“Judges, you know that the case was faked and my daughter was bribed to testify against me,” the accused man spoke again.

“The court is not guided by the conjectures of the accused. We have witnesses and the girl’s testimony, although her voice is irrelevant anyway. The sentence has been pronounced. Do what was set.” Legar nodded his head at the executioners. ‘I’m so hungry’ – he thought to himself.

While two strong executioners held the prisoner by his arms, the other two wrapped tightly his torso and head with old rags soaked in olive oil, leaving only a small hole for his mouth. The convict was placed in the pit. The dung reached his waist. One of the sturdy men, using a rock, knocked out the captive’s teeth and put a burning rag into his mouth. With the poles, they held the burning human torch in the pit.

“Hey, girl!” Legar called out to a young serving maid. “Bring us two jugs of wine. And prepare something hot to eat. Quickly, we’re hungry.”

Six judges of the Great Council took their places in a sitting area at Legar’s favorite tavern, located in the port alley.

The inn was sordid. Although there were a lot of taverns in the city and some of them were even clean and neat, this one was to Legar’s liking. Maybe it was because the inn was out of the way, or because they were serving delicacies from overseas, or because the most attractive port prostitutes frequented the place...

“This execution has made me tired. Although, I have to admit, it was very spectacular.” Legar turned toward the judges. “We can introduce it...”

“And I thought we would sacrifice this convict to Melqart,” Garon, one of the minor judges of the Great Council, said as he joined the conversation.

“What for? Those in the prison will be enough,” Legar replied and urged the innkeeper, “Hurry up!”

Two jugs of wine and six cups were brought to them.

“And what should this year’s sacrifice look like? Are you going to come up with something new?” Garon asked, continuing the topic of the upcoming holiday, and poured Legar some wine.

“I have an idea. I’ve heard about one interesting technique. I’m told it’s tried and tested – the Sicilian bull. I’m too hungry to talk about it right now. The food is coming.” Legar looked at the innkeeper carrying the steaming bowls.

They ate while talking about the day’s execution, Melqart’s holiday, temple prostitutes, and the many duties awaiting the judges in the near future. They were the Tyrian councilors, the face of this city! They were guarding morality and officiating all municipal festivals, along with the priests. They were establishing law, enforcing it, and judging those who broke it.

The innkeeper replaced the two empty jugs with two full ones.

“Do you need anything more, my noble lords?” the innkeeper asked.

“I will call if we need something from you; don’t disturb us,” Legar growled, busy watching a prostitute who had just come into the tavern.

She was exceptionally pretty. Not very young anymore, maybe in her thirties, but still beautiful. Her body was curvaceous, her shape ripe, her skin delicate and her lips full. She was dressed in a semi-transparent tunic, half-naked. The necklace and bracelets on her wrists and ankles jangled seductively. She was the essence of sensual womanliness.

But the thing that captured Legar and other judges’ attention was her dazzling hair. Long cascade of hair fell down her shoulders and back, shining similarly to polished gold. It was eye-catching and blinding like the sun during the summer, scorching them like high noon. She was phenomenal, provoking with her look.

Conversation among the judges’ stopped at once. All of them looked only at her. The prostitute, knowing very well what kind of impression she made on the

men, walked very slowly to the where the judges sat. Large demijohns with wine and flagons with mead stood there. The girl, realizing that she is the object of desire, made a lingering move and dipped her finger into one of the flagons. With this finger, coated in sweet mead, looking into the eyes of every judge gathered there, she touched her parted mouth. She moved her finger gently on her upper lip and then on the lower lip, finally putting it very slowly deep into her mouth and taking it out again, licking up the mead.

Dead silence fell over the tavern, and it was shattered by her delighted laughter. Two judges chuckled under their breath, while one of them, the most drunk, chortled stupidly. The rest looked without a word. Then she reached for a cup and poured some wine. With a delicate move, she drew aside the tails of her tunic and uncovered a shapely leg. An alluring, rounded side and a beautifully carved thigh were revealed to the eyes of the attendees. She gently pulled her leg up, lifting her knee. Still not looking away from the men, she raised the cup to her waist and tilted it slowly. The thin dribble of nectar spilled on her thigh and ran down her calf to her feet. She put the cup down, turned away, and, with the full attention of the men on herself, she smoothly glided in the direction of the wooden staircase leading upstairs. Her bottom told 'farewell' to some, and 'join me' to others.

"Man, don't even think about that," Legar loudly rebuked Garon. "She would eat you for breakfast and spit out your bones," he hisses at his ear with jealousy.

"And, ah, what was this interesting type of sacrifice you mentioned earlier?" Garon, who composed himself a bit, broke the awkward silence. "Tell us about it."

