

## Prologue

Am I back? Dear God, am I back?

The same blinding headache. The same odd taste of sulfur.

A blessed absence of heat jolted his senses. How long since he had stood in a climate-controlled room? What day was it? What *year*?

*Dear God, am I back?* he whispered again into the silence, wondering if God Himself might answer.

He still held the blue glazed terracotta vase in his hand. It took willpower not to send the thing crashing to the floor. He glanced around the tiny room. He was alone. The naked bulb suspended above the vase cast an iridescent sheen on the centuries-old glaze. He stared at the markings on the side.

*Underneath. I must look underneath.*

He tilted it backward. There it was, the simple mark scratched into the surface.

Shaking, he returned the vase to the table and backed away.

*Kaida. Oh, Kaida, I'm so sorry. I had no choice. If I could have made you understand, you would have agreed. I had no choice.*

He fumbled for the door. Tears blurred his eyes. Not bothering to lock it behind him, he stepped into the cavernous hall that held the museum's Babylonian collection. An exit sign across the unlit room spilled a red trail across the floor. His footsteps thudded across the empty hall.

He barely had a conscious thought for the three flights down to the street exit of the museum. He unlocked a side door and stumbled into the alley. The city slept under a blanket of fresh snow. Where had he left his Buick?

The cold cut through his rented tux, and he wondered what three thousand years of late charges would amount to. No, he seemed to have returned to the moment he left. Time must have remained fixed here in Boston. And yet he knew...

Five weeks had passed since the night of the University's Annual Fund-Raising Gala, the night he had stepped into the museum to see the vase.

## Chapter 1

The muted buzz of conversation and clinking of silver and stemware in the banquet hall quieted, and a wiry man stepped to the podium and adjusted the microphone. Peter looked up from his smoked salmon to give Hugh Rohner a half smile. He knew Hugh hated these affairs almost as much as he did.

The hotel's banquet hall held close to five hundred of the university's vital donors. *And lots of jewelry*, thought Peter. The ornate chandeliers seemed to bounce their light off a thousand gold-studded cuff links and glittering diamonds. He glanced over the room from his place at the head table, the faces merging into sameness. Blue hair and blue blood. Come to give away some money and make themselves feel crucial to the cause of research and education. Correction. *We* will make them feel crucial.

Hugh cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "We are honored by your presence here this evening. I trust you are enjoying your meal."

As Hugh droned on with his opening comments. Peter's mind wandered. Was it possible that only yesterday he had scaled the face of Mt. Shasta? His trip to California seemed a century removed from tonight. He wished he were hanging by his fingertips right now, instead of checking the order of his speech cards. But it was an important night. In just a few days, the announcement he'd waited his whole career for would be made public, and Peter would be named as the new president of the university. Tonight was all about impressing the alumni. He took a deep breath. Hugh would be escaping from the podium any moment now.

"...his classes are among the most sought-after here at the university," Hugh was saying, "and his research into ancient near-eastern mythology has put our humble institution on the map."

The crowd tittered obligingly at Hugh's modesty.

"He has been a professor in the Religious Studies Department here at the University for the last fifteen years, making him slightly younger than myself." Again the polite laughter. "Like me, he spends all his time poring over crumbling artifacts, searching for information about dead religions. Perhaps that's the reason he's still a bachelor!"

Peter smiled. *What would you think, Hugh, if you knew that yesterday I was hanging from a cliff?*

Hugh was Archeology and Peter was Religion, but Hugh knew people didn't give away money merely to let someone else dig up broken pots. They wanted to know what good it brought humanity *now*. That was why Peter was here.

"So let me step aside and give you the man you came to hear. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Peter Thornton."

Peter grabbed his cards and checked his watch as the crowd applauded. Hugh had given him twenty minutes to impress the room with the fascinating research going on and the dire need for more funds. But he knew his audience. They didn't want twenty minutes of dull facts. He had to give them something to hang on to, something for the starched old ladies to repeat to their friends tomorrow at the country club luncheon.

"Good evening," he began. He patted the pocket of his tuxedo. Where were his glasses? His notes were swimming across the cards in front of him. He found them and settled the gold wire-rims down to the end of his nose so he could peer over them at the crowd. The ladies loved that, he knew. The whole Indiana Jones thing.

“We stand poised on the edge of a new era, ladies and gentlemen. Current research into the past gives us new direction for the future, as we synthesize the myth of yesterday with the faith of today.”

He delivered that last line with drama. He had their attention.

“The study of ancient mythology has taught us one thing: that all myth is essentially the same. It has a certain Oneness which unifies it. Centuries of study – accelerating in our modern era – have revealed to the attentive student that there is no ‘correct’ religion. We must look within, ladies and gentlemen, to the divinity of our own consciousness.”

He was losing them. He could see the glazed look even from here. *Simplify, Peter, simplify.*

“One day even our modern Judeo-Christian beliefs will be relegated to the category of ‘myth.’”

There. That woke up the old ladies who directed their church bazaars. He saw the raised eyebrows and smiled.

“Let me explain. Christianity is part of the Whole, as all myths have been. But no doubt you have seen – this is a new era. People everywhere are embracing all types of spirituality, tapping into the power of the Universe. The marriage of yesterday’s myth and today’s faith has given birth to a new doctrine, what some writers are calling the Doctrine of Divine Man.”

From the dimly lit room full of tables, a shout rose up. “They have changed the truth of God into a lie! They have worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator!”

Peter paused and squinted into the murmuring audience. Where did that come from? Hecklers were not uncommon when he spoke on campus, but usually the people at these events had better manners.

Peter continued. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is chiefly the study of ancient peoples that brings us this new perspective. Your generous funding –”

“For the wrath of God will be revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men!”

The crowd’s displeasure with the interruption was louder this time. Peter looked up from his note cards and removed his glasses. Two men from the Phys Ed department were approaching a table in the center of the room.

A tall man with a shock of wild blonde hair stood and pointed at Peter. “Once the gates are open, the demons will come pouring in!” The two Phys Ed guys each took one of the man’s arms. He twisted away. “You will see! There is no power that is amoral. There is only good and evil, and you invite evil! Your invitation will bring the old gods upon us, and they will not rest until we are destroyed!”

*Yikes.* Peter debated quickly: Address the crazy guy or ignore him? Security guards arrived and made his decision for him. They pulled the doomsayer from the table, but couldn’t keep him quiet. His last prediction, delivered as they yanked him from the room, echoed across the tables of shocked alumni. “It is already happening! The old gods are rising! And they will enslave us!”

Peter took a moment to readjust his glasses and let the room settle. When they were quiet, he opened his mouth to continue. “*Têê malkuthach. Nehwê tzevânach.*”

Peter swallowed. *What did I just say?* The quizzical look on the faces below him proved he had not imagined it. What language was that? Aramaic? Maybe it was something he’d overheard in some recorded speech in Hugh’s office in recent days.

He gave a half smile. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have so much to learn from the cultures of the past. And it is irrational fear, such as we have just witnessed, that we are here to eradicate. There will always be those who fear the future, but I assure you, with your help, there will be no end to what we can achieve."

\* \* \*

He went on for exactly twenty minutes. Peter was always punctual.

A half-hour later, while the donors were milling around and writing checks, Peter spotted Hugh's head over the sea of benefactors.

Hugh pulled him into a little group clustered near the bar, drinks in hand. "Peter, come meet Mrs. Weaver."

Peter pasted on a smile and nodded at the older woman with shocking red lipstick and jangling earrings.

"Oh, Dr. Thornton, I just loved your little talk. Very inspiring. I heard you speak two years ago at the commencement. Just wonderful. And where is that lovely woman you had by your side that evening?"

Hugh rescued him. "Ah...Mrs. Weaver, tell Peter about your work with the children."

Peter smiled and nodded as the woman chattered. He forced himself to watch her eyes and not the thin, red lines of her mouth.

He had to get out of here. Small talk was not his strength. Besides, he was anxious to get over to the museum to see Hugh's latest artifact. "Unbelievable," was all Hugh would say when Peter had pressed him for details.

Hugh pulled him away from the group minutes later. "Lauren is around here somewhere," he murmured, searching over the tops of heads. "I wanted you to say hello to her. She's just started her graduate work. You've met my daughter, haven't you?"

