

# **The Goddess Embraced**

*Book Three of the  
Saga of  
Edda-Earth*

**Deborah L. Davitt**

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## **Chapter 1: Ascending**

*Something that often gets lost when people train young soldiers is that everyone needs something to fight for. Raw patriotism, a fervent belief in a god, will get traction from an ideologue, but most people find it difficult to risk their lives for an abstraction. They can, however, be highly motivated by concrete reality. By seeing say, a central symbol of their civilization going up in flames. If a Judean saw the Temple attacked, a Roman saw the Senate or the Colosseum going up in flames, an Egyptian saw the Great Pyramid leveled, or if a Gaul from Britannia saw Stonehenge destroyed by a bomb, they would grasp that it was a building. But they would also see it as an attempt to destroy their identity, their people, and their way of life. That can be highly motivating, in the short-term. Seeing hundreds or thousands of your own people die? A particularly vicious attack can be a rallying point. “Remember Gazaca!” “Remember Ecbatana!” “Remember the Day of Transition!”*

*But what happens when entire populations are displaced? What happens when the second generation is born, out of their homeland, and no longer remembers Gotaland, Gazaca, or Ecbatana? What happens when the memories of these places are dull, even for the people who once lived there? How do you motivate a population that is weary of war unending?*

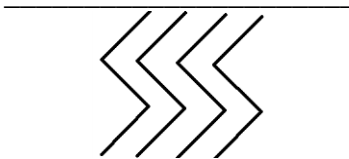
*A soldier has to make the abstract concrete. If the notion of a lost homeland is too abstract, he or she must find a concrete reality that is acceptable as a reason to fight, beyond mere duty. Some people get by on a pack mentality: “I’m fighting to protect people to my left and my right. These are my family, now. Together, we will endure.” Others put the focus, as I have always done, on the home reality: “I’m fighting to protect my family and home, the sanctuary in my mind where my spouse, my children, my parents dwell, that golden place where I can return when the fight is done.”*

*It’s actually very important to have that reality, that stable home-life. Otherwise, all you will be, is the fighter, the soldier, the killer. And you will awaken one morning, and realize there is nothing at all left inside you but death, and all the high ideals and abstractions for which you fought are meaningless, without a reality to which they apply.*

*So what happens to a soldier for whom the home has been lost, who has nothing left to fight for, beyond mere survival on the next battlefield, and the next, and the next? What happens to the soldier who has lost that feeling of fraternity with those around them?*

*I can’t cite statistics. But I think it’s fair to say that if they don’t find another motivation, those who are already dead of soul will quickly find death of body as well. A leader needs to be aware of these issues, find those affected, and help them deal with the problem, before the malaise of spirit spreads. Unfortunately, most commanders I have met, do not see this as part of their responsibilities. That’s a mentality that has to change, because I do not see this war ending inside the next ten years. Unless the world happens to end first. Please. Save your laughter.*

*—Adam ben Maor, “Leadership vs. Command.” Speech given to the Judean War College, Februarius 14, 1993 AC.*



Martius 19, 1992 AC

*“I have movement.”* The words were a hiss over the radio in Solinus Matrugena’s ear.

“Where?”

*“Three o’clock. Behind the wrecked cars.”*

Solinus edged forward around the side of the commercial building he’d taken cover behind, his assault rifle in his hands, secured over his back by a leather strap that showed scorch marks here and there. His fatigues, gray-green-khaki, were theoretically designed to blend in with the desert and scrubland around them, as well as urban settings like this one, and he wore a flak vest over it, in similar colors. A round helmet, with a small black rank insignia on one side, and a Roman eagle on the other, covered his head, and unlike the rest of his men, he wasn’t wearing night-vision goggles. He didn’t need them.

Typically, as a *primi ordines* centurion, he’d have had command of eighty men, or a century, and wouldn’t be out in the field much with them. He was spirit-born, however, and therefore considered far too valuable to waste in an administrative position; in addition to which, he was in the special forces operations wing of the JDF levies in the Imperial Legion. Which meant that his rank was mostly there so that he could deal with fools behind desks, and he genuinely did spend most of his time in the field.

Step by cautious step in a low crouch. No sound. Solinus hunkered at the corner of the building, his back against it, feeling his partner for this expedition move up beside him, ducking under a windowsill, and then standing beside him, back also to the wall, scanning the north-south street directly to their west, as Solinus himself used a mirror to peer around the wall, surveying the intersecting east-west street.

This neighborhood of eastern Palmyra was something out of Tartarus. The Persians had taken the city center last week; the Romans had retaliated by bombing the area from the air, and civilians had been trying to flee at night ever since . . . only to be captured by Persian patrols, or killed, as they fled. Every building was either collapsed in on itself from a bomb blast, showed signs of previous scorch marks and bullet holes, or was currently on fire—the Legion had softened the area over the course of the afternoon and early evening with further aerial and artillery strikes, and had just tapered off so that his team could go in, redirecting their attention to about a mile west of here. The ground shook periodically, and the scream of shells going by was attenuated by distance, but still distinctly audible. *Screeeeee- WHUMP . . . whump, whump, whump.* The only light, currently, was the dull glow of the burning buildings, and the trees in the common areas behind them. It had been a nice area, once. Upscale shops that backed onto green space. What looked like the remains of a café up to the northeast, across the street. And they had, so far,

encountered almost no movement. No one was out, dousing the fires. Looking for survivors. In Solinus' experience, that was a bad sign.