Legar still had the image of the stunning beauty in his mind, filling him with desire. He would love to have her.

"Listen, my men, and consider it yourself," he replied, and called for more wine as they all settled in to listen to his proposal.

More wine appeared for them. One of the judges was absolutely drunk and nearly unconscious, but the rest of them were focused and listening to him speak about a huge statue - a bull made of bronze, in which a human sacrifice would be placed through a special hole in its back. When the sacrifice was locked inside the bull, a fire would be lit under the statue and the victim locked inside would bake alive. However, this was not the most important thing in the whole torture. The bull was an instrument! The piping system built into the bull changed the victim's howls into the roar of an animal that could be heard by everyone around. The judges were so impressed that they forgot about the prostitute.

"Imagine those roars during the Awakening holiday! The priests would be profoundly awed and grateful to us," Legar chortled.

"I think nobody in Tyre - no, in the whole of Phoenicia - could manage to create such a bull within several days," one of the judges said.

“It’s not the bull itself that’s important, but this special piping system. A simple blacksmith couldn’t make it, even given a year.” Legar grew sad at the thought.

He motioned to the innkeeper, who then brought another flagon of wine.

“You said that this is the Sicilian bull, Legar. I have friends in Sicilia; I will try to learn more about it. If those bulls are still used there, maybe...” A judge who was silent until now spoke, looking at the spark in Legar’s eyes, “...I could get it for you. Maybe even for the New Year.”

“For the New Year...” Garon repeated in admiration.

“I could try...” The judge said.

“My friend!” Legar shouted. “Let me hug you. I’m going now. It’s time for me to get home. Finish the wine and take care of this drunkard.” With his head he gestured to their companion, lying face-down on the mat they all sat on. “Be well. It seems that my wife is in labor. I hope it’s a son; if not, I’ll send her away, this crazy daughter-maker.”

It was late at night when a very drunk Legar made it home. He paused in the yard, looked around, lost in a thought, and then made his way toward the buildings. One of the older slaves quickly leaped up from the bench at the sight of his master, running to meet him halfway.

“Master,” the old slave said, lowering his head in a bow that expressed both greeting and respect. “I was waiting for you. I wanted to be the first one to deliver the good news. Your wife gave birth to a son!”

Legar sobered up quickly. He pushed past the old slave and ran toward the door, behind which he expected to find the child. The noise on the threshold woke Taida and Asherat up. The baby, until now soundly sleeping in the cradle, awakened and squalled with its high-pitched voice.

“A son?” Legar half shouted, looking for confirmation from his wife.

“Yes,” the scared but happy woman answered. “Asherat, light up an oil lamp. Pick your little brother up and lay him down at your father’s feet.” Then she spoke again to Legar, “I’m sorry, my dear husband, I can’t do it myself; the labor was difficult and I am weak.”

“Stay in bed and get stronger. You have to be strong to raise my son,” Legar replied, picking up the little bundle from the floor. “Son, my son,” he repeated, unfolding the linens, as if to see for himself that he held a male offspring.

He stood there for a while, again lost in his thoughts, when the hungry baby’s squalling brought him back.

“In your presence, I recognize him as my son.” Legar looked into his wife’s eyes for the first time in a very long time. “I will recognize him in the presence of others at dawn.” He gently gave the baby to Taida. “I think you have to feed him.” He smiled almost imperceptibly at his wife. “Yes, I’m leaving now.”

When Legar passed the slave in the yard, he clapped the servant on the shoulder.

He then came back to his room and fell on the bed, still dressed in his robes and sandals, and fell fast asleep.

At dawn of the next day, he got up in a joyous mood, cleaned himself up, and put on his finer clothes. All dwellers of the property were waiting for him in the yard.

At the same time, tired Garon was leaving the port tavern.

In the bright sunbeams of the rising sun and the presence of all household members and slaves gathered in the yard, the master lifted the baby up and loudly said the words of the raising ritual:

“I recognize you as my son and name you Eshmun.”

Lying safely in his father’s big hands, the infant tightened his little body for a brief moment and sprinkled the father’s hands with a short but springy streamlet of urine. Shouts of joy and laughter filled the yard. Asherat squeezed the elbow of her mother who was weeping with emotion. The servants and slaves cheered and danced. Some of them were beating out the rhythm on little drums. All of them felt the importance of this moment in their master’s life. They believed that their own fate would be better from now on. There were plenty of reasons for the saying: “A happy master is a good master.”

Legar carefully passed the baby to his wife and said to the people assembled, “It’s time for the feast. Join us.”

