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In the Land of Nod fruits were plentiful, if bruised, and fragrant rains often poured. We watered our gardens, our trees, through a maze-like irrigation system that Forbearer Adam had taught Grandmason Cain, and Cain passed down to us. I recited my morning song, invoking my patron goddess Asherah:

“Oh, the fabled Cainites— whom Yah’s favored Sethites hate! Our men of renown, bound to the earth and her green yields, worshipping at the altar of strange gods. Mammon— industry; Moloch— empire; the port wine-stain feathers shaped like wings of rawhide upon our scarlet backs! ‘Industrious Cainites, cavort for us— wilt thou part the bloodied rose?’ the kings of foreign lands plead, “Dance the whip and flaming sword! Show us what sin is sweet on your tongue. Kiss away our sorrows and wipe away our tears, sweet Kohonet daughters of Cain!”

I accompanied the morning ritual to Asherah as dawn broke with the clash of my cymbals, naked at her altar enriching her sanctuary of beauty and fertility. My magick rippled throughout Nod, blessing both harvest and land, and I went to my palatial bedroom connected to Asherah’s inner chambers to ready for the morning.

“Sweet Lady, give me patience to deal with my little cousins, Istehar and Naamah,” I sighed, making a *Tawu* over my heart with thumb and middle fingers interlocked in an X. Lazily, I admired my wing-shaped birthmark in the mirror as I clothed myself in a gray layered dress, stitched with pomegranates interred within black, Egyptian glass beads. My aerial port wine-stains were shaped like an owl’s, spread from my elbows in fine feathery traces up to the nape of my neck. It was the fabled mark us Cainites bore; but to keep off misfortune or to attract it, I was never sure.

“I hate early mornings,” I sighed, “I have a feeling in my bones that the foundations of our world will shake. Perhaps High Priest Elizander is gambling heaven and earth with that errant angel again? I hope papa has not lost more money over craps or scarab races with them, dear Lady!” Papa owned a great temple and ten-thousand-cubit estate on the outskirts of Ken ha Gadol; it was the Kingdom of Nod’s finest palace, save his brother’s matriarchal sanctuary the Kohonet, ruled under the thumb of the wizened Rahab.

“Oh *crap*, I was distracted! I forgot the last part in my invocation for rain,” I sighed, preparing myself as I sang an old song I had learned from Nod’s High Priestess, Rahab, Queen of the Kohonet:

Mammon, empire! They are men of renown, the Canaanites! Men of giant stature, men of sages and might—their women of beauty, science, and song! As comely and brave as bulls the maidens all, as sandstone skinned as the great wind-worn sculptures in the desert!

I was summoning the old gods of the blood, as was my duty as Lady of Ken ha Gadol, and the spirits scraped at the back of my skull like a crow pecking pomegranate seeds. My patriotism swelled, and with war gathering on the horizon I shrilly cried the last verse in a toga that held both a ripe fig and bottle of wine, ready to loose red juice and blood at any moment, beating my breast in a frenzy that would make the First Architect Cain proud:

Life in Nod is sweet, as sweet as gristle on bone. Scorned of all Creation the Canaanites are, yet blessed by the Sitra Achra! Watch our demons cavort! Sing of our many

conquests! Name the line of Kohonet priestesses and kings! Atop snowy Mount Zephon, watch as we topple the sky!

Only the Assyrians could rival our cruelty; the Egyptians, our majesty; the Minoans, our mystery.

I sent breakfast to Elizander as I wandered out to Asherah's orchard at our palace at the base of Mount Zephon. Alisha of Chavah's seed I was, she who was Samael's beloved; I was a Kohonet-trained priestess, formed in the crucible of sisterhood, of blood, bark, and wine. Under Queen Rahab my birthmark had blossomed, and the secrets of Asherah— as well as serving the nation— had been drummed into my head like the thump of a war-drum.

“How is breakfast, my Alisha?” papa asked while a servant brought us garlic, herb omelets, challah, and dates. I drizzled honey on a loaf, drinking it down with some saffron tea. The fine brick walls of our home had high ceilings with windows made of costly Egyptian glass that, when opened, let drafts of sweet oasis air in. “Wonderful, papa. Say, does the High Priest have need of me today?” I asked, yawning.

Papa smiled. He had a face scarred by a Sethite prince's sword, but was otherwise greying and handsome. After mama's passing, papa took a harem, yet never remarried—she had been his one true love. I tried to stay clear of his consorts.

“Keep an eye on the Watcher atop Mount Zephon, Elizander says.”

I nodded, my mood souring. Things were changing, east of Eden: Watchers made camp atop mountains by the smatterings of cities and towns that ringed King Ahrand's country, his holdings, like glimmering rubies. Cymballed Naamah led them, alongside peerless, virginal Istehar, with their lovers Azazel and Samyaza. Oh, how I despised my impish, coquettish cousins!

The Watcher of our town, Baraquiël, had set up camp on Mount Zephon, above the ornate, carved cave where hoary High Priest Elizander so divined. We entertained my Uncle, King Ahrand and Cousins Naamah and Istehar often; I did not have to work the land: I could have gone into the Kohonet like smiling Naamah and gorgeous, virginal Istehar if I wanted.