He spotted what Artensius had seen, almost immediately. "It's a little boy," he said, quietly. "Standing in the middle of the road. Crying."

*"This has to be a trap,"* one of his men hissed into the radio.

*"You don't say,"* a junior centurion muttered.

Solinus stared at the child. His own son, Astegal, was under a year old; his daughter Shiori was almost three. This little boy looked about six or seven, was dressed in a dirty pair of trousers and a long caftan, Carthaginian-style, and was wandering around the road, looking up at the houses. In between the whistles and thumps from the west, Solinus could hear the boy calling for his mother. *Oh, gods. Yes, it's a trap. Yes. I'm going to spring it.* "I'm going to go get him," Solinus said, quietly.

"Sir, the mission objective—"

"Is past him. I know." They were actually here to try to recover a senior Roman official who had last been heard from after barricading himself into his governmental villa at the east side of a plaza down the road. He'd had Praetorians and a handful of legionnaires with him and his family, but the last radio contact with them had been three days ago. Solinus did not give any of them good odds for being alive and uncaptured. If the official and his people were alive and holding out, there should be Persian troops in this neighborhood, ringing the house, firing on it. If they were alive inside the villa, and being held and interrogated there, and the house itself used as a command post . . . again, there should be sentries. Instead, there was nothing. No movement in the houses and shops around them, the motorcars were smoldering, burned-out husks that lined both sides of the street, and . . . a crying little boy, wandering from building to building.

Solinus moved around the corner, hunkering down behind the blackened remains of a motorcar, and whistled, softly, trying to catch the boy's ear. *"Tinok!"* he said, pitching his voice to carry. The word was common to both modern Hebrew and contemporary Carthaginian. *Child.* He whistled again, but kept an eye on the buildings around him. There were entirely too many sniper perches for his liking, up on the ruined second floors, where the windows had been shattered by flame or shrapnel. *"Hist, over here."*

The little boy stopped moving aimlessly, and turned. Solinus' radio crackled in his ear. *"We have movement in some of the other buildings. Due north of the boy—"*

*Of course we do.* "Human?"

*"Can't tell yet. Looks humanoid. Movements are erratic, though."*

*"Movement! Trees, north of the road!"*

Solinus swore, mentally. “Move up, find cover. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

The little boy moved closer to him, the small face limned in orange light from one of the nearby burning buildings. Close enough now, that Solinus could see the tracks that his tears had cut through the soot and the grime on his face. “*Ave?*” the boy said, tentatively, walking closer. “I just want to go home,” he called, plaintively. “I won’t talk about the bad things. I promise. I just want to go home. You promised I’d see my mama again . . . .”

*Oh, gods. He was captured. This cannot possibly be good.* Solinus used his mirror again, and caught sight of *something* moving, with boneless grace, from building to building across the street, and his stomach tightened as the first surge of adrenaline hit. He reached out, fast, and caught the boy, clamping a hand over the child’s mouth and recoiling back behind the car again, trying to muffle the scream. “Shh,” he told the boy. “Shh. I’ve got you. It’s all right. You’re going to be fine.”

He could feel tears leaking down over his hand, and shifted his grip. “Roman centurion,” he whispered. “Calm down. Don’t scream. And we’ll get you someplace safe, all right?”

A shaky nod, and Solinus released his grip, and guided the boy around, so that now, the child had the car for cover on one side, and Sol’s own body on the other. “What’s your name?”

“Hannibal. For the general.”

“Good name. My little boy’s Astegal. You’re going to be brave like a general for me, right, Hanni?” He got a nod for that. “All right, I’m going to take you back around the corner of that building. When I say to go somewhere, you *go*, you understand me?”

“Yes . . . .” The answer wavered.

Solinus got a hand on the boy’s shoulder and prepared to hustle, when his radio crackled again. “*Ghul!*” came the snapped word from Artensius. “*Northwest and northeast!*”

Boneless shadows melted out from between the buildings, scampering on three limbs, or four. One of them leaped up on top of the motorcar in front of Solinus and slashed down at him and the boy with long claws covered in dried blood and old fingernail lacquer. The boy screamed. Solinus dodged the swipe, caught the *ghul*’s forearm in his hand, and ignited his fingers around it, clenching as he turned and threw the creature down in front of him. He saw the look of terror on the boy’s face transmute to awe as the bones in the arm he held carbonized in a reek of burning flesh and bone, and Solinus’ internal fires licked at his own hands and forearms. There were *reasons* he usually rolled up his uniform sleeves to his elbows, and showing off his clan tattoos wasn’t chief among them. Replacing burned uniforms got expensive.

