

Eye of the Oracle

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MERLIN'S PRAYER

O King of Light, so true and wise,
Who grants in troubled times
A wealth of counsel from above
And prophecy in rhymes,

I ask Thee now to pour Thy mind
In measure after measure,
For days of darkness snuff Thy light
And rob our only treasure.

An evil power snares the land
Deceiving flesh and blood,
And even kings are fooled by her
Beguiling, blinding flood.

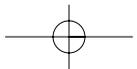
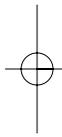
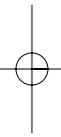
But hast thou granted her a time
To foster lies and hate?
Dost Thou foresee what I cannot,
A day this flood abates?

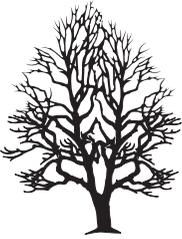
A flood of murders, vengeance, wrath,
And hatefulness within
'Tis worse than forty days of rain
That purged the earth of sin.

For in this flood we must endure
And swim amidst the mire,
While kings do battle over words
And murder what they sire.

I beg you now to bring an ark,
A savior, king, a knight,
And rescue those who wait in faith
To see his sword of light.

Prepare me, Lord, to live till I
This noble son behold,
For prophets dream, but few awake
To see your plan unfold.





BOOK 1
In the Beginning

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east
of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming
sword which turned every way, to keep
the way of the tree of life.

(Genesis 3:24)



PROLOGUE

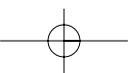
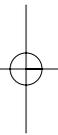
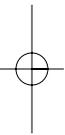
I am a daughter of the earth, sown and rooted in the soil of the land of the dead. I am an underborn, a slave girl, a bondservant to a dark mistress of evil. For centuries I have toiled, flinching at the sound of whips, grimacing at their sting on my back, and mourning for my fellow slaves as they expired at the hands of our tormentors. One by one, they perished, and now I stand alone.

This is my story, and a story of sorrow often begins in darkness. I must lead you through the valley of the shadow of death, for only a journey through shadows will allow us to fully comprehend the beauty of heavenly light.

Alas! The darkest shadows are cast by God's very own image, rebels who stand against the holy light implanted by their creator. For those who see the light and yet raise a fist at its source are the darkest souls indeed.

You must meet these foul creatures and become aware of their sinister plots. As they hunger to steal the souls of men, you will learn to despise their dark paths and hope for the light of day to expose their evil deeds. Take heart. Though the story begins in a flood of darkness, the light of the world will guide you toward the morning star, and I will greet you on the other side of dawn.







CHAPTER

THE SEEDS OF EDEN

Angling into a plunging dive, the dragon blasted a fireball at Lilith and Naamah. The two women dropped to the ground just as the flaming sphere sizzled over their heads. Naamah swatted her hair, whipping away stinging sparks that rained down from the fireball's tail.

With a flurry of wings and a gust of wind, the dragon swooped low. As razor sharp claws jabbed at the women, Naamah lunged to the side, and Lilith rolled through the grass. A single claw caught Lilith's long black dress, ripping it as the dragon lifted toward the sky.

Naamah jumped to her feet and helped Lilith up. The dragon made a sharp turn in the air, and, with its jagged-toothed maw stretching open, charged back toward them.

Lilith pushed a trembling hand into the pocket of her dress. "Only one hope left," she said, panting. Pulling out a handful of black powder, she tossed it over her head. "Give me darkness!" she cried.

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The powder spread out into a cloud and surrounded the women. Naamah coughed and spat. The noxious fumes blinded her and coated her throat with an acrid film. A hand grabbed her wrist and jerked her down to her knees just as another flaming cannon ball passed over their heads.

“Crawl!” Lilith ordered.

Naamah scooted alongside Lilith as she scuffled over the dry tufts of grass. Sparks from the rain of fire ignited tiny blazes that illuminated their hands as they passed through the veil of darkness.

Naamah gagged but refused to cough. With a guardian dragon hovering somewhere overhead, giving any clue to their whereabouts could be fatal.

After several minutes, Lilith whispered, “I think I found the cave.”

Her hands, barely visible and clutching a small bundle of sticks, crawled over a bed of gravel and then to a rocky floor. When she finally stopped, Naamah sat up and gazed into the dark cloud behind her. She squeezed fractured words through her tingling throat. “Will the dragon follow?”