"I think maybe once or twice." Peter remembered braces and giggles. Graduate work already? He was getting old.

"Never mind," Hugh shrugged. "She must have left."

"I hope she got out before the nutcase started his tirade," Peter said.

Hugh said nothing.

"Oh, come on, Hugh. I know you're a traditional monotheist, but you don't go along with that loon, do you?"

"The man obviously has some problems, Peter. But I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss what he says. You know that your fascination with power outside of God has always concerned me."

"Hugh, it's not power outside of God, it's —"

"Let's not argue tonight, Peter. Besides," Hugh smiled knowingly, "shouldn't you be working the room, in preparation for Wednesday's big announcement?"

Peter sighed and looked around. He made eye contact with someone and was rewarded with an enthusiastic wave.

"Dr. Thornton!" Another jangling woman, on the arm of a gray-haired tuxedo. Hugh abandoned Peter this time, moving on to network with the deep pockets. Peter glanced at his watch. One more hour.

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Precisely an hour later, Peter stepped from the hotel lobby into the city street. It was late, but the museum was only four blocks away. And it was worth the extra time to see Hugh's newest treasure. Peter jogged along the deserted street and pulled his overcoat against his chest to counteract the sudden chill.

His thoughts drifted back to Mrs. Weaver's earlier question about the woman she'd seen on his arm at commencement. Where *was* Julia? He wondered that himself. Married by now? Probably. She had been the only woman who had ever understood him. Saw right into his soul, or so he thought. Since then not another woman had given him a second look. Not that he blamed them. The mirror explained much. And Hugh was right about how he spent his time, the occasional rock-climbing trip notwithstanding. Some of his best friends had been dead for centuries. Not exactly an attractive trait.

So much the better. He had important work to do. Research and teaching were companions enough. He spent his vacations alone, counteracting the tedium of university life with rock climbing whenever he got the chance, though his colleagues didn't believe he had a life outside the classroom walls. But all that was about to change. The university-sponsored Ultimate Success Seminar a few years ago had started him down the road of self-discovery, tapping into his own divinity. Now he was about to be named University President.

He got out the MP3 player in his jacket pocket to finish listening to the motivational audio tapes from another Success Seminar. Certain phrases stuck out as he listened.

*Everything you need to change your life lies within you at this moment. Unlocking the power within yourself is the key to Ultimate Success.*

The power within himself. Where could it take him? What extraordinary things were possible for him if he could unlock it?

The moon slid behind a thin line of smoky clouds and left the street in shadows as Peter reached the side entrance of the museum. He resisted a panicked look over his shoulder. He visited the museum at night frequently. There had never been a problem.

His key slid into the side door, and he locked it again behind him. The three-flight climb felt good after the heavy meal, but he couldn't shake the chill that had gripped him in the street. The empty building creaked and whispered tonight. He put his MP3 player away.

Pushing open the door at the top of the steps, he entered his home-away-from-home. He paused a moment, thinking he might have heard the side entrance open again below him. Had someone followed him? When he heard nothing more he entered the dark hall, knowing the room well enough to navigate by the red glow of the exit sign. Unlocking another door, he entered Hugh's private sanctuary. One bare bulb flooded the room with light that glared off the piles of unimportant finds and stacks of yellow legal paper.

There it was, on the table. Had to be Hugh's prize. A blue-glazed terracotta vase. Neo-Babylonian, Hugh had said. Circa 600 B.C.E., during the reign of the Chaldean, Nebuchadnezzar II.

Peter loved pottery. It was firmly linked with his love for archaeology – for what was that science, he often joked to Hugh, but the study of old pots? He loved to study pottery and he loved to create it on the wheel he kept in his apartment.

This piece across the room was striking. Eighteen inches high, rounded out wide in the middle and tapering to a narrow neck. But what was so "unbelievable" that Hugh had urged him to check it out tonight? He took out his glasses again, planning to examine the markings around the side. An odd sensation flitted at the edge of his consciousness. He felt powerfully drawn to this piece, as though he were connected to it somehow. It was the oddest feeling. He

felt as though he understood where it came from, understood the man who created it. Stepping to the table, he reached out a tentative hand to tip the vase backward.

The moment he touched it, a deafening roar whooshed through his head. He saw the vase, saw his hand on it, but it had receded from him, as if he looked at it through binoculars held backwards. Hot pain seared across his brain.

Was he having a stroke? He had only a moment to wonder before the vase, the room, and the museum disappeared as if they had been part of a dream.

\* \* \*

Heat. Unbelievable heat. Pain in his head, pain in his side. The slight taste of sulfur. His eyes finally focused.

He stood in a large room, the walls a buff-colored mud brick, the high ceiling made of wood planks covered with reeds. By the light filtering through a terracotta grid of holes in the wall, it seemed to be dusk.

One of his hands was wrapped around the center shaft of a tall gold lampstand of some kind. The metal was burning hot. He yanked his hand from the shaft. It crashed to the ground, splashing oil onto the baked-brick floor.

And then he saw the man. Lying a few feet from him, an obsidian-handled knife buried to the hilt in his chest. Blood everywhere. On the floor. On himself. He looked down to the pain in his side. Was that his blood? He looked through jagged tear in his tunic and found a two-inch long knife wound.

His *tunic*? Where was his tuxedo?

Movement behind him. He whirled around. A woman backed away from him, beautiful, but terrified. She rubbed at her hand as if it were injured. Her back brushed the wall, and she put her hands behind her to steady herself. The look of panic on her face no doubt matched his own. Her lips moved but without sound.

He spun back to the man on the floor. The first aid course he'd taken before he began rock-climbing would be of no help. The stillness of death had fallen over the man's features. Peter turned back to the woman. She had blood on her, too. Had she stabbed the dead man? Had she stabbed Peter? He glanced at her face again, this time defensive. The gash in his side throbbed.

She shook her head, as if to keep him away.

What had happened? Where was the vase, the museum? Why was he in costume? The dead man, the gash in his own side—these were not movie props, but every part of his mind screamed at him that there was a rational answer.

To his left, the door opened to a hallway leading to a courtyard. Peter could see another man running toward him across the courtyard.

"My lord!" the man called. "He knows you have it! He is coming here!" The man ran into the room, his eyes taking in the dead man at once.

"What have you done, Rim-Sin?" he whispered to Peter.

"I—I didn't do it!" Peter stammered. He looked at the woman behind him. She shook her head again.

"What has happened?" the man asked again.

Peter stared at him. Was that English the man spoke? It must be. He knew it was not but he understood him perfectly. Impossible. *Impossible!*

“You must get out of here, my lord. The *rab alani* is not far behind me. You will be on trial for murder before the day is out!” He looked at the woman. “Perhaps you should take her with you — she is covered with blood.”

Once more, the woman shook her head. Peter recognized the glassy look of someone slipping into shock. He swung around the room one last time, then pushed past the man and ran into the courtyard.

He had expected to be outdoors, but he was not. All around the sides of the courtyard other hallways led to other rooms. He circled like a caged animal, realizing he was trapped in the center of the house. Which way was out?

Choosing a hall, he flung himself through it and landed in the kitchen. A man glanced up from a cooking hearth, then bowed his head respectfully when he saw Peter. Peter backed up, returned to the courtyard and chose another hallway.

*This place is like a maze!* Another startled servant in this room, but Peter could sense that the door across the room led to the street. He scrambled past the doorkeeper, through the door and up the five steps that led to street level.

The sight pulled him up short. *A dream. It must be a dream.* He stood in the center of a paved road lined with palm trees. Houses like the one he had escaped bordered both sides of the road. The heat! He could taste the gritty heat of the desert.

The street was in chaos, even though the sun was setting. Crowds pushed and pressed past him with no regard for his injury. Why were all these people in costume? Was he on a movie set for some biblical epic? His eyes traveled down the length of the street. And then his heart dropped into the pit of his stomach.

A pyramid-like structure overhung the horizon a half-mile in the distance.

He recognized the 300-foot, stepped ziggurat immediately. Seven levels of unadorned stone towered above the city, as though a giant child had stacked all his wooden blocks in a pyramid, then shouted, “Look what I made!”