It had taken seconds, and Solinus wasn’t done, dropping to a crouch to punch down into the chest cavity. *Ghul* decayed. You could tell how long they’d been dead by the bloating, the rigor, the flies, and the maggots. Solinus had long since been able to fight down his gag reflex. *Flame purifies*, he thought, as his fist slammed through the sternum, scorching through to where the

heart was. His fingers opened, then clamped shut on the mass of cold flesh, and he tore it out, hearing the *ratatatatatatat* of his men's automatic weapons firing all around him. He spun again, in time to see three more *ghul* coming for him and for the boy, and part of his mind noted, clinically, *They weren't touching him before. They were all around us, and they didn't go after him at all . . .*

*"They're in the buildings!"*

*"Eyes up, eyes up!"*

*"Watch your backs, watch your backs!"*

*"Coming from behind—"*

"Backs to the walls, and throw them in the fires!" Solinus shouted, not bothering with the radio. Just parade-ground volume, and enough authority in his voice to get everyone moving again. And then the three *ghul* that he faced were on him, one leaping for his throat while the second tried to circle in at him from his right . . . and the third, dim mind of the malevolent spirit inside it clearly calculating, finally went after the weaker target. The boy.

Solinus' entire body became flame. He wasn't lava or magma, like the *cherufe* of Tawantinsuyu, nor was he wind and flame, like an *efreet*. His clothing vaporized, the radio earpiece liquefied, and his rifle, safed for a reason, fell to the ground as his shoulder strap burned away. Light radiated out from him, blindingly, and the *ghul* all shrank back, even the one who'd tried to latch onto his throat. Solinus didn't hesitate. Both hands, entirely comprised of flame, speared into the chest cavity of the creature in front of him, and he ducked and spun, using the creature's own ribs to throw it into its companion . . . and then his foot lashed out, becoming a whip of flame that scythed off the head of the *ghul* that had just seized the boy. Caution ensured that no blood splattered the boy; it would have been clotting in the lower limbs by now, anyway. Solinus flipped, letting his own momentum and a hip twist carry his second leg into the *ghul*'s torso, as his first leg reformed and hit the ground; the *ghul*'s body fell backwards, and Solinus flowed forwards, catching the boy in hands that reformed from flame to flesh, though the rest of him remained fire. *Are you all right?* Solinus knew better than to try to speak the words out loud in this form. No lungs. No larynx. Just pure intention.

*"What are you?"* Panic and glee at the same time.

*Legionnaire. Twenty-fifth Legion, levy force.* Solinus spun as *ghul* leaped down from the building behind him, snarling and hissing as they poured down from the second floor, and surged out of the doors and windows of the other broken buildings in the street. *Too many. Too damned many. There's a hundred, at least. Fall back!* He scooped up his assault rifle with one hand, flame once more, knowing that the barrel would be cherry red inside minutes, and propelled young Hannibal with the other, little light taps, to avoid burning the child. Whenever he wasn't directing the child, he was punching, kicking, and scything his way through the crowd of *ghul*. The rotted extremities left no corruption on his form, and he shoved the boy around the corner, even as his men began to form up around him. *Take the boy. Give me covering fire, and keep falling back.*

“What about the governor’s assistant?” one of his men called back. No muzzle-fire to light the night; flashless powder had been the norm for over thirty years in most firearms.

*I’ll come back and scout the ruins in my phoenix form.* He concealed the following thought, which was his grim knowledge that he probably should have just done that to start with, but he had no sorcerers for backup at the moment. Masako was home with the children, though he’d cheerfully have killed to have her here at the moment; his wife was the best combat-sorcerer he’d ever worked with. She’d have peeled the poured-stone road up and *rolled* it on the *ghul* by now, like the lid of a tin of sardines, propelled by its key, and the melted poured-stone would have been both a cleansing fire and a fitting tomb for the bodies, while the spirits inside fled. *If our people are in there, we can come back with more force. Keep moving!*

They retreated, making their way back through neighborhoods that were only marginally under Roman control. Solinus sent Hannibal in with two of his men, with instructions that they take him to the medical evac center . . . with a stop at the Office of Counter-Summoning, first. “Glad to hear it, sir,” Artensius muttered. The man was from northern Italia, from the foothills of the Alps. Now he lifted his helmet to wipe sweat out of his eyes. “They weren’t touching him. They weren’t harming or hunting him.”

*I know,* Solinus replied, quietly, looking back over his shoulder at the boy, who was being kept occupied by another of his men, for the moment. Being shown how to load bullets into a clip. *None of the summoners on staff here are on par with my father, but they’re competent enough. They should be able to figure this out.*

He bade Hannibal farewell, still not having returned to his fleshly form . . . it was just easier, once he’d gone flame, to stay that way for a while. It avoided him having to borrow trousers from any of his men, for starters. In spite of the fiery nature of his current form, the boy actually tried to hang onto him, much to his surprise. *I will be in to see you as soon as I can. I have to make a report to my superiors, and I may be sent back out to do some reconnaissance. But the good news is, I think you’ll have my sister as your doctor. She’s been posted to the medical evac hospital closest to Palmyra. You’ll like her. Her name’s Latirian.*

Solinus disentangled himself, found his *pilus prior* centurion, and made his report. “I see you’re out of uniform again, Matrugena,” came the dry words of the Roman centurion as he looked up from his field desk. “What happened?”