“Shachar is persistent,” Lilith rasped, “but she is no fool.” She coughed quietly, clearing her voice. “She will not risk the possibility that we’re a diversion for a more dangerous attack. If she doesn’t find us soon, she will go back on patrol.”

“What about her dragon sense? Won’t that draw her to us?”

“I’m not sure. A dragon’s danger alarm is still a mystery to me. I think since our only direct threat is to the ancient garden she patrols, her sense of protection will draw her there.”

The black cloud began to dissipate, revealing the mouth of a shallow cave, barely deep enough to keep out the wind. Close to the back wall, the women found a flat stone and built a fire next to it with Lilith’s collection of sticks. When the crackling flames began to rise, Lilith and Naamah sat on the stone to rest.

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From her pocket, Lilith withdrew a small bundle wrapped in a black cloth. After untying a knot on one end, she produced an earthenware cup filled with herbs. "The way to Eden has yet another obstacle," she said, tossing a pinch of the herbs into the campfire. "Our task will not be easy."

Sparks flew toward the cave's low ceiling, riding on thin strings of silvery green smoke. Naamah breathed deeply of the aroma-saturated air, a pungent blend of camphor and garlic. She exhaled, tasting the herbs at the back of her tongue. "What could be more difficult than getting past a dragon?"

"There are forces in our world that dwarf the power of dragons. I have foreseen much that you don't know."

As cool, damp air chiseled away at the fire's rising warmth, Naamah scooted toward her sister, overlapping the fringes of their silky black dresses on the flat stone. Barefoot and shivering in the draft, she wrapped her arms around herself. "Didn't you know it would be this cold? We should have worn our cloaks."

"It is only temporary. The cold air is a path that leads us to the garden." Lilith pushed her long black hair off her shoulder and huddled close, her voice low. "Naamah, you must have more faith in me. My husband's arts have allowed me to see another world, the world of phantasmal knowledge. It is the realm of future possibilities, where I can see what might happen."

Naamah folded her hands. "What *might* happen?"

The bushes rustled just outside the entrance. Lilith glanced over her shoulder, her lips pressing into two pale lines as she set the cup of herbs on the cave's floor and drew a dagger from a sheath on her belt.

"Just the wind," Naamah whispered. "If it were the dragon, we would have heard her wings."

"Perhaps." Lilith's knuckles whitened as she wrung the dagger's wooden hilt. "But even the wind carries spirits who might expose our plans."

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Naamah waited for the color to return to Lilith's fingers. "So . . . why are you counting on phantasmal knowledge when it can't tell you for sure what's going to happen?"

"Because our opponent is so predictable." Lilith placed her long, thin hand on Naamah's thigh. "Life is the ultimate game of chance, with millions of possible moves, so I only see what might happen. My choices and our opponent's choices mesh in a tapestry through time, and I can see where some of the threads lead if I follow one or more of the thousands of patterns that fill my eyes. So far, Elohim has reacted to my moves exactly as I expected he would."

Lilith waved the dagger over the fire. A bright, angelic creature swirled inside the rising smoke, its image warping and undulating as the draft swept it around. Inside the flames, a red dragon appeared, jets of fire blasting from its nostrils. The dragon's blaze licked at the angel's bare feet as it whipped around in the smoke's endless circles. "Our plans rest on Samyaza's shoulders, and if he fails, our doom is certain. We must prepare for that possibility."

Naamah rubbed her hands up and down her bare arms. "How can this husband of yours give you the power to see the future? I have never known a man who could see past a bottle . . . or a brothel."

"You have never known such a man, because you don't know the Watchers." She thrust the dagger back to its sheath. "Your men are all fools."

Naamah pulled the hem of her dress high above her knee. "Fools, yes, but their money spends as well as yours."

Lilith slapped Naamah's hand and yanked the skirt back down. "Your harlotry will be the death of you someday! Sister or not, I cannot protect you from yourself."

Naamah caressed her stinging hand and scowled. "You didn't call it harlotry back when we were collecting wild oats together. You've been no fun at all since you got religion with Samyaza."

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Lilith grabbed Naamah's shoulder and pulled her almost nose to nose, hissing. "This *religion*, as you call it, might just save your life. If you want to survive, you had better listen to me!"

Naamah jerked away and scooted to the far edge of the stone. "I'll listen. Just don't turn me into something unearthly, like that iridescent dog you keep in your dungeon."

