

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Magic and Desire

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About the Book

In fantasies the subconscious is set free. These three short novels about forbidden and otherworldly desires reveal deeply buried erotic truths.

Ill Met by Moonlight

Can it be possible that a handsome stranger met by moonlight is a mischievous fairy out to sample a taste of human love and passion? But what will happen when the magic witching month of May is over? When he loses his human form will he lose his memories of her as well?

The House of Dust

The king is dead. But the queen cannot grieve until she's had vengeance. Shari must descend into the Underworld and brave its challenges in order to bring her lover back from the dead.

The Dragon Lord

In the misty marshlands of Navarone, the Princess is about to be married. Her parents desperately hope this will cure her "problem", which they have fought to keep secret for years. Her "problem" has always been the tendency to play with fire - she lights fires in the grate with her eyes when no-one is looking, and she is lustful in a land of rigid morality.

THE PUBLISHERS RECOMMEND THAT THIS BOOK
SHOULD BE SOLD ONLY TO ADULTS

Magic and Desire
Janine Ashbless
Portia Da Costa
Olivia Knight

**BLACK
LACE**

Magic and Desire

He stretched his hand out and she stepped forwards. He touched her fingertips then traced her jaw with his thumb.

‘You’re frightened,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ She laughed. ‘This time.’

‘We don’t have to ... we can just talk ...’ His warm hand rested on the inward curve of her waist.

Her hands explored his face as if she were blind: his high forehead, long straight nose, and thick dark eyebrows. His face was strained, his eyes suffering, with longing kept rigidly in check. When her fingertips found his taut lips, they parted in a despairing moan. Terrified of scaring her but unable to resist, he gathered her closer in his arm and touched the slope of her neck, down along her collarbone, stroking towards her breast.

‘Your hands are like feathers,’ she said with a shiver.

He lowered his head and spoke against her lips. ‘If you want to stop – at any moment – you have only to say the word.’

The House of Dust

by

Janine Ashbless

The House of Dust

by Janine Ashbless

I'VE NEVER BEEN to the King's bedchamber; he has always come to mine. But this day is not like any that has gone before it. A priestess shouldn't hurry; she should always retain the dignity of her office, but I pick up my fringed skirts and run down the long palace corridor and my handmaidens fall back behind me, squawking in alarm. Guards and servants haunting the dim rooms gape as I flit past, my gilded sandals snapping on the mudbrick floor – the royal palace is not so grand a building as the temple of Inanna, for all its size: there we have limestone paving.

As I run into the private audience chamber, Emmer, the King's chief scribe, comes to intercept me and I slow. Emmer was born to a priestess of Inanna and is still loyal to the temple; he often keeps me informed of happenings in the palace just as he did my predecessor on the *huluppu*-throne. On this occasion neither of us can waste time being discreet.

'Emmer – the King?'

'This way.' He beckons me towards a door and I jog after him into a courtyard garden. Emmer is portly and getting on in years and can't run as fast as I can.

'Is it bad?'

Emmer shoots me a look and I know from his refusal to answer exactly how bad that is. In the palace, to say 'The King is dying' would be to invite disaster not just upon the monarch but also upon the speaker. To say something is to wish for it; to be heard invoking demons like that would be to sign one's own execution warrant.

‘What happened?’ I catch him by the arm, bringing him to a halt. I have to know.

He wriggles uncomfortably from my grasp. ‘Great Lady ...’ His gaze sweeps the date palms and the fig trees anxiously.

‘What happened?’ I drop my voice to a hiss. ‘I saw the King yesterday and he was well. Now he’s sick?’

Emmer’s voice is barely audible. ‘After his meal he complained that his feet were cold and numb. He tried to stand up from the couch but he fell. Servants carried him to bed. He said he could feel nothing in his legs. Now ...’

He doesn’t need to finish. A thick knot forms in my throat. ‘Inanna preserve him,’ I mumble, but my tongue feels like leather, an alien thing flapping in the dry vault of my mouth.

‘You should hurry.’