He relayed the whole of the engagement, and the *pilus prior* swore under his breath, rubbing at his chin. “The whole neighborhood was *ghul*? Where are their summoners getting the power to make that many bargains? Half the spirits our *arcessitors* deal with won’t set a toe out of whatever their misty realm is called, thanks to the mad gods, but the Persians seem to have unlimited fucking resources.”

*I don’t know, sir. These were unusually focused, for ghul. They chased us a good two miles. Usually, that only happens when the arcessitor controlling them has very good locks on them all,*

*or if they're extremely hungry.* Solinus shrugged. *I don't think they were hungry, sir. I think they were either guarding something, or part of a trap.*

"They expected us to go for the villa?"

*Perhaps.* Solinus was dubious. The boy was also possibly bait. *I can return and scout aerially.*

"Hmm. I'll give you different backup this time."

*I trust my men, sir.*

"I know. But you've worked with Lokison before, and the two of you can slip through unseen where a dozen or twenty men trying to cut their way through won't be able to pass."

*Rig? Outstanding.*

"Yes, I've heard you two are brothers-in-law."

*Yes, sir.*

"Go get cleaned up. Try to find a uniform that you can keep on for more than an hour. And check in on this orphan. I don't like this, Matrugenena."

*Neither do I, sir.*

Two hours later, Solinus was in the medical evac center, two miles further south, behind the Roman lines, in a small anteroom with Dr. Latirian Eshmunazar, Solinus' sister, a Chaldean Magus named Shin Ilam, who wore a Roman uniform, and Rig Lokison, who'd just made his way in from another section of the bigger enclave. "I did a thaumaturgic analysis of the boy," the Magus reported, and rubbed at his eyes. "His aura, to use the layman's term—"

"None of us are exactly unfamiliar with magic," Latirian said, shifting her white over-robe as she perched on the edge of the desk. "You asked a spirit to use its vision. I can't do it myself, but I know people who can."

"I can see that way," Rig noted, quietly, folding his arms over his chest. "I can verify your results, if needed. Please, go on."

The Magus looked rattled, and shook his curly hair out of his eyes. "Very well," he noted, fussily adjusting his sleeves. "There is a fairly deep fissure in the boy's spirit. The spirit I asked to observe him suggested that it looked as if he had been run through."

Solinus swallowed, chilled. He could look through the window of the antechamber out into the main medical ward, and see little Hannibal perched on the edge of a bed, looking lost and very alone in a hospital gown far too big for him. "Tiri?"



Latirian grimaced. “My initial examination revealed signs of recent surgery to his abdomen. I don’t know how he was able to walk so far on his own, Sol.”

“He was alone, and he was desperate. One of my men carried him most of the way from where we were.” Solinus swallowed. “So, surgery. Did they take something out of him?”

“It’s not the right location for a kidney removal if they were looking for an unwilling organ donation. And I doubt they’d let the donor wander off, if they could still use him for spare parts, in that case. I’m far more concerned that they might have put something *in* him.” Latirian grimaced. “I was going to start with an X-ray, but he’s afraid of the machines. I thought maybe you could talk him into it, Sol. He seems to trust you.”

“I’ll go out with you,” Rig volunteered.

Ilam frowned at him. “How will that help matters? He’s a child, and he’s frightened. Another stranger will hardly be a help.”

Rig shrugged. “He won’t see a Roman soldier.” His form appeared to shift, and Solinus suddenly found himself looking *down* at Rig, who looked *precisely* the way he had, when they’d first met. When Aunt Sophia had been taking care of them, back in 1970. Long, dark brown hair, left loose, not the much shorter, Roman-style cut Rig used now. Softer features, of course . . . but the selling point was the innocence in the eyes. Rig had seen far too much to wear eyes that gentle anymore.

“Now that is a look I haven’t seen in a while,” Solinus said, wryly. “I’ll have to remind my twin how *cute* you were when we were young.”

“She has all the family pictures to remind her.” The voice was piping, but the grin was adult. “She still bitches about the hair, but I think that, altogether, she prefers me *grown*.”

Latirian snorted, and Solinus edited out his first three answers. “Let’s go have a talk with Hannibal,” he said, instead, and, trying not to laugh, extended his hand for the small, illusionary one that Rig offered in return. He couldn’t even *tell* if the one he was holding was real or not; it felt small in his own, and clearly also felt as if it angled up to meet his, not across. “You are getting ungodly good at this,” he muttered as he drew Rig with him out into the medical ward.

“I am my father’s son. He left me gifts. And I got over *most* of my issues with him years ago. It’s hard to resent someone for doing their best to save the world . . . even if they didn’t succeed.”

Solinus pulled Rig over to Hannibal’s bedside. “*Ave*, little general,” he told the boy. “Are the doctors treating you well?”

An uncertain nod, and woebegone dark eyes, as the boy sat up a little further on his cot, wincing as he did so. “I was a *little* scared,” he confessed. “But everyone has been really nice to me. Look. A legionnaire made me a little man.” He picked up a piece of paper, which, if one

squinted, might have had arms, legs, and a head. “He said if I’m here long enough, I’ll wind up with a whole army of them.”

Solinus smiled faintly, and introduced Rig now. “Rig here is one of the legate’s sons,” he lied, looking up at the ceiling for a moment. “He travels with his father to all the major battles. Learning how to be a leader himself, someday.”