"That was from one of my first potions, and you know it." Lilith sighed and reached for Naamah's arm. "If Samyaza wins, then we won't have to turn into anything unearthly. If he loses . . . well, he need not know our alternate plans."

"Is that why you're so jumpy? Do you think your husband's spying on you?"

"I do feel the presence of a spy, but I doubt that Samyaza sent it."

"So what should we do?" Naamah asked.

"This spy is of no consequence. Shachar is the greater danger, but she will leave the area soon enough, and we will press on. Until then, we have time for an important step in my plan." Lilith lifted a thin cord around her neck and pulled a leather pouch from her bosom. She loosened the drawstring and carefully poured into her palm a dozen or more white crystals the size of cottonseeds, covered with tiny spikes that made each crystal resemble the head of a mace. "These are the seeds of Samyaza's power. With them we will be able to plant his potency wherever we please."

Naamah touched one with her fingertip and rocked it back and forth. "We will?" she asked.

Lilith poured the seeds back into the pouch but kept one in her palm and closed her fingers around it. "Our master will teach you how to use it soon enough, but first we must prepare ourselves as vessels—myself to wield the power and you to receive the planting." She picked up her cup, dropped the seed inside, and stirred the contents with a slender black root, holding the cup just above the flames as the herbs melted into a thick brew. After seven swirls, she

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crumpled the stirrer and threw it into the mix. As purple foam rose above the brim and dribbled over the sides, she waved her hand over the top and sang in a low, mournful voice.

O Master of the midnight skies,
The god of darkness, light disguised,
Provide for me the gift of flight
And give me wings to flee my plight.

Now through the waters guide my strife,
And grant the gift of lasting life.
Regenerate my body whole;
For this I give my living soul.

And should my husband learn my plans,
O let his reins come to my hands,
For strength alone cannot compare
To woman's last beguiling snare.

O let us be the farmers' hands
To sow the seeds of fallen man.
The giants planted here must grow
Escaping from these lands below.

In Naamah's womb prepare your soil.
With calloused hands we'll sweat and toil.
O make your seeds become like trees
To trample Adam's hopeless pleas.

With both hands trembling, Lilith raised the cup to her mouth and took a long, slow drink. She closed her eyes and grimaced, a shudder crawling across her pale cheeks. After licking her lips, she rubbed some of the liquid into each of her palms, then extended the cup to Naamah.

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“You must be joking!” Naamah said, squinting at the curling purple fumes. “I’m not drinking that!”

Lilith took Naamah’s hand and wrapped her fingers around the handle. “Just smell it! That’s all I ask. Then decide if you want to drink or not.”

Naamah tightened her grip on the handle and gazed into the cup. Thick gray liquid bubbled inside. Warm vapors and a pleasant aroma bathed her senses. As she took in the delightful smell, her throat dried out, filling her with a sudden desire to drink. Her tongue clamped to the roof of her mouth, parched and swelling. It was more than a desire. She had to drink. Now!

She guzzled the liquid, then slung the cup against the cave wall and glared at Lilith. “You tricked me!”

Lilith wagged her finger. “It was for your own good.”

Naamah crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the earthen shards. “I *am* going to turn into something disgusting, aren’t I?”

“The potion does much more than that. Even if our earthly bodies die, we will be able to exist in another form. As our new bodies age, we will be able to use Samyaza’s power to regenerate ourselves. But if we can get on the boat, we won’t have to worry about unsavory transformations at all.”

Naamah swung her head back toward Lilith and rose to her feet. “On the boat, you say?”

“Yes. The most obvious phantasmal thread leads to a terrible flood. Our enemy is building a boat that we could use to save ourselves, but the builders have a strange shield around it. Although normal humans can penetrate it, the Watchers and Nephilim haven’t been able to. They want to destroy it and change Elohim’s plan to flood the world. I, however, wish to find a way to get us on board in case they fail.”

Naamah paced slowly in front of her sister. “I know a man who is working on a boat. He said it is very large and well-supplied.”

“That would be the one,” Lilith replied. “But the builders are unlikely to give away the secret of the shield.”

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“When he is at the market, he speaks only of supplying the boat.” Naamah stopped, cocked her head upward, and smiled. “But when he visits my room, his lips become quite loose.”

Lilith scowled. “Loose being the operative word.” She stood and slipped her hand around Naamah’s elbow. “Did this man mention the shield?”