The dining room was decorated with garlands of flowers. The benches were groaning with food. There were different kinds of meat and fish on the trays, and ripe fruits on the platters. Nuts, olives, dried figs and dates were mixed in small bowls. Jugs were full of wine and mead. There were even things for the youngest guests. A special bench with delicate snacks and sweet pies was prepared for the children.

It was a real festival! The beautiful decorations and lavishly set benches were the doing of the women, who were ordered by the eldest slave to prepare the feast. They worked for most of the night. The result was breath-taking.

Asherat came into the dining room and her eyes opened wide with excitement. It was her first time in this part of the house and she had never seen such splendor at once. She didn’t know how to act. Legar noticed her, approached, and said, “Asherat, my daughter, sit next to me, on my left. Taida will be sitting on my right. Speaking of, where is the mother?” he asked, looking around at the attendees.

Taking an opportunity during all of the excitement of the party, Taida had gone straight to her room. She washed her face and hands, dressed her little son in fresh clothes, put him in a soft scarf, and tied it up on her back. She reached

into the bowl with the placenta, cut off a piece and put it in her mouth. ‘God, watch over me’ – she thought to herself.

“She went to change...” Asherat’s voice caught as she saw mother now standing in the doorway, “...Eshmun’s diapers.”

“My children, my beloved...” Taida whispered, feeling rather anxious as she crossed the dining room threshold.

Seeing his wife, Legar nodded to her and pointed at the place next to him with his hand.

Not without hesitation, the woman sat by her husband, for the first time in a dozen or so years. The last time they sat together at a dinner was even before their daughter was born. They didn’t celebrate Asherat’s birth together, although she was their love child. Eshmun was not. But today Taida was performing the honors of the wife and the mistress of this house.

“Thank you for my son,” Legar whispered in his wife’s ear and then took her by the hand.

He got up and, without letting go of her hand, he announced to all gathered people, “Eat and drink to the health of my son, Eshmun. Let him grow for the glory of this house and let him be the pride of my family!”

“Long live the master and his son, Eshmun!” The words of the ritual to welcome a newborn male offspring were said. The guests sat down to feast.

Asherat glanced at her mother from the corner of her eye. Taida was somehow distant. The feasters, occupied with eating and talking, didn’t pay much attention to the master, his wife, and his daughter. Well, his house his rules, they were thinking quietly, filling up their bellies. Not sure when they’d be able to eat until full again.

“Taida.” Legar turned to his wife. “It is time you come back to your rooms. Your servant is moving all your things right now. Asherat will also live in my house. In our house...”

Rooms, servant, in our house... only these single words were getting through to Taida.

“Thank you, dear husband, what I have is enough.”

“But it’s not enough for me. And I advise you to deal with it quickly. My wife,” he said shortly and flatly.

“Let me be excused, my husband, I’m exhausted from the labor.”

“You have to eat something first. You have to be strong.”

Taida obediently reached for a piece of wheat flatbread. She swallowed it with some water.

“My wife, your mistress, is leaving us. My son also has to eat,” Legar explained the reason for Taida’s departure to the attendees.

With his eyes, he gave a sign to a female servant to go after her mistress. Asherat stayed at her place.

‘Nothing has changed here’ – Taida thought to herself, sitting on the bed in her old room. ‘The same fabrics, curtains and furniture.’ She looked around.

“What is your name, my dear?” She turned to the female servant, who had followed her.

“The master calls me Nila.”

“Thank you, Nila, you can go.”

“I’m here to serve you, my mistress,” the servant replied with fear in her eyes.

“Thank you, I would like to be alone,” Taida responded politely but firmly.

The servant bowed her head and, a little bit confused, left the room. Taida untied the scarf with her son, fed him, and laid him down next to her. She hummed a little tune and then she fell asleep herself.

The people were still feasting in the dining room. New guests arrived; the judges and Legar’s friends, who wanted to congratulate him on his son’s birth. The cooks were preparing more dishes and the servants were bringing more plates and platters filled with food, jugs of wine, and mead to the dining area.

Asherat was sitting quietly next to her father. She felt this was a crucial moment in her life, but she didn’t know what would be next. Until this day, she lived modestly but safely, at her loving mother’s side. And now? What would happen to her now? What would happen to her mother? She had thousands of questions in her head and she was afraid to ask even one of them.

The buzz of the male voices at the dining area brought her out of her own thoughts.

“Indeed, who is the beauty sitting by your side?” One of her father’s friends nodded at Asherat. The girl shrank into her chair.

“Don’t you remember? That’s my daughter.”

“She’s exquisite! She’s even more beautiful than her mother. Excuse me, Legar, but it’s a sin to keep her to yourself. Tell me only once that you want to marry her off, and I’ll find you the best candidate for a husband...”