“Huh. You don’t look Roman.”

“My mother’s Marcomanni,” Rig piped up. “The centurion asked me to come along, so I could help you be brave. It won’t be so scary if someone else is here for the tests, right?”

Hannibal shrank in on himself. “I don’t like tests. *They* said they were going to do tests, and then they put a mask over my face, and when I woke up, my tummy hurt.”

Rig plopped down on the bed next to Hanni, seeming to swing his legs freely above the floor. “I think they want to look inside you first. Right, centurion?”

“Yes. With an X-ray machine, to start with. They want to see what the Persian doctors did to you, and why. They might have to cut you open again to fix what was done, but if they do, we’re going to make sure it’s not too scary, all right?” Solinus crouched down beside the bed himself. “Think you can handle that?”

“I . . . guess so . . . .”

“Someone will be with you the whole time. I promise.” Solinus ruffled the wavy dark hair, and moved away again, leaving Rig in his place. *What do you think?* It was much harder to use mind-voice when he was in pure human form. Only in pure flame-shape did it come naturally.

Rig’s voice was an illusion; Solinus understood that. But it was still uncanny how good his friend had gotten with this sort of thing, as the low-pitched, adult voice spoke in the air beside him, as Solinus re-entered the anteroom. “There is definitely something inside of him,” Rig assessed, quietly. “It’s like looking at an inclusion in a crystal. I’m going to say it’s approximately the size of a test tube, so between four to five inches in length.”

“Where is it situated?” Latirian asked. “Can you give me some idea as to the materials?”

The Magus just looked around, in evident fascination at the powers currently in use. Rig’s voice hesitated. “I’m not as conversant with the anatomy of the abdominal cavity as you are, Tiri, but it’s left side, and high. I think it might be wedged between the stomach and the spleen, if I had to take a guess.” Rig’s tone was dubious. “I’m getting a sense of metal. Non-magnetic, so it could be anything from aluminum to bronze.”

“Bronze would not be a good thing to place in a body for the long term.” Latirian sounded angry, and Solinus watched her face harden. She could look surprisingly like Aunt Sig, sometimes.

“Tiri, I don’t think these doctors were doing this for his *health*.” Rig’s voice was just as angry. “There’s a faint sense of electricity, too. Damned if I know what that’s about.”

“Timer or a detonator? Maybe a transmitter?” Solinus asked, quickly.

“... could be. I can’t tell.”

“We need the X-rays,” Latirian decided, and got a room set up for the boy. Solinus and Rig led the child inside, while Latirian smiled at him, warmly, and reassured him that everything was going to be all right. “Just stand here, and I’m going to take a picture of what’s in your stomach. And hopefully, nothing’s wrong. But we have to know if there’s anything we have to fix, right?”

Hannibal nodded, rapidly, and clutched Solinus’ hand as he lay on the platform. Sol wore a lead-lined apron, just in case; he knew he healed rapidly whenever he switched between flesh and flame, but he didn’t know what radiation did to his system, and didn’t want to find out.

The machine whirred. Clicked. The hand clenched on his, and then relaxed. The boy’s face went slack, just for an instant. Solinus blinked. “Hanni, are you all right?”

“Fine. I’m . . . just fine. It wasn’t scary.” The boy sat up, and stared around the room, as if disoriented. Then he smiled up at Solinus. “Can you help me down?”

Something pinged at the back of Solinus’ mind. There was something different in the boy’s smile. No shyness. No hesitance. “I think they’re going to want to take another picture or two,” he said. “How about if we wait and see what your doctor says, hmm?” Unconsciously, his fists clenched, and he readied himself to summon flame.

“Please,” the boy wheedled, holding out his hands, the hospital gown falling down over his wrists in a dozen extra folds. “I don’t want to hurt if I just jump down on my own.”

Solinus backed up a step. He didn’t have othersight, the spirit-eyes that Rig had inherited from his father, Loki. He just had instinct. And instinct said *Children don’t talk that way. Shiori doesn’t have any sense of the future, really, at three. She’d either jump down, or beg for me to pick her up. But not this. This is not the boy he was a moment ago.* “Who are you?” Solinus said, just as Latirian stepped back into the room from where she’d been operating the machinery. His sister’s face was pale.

“I’m *me*,” the boy said, frowning, and then looked at Latirian. “Was something in my tummy?” The boy smiled at her, angelically. “I’m hungry. Can I have something to eat?”

“There’s a metal container inside of you,” Latirian said, gently. Whatever was setting off Solinus’ instincts, didn’t shake her professional mien, at least. “It has some kind of a device attached to it.”

“Could you tell what it was?” Solinus asked, instantly.

“No. It’s mechanical, but I won’t know what kind of device it is, until I get it out.” Latirian’s words were barely audible, meant for his ears alone, and then she smiled at the boy. “You can’t have anything to eat before surgery. But afterwards, once you’ve been able to pee and poop, I promise you can have ice cream, all right?”

