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Opening extract from

Rise of the Blood Moon

Written by

Alan Gibbons

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CHAPTER 1



The Black Tower

1

There is a dark tower at the end of the Earth. Perched high on the summit of a bare mountain, amid swirling winds and endless driving rain, it is a bleak, forbidding structure. There are no gates. There is no visible means of entry. There are no windows. No lights wink into the endless murk. Indeed, there isn't the slightest trace of a road, a path, even a foot-worn trail. There is no means of access at all. It clings precariously to a sheer rock face, the impossible creation of a lost civilisation of – who knows? Gods, demons, giants. Some say it was the work of one man. But how could that be? How could one pair of hands raise such a building?

For miles around you will not discover a single animal track or hear one note of birdsong. It is many years since even the scrape of insects has been heard. Neither provisions

nor weapons nor armour have been carried through the dense, silent forests that carpet the lower slopes of the mountain. It is quite deserted. There are no sentries patrolling it. There has never been any need. Not once, in the recent life of this tower, has any living thing, other than its present owner, his minions and his captives, dared to approach its walls.

But, if you were somehow to penetrate the fortifications, if you were to climb its hundreds of barely worn steps, you would discover, on the tower's topmost floors, a series of echoing galleries, sealed from the outside world, but without lock or keyhole. There are no magic words that will gain you entrance. There is no abracadabra. But inside somebody stirs, a boy, in the high tide of adolescence.

The events in this story happened over a thousand years ago, so far in the past that history and legend mix. Only poets and singers have ever tried to guess what might have been. The year was 675. The dynasty of the Muzals had lasted six long centuries. Their coming ushered in a time of conquest and war. From the endless steppes of the west to the deserts of the east, the peoples of the known world lived under the sway of the Muzals' monstrous tyranny. The Empire was born in fire, tempered in the clash of steel on steel. Its reputation was painted in human blood. And, as the Muzals swept across the land, the stain of that blood polluted the world.

It was towards the end of the month of Samhair when it all began. In those days the Empire of all the Peoples observed the ancient calendar of the Vassyrian scholar Udmanesh. But, such was his notoriety among the rulers of the land, they refused to credit him with its invention. They were quick to acclaim his study of the moon and stars, his anatomy of the human body, the surgical skills their surgeons used on the battlefield, but anonymously. In

all other matters, they considered him the worst kind of heretic, one who did not think like them. Udmanesh's crime was to speak out against oppression, to tell the truth about the Muzals' reign. All his life he carried the torch of freedom until his enemies struck it from his hand.

It was the time of the Blood Moon, when the moon hung full, round and silver in the night sky. For as long as people could remember, in the lunar cycle of this land, on the sixtieth day, the demons had swarmed through the darkness and fed on human flesh. As if sensing their death-hunger, the boy who lived in the tower stirred. For the first time in many hours he wasn't alone. He didn't know what day it was. There had been a time he tried to keep count, but he'd long since abandoned the record he'd begun scratching on the wall in the first days of his imprisonment. Somewhere, in the furthest reaches of his memory, he had an image of happiness, of a home, parents, a sister. But in this awful place the memory of those days was disintegrating hour by hour.

Indeed, he could no longer even tell whether it was night or day, spring or summer, winter or autumn. In the absence of a window there was no way to judge. His only way of charting the passage of time was the pattern of the Darkwing's visits each Blood Moon. The only light, set at cubit-lengths around the circular walls, was provided by the tallow candles that guttered, casting a yellowish glow around the room. Where the breeze came from the boy had never discovered, but come it did, just as the Darkwing came to feed. Despair clouded the boy's mind. He lived in an endless present, with no prospect of rescue. So far as he was aware, nobody even knew he was here. Were it not for an astonishing ability, rare in one so young, to live within the precincts of his own mind, he would have gone mad.

A sliver of ice entered his heart. The Darkwing's shadow

was spreading across the wall like a vast obsidian bruise. His presence seemed to chill the air. He was the Prince of Darkness, Master of the Undead.

'Not tonight,' the boy begged. 'Please.'

But the Darkwing was not known for his mercy, only his appetite for blood. For him, blood was renewal, blood was life. The boy flinched. His tormentor's appearance was so grotesque as to turn your flesh to water. His entire body was encased in a black and scarlet carapace, a shell like a cockroach's. He was winged in the way of a huge bug or a bat. His fingers and toes ended in claws, scythe-sharp and obviously deadly. Many were his victims, their flesh hideously ripped by his slashing attacks. His head was similarly inhuman, almost insect-like. Fangs like needles glistened in his mouth. But it was his eyes that dominated his face. They were large, black and utterly emotionless. As he crossed the room a single maggot spilled like a tear from the corner of his right eye. The rancid perfume of decay escaped the demon lord. The boy shuddered.