“You say?” Legar was intrigued. “How old are you?” He asked his daughter.

“Twelve, father.” Asherat blushed and lowered her head.

“So it’s about time to find you a husband.” Legar winked at his friend.

The men continued their conversation, throwing some obscene jokes into it. Asherat was embarrassed and suffering and wanted her mother.

“Can I be excused, father?” she asked. After he gave her his consent, she meekly bobbed her head and left the dining area.

Asherat hastily left the dining room. Filled with nervous energy, she wandered about the corridors of her new house, looking for Mother and little brother. Finally, she found a room where they were both asleep. She didn’t want to wake them up and stood in the door. Suddenly she heard someone’s steps.

“Miss,” the older slave whispered. “Let me show you to your new room. It’s splendid...”

“And my mother?”

“Our mistress will be alright here. Come, everything is waiting for you. You have to see it for yourself!” He was trying his best to convince her things would be okay.

“I would like to talk to my mom. Give her a hug...” Tears appeared in her eyes. “What’s going to happen? What’s going to happen to us?”

The slave raised his arm as if he would hug the child standing before him. But the thought that this child would be his mistress in a short time made him stop.

“Everything will be alright. And now, please, come with me.”

She followed him down the hall.

Asherat’s room was gorgeous. It was tastefully decorated and prepared for her with amply ornamented bed linen, draperies in the windows and expensive furniture. The view enchanted the girl and, for a moment, she forgot about the day’s events. She lay down on the enormous bed with a curved headboard and legs. In the pile of pillows, she found her beloved ivory doll which had been a gift from her mother. She pulled it to her chest and fell asleep, holding it tightly.

The feast eventually came to an end. Legar said goodbye to the last of the guests and the slaves started the arduous task of cleaning up, before going back to their daily routines. He went to find his wife and his new child.

“I hope that you’ll find everything you need,” Legar said to his half asleep wife. “I don’t want my son missing anything. If you want anything, speak up. I’ll make your wish come true.”

“I just have one. Will you finally tell me what happened with our two daughters? I beg you.”

“I sacrificed them to Melqart. Forgive me. Oh, I almost forgot. Asherat. I decided to marry her off.” Legar turned around and left.

The *egersis*, Melqart’s Awakening holiday, started with a procession to the temple. At noon, all set off from the most distant parts of the city; from the districts of poverty and from the houses of the councilors and rich men. Once a year, they made the sacrifices to their Lord, the King of the City. At the front of the processions were the children, then virgins and young men, and then the adults with the elders at the end. All were in their finest garments and the girls and women decorated their heads with wreaths.

Everyone carried gifts that would be presented in the temple. The rich were giving crops and large animals; the poor, small fowl or their own food. They walked with accompaniment of cymbals, bells, and drums. They sang songs

of thanksgiving, talking loudly and laughing. This very special festival celebrated from time immemorial to help unite the citizens of Tyre.

The meaning of this holiday was obvious for everyone. The food and beverages were corresponding to the vital need of eating and drinking, and putting away the fear of death from hunger or thirst. The generous sacrifice, on the other hand, guaranteed a successful harvest. Additionally, the amount of sacrifices made at the temple was enough for the priests, with no issue, to survive the next several months. At least until the celebration of the new year.

Apart from the gifts, each family participating in this procession carried a wooden platform with a statuette. It was the personification of the god Melqart. The statuette was formed from clay, and barley grains sprouted out of it. It was believed that, each year, their god was dying and, each year, he was reborn in the barley grains that also had to die to become the bread; the food for the people. The sprouting symbolized the god coming back to life and, at the same time, the favors provided for all mortals.

The colorful processions marched through the main streets of the city, finally integrating into one mass at the square in front of the temple. All clay statuettes were put on the ceremonial platform standing on the square.

Legar's servants also participated in the procession. Legar rested at home, getting ready for the evening part of the *egersis*. Asherat and Eshmun were sleeping, and Taida sent a trusted slave to get Illithya.

The old midwife reluctantly crossed the threshold of Legar's house. She came only because the baby was supposedly feeling ill. The truth was different.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked, as she crossed through the door.

"Everything is alright with my son. I'm sorry, Illithya, I lied to you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have come."

The midwife stood, waiting for an explanation.

"You have to help me, one last time, I beg you," Taida asked. "Her father wants to marry Asherat off. I'm not willing to allow that to happen."

"It's his will. You can't change anything."

"But she's only a child!"

"Child? She's twelve years old, as I recall."

"I want to spare her my fate, do you understand?"

"She won't escape from fate."

"You're a wise woman. Please help me keep her from harm!"