The boy’s expression shifted. Turned sly, a little hint of humor curling up his lips. Solinus moved up beside his sister, unobtrusively, and touched her wrist, lightly. “Ice cream after you carve open this body, or food now? Not even a question.” The boy bared his teeth, a rictus grin in the small face, and Solinus threw Latirian to the ground, igniting himself, even as his sister’s hands burst into flame as well. Solinus rolled back to his feet, shouting, *Rig! Now would be good—*

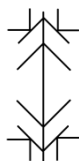
—and was hurled off his feet and into the wall behind him, which burst into flames on contact, as a boy just over three feet in height directed a wave of pure force at him. Sol called all of the flames in the area back to his body, and stared as the child’s body was suddenly shrouded in waves of energy; extra limbs began to force their way out of the ribs. Twin swords of light appeared in his two existing hands, and wings and a tail began to form as well, but the child’s *face* stayed the same, mockingly enough. Solinus cursed under his breath and threw fire at the creature, trying to break down the energy shield around the boy’s possessed body. Latirian did the same, hurling orbs made of sun-bright plasma right at the creature.

Solinus’ flame washed over the tiny form, and set the wall behind the boy on fire; the child lifted a finger, and Latirian’s orbs vanished in the air. “Mmm,” the child whispered. The voice had changed now. Become older, though still piping. “That tastes so *good*. What *are* you lovely creatures? I taste summer, honey, fire, and smoke. I’d like some more, please.” A smile, and then the creature *leaped* at Solinus. Solinus dodged, but one of the swords slid through his flame-shape, and he felt . . . cold, suddenly. Cold and hungry. As if he were about to go out. *Rig!*

The door to the room slammed open, and Rig stood in the doorway, looking no more than six once more. Or at least, *a* Rig-shaped child stood there. The creature smiled at Rig. “Oh, there’s my playmate. All in good time.” The swords lashed out, and Latirian lifted both hands, putting a shield of pure fire in front of her fragile body, stopping the blades, at least for a moment . . . and then her shields flickered and were snuffed.

Solinus forced himself back into human form as his consciousness wavered, and rolled, grabbing for his side-arm, which had fallen, in its holster to the floor, the belt that had supported it smoldering. Thumbed the safety off, and fired at the creature. Bullets made of iron and dipped in human blood, heavily enchanted, to boot. He might be in the JDF, but he wasn’t Judean. He had no compunctions about having Masako or any other technomancer enchant his weapons.

Two of the bullets got through, and slammed into the creature’s back. Blood actually poured out, and it turned and looked over its shoulder at him, hissing from Hannibal’s little face, and one of the lower hands, now fully formed, flicked a finger at him . . . and another wave of force slammed Solinus through the wall behind him, into the room beyond. He didn’t even register the way the flimsy, portable wall crumpled into fragments and the debris followed in his wake; he was unconscious from the moment of impact.



Rig winced as Solinus' limp body tore through the wall, and concentrated, harder. "Tiri, left!" he whispered in her ear, forming an image of her, over where she was now, and rendering her real self invisible—and invisible, too, to othersight. He hoped. "Further. Trust me." He kept his child-self puppet frozen in horror in the doorway, its only animation the way the eyes flicked around the room.

Seconds later, Rig watched from his true vantage point as the creature lashed out again at Latirian's simulacrum, and he curled her effigy in on itself, and made it crawl away . . . only to dissolve into a mist. The creature spun around, sniffing the air, and below it, on the floor, the real Latirian inched away, crawling towards where Solinus had been flung through the wall.

"Nice try," Rig told it sardonically, trying to catch and hold its attention. Letting his own effigy seem to be speaking. "But I think you're going to find me a much more engaging playmate." The child-like face bared its teeth. "Want to play hide-and-seek?"

A split second later, and the creature was on his illusion, swords lashing out, and two new weapons materializing in the lower hands—whips of raw energy. Rig exhaled, slightly, in relief. He hadn't been sure his illusions were good enough to fool a spirit of this power; he was weaving on several levels at once. Multi-sensory input, including othersight itself, which had an outside-of-time component that he wasn't sure most humans could sense, let alone simulate. His illusion for Latirian, for example, had included how he saw her in the spirit-vision that had manifested itself in his late adolescence, due to Aunt Sig's constant tutelage. He'd added a heartbeat that could be heard by sharp ears, and even scent, if crudely; he simply didn't have the same senses as someone like Maccis. Calculated risk. But the creature had seemed fooled; it probably relied on othersight to hunt.

As it was, Rig let his personal simulacrum disperse, all but the othersight version, which he'd more or less invented on the spot. He couldn't see himself in othersight. No one really could. He'd used what Solinus looked like to him, however, a blaze of golden fire . . . but he made his a flame wrapped in shadow, just to distinguish himself from Sol. He swirled the man-like form away, drifting it down the corridor and away, like a demanifested spirit. And watched as the creature followed.

The Magus to his left gaped. "How long can you hold its attention?" Shin Ilam demanded.

"As long as I have to. I hope." Rig's words were terse. He couldn't afford the distraction. "Get a binding circle on the ground, and I'll lead it there. It shouldn't see the circle till it's in the middle of it." Othersight told him that the creature was chasing his effigy down a long hall, but there were people all around. *Come on, don't just stand there staring*, he thought. He couldn't hold this complex of an illusion *and* throw light distortion over all the people standing in doorways, gaping. And he didn't think he could force the creature to overlook them, as he could sometimes convince a human's mind to do. Figments and hallucinations were only two of the tools he

possessed.