We set off again. As we scurry beneath the cedar lintel of the King’s quarters, past guards who shrink away bowing their heads, I remember the first time I met King Tamuz face to face. It was on the night of the Spring Equinox, the first night of the nine for which the Great Marriage is celebrated and the beginning of the New Year, and it was my first time in the role of Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth. I was no maiden of course, at nineteen years old – no priestess of Inanna’s is – but I was just as nervous as any bride. There’s a hierarchy among the priestesses, and those of the grade of *nu-gig* such as was I, a daughter of princes, do not have to work the common chambers of the temple unless the goddess moves us. Perhaps I’d had less experience of men than I assumed. Certainly I hadn’t yet realised that in public rituals such as the Great Marriage it’s never the woman who needs fear she will not acquit herself properly.

The high priestess then, Gushea, should by rights have been playing the part of the goddess as she had done ever since I could remember, but she was ill that year with a hot

fist of pain in her belly, the first sign of the sickness that eventually took her, so she'd nominated a lesser priestess as was her prerogative. I don't know why she chose me, only that it was the beginning of the period of her favour that was to end in my ascension to the *huluppu*-throne.

My first good look at Tamuz's face was as he climbed the steps to the bridal platform. It was a breezy night and the torch flames were flapping and hissing, threatening at every moment to go out, sending shadows dancing all across the great open square. But as he reached the foot of the bed the wind suddenly dropped and everyone, not just the drummers and the timbrel and the sistrum-players but the whole crowd – the whole city of Uruk from nobility to slaves – gathered on every balcony and roof and step for a good view, fell absolutely silent, holding their breath. Their King and their goddess were bathed in a nimbus of golden light as the torches renewed their vigour; I remember thinking that it was the best of omens. I remember the way his long hair gleamed in oiled ringlets upon his shoulders. He wore no crown that night of course; he approached the goddess Inanna in humility, as a mortal man, though his cloak was of the finest, most heavily worked embroidery. The bed beneath my bare feet was spread with sheepskins to represent his status as the shepherd of the people, to represent the flocks and herds of Uruk whose fecundity for the coming year depended upon the heat of our passion. Over the fleeces were strewn seeds of flax and lettuce and barley, which could not germinate unless quickened by our desire.

I remember how he paused to look me over. It was the lift of his eyebrows, the slow appreciative grin – so entirely unexpected – the unmasked and unforced pleasure in his eyes that somehow invited me to reciprocate: those were the things that lit the flame in my belly. There'd never been any question that the goddess would move in me; my body

was trained to be her vessel. But I'd never expected my heart to jump like that.

Clearly, so that all could hear, we spoke the ritual verses. Then he slipped off his long cloak and he was naked beneath it, naked and muscular and golden under the torchlight except for the dark hair at his groin, black and oiled like his beard, and his duskier phallus already heavy and pendent with anticipation.

*My honey-man, my honey-man sweetens me always,
He is the one I love,* sang the women.

Tamuz took me without hurry into his arms, drawing off my fragile nuptial gown and caressing me tenderly. 'Oh ... my holy jewel,' he murmured as his lips stooped to my breasts and grazed my nipples. 'Oh, my wondrous Inanna.'

The words were as familiar as my own heartbeat, but for the first time I heard them as if they were truly meant for me. In those moments Inanna did not simply fill and inhabit me; I felt as if I were really her: the goddess who moved the world to love. We spoke the verses as our hands moved to explore and arouse one another, skin on oiled skin, everything smooth and slippery. His phallus was soon as hard as *huluppu*-wood under my fingers. And there, in front of all the people, on that bed smelling of fleece and cedar oil and scented resins, he covered me and entered me and moved upon me with sweet unhurried joy, his fullness my delight.

That was the first time. Afterwards we attended the wedding feast in the palace and I sat regally clad beside him upon his throne, as all the luxury of Uruk was laid before us in a feast of roasted meats from the fields and the steppes and the far mountains, fish drawn from the Two Rivers, almonds and dates and honey and cheeses and soft bread, wine and beer both dark and light. Musicians played their stringed instruments and sang for us and dancers displayed their lithe and naked bodies up and down the room, the whole assembly loud and relaxed and joyous. As

the night wore on many guests slipped away to couple in the shadows behind pillars; such things were expected on this night. The harsh hungry days were over; the parched fields would soon be green again, the thin herds fat, the ewes giving milk as they dropped their lambs. Soon the god Enlil would unleash the Two Rivers from their sources in the distant mountains and their flooding would fill the canals and ditches that would water our fields all year. The King had wed the goddess and her blessings would shower upon his land. And I sat in the middle of it all, the radiant ornament of the assembly, the toast of the land of Sumer, my fingers twined with his. They sang in celebration and in praise and I accepted it as the goddess's due, all night until dawn, and then I went to greet myself, the Morning Star, shining upon the horizon.