"What can I do? What? You have to decide. There are only two solutions, my dove." The midwife lowered her voice, looked around, and sat at the edge of the bed. "You can tell your husband that someone has already touched her. But we would have to cut her and we would have to do it fast. Then you could be sure that nobody would want her. The problem is that Legar would most likely start an investigation. He wouldn't touch you, because you're the mother

of his son, but innocent people would die. Or, you can tell him that she's not bleeding yet."

"Everything is moving so fast. I have to think about it."

"You don't have much time."

Illithya curiously glanced into the crib of the sleeping baby.

"How are you, little sparrow? What name did you give him?"

"My husband named him Eshmun."

"Eshmun, Eshmun," Illithya pondered. "That's the name of Sidon's god."

"Legar gave him this name in the memory of his grandfather."

"That's fine then. Because you don't look like the God of Health, little sparrow," the old dame laughed. "Don't worry, he'll grow pretty. Feed him well. Did you eat the placenta?" Illithya looked around Taida's room. "It's beautiful in here. Like in the old days. You gave birth to Asherat in here, didn't you?"

"Yes. And until that moment, everything was good, and then it all changed. I got used to those changes. And now, here I am again..." Taida's voice broke. "And I'm afraid." She threw her arms around Illithya's neck.

"Don't cry, you stupid woman. There are worst things in this world. You have someone to live for. Think about it all the time! You have to decide what to do about Asherat. I'm going now. I want to make a sacrifice to Melqart. I advise you to do the same."

"Illithya, I know you won't take a payment, but let me send you some food and wine. We were celebrating Eshmun's arrival, so we have many leftovers. The servants can bring baskets to your home."

"Let them bring me some wine. And keep me informed about your Asherat."

"You will get your wine today. I will send you the message tomorrow."

"Let it be that way."

In the temple yard, the priests started the ceremony. They were majestically marching around the platform, mumbling under their breath the prayers, incomprehensible to the onlookers. Numerous Melqart statuettes made of claylike soil stood on the platform. In some of them, the grains were only beginning to sprout and, in the others, large blades of barley were growing. After they finished the prayers, the priests symbolically sprinkled all the statuettes with water.

The crowd chanted for the glory of their god: "Our only King, the greatest and invincible, hallowed be thy name, thy law come. Feed us with your bread and forgive us our deadly trespasses. Save us from evil, temptation, poverty, and death."

The attendees offered their sacrifices in the temple and then returned to take their statuette, already sprinkled with water, from the platform. To be sure all statuettes were sprinkled and that everyone would go home with watered barley, the priests had to go around the platform many times. This lasted for several hours. Evening was the time when the councilors and judges would make

sacrifices, to ensure peace and wealth in the city. Then, the ceremonial platform was transformed into, depending on the times, the place of execution of criminals or prisoners of war. It usually burned with live fire until the morning of the next day.

It was already late afternoon when Asherat woke up. At first, she wasn't really sure where she was; a strange room surrounded her. 'Oh yes, I'm in my father's house' – she thought to herself. Yesterday, her mom gave birth to her little brother, and this morning, her father named and recognized Eshmun as his son. Then there was the feast to welcome him.

"Mother, where are you?" She dashed out into the corridor.

Taida heard her daughter shouting and she went out to meet her.

"Mother, please don't leave me here ever again!" Asherat hugged her mother.

"My dear, calm down, everything is alright."

"It's not!" Asherat protested. "Nothing is alright! I don't want to live here. I want to go back to my home with you and with baby Eshmun."

"Come, we'll see if the baby is still asleep," Taida said calmly, stroking her daughter's head.

"Can I kiss him?" Asherat gently touched the baby's face.

"Of course, my dear, he's your brother."

"Mother. He smells like a little kitten." The girl smiled.

"Like a little kitten?" her mother said with an answering smile. "You know, now he's tiny and vulnerable, but someday he will grow up to be a big, strong man."

Asherat grew sad. She cast down her eyes.

"Father said... he said..." She couldn't get the words out. "He said that I have to get married. And I don't want to." Asherat burst into tears.

"Listen to me, my daughter. You are a good and very wise girl. Actually, you are already a young woman. In the life of every woman, there comes the time when your father marries you off. It's completely normal. That's the order of things. However, I assure you that it won't happen today or tomorrow, or in the near future; do you understand? You only have to trust me and do what I say, alright?"

There were noises in the corridor. The servants had returned from the Awakening Holiday.

"What is that noise?" the girl asked, frightened.

"The household members came back with the watered barley."

"Oh yes, today is Melqart's holiday. Mother, why aren't we celebrating the *egersis*?"