“I don't know if I can *hold* a creature like that. Every summoning is a wrestling contest, and even the circle is just . . . a way of expressing will—”

“I've heard the academic debates my whole life. Circle. Ground. Banish it.” Blood sang in Rig's ears.

“I may have to blood-bind it—”

“No. *Banish*. Not bind. ”

“You may have to kill the host's body—”

"The host body is a child, and killing it could potentially empower the spirit. Last resort." Every word was an effort, as Rig danced his illusion through the halls of the medical center, his mind swimming from the effort. People running, screaming, fleeing. He could hear muffled shouts, could hear Latirian telling the unconscious Solinus that she had him, she'd fix the broken bones . . . Rig couldn't do it all. He couldn't cloak all of them, and certainly not from where he stood, motionless, in the radiological anteroom, beside the Magus.

“At the moment, I don't think there's a child left, ” Shin Ilam told him, grimly. “It's treating the body as a full possession. ”

“An avatar?”

“You *are* educated.” Ilam still sounded startled. “Yes.”

“We can't be *sure* there's nothing left. But if you're sure it won't empower—”

“Take a good look at the spirit,” the Magus said, sharply. “If you see even a wisp of the child left, then killing the body won't work. If the spirit has consumed him, it's already empowered.” Shin Ilam was of the Magi, through and through, He adapted to harsh realities very quickly.

*I don't like your version of hide and seek!* The voice rang through Rig's mind. The spirit spun and leaped away from his illusory self, and Rig could see it, through the walls as it advanced, a vortex of blacks and reds, and leaped upon the pale gray outline of a man, who was lying down. Just barely alive, and trapped in a bed. All four of the upper limbs tore into him, and Rig saw the life . . . go out. It was no less horrifying for being so abstract; he knew that in reality, a hospital bed and its environs were likely sprayed with gore, and he shook with impotent fury for a moment. “No!” he snapped.

Rig wrapped his real essence in invisibility, and the Magus beside him, as well, letting his child-effigy vanish. He couldn't cloak everyone in the hospital, not individually. But he could make everyone vanish at once, as he melted the hospital into a hallucinatory terrain that was . . . a dark cavern under a mountain. The halls replicated that theme; the rooms became bubbles carved out

of soft limestone, with stalactites and stalagmites. Cool drip of water. Every wall blocked othersight; the people behind them faded from visible reality for the spirit. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck as Rig said, out loud, “That soldier couldn’t have been much of a mouthful,” letting the words whisper everywhere, like echoes in a cave. “Come find me. I’m a much better meal, don’t you think?”

Shan Ilam swore and raised his hand, blazing the lines of a binding circle into the floor with raw fire. The magus grabbed Rig by the arm, and moved him, physically, out of the circle. Rig obeyed like a child; he was floating somewhere above his little creation, trying to keep every detail smooth and believable. “No, no, not that way,” he taunted the spirit. “This way. I’m over here.” For the doctors, patients, and nurses, he couldn’t do much. If he hadn’t been holding the othersight illusion in place, he could have escorted them out with another effigy of himself. But he was, alas, just a little too human to be able to pull off that many things simultaneously.

Rig baited the creature back. And when it ran back into the prepared room, it paused at the door, sniffing suspiciously. Rig tried to suppress the smell of burned carpet, and just hoped that the overall scorched smell from Solinus and Latirian’s attacks would explain any lingering hints. A quick glance at the creature. No inner core, no lingering sign of the child’s spirit . . . but that didn’t mean it *wasn’t* there. Deeply suppressed. “You need its Name?” he whispered, suppressing the sound, but letting Shin Ilam hear it.

“It would help. But I think I can take a guess,” the Magus said, grimly. “Body aspect is a Persian *daeva*. They are not usually summoned, and for very good reason. From the constant mentions of hunger . . . could be Tawrich. That one’s . . . usually female.”

“Try it. Use the rest of the Names you know if that one doesn’t work.”

“I don’t actually *want* the weight of their attentions, believe me. But if the first one doesn’t work, I will recite the Name of every *daeva* that I know!”

Rig condensed the illusion of the cave to *just* the immediate surroundings, and, at the far doorway, placed another image of himself, this time an adult version. Not quite realistic. He made his hair long for this effigy, and made himself a little taller. Put a distaff in one hand, and a sword in the other. “Foolish spirit. You would fight *me*?” he taunted.

*I know whom you appear to be. The spirit stepped into the cavern. It is a lie. Loki fled this world, foolishly abandoning his power. You are not him.*

*Closer, Rig thought. Just a little closer.* “Oh, I don’t claim to be Loki,” his effigy replied, calmly. “Just his son. Of course, I’ve never actually met a *daeva* before. Are you all this clumsy? Really, adopting your full form, so quickly, too?”