There on the balcony Tamuz found me in prayer, my hands raised to the heavens. Softly he dismissed the company and came up behind me. I faltered in my words as he slipped his hands about my upper body, cupping my breasts as he pressed up against me.

'Don't stop,' he murmured, kissing my neck.

Such informality was permitted during the time of the Great Marriage, so I carried on praying while he rolled my nipples to points of exquisite frustration between his fingers and bit softly at my ears, tugging at the clusters of golden balls strung from my pierced lobes. I made it to the last verse in a stumbling rush, my spine arched so as to press my shoulders and my buttocks back against the hard wall of his body. I could feel little bolts of lightning chasing across my breasts and down to the wellspring of my sex, as if great Enlil himself were playing with my nipples. When Tamuz laid a firm hand upon my navel and slid it down to cup my pubic mound I gasped out loud. I wanted so much for him to set me face down over that low wall and root me there high above the flat roofs of Uruk, now touched with faintest pink from the approaching sunrise, so that I might

encompass the whole of my realm with my eyes as he filled me, so that Utu the shining sun might blind me with his glory as I was made incandescent from behind and within. But Tamuz turned me instead and sat me upon the edge of the wall, lifting my skirts over my knees to reveal my smooth thighs and sliding his hands up their inner surfaces, all the way to the mound of my delta. I put my arms around his neck and drew him closer, my legs encompassing his. Gently, with the tips of his fingers, he stroked my purse until he broke the fragile seal of flesh and let the moisture within seep out.

‘Daughter of the Moon,’ he whispered, his eyes shining, ‘we’ve hardly met and yet I have wounded you sorely.’

‘You did,’ I breathed. ‘The pain is unbearable. My whole body cries out.’

‘Forgive me. I thought you might be healed by now.’ He circled the pomegranate-pip of my clitoris expertly, making me shudder. I dug my nails into his skin.

‘This is a wound that can’t be healed. You hurt me too deeply and now I must live with it forever.’

‘Can I make reparation?’

‘You might, if you are brave.’

His fingers were slippery now to the root, moving slickly in and upon my sex, stirring me beyond endurance. ‘And how shall I do that?’

‘You must staunch the wound,’ I said, parting the layers of his long kilt to reveal the length of his prick, the skin already taut and glistening, ‘with the weapon that made it.’ I took hold, and Tamuz’s expression made it clear I had his undivided attention. ‘It’s an ancient magic,’ I confided, my eyes wide and serious. ‘Only by wounding me again can you ease me of my pain.’

‘Then,’ he said, his voice hoarse, ‘I see you’re skilled in the magical art.’

My hand was working his copper to harder bronze. ‘Oh yes, my King.’

‘And it is my duty to help you.’

With infinite care, both of us breathing shallow and quick, he nudged into me, sheathing perhaps two-thirds of his length. The wall held me at just the right height for him.

‘Don’t let me fall,’ I whispered.

His arm tightened about my waist. ‘Never.’ And as he pressed into me with long firm thrusts, taking his time, I gave myself up to his arms and his lips, letting my head fall back until I hung over the dizzying drop and the city below. The stars were fading overhead into a pale and cloudless sky but within me whole new constellations were exploding into birth.

That was the first night. Eight more days and nights we spent in each other’s company, and Tamuz hardly left my side. For eight days and nine nights the cares of rulership were taken from his shoulders. He was forbidden to make war or sit in judgement or to slay man or beast in all that time; his only duty was to bring pleasure to his divine wife. Willingly, I think, we both played the part of young lovers, rapt in our first all-consuming passion – though for neither of us was this the first, or anything like. By day we walked hand-in-hand, and lost ourselves in foolish games, and sailed upon the river listening to songs of desire. At night we lay together in the pavilion in the temple garden, denying ourselves sleep, hunting each other fervently across the bed. Then the ninth morning came and Tamuz returned to his palace, to his wives and his concubines, and I returned to being a priestess of a high, but not the highest, rank. For a time.