Etemenanki. The House of the Platform of Heaven and Earth. Commonly believed to be the biblical Tower of Babel.

Peter stood rooted in the center of the street, jostled by the passing crowd. As he stared at the tower only one thought thrashed its way into his mind.

*I am in Ancient Babylon.*

A yell from behind startled Peter into action. A turbaned man on a camel shouted to clear the way. Peter stepped to the wall of the house a moment before the camel crushed past him. The wall was cut into a sawtoothed pattern, and Peter pressed himself into one of the shadows.

He glanced in both directions. Several hundred feet down the street, three men strode toward him, cloaks flapping behind them, a cloud of sand swirling at their feet. Somehow Peter sensed they had come for him.

He lurched away from the wall and ran down the road dodging animals, children, merchants. He ran through the city streets with no idea where he was going. The ziggurat always loomed over the buildings, giving him a sense of direction, but there was no place to hide.

*Trial. Murder.* The words pounded in his ears as he ran. Behind him, he heard shouts. The men had seen him. They were chasing him. Maybe he should stop and explain that he didn't know what had happened. *Sure, Peter, they'll believe the old “I'm in a time warp” defense.*

Better to run. He tried to sprint, but the jagged cut in his side tortured him. He put his hand over it, blood seeping through his fingers as he ran.

Finally, when darkness hid the streets, he could no longer run. He stumbled through the nearest doorway and fell at the feet of an astonished man who held a blazing reed torch.

“Get out!” the man screamed, punctuating his command with a kick to Peter’s stomach.

## Chapter 2

The dusty night wind shrieked across the summit of Etemenanki, snatching at Qurdi-Marduk-lamur's outer cloak and tangling it around his bare legs. The priest lifted his shaved head to the sultry air and filled his lungs. A young lamb dangled by its neck from his left hand, kicking and bleating.

The gods of the night were dazzling this evening. He felt their presence, closed his eyes and let them look down on him in their pleasure. He raised his right hand and began the sacred *su-ila*.

May the great gods of the night,  
Shining Fire-star,  
Heroic Erra,  
Bow-star, Yoke-star,  
Orion, Dragon-star,  
Wagon, Goat-star  
Bison-star, Serpent-star  
Stand by and  
Put a propitious sign  
In the lamb  
I am blessing now  
For the haruspicy I will perform at dawn.

The lamb kicked more after the Lifting-of-the-Hand. Perhaps it suspected what its fate would be in the morning.

Qurdi laughed. He tilted his head, and a shivering slave hurried over to take the lamb from him. If the gods were gracious, the lamb would provide an answer tomorrow.

And where was Rim-Sin? News from the *rab alani* had reached him already. Rim-Sin had escaped from his home where a dead Jew had been found. Where would he go? Certainly not to the Esagila complex. He would know the *rab alani* would search for him there.

Qurdi smiled at the stars above his head and spread his arms wide enough to embrace them. He would find Rim-Sin. He had no doubt. And when he did, Rim would give him the answer, if he had discovered it. Was it an incantation? An amulet? There was no way of knowing what Rim had found, but it must be awful in its power. No matter. Qurdi had worked too long to rise in the king's court. He would not let Rim-Sin take the place of Chief Advisor — that place rightly belonged to *him*. He laughed again. Prying open secrets was a diviner-priest's joy, and Qurdi knew special ways to extract information from those who thought to climb above him. Once he knew Rim's secret, he would escort him to the king for justice himself.

The temple of Ishtar lay two hundred *qanu* from the outer enclosure around Etemenanki. It took Qurdi-Marduk-lamur only minutes to walk there, but he cursed himself for spending so long on the Platform. The goddess was demanding, and she would not favor him for arriving late, especially since he'd been delayed because he'd been offering the *su-ila* to her rival gods.

Temple slaves had lit the torches inside before he arrived, and from the courtyard he could see straight through the antechamber and into the oblong chapel where the statue of Ishtar stood centered against the back wall. He strode through the temple and into the chapel, pressing the back of his hand to his nose before the goddess, hoping she forgave him for his appeal to her fellow gods of the night sky.

She was so beautiful. Sculpted from gold, clothed in the finest linen Babylon could produce. He prostrated himself before her, his heart calming in her presence. Standing, he studied her position. Had someone impure pushed against her? No, he was imagining it.

It was growing late. Soon the city streets beyond the courtyard would fill with people headed for the festival.

Qurdi clapped several times. "Bring the meal!" he shouted.

There was no response. He stalked to the temple kitchen where slaves still arranged pomegranates on an elaborate table.

"Fools!" he shrieked, smacking the nearest slave's face with the back of his hand. "It is the Day-of-Lying-Down! The festival begins soon!"

Four slaves rushed out behind him through the antechamber. They carried the tables for the evening meal, laden with beverages and trays of lamb, duck, eggs, and ripe fruit. The slaves placed the tables in the center of the chapel, and another slave brought the water for washing in a golden bowl, placing it beside the food.

All the slaves bore the eight-pointed star of Ishtar on the backs of their hands, branding them as dedicated to the goddess. To Qurdi, almost all his slaves were identical. They could be Hittites, Assyrians, Cassites, or Jews brought from any number of vassal countries. Thanks to the brilliant military strategies of King Nabu-kudurri-usur, Babylon had become a thoroughly mongrel city.

When the food was placed, all of them except two hurried back to the kitchen. Qurdi would recognize these two young slaves anywhere. They lingered behind, watching Qurdi for any further instruction.

"Go," Qurdi commanded, but gave a slight smile and nod to one as the fine-looking boy walked back through the chapel.

Qurdi presented the tables to the goddess. His stomach rumbled at the sight of the food, but he would not eat yet. Not until the goddess had been served. He drew the linen curtain around the statue and tables of food, protecting his lady's privacy.

He clapped again.

More slaves danced in, banging drums and cymbals. They spun for her, their red robes snaking around them like a blood-red river. Qurdi watched in satisfaction as the ritual fumigation was performed for the goddess. After the meal, the slaves opened the curtain, removed the tables, and placed water before the goddess. They again drew the curtain so she could wash.

When all was complete, Qurdi followed the slaves to the temple kitchen. He had been eyeing the mutton since the tables had been brought. Now it was his turn. After he finished, the slow-moving slaves would need to be disciplined. Qurdi always enjoyed that.

And in the morning, when the sun's first rays streaked across the city, Qurdi would slit the lamb's throat and find Rim-Sin.

\* \* \*

Pinpricks of torchlight danced across Peter's vision. He had only a vague sense of the man above him who had kicked him. Loss of blood, the heat, and the shocking strangeness of it all combined to leave him only half-conscious on the floor of the stranger's house.

"What is it?" a woman's voice called from within.

"Nothing! Go back into the courtyard!" the man yelled.

"But the festival! It is about to begin!"

"I said go back!"

Peter reached a bloody hand to the man's ankle. "Please."

“Get out.” The man glared down at him.

“I need help.” The pain blurred Peter’s vision.

“I cannot help you. A bleeding man is an evil omen. Especially today. Even the moon-god Sin is dead tonight! I have no protection against your evil. Find the *asu* if you need healing. Now get out!”

Peter stumbled out of the house before the kick to the stomach could be repeated.

Which way? The sun had set, but hundreds of burning torches marched through the streets in every direction, and the heat was still unrelenting. High-pitched singing floated to him on a hot breeze. He could barely see the faces behind the flames of the torches. Pressing himself flat against a wall again, he waited for a cluster of people to jingle past him. The jewelry on their colorful tunics and cloaks glinted in the firelight.

Mrs. Weaver’s absurd earrings. The fund-raising gala. *I was there only minutes ago. What is happening to me?*

A break in the crowd gave him the chance to cross the street. On the other side, he collapsed to his knees beside a roadside shrine, gripping the only solid thing he’d found in the waves of confusion. A mournful chant began in the street, and others behind picked it up.

The scholar in Peter struggled to race through all the learning of his life on the subject of Babylon. Into which part of the city’s two thousand years had he stumbled? Impossible to say. Who was on the throne now? The scattered roadside shrines, the streets full of moon-worshippers of all races, the tower rising above the buildings, all these things had remained the same in Babylon for centuries.