*I would not have needed to, had there not been three god-born awaiting my awakening. The daeva’s admission was sour. I would have just gone from bed to bed in this place of suffering. A helpless child in need of comfort, and I would have devoured a thousand lives in a night, before a single human awoke to my reality. Then I would have assumed my true form, and devoured the*

*physickers and the nurses before making my way through the rest of your camp. A shame I'll have to forgo the slow and exquisite deaths of pitying hearts, but to revel in the fear and the pain of a thousand or more is also no bad thing. I have many appetites, and all require sating.*

It took another step, and froze in place, as if it had just run into an invisible wall. *You seek to bind such as me? How amusing. I allowed myself to be bound into that jar, the better to be transported to my prey.*

“I watched Baal-Hamon die,” Rig said, dropping all illusion, and stood in the door of the radiological room, his assault rifle in his hands. “Dagon and Baal-Samem, too. You? You’re a *servant, daeva*.” He saw the eyes widen, just for an instant, and then he opened fire.

Magically-enhanced bullets tore through the four arms, the torso, and the wings, throwing the creature back, pinned against the far ‘wall’ of the summoning circle. Unable to move forwards, unable to escape, the creature healed almost as rapidly as the wounds appeared . . . but not quite. “Now!” Rig snapped, and the Magus raced through the banishing incantation, gasping out, at the very end, the Name *Tawrich*. Rig could feel the energies building, which surprised him, mildly . . . but what surprised him more was the fact that he could *see* the rift to the Veil form below the creature, circumscribed by the binding circle. And then the spirit was pulled out of the child’s distorted body, and Rig could hear it screaming in fury as it was sucked back into the Veil.

The portal closed, and the Magus staggered, dropping to his knees to wipe blood from his nose. The body possessed by the *daeva* twisted, distorted, and fell to the ground. Rig leaped forward, and put two fingers to the child’s throat, looking down at the face, which was . . . covered in blood. Some the boy’s own, some that of the man the spirit had killed, using his body. The wounds were still healing, if more slowly than before. “Oh, gods,” Rig muttered. “He’s alive. The body is, anyway. I don’t know . . .” He concentrated, hard, and could see flickers of a spirit left in the body. *Oh, gods. This isn’t . . .* “Latirian!” It was a shout. “Get in here!”

Latirian scrambled into the room. “Sol’s still out cold . . . oh, gods.” She dropped to her knees, and checked the child’s vitals. “I can’t believe he’s still alive.”

“I don’t know if he *is*. The spirit’s almost gone from the body. I think most of it was devoured by the *daeva*—” Rig was dazed. “This is a little past where I can help.”

There was a thud that made the whole building shake. Dim awareness, for Rig, of people returning, hesitantly, to the building, murmurs of consternation everywhere. *What was that thing? What just happened? Doctor! Doctor, this patient pulled his stitches getting to the door, he’s bleeding out—*

Ilam moved to look down at the boy. “It would be a mercy to kill the body,” he told them, quietly. “Look at him. Even if the mind were intact, *look* at him. He’s got four arms. A counterbalancing tail. Wings. You want him to grow to adulthood, like that? Even assuming the heart can take the burden—”



“He’s regenerating,” Latirian replied, tersely. “The heart will repair itself constantly, but I’d be willing to bet the *daeva* also adjusted the heart’s size—” She peeled back an eyelid, checking pupillary reaction. “But if I remember Da’s lessons right, the *daeva* still might have a link to this body. It’ll be able to use him like a lodestone, always coming back through the Veil to him . . .”

“How long will the banishment last?” Rig asked Ilam.

“I don’t know. They *have* to be summoned. They can’t walk between the worlds, freely. But they’re powerful.” The dark eyes studied Rig. “You were there when Baal-Hamon died?”

*Me and my big mouth.* “I was taunting the creature. Getting its attention locked on me. I’d have said its mother was fat, but I doubt it ever had such a thing.” Rig grimaced, and locked eyes with the man. *Forget.*

“Ah, true enough.” The Magus shook his head. He had a stubborn, strong mind, but Rig’s will was an insidious thing. He’d discovered this particular ability after Baal-Hamon’s death, and for the most part, it horrified him. He could influence people, with suggestions like this one. He’d only spoken of the talent with three people: Inghean, his mother, and Aunt Sigrun, and the advice from all of them had been the same: *don’t use it if you can avoid it. It’s a crutch.* Still, it was useful for situations like this. A little delicate pressure and a plausible, rational explanation, and Shin Ilam would probably never think about it again.

“Rig, I don’t know what to *do*,” Latirian said, her voice miserable. “We could try removing the extra arms surgically—”

“How about if we ask *him*?” Solinus said, from the doorway. He was leaning against the wall, a sheet wrapped around his waist, looking battered. He needed to go to flame-form to heal properly, Rig knew. That he hadn’t yet was a strong indication that he *couldn’t*, at least not yet. *That’s not a good sign at all. Inghean’s going to have my head if her twin is badly hurt.*

And then, behind Solinus, a shorter figure appeared, a black, feathered cloak over the shoulders, hood shrouding the face. A hand lifted, and landed on Solinus’ shoulder, and the centurion shuddered and swung around, every bruise and scrape and contusion vanishing from his face. “I see you have all been busy,” Sigrun said, her voice weary as she stepped forwards into the room, having taken Solinus’ wounds. “I think it best if all of you start at the beginning, and tell me everything that’s transpired here.”