“Sister Alisha, come dance with us! Your hair is the reddest of us all, like flame across an amber night. We shall teach

you the secrets of Lady Lilith and her starry Lilim, where there are men of pleasure and Watchers to delight our every wicked craving. Why, just yesterday Azazel crushed malachite into a fine powder to paint my bronzed lids, and for Istehar, Samyaza fashioned a bracelet of onyx and polished jewels to affix over her tanned wrist," Naamah had burredled; they were always begging me to join them.

I shook my head, remembering their incessant prattling last week— oh, goddess *forbid* I had to play hostess to them again!

I sat idly by after having finished harvesting palms, fruits, and nuts, as my labor on the estate farm was done for the day and my midwife's herbs dutifully replenished; Elosha, my childhood best friend, was to give birth the town over next week according to her moon chart. And without warning there came a great wind racking up golden dust in the damp soil, shaving scruff from the wheat. I looked beside me to find that I was not alone at my favorite fretting place; the Worry Rock, as I called it.

No, there was an angel, an angel of might and of handsome mien to boot; he wore skin in midnight's particular hue, eyes that shone like lapis lazuli, and was decorated with luxurious curls of white-turquoise hair that fell to his waist in

braids. The angel held an astrolabe in his hands, charting the early morning stars that had stubbornly refused to set.

“To what do I owe the honor, introverted Watcher?” I teased. Our town misfit angel, Baraquiél, kept to himself; it was said he abhorred women and had refused every temptation Samyaza and Azazel had lured him to the Kohonet with. As for us humans, Baraquiél would only talk in whispers to High Priest Elizander. The fact that I was, in my dirtied state, the first woman he had probably laid eyes on in years, mattered very much to me.

I had my vanity, after all.

“Rain is coming today. Lightning strikes. It boils my blood, stirs my wings to ride aback the wings. That is the problem of sin, comely daughter of Chavah— Azazel’s wings are withered, having strayed too far from the Father, and Samyaza rots not long behind.” I crossed my legs, admiring his wings— ibis, like I saw on trips to Egypt with papa. “And yet, Samael and Lilith are still whole, and they have flown long after leaving Yah’s paternal court,” I pronounced.

Baraquiél winced. “Do not speak to me of the ways of God: you are a heathen. What would you know of my Father?” His inquisition rent my heart into ire and iron, and I rebuked him.

“Quite a lot, actually: I’m a Kohonet-trained qodeshah. I tend the sanctuary of Asherah, and nurse her sacred groves. I midwife babes, heal the sick and heal the lame with my sacred herbs and unguents, dancing for our kingdom’s rains.”

Baraquiél smiled. His teeth gleamed sharply, his midnight skin shining starlike with dew. “Isn’t *qodeshah* what Father’s humans call *whores*?” I winced. “That is not the heart and soul of our practice, Baraquiél. Indeed, we tend to the men once a year at the Festival of Atargatis, turning away neither ugly nor old, sick nor poor from our patient breasts. That is how Lilith and Chavah love: given freely, humbly, like mothers— their suitors as if their own kin. The Sethites gossip a lot, but their lies about Cainites are rumors: they hold neither sting nor vinegar.”

Baraquiél twisted one of his intricate braids, laden with bronze beads. “So, then, would you not turn me away?” I blushed, and Baraquiél looked at me hungrily, like a lion waiting to pounce.

“It is many moons until the Festival of Atargatis...but I would be happy to show you Asherah’s grove.”

“You *want* me, Alisha. It is etched in sinful Cainite daughter’s bones to tempt angels. Why I signed that pact with damnable Azazel is repugnant to me. ‘Take a wife,’ he said, but the Kohonet was stifling— all those *oudh*-clad ladies barely clothed? Not like you, Alisha. That dress— it suits you well. Stately. Modest. Good for farming— good, in fact, for *flying*.”

“*I do not want you!*” I blushed, but I was certain he always saw me admiring him from my palace chambers as he made his daily walk to High Priest Elizander, where they gambled over dice; playing craps with a cantankerous, wheezing elder was not how I imagined I would spend eternity, if given the chance. Once, Baraquel and father had raced scarab beetles. Papa lost and refused to see Baraquel again; I could surmise papa forfeited quite a sum of money. In the morning Baraquel appeared jolly at Elizander’s door with casks of fine Minoan wine, and by then it was not hard to guess where papa’s money went.

Baraquiél smirked. “You are a *qodeshah*, my Alisha. A heathen. It does not matter what you want, does it? It only matters what Azazel and Naamah deem you fit for.”

I scowled. “You are coarser than sand, Baraquiél, and are ignorant of our ways. I’ll let it be known that I have never done a dance with a Watcher.”

“Not even shy Samyaza?”

“That lunatic is just pining after closed-leg, prissy Istehar! I can’t stand the lot of them! Naamah is spoiled, and Istehar is a shrew.”

“And I cannot stand my fallen brothers. So what does that make us, dearest Alisha?”

“In a pickle.”