Forget that. Did he care what year it was? He had to get home. But how? How had he gotten here? Was this a dream? Could he wake himself up?

*Reality is no more real than your dreams. Perhaps we are dreaming even when we believe we are awake.*

The words came to him unlooked-for. They were from that Success Seminar. He closed his eyes and lowered his body to the sandy soil. He wouldn’t have thought the words were so embedded in his mind. Playing them again and again had paid off. He had internalized the truths.

*If you truly believed in this different reality, you could do impossible things when you are awake. There is a higher reality, and in it nothing is real but your own spirit. All the spirits are one – we have created boundaries between ourselves unnecessarily.*

Had he created this impossible thing? This impossible place? Was it a lesson, a test? Was he in control of it?

He lifted his head, leaning against the stone shrine for support. Where should he go? The three-foot monument along the road hid him well, but if this were not a dream, he would soon bleed to death.

The angry man across the street was right. He must find the *asu*.

Peter fell in with the wave of worshippers and the current sucked him into its rush toward the temple. He had no plan, but he would never find help if he didn’t move. The procession streamed up and down streets, carrying him like a piece of driftwood until he was completely disoriented. He cursed his terrible sense of direction. Was it only a few hours ago he had gotten lost on the way to the hotel?

The bobbing torches began to blur and the chants became muted. He was losing consciousness. He stumbled once, twice, and was certain he would soon be trampled, but then

a hand shot into the fray and plucked him out. He collapsed against the brawny chest of a bearded man as the throng rushed past.

"Rim-Sin!" the young man shouted into his ear.

*Oh no, not again.* Peter shook his head.

"Come," the man insisted, yanking him toward an open door.

Coolness inside. Peter closed his eyes. Nothing mattered now but sleep.

"Stay awake, Rim."

A gentle slap on his face. Then darkness.

\* \* \*

Cosam lifted Rim-Sin, tall as the injured man was, and carried him through his courtyard and into his central living room, setting him down on a wide palm-wood chair padded with palm fibers.

A woman gripped the back of another chair, her eyes darting back and forth between Rim-Sin and Cosam.

"I know, Kaida," Cosam said, in answer to her look. "I know who he is. But we cannot leave him in the street to die."

She said nothing.

"We must keep it quiet that he is here, however. Giving aid to the king's diviner would not be looked upon with favor by the elders. It will take Rebekah a few moments to get back with the *asu*. Once he is well enough to walk, I will send him home again, I promise."

Cosam bent over Rim-Sin and ripped at his tunic, exposing the wound. "Bring water," he said to Kaida, but she remained motionless, staring at Cosam.

"Kaida, you should sit down also. You look almost as bad as he does." Cosam pointed to the chair she held, and the woman sank into it as into the arms of a friend.

Ten minutes later a dark-haired girl glided into the room, graceful in spite of her protruding belly. She was even younger than Kaida. Cosam put an arm around her and kissed her forehead.

She smiled at his affection. "No Hebrew would come out when the Sabbath is beginning, Cosam," she told him.

"Then we must thank the Most High the *asu* is not a Hebrew."

Rebekah looked at Kaida and her smile faded. "Cosam says he found you wandering the streets as well, Kaida. What has happened? Where did this blood on you come from?"

Kaida's eyes widened, then closed. Rebekah went to her and touched her arm, but a movement in the doorway caused them all to turn.

A man crept into the room, dark braids swinging against his purple tunic. With one squinted eye on the patient, he pulled a knife from a leather bag, laid it on a nearby table, and lit a small torch.

\* \* \*

*Hugh?*

Peter blinked several times, trying to focus. What a bizarre dream! That would be the last time he would have tiramisu for dessert!

He started to speak, but a searing pain in his side tore a yelp from him instead.

"Hold him down!" a voice shouted in the blurred distance. "I must finish the cauterization!"

Waves of nausea washed over him, and then darkness again.

The dreaming returned.

Peter stood at the base of the Platform of Etemananki. Before him knelt hundreds of tuxedoed and gowned university alumni, their faces downturned to the sandy ground. At the center of the crowd, one man stood and studied him.

Hugh! Peter reached out, unable to speak.

"Chief Thornton!" Hugh's voice carried across the heads of those that bowed to him.

Chief?

"Hugh, get me out of here!"

"It is not time, Peter. You are not finished."

Peter shook his head. "Finished?"

Hugh pointed to Peter's right. Bare-chested slaves pushed carts of bricks toward them.

"What are they doing?" Peter asked Hugh. He turned back to his friend. Hugh was gone.

A woman in the crowd in front of him looked up from her place on her knees. He had seen her somewhere before. At a fundraiser?

She pointed at the sweating slaves. "They are finishing the tower!" Her voice raised to a shriek. "We must finish the tower!"

The crowd jumped to its feet. Peter backed away. They surged toward him, hands out, shouting. "Finish the tower! Finish the tower!"

Peter pushed them away, ducked through the crowd and ran into the streets. They paid no attention, each of them instead picking up all the bricks he or she could carry and staggering up the first set of steps cut into the side of the tower.

Peter watched for a moment. A voice behind him set his heart pounding again. "You must tear it down."

Hugh.

"What is happening to me?"

"It is a test. You must tear it down."

"I don't understand!"

Hugh smiled. "He was trying to tear it down, but you killed him. Now you must finish the work."

"Who? How?" Peter grabbed Hugh's arm. "Help me, Hugh!"

Hugh shook his head. "There is a larger work to be done, but not until you finish his first task. You are not ready." Hugh disengaged from Peter's grasp. "There is much to learn, Peter. You've only begun."

Shouting began again, behind him. Peter turned to the crowd he'd escaped. They still marched in succession up the stairs, each carrying bricks. But a common shout had united them.

"Rim-Sin-Thorn-ton! Rim-Sin-Thorn-ton!"

Peter sank to the sand, buried his head between his knees, and let the murky darkness cover him.

\* \* \*

When he awoke, the room came into focus as though he had found his glasses. Sunlight poked through a terracotta grid mounted in the wall. He lay on a wide cot with a mattress of woven reeds. Across the room, a beautiful woman poured water from a yellow-glazed pitcher into a matching bowl.

He shifted his weight, and the woman startled like a lovely, frightened rabbit. She watched him without speaking.

He had seen her before. Waist-length black hair and the pale, terrified face. She had been there with the dead man. Spattered with blood.

The bearded man from the street entered. "Ah, you are awake, finally. The *asu* has repaired you well, I believe."

Peter took a deep breath. The pain in his side had lessened. A dim memory of a man with braids floated through his mind. But he felt hot, very hot.

"Kaida told me what happened in your home, Rim-Sin. You are safe here until you can explain. I will not tell the authorities where you are."

Peter looked at the girl through narrowed eyes. What had she told this man? Had Peter somehow stabbed the dead man? Or had she done it herself and blamed him?

"One thing I must insist upon, however," the man continued. "Though we've newly become captives in this city, this is still my house. While you are my guest, you will treat my sister with respect. Under this roof she is not your slave, and she is not your – your – she is not yours to do with as you please."

Peter suddenly understood the girl's fear. Whoever this "Rim-Sin" was, the pretty girl across the room was his concubine.

\* \* \*

Peter alternated between sleep and fevered wakefulness. Judging by the dark and light he had seen in the home when he woke, he knew that several days had passed uninterrupted. When he was awake, only Cosam visited him, but sometimes he would snap open his eyes and find Kaida bending over him or setting food beside the bed. He didn't trust her. What was she doing? Would she poison him?

Once, her dark hair fell across his face as his eyelids fluttered. He shut them again before she noticed he was awake. He fell asleep and dreamed again, this time of Julia.

A graduate student, three years ago. Fifteen years younger than him. Peter had had no intention of getting involved with her, no more than with any of the female students who found reasons to stop at his office door. They all liked to talk about his classes, and he didn't mind. There would be no one to talk to at home, after all. His colleagues invited him out for dinner or drinks every few weeks, but he was never himself around them.

Julia was different. She seemed to see the real Peter. Though the buttoned-down exterior fooled the others, he could never be fake with her.