Years have passed since then, ushered in by the scorpion-men that open the Gate of the East, and ushered out through the Gate of the West into the darkness beneath the earth.

As I hurry through the palace at Emmer’s side, it seems to me that the colour has drained from the red and black and yellow zigzag patterns on the walls, from the lapis

lazuli of the stone mosaics, from the gilding on the carved beams, until everything looks grey and brittle. Fear and fury twist like wrung linen in my belly. Tamuz is a king in his prime; for him to die now is an affront to the gods. It is also, it transpires, a public spectacle. His bedchamber is filled to the door and overflowing with officials and noblemen, slaves and guards and priests of every one of the gods. Everyone is talking and pushing and arguing; women are already wailing, and the air is sour. Emmer has to hammer on the backs of those who cram the doorway: 'The First Daughter of the Moon! The Lady of the Morning and the Evening! The Queen of Heaven! Stand aside for the High Priestess of Inanna!'

They part reluctantly, but they let me in. I push my way to the bed, tiny in that great chamber but far too big for the lone figure which occupies it. Positions immediately round the bedside are taken by physicians, and by Tamuz's four noble-born queens and his family. He has no sons for all his vigour, but I recognise his sister Geshtinanna, his half-brother Nergal and Nergal's son. Kneeling by the bed, weeping and clinging to Tamuz's hand which hangs limply over the edge, is his senior queen, Ninsu.

'Get off him!' I order and she shrinks away. Then I hoist my skirts and climb on to the bed to kneel over him.

It's a shock. When last I saw him only yesterday, returning from a lion hunt in the steppeland beyond the Euphrates, he was in the fullest health. Now, covered to the waist with a sheet, Tamuz looks like he's already a corpse, his strong frame almost flattened against the bedding and his skin as grey as salt. His eyes are only half-open and under the lids they still move in their sockets, but his chest is hardly rising at all. I touch him and he feels cold and clammy. I lay my fingers to his throat but his pulse is barely there, as slow and muddy as the Tigris in late summer. Kneeling forwards until my face is right over his, I call his name.

The King's lips move, but no sound issues forth. Only his eyes turning to mine under their lowered lids show that he is conscious of my presence. I have to swallow my tears. It's far too late to save him. If news had come to me earlier, if the malady had not been so rapid, then I'd have had time to make him an amulet that would restore his strength or cast the poison from his body by prayer and rite. As it is, I'm barely there in time to bid him farewell. 'My face covers your face like a mother over her child,' I whisper, my voice cracking. 'I will place you like a jewel between my breasts; during the night I will give you covering, during the day I will clothe you. Fear not, oh my little one, whom I have raised.' A tear slips out and splashes on to his cheek. 'Tamuz ...'

Softly a sigh escapes from his lips. I am close enough to watch as his eyes darken, the pupils dilating in death. My own eyes I have to close, and for a moment the roar of blood in my ears is so loud it drowns the gabbling of the crowd.

'The King is dead,' I say, when I can find my voice.

As I sit back people start to scream and I shut my eyes again. All around me I hear the sound of the rending of cloth. They will all tear their garments and their hair; they will rip at the skin of their faces and their thighs with their nails until the blood runs; they will pour ash over their heads. And, when they grow too tired to carry on, the mourning will be taken up by the professionals from the Temple of Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Dead. That is the way of it when someone dies.

I feel for a moment that I'm going to be sick. My own saliva has turned so bitter I can hardly swallow and my eyes feel like they're burning. It isn't sorrow. A creeping paralysis that begins at the feet and spreads up the body until the heart and lungs give out – I know those symptoms. Tamuz has been poisoned. Somebody has fed him the oily distillate of the hemlock weed that grows on the banks of

ditches and rivers. It gives an easy death, they say; painless so long as you have the courage to face it.

But who has done it?

Then I look around and in the midst of that wailing, hysterical crowd I meet the cold black eyes of Nergal, brother to the late King. And I know.