Loud talking from somewhere in the house woke up Legar. He opened his eyes, stretched himself, and yawned. He looked outside the window. The afternoon sun was low on the horizon, but was still warm.

‘It’s time for me to go’ – he thought to himself. He washed himself and put on his best judge’s robe. Before he left home, he decided to stop and see his wife with his new son.

“Welcome, my wife,” he greeted Taida. “How is Eshmun?”

“Welcome, my husband, it’s nice to see you. Judging by your clothes, you’re going for Melqart’s holiday,” Taida replied politely.

Legar confirmed it with a nod of his head and he smoothed his robes, very pleased.

“How can I serve you?” Taida said.

“Again, I am here to see my son. And how is he?”

“He is doing well, thank you, we’re both feeling good. The same goes for Asherat, right, my dear daughter?”

Asherat nodded her head slightly.

“That’s excellent. I will see you tomorrow, as the ceremonies will last all night.”

“Have a great time, Legar.” Taida tried to smile.

“Woman! It’s not entertainment, I’m going to work! Do you think that I’m going there because I feel like it? To be a Great Judge is a great responsibility!” He yelled. “You’re stupid and don’t understand anything.”

“I’m sorry that I’ve offended you. I wanted to wish you a nice evening,” Taida tried to smooth things over.

Asherat stood there, stupefied.

When Legar came to the temple yard, there was already a pile of wood, dry branches, and rags lying on the ceremonial platform. The prisoners were led in and positioned along the side of the yard. There were judges, councilors, dignitaries, and rich men from the city among the onlookers. Dusk was approaching and the priests were praying.

Suddenly, Garon ran into the yard.

“You’re right on time.” Legar patted the young judge on the shoulder.

“Legar, I went to your house, but they told me you’d be here. I’m glad I’ve found you. I have to tell you something important. I’m setting off today.” Garon drew back his coat.

On his chest, tied on a string, a lock of bright golden hair was hanging. Legar guessed whose hair that was. He felt a pang of jealousy.

“And yet...” he smiled insincerely.

“I’m taking Artemia with me; the ship is already waiting in the port. Farewell, my friend...”

The boys' choir placed itself on the broad stairs leading to the main building of the temple. Numerous torches were lit up around them. The guests who gathered there sat on the benches arranged in the semicircle in the yard. The evening celebration of Melqart's festival was opened by the performance of laudatory songs. Then the emissary of the Roman prefect delivered a speech, wishing the attendees and all citizens of Tyre bumper crops for the upcoming harvest. After his speech, the priests performed thanksgiving poems in honor of the god-king. The choir sung again.

Legar couldn't focus on the performances. He still had the mysterious beauty from the port tavern and Garon's happy face in his mind. The jealousy in his heart was growing into anger and envy.

The young boys' choir finished their songs and made room for the older priest. The old man, assisted by his retinue, asked the attendees to rise. With his sonorous voice, he said the words of prayer in which he asked for Melqart's benevolence on the devoted nation, for health in his followers, and for life and abundance. Legar stood there, lost in his thoughts, not listening to the priest.

"Great Judge of the Great Council, it's time for the sacrifice to Melqart!"

Legar, brought back to reality, came closer to the platform and signaled the guards to bring the first prisoner.

The sturdy men tied a skinny, scared convict to the pole attached to the platform. The man started to writhe and scream.

"Be worthy of the highest sacrifice," Legar said, loudly and clearly, through clenched teeth.

He took the torch from the guard's hands and set fire to the oil-soaked wood surrounding the staked convict.

"Melqart is great!" he shouted.

"Melqart is great!" the crowd echoed.

The oldest priest, standing on the stairs, said the words of the known ritual to the attendees: "What should have happened is done. Go to the temple, everything is ready."

Gathered people, walking toward the main building, were accompanied by a burning prisoner's screams. After the last person, the gate was bolted shut.

About the same time, Taida and Asherat were finishing Eshmun's evening bath.

"You were asking me, my dear, why we aren't celebrating the *egersis*. I will tell you."

Taida dipped her finger in the soap, made of goat's fat and plant ashes. On the polished metal that served as a mirror, she drew four letters: YHWH.

The interior of the temple was marvelous in its richness. The walls and floor were decorated with perfectly polished stone. Two rows of columns, beautifully carved, were spaced evenly from the door to the end of the spacious hall.

In the depths of the hall was Melqart's golden statue – a huge figure of a muscular man with the head of a bull. It was intimidating with its might and, at the same time, was enchanting. This evening, it was decorated with branches of blooming flowers, wreaths, and garlands. Many oil lamps were mounted on the temple walls. Their light reflected off the statue, creating the impression of it being on fire. The whole room glowed.