Naamah swiveled her hips, twirling her dress slowly back and forth. “No, but if you let me sing a song to him, I can charm him into spilling his secrets.”

“Oh, really?” Lilith tipped her head upward and stroked her chin. “What’s his name?”

“Ham.” A burning pain drilled into Naamah’s pelvis. She laid a hand over her stomach but tried not to show how much it hurt. “I don’t know his family name.”

“I wish you had told me about this before,” Lilith said, tapping her foot on the ground. “We have to find this man.”

The pain stabbed Naamah again, but deeper than before, as if something had grasped her womb with sharpened claws. Still, she forced herself to keep a calm face. “If you’d let me in on your secrets once in a while, maybe I would have known you were trying to get on board.”

Lilith glanced out at the bushes again and slowly turned back. “Very well. I will tell you why we are on this journey. You will soon see how all my plans tie together.” She picked up a long stick and stirred the coals in their fire, creating a billowing gray plume. A new vision coalesced in the smoke, an angel standing next to a tree. The fire spewed a finger of flame through the angel’s hand, making him appear to have a brilliant sword that flashed as he stood guard.

“That is the Tree of Life, and I have long coveted its fruit.” Lilith pointed at the flame. “Here is our problem. One of the Cherubim protects it with a sword that creates a shield of light.”

“I see,” Naamah said. “Now that you have one of the Seraphim on your side . . .”

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“You’re way ahead of me.” Lilith glanced outside and checked the brightening morning sky. “Samyaza will be there soon. I want to see him battle the Cherub and win the sword, then we can pluck the fruit at our leisure. Once he has regained his weapon, he will be invincible, perhaps even against the archangels.”

Lilith arose and, bending low, sneaked out of the cave. Naamah followed close behind, pressing her hand against her belly again. Whatever that potion was, it seemed to be turning her organs inside out.

Constantly glancing at the sky, they wound their way through a dense forest, padding softly on a wide clover path until it opened into a field. Lilith halted suddenly and stooped next to a leafy bush. Naamah leaned over her, trying to follow her sister’s line of sight. In the distance, a white glow arose above a thick, thorny hedge that extended as far as the eye could see.

Lilith’s voice softened to a low hiss. “The hedge is Eden’s boundary. The thorns are sharper than any sword, and the poison in the tips will shrivel you into a prune in seconds. The only way to enter is through the guarded gate.” She skulked to the hedge and followed it toward the glow, Naamah once again trailing her. As they drew closer, a gap appeared in the hedge, and the guarded tree came into view. Stooping again, Lilith pointed at a beautiful, white-robed angel. “His sword shoots out a beam of light that can kill us even this far away. As long as he waves it over his head, it creates an almost impenetrable shield around himself and the tree.”

Naamah settled quietly behind her and peered at the darkening sky. Black clouds boiled overhead. Bolts of lightning streaked jagged forks across the heavens. “Something weird is happening,” she whispered.

“I didn’t expect this.” Lilith’s brow bent downward. “Samyaza planned to come by stealth, not with a lightning fanfare.”

Naamah pointed toward the top of a tall sycamore tree. “I see him.”

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A winged angel, bright and shining against the stormy backdrop, glided to the ground, his silver hair flowing in the freshening breeze. Dressed in white robes, drawn tight at his waist by a golden sash, he strode to the gate and spoke to the other angel in a booming voice. "Greetings in the name of Elohim."

The Cherub nodded, waving the sword to keep the shield in place. "May our God be glorified forever. What brings a Seraph to Eden's boundary today?"

"I have come to relieve you of your duty. You are to return to the council for a new assignment."

The Cherub glanced up at the troubled sky. "Something is amiss. I sense God's hand moving in the heavens, yet no messenger has alerted me of a change."

"I am the messenger." Samyaza held out his hand. "Give me the sword and go your way."

The Cherub lowered the sword, and the shield blinked off, but he kept the hilt firmly in his grip. "With all due respect, my liege, what is your name?"

"I am Samyaza, prince of the guardian angels." He took a step closer, bringing him within arm's reach of the Cherub. "It would not be wise to continue questioning my authority. Remember Lucifer's folly."

The sword trembled in the Cherub's hand, but his voice remained steady. "Your name is familiar to me, and you have the wings of a Seraph, but I am here by order of the Majesty on High, so I cannot abandon my post on your word alone. Only Michael can countermand the order."