She had hounded him about the slate-colored rock he kept on his desk until he admitted that he brought it down from El Capitan, the highest wall he'd ever scaled. He was shocked when she insisted on going with him the next time he climbed.

That climb began a year which chipped away at his cold heart, until he would have done anything she asked.

And then she was gone. A job offer in London. Nothing really to keep her here, she said. A great opportunity. He drove her to the airport, walked her to the security gate, kissed her goodbye, and went home to his empty apartment.

That had been two years ago, and not another person had entered his apartment, or his heart, since.

But today, in his dream, she was there. Climbing with him again, laughing at the way he almost slipped on loose rocks, calling him an old man. Except today, instead of blonde hair, she had long, black waves that the wind kept blowing across his face.

\* \* \*

"Rim, wake up." A hand shook his arm.

"What is it?" Peter said, raising himself from the bed in the early morning light.

"The *rab alani* has discovered you. He is on his way. You must leave quickly!"

Peter jumped up, wincing as the healing gash on his side pulled.

"Slowly, slowly."

"You said quickly!"

Cosam smiled.

In his moments of wakefulness in the week he had been here, Peter had allowed himself to trust this big man, who was probably ten years his junior. Cosam could've turned him in—or killed him—if he'd wanted to. Peter marveled at the kind way in which Cosam had treated him, even though he believed Peter to be his sister's slave-master. Even so, Cosam had kept Kaida safely hidden from him most of the time.

Peter had wrestled with whether to tell Cosam everything. But he'd decided that mistaken identity was better than being believed to be insane. Instead, he had tried to gain as much information as he could about this time and place.

"The *rab alani* must not find you here," Cosam said. "Where will you go?"

*Good question. What are my choices?*

"Perhaps your fellow diviners will hide you," Cosam suggested. "At Esagila, or even in the palace."

*Diviner.* The textbook definition typed itself across the screen of his mind: specialists who solicited omens and interpreted signs from the gods." Esagila was the god Marduk's temple, he remembered. Could he find it?

It sounded farfetched, but it was something to go on. Or should he face the *rab alani*, and try to explain? Explain what? No, it would be better to stay out of sight until he figured out how to get back.

Kaida slid into the room, her eyes on Peter. "The *rab alani* is on the next street."

"Then you must go." Cosam gave Peter a cloak and took him to the outer doorway. With a wave, he disappeared into the house, leaving Peter alone in the street.

## Chapter 3

Babylon.

She could trace her lineage back to the earliest civilizations, a hybrid of every ancient people that had made their homes on the sand-strewn plain of Shinar. She had stood for ages, as all manners of races had swept in from every direction and scattered through her streets. First the Amorites, then the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Aramaeans, and most recently the Chaldeans. She was a city of sand and blood, and although those who infused the city were from conquered lands, she was, in a sense, welcoming them home again. For it was out of the heart of Babylon that every race and culture had flowed through the East. She was their root, their source. And her heart was the tower of Etemenanki.

She had smiled as the ancient tower had first risen above the plain. Man had decided to make himself equal with God. He baked bricks, he collected bitumen tar, and the tower rose. Before it was ever completed, the project was abandoned, victim to the sudden confusion of language. The people called their tower "Babel." It meant "Gate of God," but sounded very much like "confusion."

Now, centuries later, the tower was partially restored and Babylon honored her gods there. Around the tower, Babylon flourished in the desert sand, drinking in the Euphrates River, which flowed through the center of her, dividing the Old City and the New. She was beautiful, from the Southern Palace to the Hanging Gardens. She was protected from invaders by double walls, sentry towers, and a surrounding moat. And inside her walls, her people dedicated themselves to the search for exhilaration.

Babylon offered her citizens excitement in many forms. Revelry, drunkenness, and carousing whetted their appetites. They devoured prostitution and idol worship and then glutted themselves on uncontrolled immorality and violence. Witchcraft and sorcery inebriated them until their lives were completely given over to the endless search for stimulation.

Babylon was diseased. Rotting from the inside. But in her sated stupor of excess, she had no idea.

\* \* \*

In the western courtyard of the royal palace, Qurdi-Marduk-lamur waited with an assembly of slaves, charioteers, astrologers, and diviners mingling in the blistering heat as they prepared for the hunt. The astrologers had informed the king that the day was an auspicious one for the kill, and he was only too eager to show his people the favor of the gods. As on all occasions, Qurdi would attempt to use the events of the day to manipulate the king's favor away from anyone but himself, the High Priest of Ishtar.

Sunlight reflected off the buff-colored palace walls, blinding the eyes and tightening everyone's nerves. Even the horses were jumpy.

Conversation hushed as the king strode out into the courtyard, spear in hand. Here was Nabu-kudurri-usur, son of Nabopolassar, descended from the gods, war-chief of the Chaldeans, son of the morning, conqueror of all nations.

His shoulder-length hair and square-cut beard were dyed black, and the ends of his hair had been curled before he'd made his appearance. His skin was lighter than most of his Persian subjects. The courtiers said it was a mark of honor to be thus protected from the killing sun, but Qurdi had heard rumors of a questionable lineage. The king had dressed for the hunt in a Tyrian purple belted tunic with straps running diagonally across his chest. A slave jogged beside him, carrying his cloak. The young king vaulted into a two-wheeled chariot and signaled a charioteer in a plumed helmet to depart. The man snapped the reins over the horses' backs.

"Halt!" the king demanded when they had just begun. "I want to speak to Belteshazzar."

A young man, dressed in a plain brown tunic, broke away from the enclave of wise men and approached the chariot with a smile. His wavy dark hair was worn defiantly shorter than Babylonian fashion, a feature that seemed only to endear him to the ladies of the court. Qurdi had heard women praise his dark eyes and strong build as well. Apparently, the king was only one of many enamored of the handsome foreigner, though Qurdi understood nothing of their admiration.

The king leaned down to him. "What does your god tell you about the hunt today, Belteshazzar?"

"He has told me nothing, O King."

The king grunted. "Do you have an incantation for a successful kill, then?"

"O King, live forever, I will gladly pray to God for your safety."

"So be it." The king waited for the recitation, but the young man before him only bowed his head.

"Jews," the king said, shaking his head as though the whole lot of them were a puzzlement. He flicked a wrist at the charioteer once more, and the horses headed for the courtyard gate. The rest followed on foot, their destination an arena surrounding the tower of Etemenanki.

Qurdi dropped back from the crowd and several of his colleagues slowed to join him.

"He consults the Israelite, even after we have spoken." Qurdi said, more to himself than to the others.

"He does not trust us as he once did, Qurdi," an astrologer said.

Qurdi tilted his head. "The young Jew has the king's ear in all matters these days."

"Something must be done!" a diviner said.

Something would be done, Qurdi vowed. Something would be done. The current Chief of Magicians held to none of the Chaldean's ways, yet still the king relied on the boy. Last week Belteshazzar had not even attended the festival dedicated to the monthly death of the moon god. Still insisting there was only one God, the Jews' Yahweh, he would not serve the created lights of the sky. The Day-of-Lying-Down was only one of three lunar festivals each month, and Belteshazzar intentionally spent each of them in his palace quarters. He was clearly a heretic. Why couldn't the king see it?

The procession reached the park in front of the tower where the hunt would take place. Etemenanki loomed over the arena. Hundreds of palm trees towering over the waist-high walls barely stirred in the morning heat. The king's chariot made a wide circle at one end of the arena, turning to face the opposite side where a lion paced in a wooden cage, hungry for a meal. A line of spearmen stood inside the wall, protection against misread omens.

In his chariot, the king played to his audience, who leaned over the walls to reach for him. With his arms outstretched, he turned a circle in the chariot, inviting their praise.

Qurdi did not blink as the gold medallion at the king's waist shot an arrow of sunlight into his eyes. The golden light chilled in his eyes and pure hatred reflected back. The king's father had been a son of the gods, worthy of service. Nabu-kudurri-usur was only a man.

"Prepare the lion!" the king charged.

Two slaves stood beside the cage. "The lion is ready!"

With a dramatic flourish, the king dropped his arm. The servants raised the door, and the lion roared out, shaking its mane.