The benches, ready for the feast, were set before the statue. On them was everything that had been brought by the citizens of Tyre as oblations: fresh bread, meat, fruits, pies, and excellent wines and mead. Other gifts were stored at the back of the temple. The master of ceremony announced the beginning of the feast. The men sat at the feast presented before them.

All of a sudden, a gentle sound of pipes and bells could be heard from the back of the hall. The music became louder and faster, the tension growing. Then, on silk sashes, straight from the ceiling, young, half-naked women started to drift down. There were almost as many of them as the feasting men. They landed easily and then walked around the where the men reclined, some of them sitting on the men's laps. One of them approached Legar. She was pretty and ready to play. Pressing her firm young breasts to his back, she easily broke his initial resistance. He spun in his seat, grasped the woman in his arms and, with pleasure, pressed his mouth to hers.

While Legar was feasting and enjoying the carnal pleasures of the evening, Taida was revealing a great secret to her daughter; the secret to life.

“What do these signs mean, Mother?” Asherat pointed at the polished metal.

“That's the name of my God,” Taida replied. Seeing the surprise on her daughter's face, she added, “I believe in a different God than Phoenicians.”

“Is it a Greek god?” Asherat thought about her mother's origin.

“No, my dear, this is the Israelites' God.”

“The Israelites' God? Here? Why?” Asherat didn't understand.

“I believe in a God who wants us to love Him with all our heart and all our soul. Who wants us to love other people like we love ourselves. I believe in a God who doesn't demand human sacrifice.”

For the first time, Taida was talking with her daughter about the One True God. When Asherat was younger, Taida didn't see the need and the little girl had never asked. Now she decided that she couldn't hide her faith from Asherat. She knew very well, though, that she had to keep it secret from others, especially from her husband.

“My love, I expected that it would be difficult for you to understand. But I promise you, I will explain everything and answer all your questions. Father will be gone tonight... so, you can sleep with me.”

Asherat, filled with gratitude, hugged her mother.

The feast in the temple started to transform into an orgy. At the first sounds of the ecstatic music, the women sprung up, leaving their companions, and created two circles around the bull. The drums blared. The circles started to rotate, each of them in different directions, and the women screamed and ran in the circles as if they were blindfolded.

They stopped. Their faces and hands rose to the golden statue. They howled. They bowed low, made several steps back, and then came closer again. They span around themselves several times. Again they took themselves by their hands and, in the wild frenzy, they started to revolve. They were screaming, howling, moaning. The drums were blaring louder and louder, and the women were tearing their half-transparent robes, exposing their breasts, bellies and wombs.

At an instant, the drums fell silent. The dancers were naked, hot and sweaty with madness in their eyes. Suddenly, they stood upright and proud with their faces directed toward the men. They were waiting. With lust in their eyes, the men knocked over the benches to reach the priestesses as fast as they could. With their trembling fingers, they took out their hard penises from under their clothes.

Melqart's worshippers fell anywhere, anyhow, just to start copulating. Now. Right now! On the floor, on the benches... In different positions and configurations. One man and two women, one woman and three men. Women with women, men with men. Everybody with everybody. They were one big promiscuous human mass. Screaming, moaning, and panting could be heard all around. Food was spreading on the ground. The air was heavy from the sultry vapors of pleasure. The orgy seemed never-ending.

Before the dawn, they got tired. They fell asleep one after another. One on the other.

The last Melqart sacrifice was burned at dawn.

That night, Asherat couldn't sleep. For the longest time, she thought about the god that her mother believed in. She heard her mother getting up to feed Eshmun. Although she wanted to ask about many things, she patiently waited for the first rays of the morning sunlight.

"Mother, what does your god look like?" she said, continuing the conversation of the night before.

"My dear, are you not asleep?" Mother smiled. "I'll tell you, but we have to be quiet."

Asherat pointed at sleeping Eshmun.

"Yes," Taida confirmed. "Listen. Nobody has ever seen my God. The human eyes can't see Him, our mind can't imagine Him, and our tongue can't describe Him."

"So, how do you know what kind of god is he?"

“I feel His love, holiness, and lawfulness. I know that His love, holiness, and lawfulness is eternal, because the God Himself is eternal. He has existed from the beginning and He will exist forever and ever. This God’s eternity also gives us, the ordinary people, hope for eternal life, because our Lord created us in His own image. And that means that, someday, we will live eternally. My God is mighty, He does everything He wants; He is the Lord of anything He wants. The God that I believe in is omnipresent; He fills the heaven and the earth. He is omniscient. His knowledge penetrates the whole space and all time – the past, the present, and the future. He is all wise; everything was wisely created, arranged, and established with His greatest intention and purposefulness. And He passed along to humans rules to live by; He taught them how to live lawfully.”