Tamuz's funeral rites take seven days. On the last of those I linger in his shrine when all others have finished and gone. A part of me does not wish to face the world outside that simple room. The bare mudbrick walls enclose a square space open to the overcast sky, and as I kneel before his altar the first sparrows flit cautiously in to inspect the feast laid in offering there; food provided for his sojourn in the House of Dust. Buried with Tamuz, deep beneath my feet in his burnt-brick vault, are more precious gifts and possessions: the gold and the silver, the harps and the chariots and the thrones.

The boldest of the sparrows is pecking at a loaf of barley bread when movement in the doorway behind me puts it to flight.

'Still here, Daughter of the Moon?' says Nergal. 'You're taking your time.'

'Tamuz was a great king,' I say, getting to my feet; I don't like being on my knees before this man. 'Mourning him is not swiftly done with.'

Nergal's hair is worn unbound and uncombed in sign of mourning; it gives him a wild look that matches the glint in his eye. 'I think your attendants wish you grieved him less.'

He has a point; the chanting of my entourage, waiting outside in the royal cemetery grounds for me, has sunk to a mumble. They are not comfortable out there: even the best woollen cloaks are little use against the biting winter winds and the sacred harlots of Inanna are used to a life within sheltering walls.

'My women are as loyal as I am.'

‘But not so grief-stricken, I think. Nor so bitter.’ His smile does not stretch further than his lips.

I look him in the eye steadily as I acknowledge his words. I am oddly relieved. There is between us an honesty of a sort: each of us knows where the other stands.

‘The gods dispense joy and woe. We must endure both.’

‘Yes. And tomorrow there will be a new king upon the throne of Uruk, and then of course you will rejoice, Lady Ishara.’

‘Of course. Tomorrow.’

‘And are you looking forward to the Great Marriage?’

I don’t hide my coldness. ‘Naturally I look forward to the return of spring.’

‘Will you take the role of the goddess yourself?’

‘Should I not?’ My voice is husky; I’ve already considered that point.

He folds his arms. ‘The first time you played the part of Inanna, I remember I thought you perfect in your beauty. I was an ardent and romantic youth then. I came to the temple the next month and asked for you in person – do you remember?’

My eyes feel like stones in their sockets. ‘How could I forget the brother of the King?’

‘And you were ... most beautiful. Most accomplished. The goddess shone in you, Lady.’

‘She blesses us.’

He puts his hand on my waist. I stiffen. That hand makes me too conscious of the sweep of my hip below it, the curves of my thighs and buttocks. It makes me conscious that he is not curvy at all; he is all blocky mass and hard lines.

‘Don’t touch me.’ I try to retreat.

‘Oh come, Lady.’ He backs me up against the altar, so I’m nearly sat upon the lip. ‘Aren’t you a courtesan of Inanna? Why refuse me?’

I grit my teeth. 'You are not yet king, Nergal – and I am in mourning.'

'Love is the balm for grief, isn't it?' Without effort he bats away my protesting hands and cups a breast, kneading it through the fine wool of my dress. I bite the inside of my lip to stop myself gasping; despite my anger and my loathing my nipple responds to the masterful sureness of his touch, rivulets of hot sensation pouring across my skin. There's no hesitation in him, no need for exploration; he knows what to do and my treacherous body melts like clay under a winter storm.

All I've wanted for this last week is to feel Tamuz's arms around me, to relax in his sheltering strength, to hear his reassuring murmur in my ear. My body aches for comfort and for release – but this is the last man I should take them from.

'Of course ... You're not so young now, Lady Ishara. These breasts are not perfect any more.'

Blood burns in my face but his hands give the lie to his scathing words.

'Hardly fit for a king. There are a hundred women in my palace more beautiful than you and as many in the temple of Inanna, no doubt. Just on the way in here I noticed one of your maidens, with a face as sweet as that of a newborn calf and breasts that stand in perfect cones ...'

'If your taste runs to virgins then you will have every chance to satisfy it when you are king,' I say bitterly, but I can't drag my attention from the touch of his hands, the pressure of his body, the way he's turning my insides upside down.

'Hm. Has the part of Inanna ever been played by a virgin?' he muses. His caresses are ruthless.

'Don't be a fool –'

'Better the King beds a young beauty than a worn-out harriidan, don't you think?'

