

Chapter 01: Time Lost, Time Regained.

Wind and sand blow without mercy against six faltering tents posted somewhere on the desert road from Persepolis. Tonight is dark and evil, filled with omniscient forces gathered around a besieged party of rebels trapped in an oasis of death. Monstrous vehicles pelt out light, piercing the blackness; waiting, seething, holding vigil with masters gathered in a scanty muster.

Shining through a dismal sky is the magnificent star, Vega. An old man braves the onset of a violent lightning storm to offer supplication on his knees. Outstretched palms reaches for the glorious star in desperation. His eyes blaze with fire; his voice determined to be heard above howling phantoms.

“Almighty creator, your humble servant Peki pleads for thy mercy. Help us oh Lord in our hour of need. Protect us from those who will do us harm – hasn’t she suffered enough in her short years?”

Lightning bolts split the sky in brilliant splendor. Thunder clasps resonate through the man’s wary chest. He wipes a flood of tears escaping down his brown cheeks. A bloodstained hand drops on his shoulder. He peers at the soldier, an Anuk General beaten by the ravages of time, yet his visage remains large and intimidating. “Markus, did you find water?” A sullen look instead of a parched voice answers the question.

“Three days under siege. We won’t last much longer.”

Peki accepts a helping hand off tired knees. Dark scarves don blistered faces to stave off the sting of whipping sand. They trudge towards the largest tent at the camp’s center, with despair fermenting in empty stomachs. Peki pulls the warrior close. “Why haven’t they finished us off? How many are left?”

Markus shrugs. “Scouts estimate 100. Curses on House Moira of ENlil. We will hold the line as long as we can, but...we are only 20.”

“Thank you General.” Peki pulls the tent flaps in a slow, controlled manner, careful not to startle three women lamenting prayers near a 25-year-old girl in a bloody gown. Vacant blue eyes stare up at him. Flickers of light from an urn’s calm fire distracts his gaze. Eyes fall on a motionless bundle wrapped tight in cotton, absent any discernible features under its shroud. His face crumples, legs give out. His stomach constricts, and heart leaps out in despair. Lungs empty with silent cries choking every fiber of his being.

The chanting ends abruptly as the girl rolls on bruised knees to crawl towards the crumpled man. Her long dirty-blond hair drags as her head drops low, dusting the ground with each push forward. Peki straightens up to receive the broken creature he cared for all her life – loved her as his own child. She climbs on him, holding on with a weak grip.

“Your Grace, you must rest. Regain your strength for I fear you are the only one who can protect us.”

Long arm reaches for Peki’s face. “My beloved will come. Oh Peki, my race is a violent one. Look at what we have done to the world. It is my fault.”

“Nonsense. You speak of things you know nothing about.”

“But I do. If I were born into the common human stock, none of it would have happened. You would be safe, and baby Kor...Koray would be safe.” Heartbreak pours out in her trembling voice and shaking body. She closes her eyes at Peki’s embrace. “I am the ‘Destroyer-of-Worlds,’ so proclaimed by my ancestors, Lord ENlil and ENki.”

“There’ll be no talk of that as long as I’m alive.”

“What happens when you have passed? I’ll go on for a thousand years without guidance. Not even Samiri can offer your wisdom.”

“If he were here, what would he advise?”

She thinks for a moment. Pale cheeks redden, pores on cold skin swell with heat radiating throughout her body. Bloodshot eyes darken as they travel to the innocent near the fire. “He would say, ‘Kill them all.’”

The silent women bow their heads with eyes shut tight, waiting divine light to descend from heaven. But there will be no such thing. Instead, the girl’s blood surges with her inherent nature. The power coursing through her veins runs more potent than any Anuk with claims of a direct line to the Forefathers

from the stars. Between the delicate drum of a heartbeat, she disappears, leaving the tent's flap rustling with howling wind. All eyes fall on the vacant spot near the urn.

Soldiers holding vigil are startled by a wraith darting towards the oasis' dry edge. Lightning flash illuminates the Anuk descending on the besiegers' encampment.

Enemy spot-lamps fall on the tall girl with a swaddled clump held high for all to see. A line of sentries train rifles on the haggard intruder. Some tremble, others strengthen their resolve.

"This is your legacy!" Her hateful gaze travels slowly from left to right. The enemy gathers quick to bear witness to the proclamation. Markus and his soldiers struggle to reach a bluff to lend aid to their Queen.

"Forget this night for it deceives you about tomorrow. Forget the dead for they will turn away from your embrace. Remember my dead!" Her eyes glaze over with tears threatening to weaken her resolve. She tightens her grip on Koray to remind herself, *this ends now!* "Surrender your souls to what you will remember." She kisses her bundle on its way to the sand. "Tonight, I will taste blood like your pagan ancestors did...all of you, descendants of man. Why? Because the blood of the ancients burn in me; the light of Orion shines in me. The mysteries of Lyra are mine to herald, for I am Persephone – bringer of your doom!"

Fear covers the sentries' faces. She disappears between desperate blinks. Howls of death compete with thunder from above. Gun-fire erupts. Blasts of light crisscross in wild desperation to catch the attacker. Bodies fall with hot blood pouring on the sand. Internal organs spew out with crimson splatter as they are ripped out in a fury.

The wave of death circumambulates the oasis seven times in quick succession, eradicating every soul it encounters. Markus urges his soldiers to fire with extreme prejudice on anyone left.

Dust clouds in Persephone's wake dissipates at the end of the assault. Her blank stare cries out for relief. The living sees the Queen tumble to the bloody ground.

Markus darts off to her, pushing his mind past gut-wrenching fear creeping up his spine. He drops hard, panicking at the weakened body before him. He stares into her fading eyes. "Majesty," he sobs, "you can't leave us."

"My protector – I remember...the girl of 12, saved by strong arms, these arms. I couldn't protect her...forgive me. Tell my husband, kill them all."

"You can't die. They can't win."

"They will never win, for the awakening will come. Markus, grieve not for in my life I've known true love, friendship, loyalty. Remember me, Markus. Remember Koray."

The light in Persephone's eyes goes out. Her body drops limp. Markus cries out to the sky with piercing rage. His wailing brings all from the oasis into a circle. They fall on knees and bow their heads. Peki clutches the wrapped child and drops on his Queen's cold lap.

Thunder rumbles down on the grief stricken. Clouds let loose their stores in torrential downpour – giving credit to the lie of Persephone's godhood. Bloodstained sand is washed clean as a testament to the eventual renewal of things. In this tragedy, both Markus and Peki fear, no such miracle will bless the departed.