The animal padded back and forth several times, saliva dripping from its jagged teeth, its eyes never leaving the king's chariot. The crowd cheered, anxious for action.

Another signal from the king brought vicious dogs snarling out of other cages, along with the beaters.

The dogs circled the lion, who bared its teeth and hunched its back. These dogs had been bred to attack, and they did not disappoint. Two of them lunged, and the crowd let out another yell. The lion had to choose, and one dog soon lay twitching in the sand.

The beaters rushed in then. They struck with their long sticks and drove the lion toward the king's chariot, where he waited with his spear.

Qurdi glanced across the crowd at Belteshazzar. The Jew still stood with his head bowed. Qurdi allowed himself the brief pleasure of imagining a spear driven into Belteshazzar.

Belteshazzar surprised him at that moment by lifting his head and returning Qurdi's stare. Qurdi watched him, wondering if the young Israelite diviner could read his thoughts. He certainly had power none of them possessed. Belteshazzar approached him, and Qurdi looked away.

"The heat incenses the lion today," Belteshazzar said.

Qurdi lowered his chin, his eyes on the hunt.

Belteshazzar seemed to stare through him again. "The king will no doubt be successful."

"Oh?" Qurdi said. "Does your *One God* speak to you now?"

Belteshazzar looked away. "You show your Chief disrespect, Qurdi. Sometimes there is wisdom in silence."

Qurdi moved away with thinly disguised loathing. These captives from Israel had first come eight years ago. Nabu-kudurri-usur had brought royalty, soldiers, craftsman, and artisans—all the best people of their land—to assure that the vassal nation would not rebel. Belteshazzar was among them, practically a child then. He had joined the *kasdim*, and before any of the wise men knew what had happened, the usurper had interpreted one of the king's dreams, been promoted to Chief of Magicians, and been given a Babylonian name, which he refused to use since he would not acknowledge Bel as god. Daniel, he insisted upon called himself. Since then, he had not bowed his head to any Babylonian god. He worshipped only his One God. Hatred for the Jews was the only thing Qurdi and the king's chief diviner, Rim-Sin, shared.

A shout went up from the people. One of the beaters had drawn too close. He thrust with his stick in defense, but the lion swiped at it with a massive paw and sent it flying. With the gracefulness of a housecat, the beast pounced on the slave. The people screamed in a mixture of horror and delight.

*Ah, well. That is what the slaves are for. All the more honor for the king when he kills the lion.*

The beast approached the chariot now, where the king stood poised with his spear held aloft. The animal bared its teeth only once before Nabu-kudurri-usur heaved the spear toward its chest. The shaft sank into the fur, blood spurting. The spear-thrust angered the lion, however, and it charged the chariot where the king had begun to seek victory acclaim from the crowd.

With his back to the lion, the king mistook their screams for praise. The lion moved closer, the spear jutting from its hide. When the spearsmen ran in, the king turned back toward

his foe. He raised an arm to stay the spears, and pulled an arrow from a quiver in the chariot, putting it to the bow. He took careful aim at the approaching beast, and let the arrow fly. The lion dropped.

The people were half-crazed with devotion to their king. The gods favored him, and so would they.

The king stepped down from his chariot and raised a golden cup high. More cheers. He ran a hand through his hair, damp with sweat. Then, with an arm across his chest, fist over his heart, he spilled a few drops from the cup over the dead lion, atoning for the harm he had caused it and appeasing its angry spirit. Even from this distance, Qurdi could hear his mighty voice recite the devotional speech thanking his patron goddess for the day's success.

Belteshazzar moved away, and Qurdi's colleagues surrounded him. "What did Belteshazzar say?" one asked.

"The dog never says anything of importance," Qurdi said. "Come. It is time to return to the palace. We must consult the omens. I believe there will soon be an unfavorable report to give the king about his Chief of Magicians."

\* \* \*

In the home of Cosam, Rebekah's time had come.

Cosam waved off Kaida's attempts to calm him as he paced through the small courtyard, trying with his thoughts to speed the midwife to his home. Rebekah emerged from their main living chamber, one hand on the doorframe.

"What are you doing?" Cosam steered her away from the chamber. "Go back to your bed!"

"I have done this before, husband." She laughed. "It is better to walk."

Cosam shook his head, looking toward the street door once again. "Where is the midwife?"

"Perhaps the midwife would be here if you had called for a Jewish woman, instead of a Babylonian."

"Rebekah, you know I had no choice. The Babylonian priests will not allow a temple goldsmith like me to contaminate his home with a Hebrew midwife. They would consider all my gold work to be impure."

Rebekah frowned. "This would not happen in Jerusalem."

"We are not in Jerusalem. We are in Babylon now, and will stay here until the Lord God's judgment is finished!" Cosam's concern spilled over into irritation. He regretted it instantly and went to put his arms around the woman he loved more than life.

Rebekah doubled over, clutching the back of a chair as her face whitened.

"Back to our room, Rebekah!" Cosam cupped her elbow and pulled her toward the doorway.

"Kaida!" Cosam looked over his shoulder. "Come, help Rebekah."

"She will be fine, Cosam, do not worry," Kaida led the laboring woman to her bed. The room had been darkened and was slightly cooler than the courtyard. Rebekah stretched out on the bed and Kaida fanned her face with a palm branch.

Cosam's brow furrowed as he watched his younger sister help Rebekah onto the woven-reed bed. "You are so different since we arrived here, Kaida. That man has made you angry."

Kaida scowled. "I will not be his concubine!"

"Kaida!" Rebekah shook her head, now between contractions. "You must not think of running away!"

"Perhaps Kaida will one day buy her freedom, Rebekah," Cosam said.

Kaida's head snapped toward him. "How would I do that?"

"I have been saving, scraps of silver when I can, but it will someday add up to something."

"Someday," Kaida said, as though the day were only a speck on the horizon.

Cosam pitied her. They'd been in Babylon less than a month, but already she'd been given to Rim-Sin. Even if she could buy her freedom, who would marry her?

Rebekah moaned in pain. "Where is the midwife?"

"What is wrong, Rebekah?" Cosam was by her side in a moment.

"I do not know. Something seems different this time."

Cosam bounded to the courtyard.

A little girl wandered into the bedroom, a five-year-old version of her dark-haired mother. Her glossy black hair was hidden by the everpresent linen head covering, but an errant curl strayed across her eye. She looked up at Kaida with a crooked-toothed smile.

Kaida put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "This is no place for you now, Hannah," she said, turning her toward the doorway. "Go now, play with your doll."

"What's wrong with Mama?"

"She's having a baby," Kaida said. "Sometimes it hurts. Run along now."

She watched the child skip away, then turned to Rebekah. "What name will you give this child?"

"I do not know. Cosam would like to name him Elmadam, after his father. But I want to call him Addi."

"And are you so certain it will be a boy?"

"I have prayed so, for Cosam's sake."

Another contraction gripped her, and she closed her eyes. "Something is wrong, Kaida. I can feel it. Do not tell Cosam. But pray for the midwife."

\* \* \*

Peter tried to blend in to the noisy crowd as it moved toward the palace. The king's chariot, draped with the body of the lion, headed the procession. The throng that followed seemed a good place to get lost. He held to the back of the crowd, hoping any palace officials who might recognize him as Rim-Sin would occupy positions of honor near the front.

A whisper at his ear contradicted his hope. "Rim-Sin, where have you been?"

Peter glanced at the young man beside him, then continued toward the palace.

The younger man fell in beside him. He wore a purple robe, embroidered with gold stars. Gold bracelets encircled both wrists. "Word of the killing has reached the king's ear. He has mentioned you in court."

Peter shrugged. "I am trying to remain unseen for a time."

"You missed our meeting two nights ago. You were to teach me the new ritual."

Peter sensed disappointment in the man's voice. Rim-Sin's protégé? "I am sorry," he said. "It could not be avoided." The palace loomed before them. Peter nodded toward it. "I wish to remain hidden, still. Do you think there is a place in the palace where I will be safe?"

The younger man laughed. "The palace has more rooms than a honeycomb, Rim. You know that." He touched Peter's arm. "Stay behind me and keep your head down. In those clothes you will be mistaken for my slave. I will lead you in."