Streaks of darkness shot out from Samyaza's eyes, splashing the Cherub with a sizzling, oily resin that stuck fast to his robes and spread quickly over his hands and face. The sword's light flashed on in the blinded angel's hands, sending a bright beam blazing into the sky. Samyaza lunged forward and shook the Cherub's wrist, slinging the blade under the branches.

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Pushing the angel to the side, Samyaza flew toward the trunk, snatched up the sword, and stalked toward the gate. The Cherub threw himself toward the sound of Samyaza's pounding footsteps and wrapped his arms around his neck. The powerful Seraph reached back, grabbed the Cherub's hair, and heaved him toward the tree. The resin-covered angel slammed against the trunk, knocking white fruit to the ground. Samyaza marched toward him, his sword raised.

A loud clap of thunder shook the earth. Another angel, the largest yet, burst from the clouds and zoomed to the ground, landing with a drawn sword raised to strike. "Be gone, Samyaza, you wretched liar. You will not have this tree or its fruit."

Samyaza backed away, visibly trembling. "Michael! I have no quarrel with you. This was my sword before I—"

"Before you left our Lord and Master to satisfy your carnal desires." Michael helped the Cherub to his feet, and with a wave of his hand, the black resin melted away. "Take the sword and crawl back into your hole with your corrupted followers. It will be nothing more than a carving knife to you now."

Samyaza held the sword aloft, but it created no beam. Not even the tiniest spark flashed from the blade. He thrust the tip into a patch of clover and drove the sword into the ground up to the hilt, then shook his fist at Michael. "The people will follow us, not the tyrant in heaven! They want to be free of his authority, and we will teach them to follow the longings of their hearts!"

Michael waved his sword and a new, brighter shield covered the tree. As the dome swirled with radiance, the entire plot of ground ripped away from the earth, uprooting the tree and carrying Michael, the Cherub, and the fallen fruit with it. "If people want true life and freedom," Michael said as they slowly lifted into the sky, "they will look above. Like rain from the heavens, that is the source of their deliverance."

Boiling clouds swallowed the shimmering tree, and, for a moment, all was quiet. Samyaza stared at the ominous ceiling, slowly

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turning and backing away from the garden. His wings beat the air, and, just as his feet lifted off the ground, a dragon burst out of the clouds shooting twin jets of fire from its nostrils.

Black streams surged from Samyaza's eyes, colliding with the fire. The impact created a sizzling eruption of smoky gas that spewed high into the air. The dragon pulled out of its dive and zoomed by Samyaza, smacking him with its tail before ascending again toward the clouds. Samyaza toppled, but a flurry of his wings kept him from striking the ground.

Lilith leaned over and whispered to Naamah. "Samyaza likely remembers how his master conquered the first female human. It will be interesting to see how he deals with the first female dragon."

Samyaza yanked the sword out of the ground and stabbed it at the sky. "Does the mate of Arramos only fight when she can attack by surprise?" He turned in a slow circle, his eyes darting in all directions. "Come and meet me in single combat, if you dare!"

Shachar burst out of the clouds again, and with a great beating of her wings, she landed in front of Samyaza. "I am not a dog to be baited by a bone," she roared.

The Seraph spread out his arms. "Yet, you are here, panting and drooling for the very bone you disdain."

"Only to lance a demonic abscess." She pawed the ground with her claws. "If you desire a fair fight, drop the sword and let us see who wields the greater power."

"As you wish." Samyaza bowed dramatically and released the sword.

"Step away from it," Shachar ordered. "Far away."

Samyaza marched several paces to one side and gestured toward the sword. "Satisfied?"

Shachar nodded her scaly head. "Trusting you is a fool's game, but I will risk what I must to rid the world of its greatest plague."

The shining angel flashed a wicked smile. "Since you are the aggressor, I invite your first volley."

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Shachar lunged at him, her teeth bared and her nostrils flaming. Samyaza dipped under her jets and latched on to her tail as she passed over. With a mighty spin, he slung her in the direction of the sword. The dragon crashed to the ground and slid next to the hilt. As she lifted her wobbly head, her eyes seemed glazed and distant.

Samyaza zoomed to her side and grabbed the sword. With a dramatic thrust, he plunged the blade into the dragon's underbelly. Shachar let out an ear-piercing shriek and writhed in the grass. "Coward!" she screamed. "Deceiver!" She spat out a weak ball of fire, but it rolled past the towering Seraph as he backed away.