‘Don’t mock the gods,’ I groan. ‘The Great Marriage is not about your desires or your pride. Even you must come before the Queen of Heaven in humility, or bear her curse. The King needs Inanna, Nergal. Inanna does not need the King.’

His eyes look like pools of bitumen in the dim light. ‘We’ll see,’ he says. He pulls up my skirt and sinks a hand between my thighs. I gasp and twist, then I grab at his forearm but he is too strong for me to shift.

‘Would you have me call my women so all know of your shameful behaviour?’ I hiss in his ear as he leans into me, his body hard.

He grabs the hair at the back of my neck, pulling my head back to stretch my throat. ‘My shamefulness?’ he mocks, his fingers moving in their tight slot. I can’t force my thighs together hard enough to keep him out. ‘What about yours, Ishara?’

The edge of his hand is grinding right up against my mons, bruising my clit. His fingers are finding wetness. Inanna is a bitch: she loves the strong man, the forceful man, the one beautiful in his power and confidence. She moves in me like a flood-swell and I am borne up, helpless. Nergal hears my gasp and laughs, then kisses me punishingly, his tongue invasive. I can’t keep him out. The goddess in me doesn’t want to keep him out. I yield to his hot wet mouth and as his tongue goes in deep his fingers enter me too. My hips buck.

‘I bought your favours when you were younger,’ he whispers, biting my lips. ‘Now you give them to me for nothing.’

‘Inanna!’ I gasp, calling on my goddess to have mercy, to get out of me, to let me hate what this man is doing to me with the hands stained with his own brother’s death; to hate it as I ought to. I can hear the moist noises as his fingers work my wetness, twisting and flexing within me.

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘call her. I want her to see this. I want her to see her whore giving herself up to me. I want her to see you loving this. Loving my hand in your wet hole. Loving your King. Loving your King’s cock.’

He pushes me on to my back and I go down among the roasted fishes and the glazed ducks and the cakes. He hoists my knees up and wide, splaying the gash of my sex and parting his kilt he pulls out the thick prick I remember so well. Its blunt head stretches me and he’s inside me with one thrust. And then he lays his hand back on my swollen mound.

This is the cruelty of the man; he doesn’t just intend to fuck me. He’s going to make certain that I want what he’s giving. He’s going to make sure that I taste the dregs of humiliation, needing to be pleased by the man who slew my King and my lover. So he takes his time, sliding his whole length in and out of me in measured, perfectly timed strokes, sometimes withdrawing altogether so that he can have the pleasure of penetrating me again and finding on each occasion that I am wetter and wider and more ready for him. He lifts my breasts up through the deep neck of my dress so that they are held squashed together by the fabric and he slaps them with his big hands to make them quiver, sharply enough to make me see the stars. And all the time he stirs my clit, slippery with my juices, until I despair of my soul and my sanity and remember only what it is to want.

As I start to come, he leans over me and grips my jaw in his hand, grinning into my face, forcing me to meet his eyes and confront myself there as I dissolve into the ecstasy of Inanna.

When my stifled cries have made it clear how I have surrendered myself unreservedly to him, he takes his own pleasure, gripping my hips as he thrusts fierce and fast in a breathless race to his climax. His rhythm sends my breasts slamming back and forth and the harmonies that sets up

shake my whole body and send it tumbling to a second crisis, just as he reaches his first and fills me with his seed.

‘Good!’ he roars triumphantly, slapping my arse hard. ‘Good! Yes!’

He braces himself on his arms when he’s done to look down at me. There’s a puddle of spilt wine under my left shoulder and a soapstone bowl is digging painfully into my hip.

‘That was what you wanted,’ he observes. ‘Where’s your loyalty to Tamuz now, Lady Ishara?’

I pull him down so I can speak in his ear. It’s better when I don’t have to look at myself reflected in his eyes. ‘You first wanted me when you saw Tamuz love me in front of all Uruk. Tamuz fucked like a king. Tamuz fucked like a god. Let me tell you this, Nergal; never *once* were you as good as your brother.’

That kills his smirk. He pulls away, leaving me both relieved and in torment. I sag, gasping, and tug at my clothes with clumsy hands.