Peter followed the man and, studying the embroidered stars that twinkled in the sunlight. He looked like a sorcerer's apprentice, all right. Peter wished for a closer look at the outside of the palace, but the young man ushered him through the arch and into a corridor. A door opened on his right and Rim-Sin's young friend pushed him in. It was a bedchamber, sparse but clean, with a raised bed and a small table beside the window.

The man closed the door behind them. "You're safe here for a time, Rim-Sin. But the palace has sharp ears and a wagging tongue. It won't be long before you are found."

"Thank you."

"And what of the New Year Festival?"

Peter raised his eyebrows.

"It is your year! If you do not come forward to perform the New Year sacrifice for the king, you will be hunted and killed!" He grabbed Peter's arms and studied him with piercing eyes. "If the gods do not kill you first."

Peter swallowed, then shook off the younger man's arms. "The New Year Festival."

"It will not be long. You must clear up this business about the dead man very soon, Rim! The king will not stand for your absence."

*Which king would that be?* Peter needed more information, and decided on a risk. He turned his back toward the other man and picked up a golden bowl from the small table. "What do you call this king?"

"Call?"

"Has he given you his private name yet, or do you still refer to him as..."

He swiveled back to the younger man and tried to read the confusion on his face.

"I call him Nabu-kudurri-usur, as every other diviner in the court calls him."

*Nebuchadnezzar II.*

"Ah. Well, it is still early in his reign, is it not?"

"The seventh year. That is not so early."

Babylonians never counted the first year, "the year of accession," Peter remembered. Nebuchadnezzar had taken the throne in 605 B.C.E., after his father had died unexpectedly. Peter calculated. That put the current date at 597 B.C.E.

What was happening at that time? He plowed through facts and dates in his mind. The second deportation of Jews from Israel took place in that year. Babylon would destroy Jerusalem eventually, but not for another eleven years, in 586. The first deportation, eight years ago, had supposedly brought important biblical characters, including Daniel. The second deportation in this year, had brought King Jehoiachin and the royal family, the prophet Ezekiel, as well as most of the Temple's gold articles that Solomon had commissioned.

"Rim-Sin?" The younger man studied Peter. "You do not seem well."

"I am fine." Peter waved off his concern. "Perhaps you should go. I don't want you to have trouble on my account."

The other man nodded. "Take care, Rim-Sin. And do not forget the New Year Festival. The king's sacrifice must be performed by you, or every man and god in Babylon will be hunting your head."

With that dire prediction, the man spun and left the room, his purple robe floating behind him.

Peter returned to his thoughts of ancient history. He felt grounded in time now. But this was not a university lecture. He was actually in Babylon! He had long ago given up the idea that he was dreaming. He would have wakened himself by now if he could have. He sat on the bed, the now-familiar dizziness sweeping over him. Perhaps he was actually lying in a coma somewhere. Scraps of *Star Trek* and every time-travel film he'd ever seen flitted through his mind. The reality was incomprehensible. It pressed in on him, walls of irrationality threatening to crush him. But still, there must be a reason for his presence here.

The realization that he did not bring himself here nagged at him, and he struggled to resolve it. He remembered his speech at the fund-raiser a few nights ago. "The divinity of our own consciousness." Right. He took a deep breath. It was time for his divinity to kick into high gear and explain how he got here. Better yet, explain how to get home.

If he knew he could control this situation and go back to the twenty-first century whenever he wanted, he might think about staying here awhile. It was the ultimate research project, wasn't it? There was a world of unanswered questions in his time. What answers could he take back with him? He could make his fortune as an expert in daily life in ancient Babylon. But the most important answer he needed right now was how to find his way out of here alive. Besides, the thing he really wanted already awaited him at home – the position of university president. What had they done in his absence? Who would believe where he'd been?

But until he learned how to return, he would play the part of Rim-Sin, king's diviner. How much did he really know about divination? It was a branch of sorcery, he knew that. The kings relied upon it. They read chicken entrails and so forth, looking for signs of what the future held. Could he fake it if he needed to?

While many of his colleagues had drifted toward the more mystical techniques of self-transformation, Peter had tried to stay in the mainstream, choosing to concentrate on health issues, success training, and education. But admittedly, he had always been drawn toward mysticism. It was merely a lower form of understanding, really. Getting in touch with your subconscious is the first step toward godhood, but personal subconscious is merely your own local area of the greater collective subconscious. In the collective, there are archetypes, which some people called gods. Some sought to activate the forces of these gods through ritual, but they were merely symbols, Peter knew. Which rituals did this primitive society employ to call on the gods?

A sudden thought occurred to him. Perhaps he *had* brought himself here, however unconsciously. Perhaps he had been chosen by the collective subconscious to help move this society from its polytheism toward a broader understanding of their own oneness with divinity. What could be accomplished if humanity began to recognize these basic truths earlier in its existence? Could the harm already done to Earth be avoided?

A knock at the door roused him from the bed. His side throbbed again as he climbed off. He opened the door –

And beheld a stunning woman with fire-red hair and an emerald green dress. Her beauty was breathtaking.

“Rim.” The word was soft and her smile slow, like a cat who’s found a treat.

Peter arched an eyebrow and said nothing.

“Aren’t you going to let me come in?” Her lips formed a tiny pout.

He opened the door wider and she glided in, jewels tinkling from her ears, wrists, and ankles. Her eyes were painted in green and white with the care of an artist. She smelled like jasmine at night.

She turned and smiled. “You look like a slave. Where have you been?”

“I have been – occupied.”

“Hmm. I see. The last time we spoke you were headed for the palace treasury, looking for some Jewish spoils of war, I believe. Were you successful?” She reached a jeweled hand to his shoulder to smooth a wrinkle from his tunic.

Peter took a step backward. “What have you been doing?”

She turned away, sighing. “The same thing I do every day. Waiting for my turn with the king. Trying to keep the foreign harlots from taking my place. You should hear what one of them told my slave girl.”

Peter listened to her whining tirade about the other palace women. As he remained silent she continued to speak, revealing much. Assyria had been her home, she said. Royalty once, but one of the king’s wives now. Her main goal seemed to be rising to the top of the other wives in the palace complex.

“I am tired,” he finally said, hoping to stem the tide of her petty jealousy.

She pursed her lips in another baby-like pout. “You’re not asking me to go?” She ran a red-nailed finger across his jaw line, leaned close and smiled. “So soon?” Her hand slipped around to the back of his neck, and felt hot against his skin. Her smile widened.

*Tempting. But the king’s wife?* He was in enough trouble already. “Another time.”

Her fingernails dug into his neck like tiny biting ants. She whispered into his ear. “Now.”

He pulled her hand down. “Another time.”

He closed the door behind her and the sound echoed through the empty corridor. Ridiculous to be thinking of staying here for research purposes. He had no idea of how to exist in this world. He must get home. He had been Rim-Sin long enough.

Who was this Rim-Sin? Where had he gone? And how had Peter come to be walking around in his body? He had already figured out that he at least looked similar to his usual self. He could feel his disproportionate height and his body looked the same to him. Minus the glasses. Strange, he could see clearly without them now.

How could this be? Why did everyone think he was Rim-Sin, when he was obviously still himself? How did they understand him when didn’t speak a word of Aramaic? It was as if everything about him, his appearance, his speech, all transformed before they reached the eyes and ears of those around him. He wished vaguely for his handheld tape recorder. It would have been good to get his thoughts down to organize later.

He lay on the bed again, his mind reverting to earlier questions. He had stumbled into a fascinating place and time, that was certain. He remembered another line from his speech: “The myth of yesterday, synthesized with the faith of today.” Well, today *was* yesterday. Babylon was a case in point for his thesis. He was in the center of one of the most pagan, polytheistic societies that had ever existed. And with Cosam and his family it was juxtaposed with Judaism, the root of Christianity. What better place to prove that all myth, all religion, is

part of the Whole? Here in Babylon rival cultures lived and worshipped with little difference between them. Proof that all truth is relative, that truth shifts as cultures rise and fall.

The Success Seminar tapes played in his mind again.

*Question dogma. Question ideology. Question all outside authority that claims to be truth. Break free from the prison of social conditioning.*

Peter spent the night in the palace, trying to adjust to his new surroundings. Late the next morning, his door opened again and the red-haired woman appeared.