“I like to eat pickles; they are one of humanity’s finest creations. That does not sound so bad.”

We were leaning against each other by now, some sort of animal magnetism drawing us together, or simply us bonding over both being irascible, ornery bastards. I was not too sure which it was.

“Where does an angel get pickles from, Baraquiël?”

“Elizander makes them. You really should talk to him more. He is wise. In fact, just yesterday he told me how to ingest Syrian rue so as to experience strange visions.”

“You’re doing drugs with an old man?” I laughed. “What did you mean, then, when you said ‘my dress was made for flying’?”

Baraquiël smiled. “Shall I show you, Alisha?” He lifted me gently but sturdily into the air as we set off flying. The air was sweet, warm, and thick, the clouds damp but not clinging, and his great ibis wings spread out like war flags.

“I could get used to this, Baraquiël.”

“Call me Baraq.”

We took to playing craps with Elizander.

Over time, I built up stamina to visit Baraquiël’s camp atop Mount Zephon. Always, we went flying, and over time, he fell from the stars for me like Lucifer struck down from heaven, in love with a comely daughter of Cain. We worshipped Asherah

and danced for Samael, and made love for Lilith and Chavah. I found myself with child by the third month, and Baraquiël dropped his pickle mid-bite out of sheer joy.

“I will have to be a little more careful when you fly, then.”

The rains came that night with a loud thunderstorm, filling Nod’s wells for years to come. The canals were brimming with fertile waters, freshly churned soil, and loam. Baraquiël, the angel of lightning, was like a weathervane, the winds responding to his moods. We made plans to marry, and Rahab blessed us on our first journey to the Kohonet together. Naamah was ripe with her second child, and Azazel lingered at the edges like a black ink-stain, scheming.

That night, Baraquiël’s feathers began to fall out, one by one, like snow atop Mount Zephon.

By the fifth month, my husband had Elizander cauterize his dead ibis wings from his back.

“Where I’m going, as father to the fruit of my seed, I won’t need any marks of my old pact with Yah,” Baraquiél simply said, caressing my swollen womb as I cried over his lost bit of heaven.

Samyaza had finally had enough of Istehar refusing his advances; she asked him the Secret Name of Yah, escaping his assault by flying to the stars. Yah, taking pity on one of the Cainites for what might have been the first time in eternity, changed Istehar into a constellation. They came to call her the Star Maiden. Samyaza hung himself the next morning, and Yah made his death a starry tomb; you may know him as Kesil the Hangman. What it took for an angel to die, I did not wish to know.

The Nephilim, our children with the Watchers, grew fast if they were conceived out of lust, not out of love. Baraquiél and I heard rumors every day that they were giants, full-grown in a year, and Azazel and Naamah were setting their scions and the Kohonet’s other half-angel offspring as lords over our enemy the Sethites. And then the Nephilim turned on Nod.

First the Nephilim ate the cattle. Then they ate the sheep. Finally, the goats and pigs. When even that was not enough, the Nephilim turned on man. Azazel and Rahab had lost control, and the Land of Nod fell into misrule and infamy. Elizander, papa, his consorts and servants, Baraquiël, Elusha's family and I fled to Egypt, carrying as many riches as we could to start life anew, and just in time at that, for Raphael was sent to bind the Watchers hand and foot in Dudaël.

After that, Samael sent a flood, a great drowning of his son Grandmason Cain's land, to wipe the Nephilim off the face of the earth.

All but one.

I gave birth to a girl with ibis wings, lapis lazuli eyes, amber skin, and red hair: *Sarai*. Elusha was her godmother, and we cut her wings like the Sethites circumcise their children.

Baraquiël has taken to dyeing his white-turquoise hair with henna. We work as scribes and gardeners, and I serve as a priestess of Qadesh— the name of Asherah in this foreign land. Every year I serve my goddess. I turn away no man, young or old, Greek or Egyptian or Sethite, African or Assyrian. But it is a

bitter service, and all I can do is think of Baraquiél, my dear husband, as the strangers ruthlessly spear into me from above.

One day, in our large house by the Nile, Sarai was playing with seashells, and I looked over at Baraquiél— still beautiful, but more mortal than he had ever been— and I squeezed his hand, asking him “Was it worth it? Leaving Heaven, leaving your holy post atop Mount Zephon, taking a heathen bride?”

Baraquiél smiled like it was the most obvious, pleasing answer in the world. “My darling, beautiful Alisha, is it worth it to spend months brining a pickle? Does rendering the common, humble cucumber into a treasure for the tongue not take some patience sacrificed, and tempers tried? Are you not my greatest service of all?”

And with that, we kissed, drank wine, and called over our darling little Sarai to enjoy a plate of dates. She pecked her papa on the cheek and told us stories about her doll. When I looked into Baraquiél’s eyes I saw the crackle of joyous lightning.

Love, true love, is often hard to find. But I lived in the
Land of Nod once, wiped from the face of the earth, and I myself
won a husband from the stars. Strange, us forgotten Cainites.
Foreign in our magic, sinful in our ways.

Proud people, though, the memory of Nod.

And for Asherah?

I dance.