‘Bear in mind, Lady, that I have one great advantage over Tamuz: I am alive, while he dwells among the worms in the House of Dust.’ He picks up a loaf and wipes the juices from his fingers thoroughly on to the bread before tossing it back on to the slab. ‘That’s the only way he will ever taste you again. But, given that you fucked me in his tomb before the funeral feast got cold, I doubt he’ll have much stomach for it.’

I flinch as his words stab deep, and watch with burning eyes as he leaves.

Smoke coils in the still air of my bedchamber, illuminated by a single lamp. The smoke stinks; I’ve been burning a hank of my own hair. It makes the familiar pieces of furniture seem less solid, the shadows deeper, the walls further off. I drop another sheaf of henbane on the

smouldering embers in the brazier, and speak the words one more time.

In a corner something moves, uncoiling. My first impression upon glimpsing its long neck is that it is a serpent, my second that it is a vulture. It cocks its head from side to side as it looks at me and its eyes glow dull red like the underside of the charcoals. It is a *galla* – a demon of the Underworld.

As it creeps forwards, I see it better, though it remains as insubstantial as dirty smoke. Its body is that of an old man emaciated to the point of starvation, but there are great grey wings springing from its bare shoulders and its head and feet are those of a carrion bird. All four of its arms end in ragged claws.

I motion towards the dish of blood I have set out. 'Drink.'

The blood is mine, and my arm aches as it stoops and laps with a pallid tongue at the dark liquid. It seems to grow a little more solid after its repast and sits up, regarding me with flickering eyes. It speaks without moving its mouth, its voice a dry whisper in my head.

What do you wish for, Priestess of Inanna?

'I want you to go to the royal palace. I want you to kill a man for me. It must be tonight.'

That is easily done. What is his name?

'Kill for me Nergal, son of Enmerkar, father of Gilgamesh. Turn his bowels to blood. Fill his flesh with gnawing worms. Take his soul to your mistress in the deep places under the earth and let him stay there forever.'

The demon is incapable of facial expression but somehow conveys a wary surprise.

You wish me to slay the King of Uruk, Priestess of Inanna?

'He is not king until he is crowned tomorrow. Slay him tonight.'

And what will you pay me?

'A black lamb sacrificed at the dark of every moon for a year.'

It nods.

It is agreed.

Like smoke the *galla* drifts across the floor and dissolves into the wall.

Geshtinanna, sister of Tamuz, half-sister of the new King and high priestess of the god Enki, comes to my room at the worst possible time: just as I am being prepared for the Great Marriage. My cosmetics lie scattered about the table: kohl and malachite for my eyes and red earth for my lips and nipples, rosewater for my skin and perfumed unguents with which the black curls of my hair have been oiled, bronze tweezers and razors with which my body has been smoothed to silky perfection. I've crunched crystals of frankincense between my teeth to perfume my breath and more resins burn in the brazier to further scent the air because this is a holy occasion. My bridegroom awaits. Crowned, he still needs the goddess Inanna to seal his authority. In her keeping are all the attributes and gifts of civilisation and only by her blessing can a man reign in any of the cities between the Two Rivers.

Nergal has taken the throne-name of Lugulbanda - 'ruler of all the land' - but he is still the same man. As my serving women tilt the copper mirror before me I look at my stony face and wonder if I will be able to fool the city into thinking I am opening with joy my arms and my thighs to him. In the dim surface of polished metal my kohl-rimmed eyes look like black holes in a beautiful mask.

I could choose another priestess to take the role, but that would be an act of cowardice. Either the goddess blesses the city of Uruk through its king or she does not; Inanna does not count out half-measures of her love like a housewife giving grudgingly to a beggar at her door. She loves as a young woman does, fiercely and unstintingly,

with passion and without reason. That is why she is titled Maiden as well as Lady.

I hold out my arms and my women slip over me the gown that I will wear to my bridal bed: a net of gold thread. My rouged nipples snag upon the weft and poke out through the holes of the weave. Though ankle-length it is shaped to my frame, and there's no disguising the lines of my body within this glimmering sheath.

It's at this moment that Geshtinanna enters my room. She bows her head simply, as one high priestess to another. 'Ishara. Let us talk.'