“Rim.” Her voice was a whisper. “You must not stay in the palace. I have heard that Qurdi-Marduk-lamur plots against Belteshazzar. He plans to assure his own place as Chief of Magicians. There are some that say you are also in his way, and he would like to see you dead!”

Peter put a hand to his head. The *rab alani* – apparently the Babylonian equivalent of the town cop – was already chasing him. Now some crazy man named Qurdi-Mardi-llama, or something? Was all of Babylon trying to put an end to Rim-Sin? No wonder he had disappeared. Peter suddenly longed desperately to be back in his cramped, dusty, university office.

Instead, he followed the clinking woman into the deserted palace hall, wondering how long he could avoid the powers that sought his life.

\* \* \*

Qurdi bent over the bloody entrails of a freshly-killed goat, searching for an answer to his question. Would he rise to Chief of Magicians? He studied the details of the haruspicy as though his future lay in the bloody mess. Each discoloration, each unusual mark or deformation, was noted with interest. Some of these signs were well-known; for others he checked the handbook to be certain of their answers.

But this time the answer was ambiguous. Even after he consulted his handbook there was no way to make the signs read one way or another today.

It does not matter, he thought. The omens will say something else soon. A message for the king about his Israelite pet, Belteshazzar.

A door whispered open behind him, and the single flame in the darkened room flickered. His two favorites entered. Qurdi said nothing, only turned to fix his empty eyes on the slave boys.

“Rim-Sin was seen in the palace,” one of them said.

Qurdi straightened. “Where is he?”

“He is gone already,” the other said. “The woman, Ilushu, entered his room to speak with him.”

“Speak with him?” Qurdi’s lips tightened. “I doubt that.” His eyes narrowed as an idea formed. “An advisor with a royal wife. If the king were to know about Rim-Sin and Ilushu...”

The slaves bent their heads to the floor. The punishment for *any* palace official consorting with a royal concubine was a severe beating, possibly worse.

“No.” Qurdi shook his head. “That would not suit my purpose. However...” He laid down the knife he had used to probe the entrails. “Perhaps someone else has been seen with Ilushu.”

“I do not think so, my lord,” the second slave said.

Qurdi’s smile was almost tender. He laid a blood-spattered hand on the arm of the young man. “No? I believe you may have seen Belteshazzar with one of the royal wives, did you not?”

The slaves looked at the floor again, and Qurdi turned back to his bloody work. "But first the omens. I feel sure the omens will warn the king to expect treason from his favorite diviner."

\* \* \*

Peter didn't know where else to go. He knew the *rab alani* had already been to Cosam's house, and might come back any time, but besides the palace—where Qurdi-Whoever-He-Was waited for him—where else could he go?

He wandered the city for awhile, and finally found Cosam's home by chance late in the day. Cosam had no doorkeeper, and Peter slipped into the house unnoticed. He let his eyes adjust to the dim light for a moment. A sudden scream from within the house startled him, and he jogged toward the sound. He found Cosam and Kaida in one of the bedrooms, hovering over Rebekah, who lay back on her bed, sweating and crying.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Rim!" Cosam's face was etched with worry. "The baby will not come! Something is wrong!"

"Where is the midwife!" Rebekah screamed.

Peter looked from Kaida to Cosam. What could he do? He ran back out to the street, searching in both directions. A portly woman toddled down the street, a black bag slung over her shoulder. Peter ran to her.

"Are you the midwife?" he asked.

"Your wife will be fine." She smiled and patted his arm.

"She is not my wife," Peter said.

"Your concubine, then. Do not fear." She continued at her unhurried pace.

"Please, you must come quickly! Her husband says that something is wrong!"

The woman smiled again, nodding her head.

Peter dragged her the remaining distance to the house as though she were a runaway dog.

She went inside and finally began examining Rebekah. She turned to them with a grim look. "The baby is turned. It will not come."

A breech birth. Did Babylonian midwives know what to do in these situations? Peter certainly did not.

He caught Kaida's eye. Would she have any knowledge he did not? He raised his eyebrows at her, but her face revealed only hatred, mixed with fear.

"You must chew this," the midwife said, pushing a piece of tree bark into Rebekah's mouth.

"Cosam, please!" Rebekah twisted her head away from the woman's pudgy hands.

"Do as she says, Rebekah." Cosam was near tears. He turned to Kaida. "What else can we do but follow her instructions?"

"Pray, Cosam," Kaida said.

The midwife bared Rebekah's belly and began massaging it with ointment. Peter backed away, to leave the family in privacy.

"Stay, Rim," Cosam said as Peter reached the doorway. "I do not believe your gods can help, but I want you to stay."

"I can do nothing here, Cosam."

Kaida stared at him, the lines around her mouth deepening.

"Stay," Cosam said, pulling Peter to his side.

The midwife wiped her hands and pulled what looked like a small rolling pin from her pouch.

Rebekah moaned and spit the tree bark from her mouth. "Cosam, these pagan rituals will do nothing! Make her stop!"

Cosam shook his head, the tears flowing now. "I cannot lose you, Rebekah. I cannot. I do not know what else to do."

The midwife placed something around Rebekah's neck. Peter leaned in closer to see it. A leather cord, with a carved image strung on it. Peter recognized the image of the demon, Pazuzu, from the pages of some old textbook he had studied. The god's canine face, scaly body, and talons were unmistakable.

"Pazuzu will protect you." The midwife touched the image. "The evil of the demon Lamashtu cannot touch you when Pazuzu protects."

Lamashtu, Peter repeated to himself. Female demon who caused miscarriages and stillborns. Lion's head and donkey's teeth. Not much uglier than Pazuzu, really. But apparently Pazuzu was able to counteract Lamashtu's evil.

Sad, he thought. I know more about these people's foolish beliefs in demons than I do about modern childbirth. Rebekah could die, along with their child, and I am as helpless with all my education as they are in their religious ignorance.

He was surprised by a rising wave of anger toward the midwife, now torturing Rebekah by using her rolling pin of "magic wood" over the suffering woman's stomach.

Kaida moved around to stand behind Peter, apparently frustrated by the midwife's useless ritual as well. "She might as well go home."

Peter agreed. "No magic wood will help here." Kaida studied him with narrowed eyes. Peter realized his mistake too late. He was supposed to be a diviner! Magic wood was probably a major part of his life.

"You spoke correctly a moment ago," she said. "You are worthless here."

Peter's ego flared. Who was this slave girl to call him worthless? "And I suppose you're going to help in some way?"

"I pray to the God who hears." She answered with the same sarcasm.

Peter responded without thinking. "There is no god but that which you create."

"Appropriate words from a man who spends his days and nights groveling before statues." Kaida's voice was bitter. Peter knew her animosity must have been directed toward Rim-Sin, but he felt it himself, as well.

Rebekah screamed in pain. The midwife put away her rolling pin. "The baby does not come. She grows too tired to deliver. We must take her to the mortuary and recite the incantations."

Cosam put his hands over his face. "God, forgive me. I do not know what to do."

Peter shook his head. The poor man's torture over the conflict with his Judaism was pitiable. Especially since neither "Yahweh" nor Pazuzu could be of any help here. A competent obstetrician was the only person they needed right now.

The midwife did not wait for Cosam to make a decision. "Pick her up," she ordered Peter. He dared not refuse, considering his supposed vocation.

The midwife set the pace as they marched out into the streets. Night was falling. Cosam and Kaida followed the midwife with Peter trailing behind and carrying Rebekah. She twisted and moaned in his arms, her head buried in his shoulder. They reached the mortuary in only a few minutes. Small shrines littered the field, and the midwife led them into a building. Peter glanced around him, taking in the bas-relief images of demons and gods on the walls.

"Lay her down." The midwife pointed toward the floor.

Peter laid Rebekah on the bricks and stepped back.

"I submit to your power, Rim-Sin." The midwife nodded in his direction.

Peter swallowed. Did she expect him to do something?

He panicked, his eyes flicking back and forth between Kaida and Cosam, who stared at him. Rebekah moaned again in the darkness at his feet.

*Now what?*