When the dragon's throes settled down, Samyaza grasped the hilt of the sword and withdrew it from her body, jumping away from a gush of fluids. He glared at the bloody blade and dropped it to the ground. "Disgusting creatures!" With a flap of his wings, he lifted into the air and disappeared in the blanket of clouds.

Shachar opened her mouth as if trying to speak. She twitched for a moment, then heaved a final sigh as her eyes slowly closed.

Lilith and Naamah ran toward the dragon. Lilith snatched up the sword and wiped the blade on the grass. "Samyaza might not be able to use this," she said, turning the blade over to clean the other side, "but if I can find the secret behind its flame, it could be a powerful weapon indeed."

She propped the blade on her shoulder and strode through the gateway, now unattended by angel or dragon. Naamah followed, gazing at the devastated garden. Knotted trees with bent crowns and twisted branches plagued the endless fields of dry grass. On one squared-off plot, leggy bushes hunkered over a tangled mess of tall weeds and thorny vines. Hundreds of thistles raised bristly heads among row after row of dwarfed fruit trees and shriveled vegetables. Naamah let out a low whistle. This was no paradise, no land of perfection, despite the claims of her childhood songs.

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Lilith tramped down to the bottom of the hole where the tree once stood. She stooped, pinching a sample of soil and drawing it close to her eyes. “Not a trace. Not a root or seed anywhere.”

Naamah noticed a glinting speck in the dirt. “Here’s something!” She plucked out a smooth white pebble, barely as large as her fingertip, and handed it to Lilith. “Could this be a seed?” she asked. “It looks like a pearl.”

“It could be.” Lilith knelt where Naamah found the pebble and used her finger to stir the soil, a mixture of moist brown dirt and a strange white paste. “Here are two more.” She collected them and slid all three into her pocket. “We’ll keep them for posterity.”

“Posterity?”

“Future generations. I don’t know how long it takes to grow a Tree of Life, but I intend to find out.”

Lilith gazed toward a path that led into a stand of skinny oaks. “The other tree should be in that direction,” she said, pointing.

As she headed toward the wood, she swiped Samyaza’s sword in front of her as if fending off an invisible enemy or perhaps testing its weight and balance. Naamah had to jog to keep pace with her sister. Lilith’s stern expression told her it wasn’t a good time to ask questions, so she just stayed at her side, taking in the sights of loss and waste in the massive garden.

After following the path through the trees, they arrived at a glade. In the center of a circle of grass, a tree, heavy with red, oblong fruit, stood tall and lush. Lilith strode right up to the nearest branch and called out, “Lucifer, my lord and master, I bring you vital information.”

A fresh breeze flapped Lilith’s dress as she stood in stoic silence, the tip of the sword touching the ground in front of her. The wind crawled up Naamah’s legs, bringing her a chill. The pain in her stomach had settled, but a new queasiness took over. Something foul drew near, worse than a fetid carcass. Whatever it was seemed

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to seep through her skin and into her heart, making it slow to a few, sickening thumps.

Soon, a gentle hissing joined the shush of the wind. A long, thick snake slithered out onto the branch and rested its head near a bobbing fruit. Lilith extended her arm and pushed her hand under the serpent's belly. Bearing scales like sun-baked leather, black hexagons meshed with olive green, the snake crept along Lilith's pale arm. Its tongue darted in and out from its triangular head as it spoke in a slow, threatening cadence. "If you have come to tell me about Naamah's customer, you have come in vain. While I am in this cursed condition, my disciples sneak in through the garden's western gate. One of my agents overheard your conversation and reported the news about this boat builder."

"So that's what we heard in the bushes," Lilith said. "It *was* a spy."

The snake flicked its tongue, touching her cheek with its forked points. "I send spies on my enemies and my followers, especially followers as ambitious as you."

As the snake wrapped a coil around Lilith's neck, she lifted her chin and swallowed hard. "And how shall we use the information, my lord?"

The snake maneuvered its head in front of Lilith's eyes, wavering back and forth in a hypnotic sway. "I sent my agent to speak to my servant, Lamech, son of Mathushael. I have ordered Lamech to adopt Naamah into his family. Naamah's new brother, Tubalcain, knows Ham and will offer her to be Ham's wife."

"His wife?" Naamah said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Ham is a regular customer, but that doesn't mean I want him for a husband!"