I have to tell myself to close my mouth. For a moment I'm angry at her intrusion; my mood is bleak these days and I'm quick to snap. Then I hold up my hand to my women. 'Leave us.'

'Great Lady,' says the eldest, 'you've little time before the ceremony.'

Geshtinanna's eyes are bright and hard; she says nothing. 'A few moments,' I order. 'The moon hasn't risen yet.'

'But your hair –'

'Out!' I snap my fingers and they withdraw, leaving me alone with the sister of a murdered man. 'Let's talk, then.'

Geshtinanna comes closer, and when she speaks it's in a low voice. Her gold rings glitter as she reaches to touch my arms. 'Ishara. Please. I came to beg you not to wed that man.'

'Not wed him? It's too late for that. None of the other *nu-gig* have been purified.'

'No. I mean, not you. Not any of the priestesses. Please – refuse him the love of the goddess.'

'Why?' I ask, though I cannot bring any sense of shock to my voice.

'You know why. You know what he did.'

I can't hold her gaze. 'I know. But there's nothing I can do about it.'

‘Denounce him, Ishara. Do it in public before all the people.’

‘Without proof? Nergal has already executed those who confessed to the plot.’

Three servants of an inconvenient nobleman had been beaten into loquacity, and then impaled with their master on stakes at Uruk’s rubbish pits, to rot unburied. Their ghosts will whine among the stink and the smoke forever.

‘You believe they were the ones?’

‘Of course not!’ My rage, clamped for weeks in my breast, threatens to flare up like burning pitch. I can feel a great black cauldron of it boiling under my ribs.

‘In the city there are those who say that the goddess Inanna discarded the King because he fathered no sons. They say it is your decision that he died. That Nergal is your choice.’

I clench my fists until my nails slice the skin. ‘I’ve heard that.’

‘Then prove them wrong. Reject Nergal.’

‘I can’t!’

‘You can refuse the Great Marriage.’

My tongue feels like it is drying up inside my mouth. ‘There would be famine,’ I grate. ‘The people would suffer and die.’

‘Haven’t we got grain and hay stored away for such a time?’

I back away from her and sit on my bed. I want to bury my face in my hands and weep, but I can’t afford to smudge my make-up and I haven’t cried in many weeks. Not since Tamuz died. Every woman in the city wept except me – whose tears are dammed up like the Apsu, the ocean of water that lies under the earth. Sometimes I cannot breathe for them filling my throat. ‘I can’t,’ I repeat. ‘He is the King.’

‘I worked a magic against him.’ Geshtinanna’s voice is hoarse. ‘I tried to slay him, for what he did.’

I look at her sharply. 'You shouldn't tell me that.'

Of course, Enki the Wise is the god of the magical arts – but, even for his priestess, to use magic against the King is to seek death.

'It didn't work. He surrounds himself with sorcerers and they ward off all attacks.'

I nod. I can't tell her that I'd tried it myself, equally in vain. 'He's blessed by fate. Geshtinanna ...' For a moment I weaken, wanting to confess and rage and hear my words echoed by hers – it would be such a relief to weep in each other's arms. But it would achieve nothing. 'Geshtinanna, I can't act against Nergal. He is the King. He is the might of Uruk. The Queen of Heaven always desires a strong consort, a warrior, who will love her well and fill her to overflowing and guard his people. It's not my job to choose the King. It's written by the gods who lives and who dies. It's written who rises and who falls.'

Geshtinanna clasps her hands together. Her face is flawless under her heavy make-up but her hands are beginning to look old. 'Then be careful the gods haven't written about you on the Tablets of Fate, Ishara. Nergal wishes to offer me in marriage to the king of Nippur.'

I frown. 'What? But you're the wife of a god.'

'Not for much longer. Priestesses can fall too.'

'He can't do that!'

'He feels someone younger and more comely would please my Lord Enki more.'

This is the moment that my women come back into the chamber, apologetic but determined. 'Great Lady?'

Geshtinanna bows. 'Forgive me for wasting your time, Ishara.'

I'm trembling with suppressed anger as they complete my toilette, painting my eyelids green and braiding my hair into place before arranging upon me the jewellery of Inanna – the delicate crown of golden leaves, the heavy earrings that brush my neck, the agate necklace, the belt of