“And how do you know this god is wise?”

“I believe in God’s wisdom. I don’t have to necessarily understand it. The Lord’s ways are often incomprehensible for us humans. But I trust Him, that He wants the best for me. This God loves me, because He is the love Himself. He loves you, Eshmun, your father, and every person in the world. And He waits for people to open their hearts for Him. No man, my daughter, can find His grace on a path different from the one the Lord has created, sanctified, and recognized as the right way. And now, my dear, let’s ask the servants for something to eat. I’m very hungry.”

“Mom, are you on this path he created?”

“I’m trying. That’s why this God gave us the Ten Commandments.”

Noon arrived and the participants of the night’s orgy started to wake up. They noticed that the priestesses were already gone. Only men were left in the temple. Some of them were getting up self-satisfied, and others were full of shame. Their crumpled robes, disheveled hair, and tired faces bore the traces of the night’s events. The floor was covered with dead flowers, ruined food, and vomit. Legar rinsed out his mouth with a cup of wine, found his robe, put it on, and left.

The distance from the temple to his home wasn’t far, but he didn’t want to go near any buildings in which people knew him, so he chose narrow alleyways and kept his face turned down, finally making it home. Once at the house, he half-heartedly scolded some slaves lounging in the yard and gave several orders; requesting a hot meal and water. He sorted himself out and changed his clothes. He wanted to see his son.

“Welcome, Taida,” he said loudly, but he lowered his voice when his wife, who was feeding Eshmun, put a finger on her lips.

Asherat was sitting by her mother.

“Welcome, my husband. What can I do for you?” Taida asked quietly.

“My son, suck your mother’s breast. Get strong and grow. Someday, we will go together to the temple.” Legar smiled at the memory of the last night. “And

you, my daughter, watch and learn how your mother is taking care of the child,” he said to Asherat. “Soon, you’ll be doing the same thing. It’s time for you to get married and have your own children.”

Asherat stiffened. She clenched a sheet hem in her little fist.

“Legar, our daughter is still a child herself. She’s not bleeding.”

“She’s not? That’s impossible!”

“My dear husband, don’t you remember? Asherat was unhealthy and weak for a long time. She’s not a woman yet. She’s not ready. Her husband will not have any benefit from her...” Taida said, getting her emotions under control with difficulty.

“Asherat?” The father turned to his daughter sharply.

“Yes, father, that is true. I’m not a woman yet.” Her cheeks were on fire.

“Well, I want to be the first to know when you become a woman. Do you understand? If I find out that you are lying to me, that you both are lying to me, you will be sorry! Remember that. I’m going to my room, the night’s duties made me tired.”

“Mother,” Asherat said when her father had left, “does he love us?”

“No,” Taida said sadly, “but you have a Father who does love you.”

Asherat stood in Illithya’s yard. She had been here three days ago when her mother needed help. Only three days and so many things had happened since then! Her mother gave birth; her father recognized Eshmun as his son and gave the feast in his honor; they moved into her father’s house; she learned that she would eventually be someone’s wife. And, finally, she heard the tale about the one and only living God...

“Illithya, can I come in?”

“Who’s there?”

“Asherat, I have a message from my mother.”

“And did you bring the wine?”

“I don’t have any wine,” she replied truthfully.

“That’s a shame. Come in, birdie.”

The midwife was lying in the room on the old, dirty bed. On the floor next to it, there was dried up food and an emptied wine jug.

“Tell me, what does your mother want?” The old dame gabbled.

“She sent me to tell you, that...” Asherat stopped talking when she saw the state in which the midwife was in. “Do you need help?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” the old lady cackled. “Help? Good one! Wine is what I need!”

“I don’t have any wine,” the girl repeated. “Could... Could I see the chair for a woman in labor?” She glanced toward the storeroom.

“What for? You need that thing?” The midwife laughed.

“No, no... well... because my mom, because I... because my mom told me to say that I am not a woman yet,” Asherat muttered, embarrassed.

“Ah, so she decided to do it that way. Alright.” The old midwife was still lying on the bed.

“Well, can I see the chair?”

“Look all you want. If not now, then later... You won’t escape it...”

Asherat went into the storeroom. She touched the old chair on which many women had given birth. She looked at it closely from every side, as if she wanted to remember its shape. Next to the chair there was a big chest covered with dust. She opened its lid with difficulty. There were bags, bottles, and amulets inside. On the bottom, she also noticed old scrolls. She found on them a list of which children were sacrificed to Melqart...

Scared, she ran home. All she could hear were her mother’s words: ‘My God doesn’t demand human sacrifices.’