The serpent's head shot toward Naamah, its fangs extended as it bit the empty air just inches in front of her eyes. Naamah staggered backwards, catching one of the tree's branches to keep her balance. Recoiling over Lilith's shoulders, the serpent hissed, "Either marry him or die!"

EYE OF THE ORACLE

Naamah shivered in the tree's shadow, holding her stomach again as the fierce pain stabbed her insides.

The serpent turned its flaming red eyes back to Lilith. "Ham's father will recognize your name, so you must change it before you meet him. We cannot allow him to know who and what you are."

"Of course, my lord." Lilith kept her head tilted upward. "Do you have a preference?"

"Choose whatever pleases you. I will arrange things to make your new name work."

Lilith smiled. "As you wish, my master."

The serpent's tongue flicked again. "I have news about the sword."

Lilith lifted the blade. "The secret to its flames?"

"Yes. The sword is designed to detect the nature of the hands that grasp it. The flames shoot from the blade only if the hands are innocent and undefiled. Of course, the Cherub who guarded the Tree of Life was holy, so he was able to use the blade's protective shield over the tree."

Lilith ran a finger along the blade. "And Samyaza's hands have been deemed corrupt." She gazed at the grip, wiggling her fingers around it. "Can the sword be fooled into thinking it is being held by holy hands?"

"Perhaps. It has no thinking process of its own. It merely responds to how it was forged."

Lilith studied the etchings in the blade's silvery metal. "Who are the two dragons doing battle in the design?"

"I am one of them, and I struggle with a dragon who is to come, a warrior who will fight with me to become king of the dragons. Michael etched that symbol when he gave the sword to Samyaza and commissioned him to find and protect the holy dragon who would come to try to conquer me."

"I see," Lilith said, nodding. "So this king must have holy hands in order to defeat you."

THE SEEDS OF EDEN

“Yes. But since this usurper could be a human representative for the dragons, our goal is to corrupt every family line, whether dragon or human, with the seed of the fallen ones. But, beware. Elohim has already hatched a plan to thwart ours. I know little more than a code phrase one of my disciples overheard—‘oracles of fire.’ ”

“That’s it? No context?”

“Only that there are two of them. Perhaps a pair of angels commissioned specifically to infiltrate our ranks and destroy our work from within.”

“I will watch for them.” Lilith lowered the sword. “And when will you become a dragon again and leave the garden?”

As the serpent slithered along Lilith’s arm, she raised her hand to the tree. It coiled around the branch, and its head turned back toward her, its voice echoing like a ghostly whisper. “When I steal the body of a certain dragon, I will be whole once more.” It crawled back into the thicker foliage and disappeared.

Naamah ran from the tree and sidled up to Lilith, crossing her arms again. Lilith chuckled and kissed the top of her head. “Don’t worry, Sister. Yours will be a marriage of convenience. We can dispose of Ham when he has served his purpose.”

Naamah turned her back to Lilith, her arms still crossed. “Then *you* marry him. You seem ready to betray your husband.”

Lilith grabbed Naamah’s shoulder and spun her back around, her eyes turning bright scarlet. “I’m doing this for us!”

The pain from Lilith’s grip made Naamah shake. As she stared at her sister’s fiery eyes, she felt tears forming in her own.

Lilith slowly relaxed her fingers. Stroking Naamah’s hair, she leaned close and whispered, “Lucifer has given me the means to carry out the plan that will save our lives. He knows Samyaza is not likely to cooperate, but I don’t really want to betray my own husband.” She pressed the tip of the sword into the grass. “I won’t resort to draining his power unless I have to.”

EYE OF THE ORACLE

“Draining his power?” Naamah pointed at the sword. “With that?”

“No.” Lilith spread out her fingers, showing Naamah her palm. Splotches of purple stained her skin from the heel of her hand to her fingertips. “My seed concoction has many uses, and absorbing potency will come in handy.” Reaching up, she caressed one of the red fruits dangling from the tree. “Speaking of seeds”—she plucked the fruit—“I think these might also come in handy.”

“For posterity again?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” Lilith dropped the apple-sized fruit on the ground and chopped down with the sword, slicing it cleanly in half. Kneeling, she picked through the flesh, collecting six seeds, then, spreading out her fingers again, she let the sparkling red seeds roll around on her stained palm.

“They look like rubies!” Naamah said.

Lilith dropped them into her pocket along with the others. “Much more valuable than rubies, Sister. They are the seeds of corruption. And those who control the corrupting influence wield the power to rule the corrupted.”