'You must give me what is mine,' the Darkwing said, coming closer. 'You know I will take it anyway.' His hand gripped the boy's shoulder, the razor-like claws digging into his flesh. 'You do know that, don't you?'

The boy nodded wretchedly. He knew. Even then, weak as he was, his mind was sharp, his thinking clear. Seeing the Darkwing's hungry approach, the boy cowered but was unable to resist. He knew that he would survive the feeding. In the early weeks of his imprisonment he had wondered, each time the Darkwing came, whether he would wake up again. But death would have been a release, far less cruel than this enduring torment. The Darkwing did not take more than the boy could give. He never exhausted the scarlet fountain of warm blood, which had become his own life's elixir. Nor did he let the boy become infected by the

contagion of the undead. He needed the young man conscious, warm with the flickering flame of life. The Darkwing had fed on many victims but none had tasted so sweet. The blood in this boy was as pure as the first light of dawn.

'Come to me,' the Darkwing said.

The boy did as he was told. There was no alternative, this time or any other. Raising his eyes, he met the crow-black stare of the Darkwing.

'Will I ever leave this place?' he asked, trembling to the very marrow of his bones.

The Darkwing dismissed the question with a blink. The predator lord didn't waste words. He came. He fed. That was all.

Afterwards, the boy slept. He had never seen the Darkwing arrive in his windowless prison. He had never seen him leave. He seemed to be able to materialise from the walls the way mist gathers on a cold windowpane. This visit was no exception.

2

On that same sixtieth day of Samhair, at that same gathering of dusk, the evening bell tolled over the glittering city of Parcep. Known as the Gateway to the East, Parcep of the Tiger Gates was the main southern port of the Empire and the second city of the Muzals' vast domain. It sucked in metals, spices, jewels and silks from the many lands the Imperial armies had conquered. Most of all it drew in the Helati on whose labour the Empire's power was built. Along the port's quays trudged each new consignment of these slaves to be put to work to enrich the Children of Ra.

It was a tranquil summer's night. The heat clung to everything like resin. The waters of the southern ocean were as still and turquoise as one of the decorative pieces created by the Empire's master glassblowers to stand in pride of place upon some wealthy noble's table. Dhows and outriggers lay becalmed on the water's glassy surface. Galleys from far-off Lyria crossed the harbour, their oars churning the still ocean. They had loaded their amphorae with peppers and spices from the warehouses of Parcep in exchange for timber and ore.

In the thickening darkness two friends were walking down the processional Avenue of the Kings.

'Which room did you say was Julmira's?' the taller of the pair asked, staring across the wide avenue at a large, whitewashed villa.

'Well, well,' his companion said. 'It seems you don't know where your sweet betrothed lays her head each night.'

'Kulmat,' Gardep snapped, 'point out the room.'

He had had quite enough teasing since Commander Rishal had sprung his surprise: an arranged marriage between his daughter and his most skilled young warrior. As was the custom in old Parcep, the future bride and groom didn't meet formally until their engagement feast.

'That's it,' Kulmat said. 'The moment I heard the news, I got one of the house slaves to point it out.'

Gardep peered through the gloom. With three floors, the villa was one of the largest in the city. It stood next to the Temple of Ra. It was a rich man's house, with its own well, its own plumbing and many glittering rooms maintained by a veritable regiment of white-garbed house slaves. The roof gardens were sumptuously stocked. Rishal's bowers of wild roses were much admired. Indeed, Gardep could smell their scent from where he stood. The gardeners of Parcep

were renowned throughout the Empire for their work and none more so than those employed by Rishal.

The courtyards of the villa, visible through the gates, were magnificent. Elaborate mosaics covered every inch of them. Statues of polished sandstone stood along every corridor, passage and walkway, illuminated by flaring braziers. Pride of place went to the statue of the sun god Ra, the deity in permanent conflict with his evil brother, the moon god Sangra. Gardep took in the sights and wondered why he was being offered a marriage that would give him all this. He had, after all, grown up not knowing his own roots, an orphan with only the haziest recollection of his past in one of the subject territories of the Empire. Solitary and shy of most of his fellows, with just the one close friend in which to confide, he felt ill-at-ease with the cream of Parcep society.

'Rishal-Ra must be the richest man in all Parcep,' Gardep said, marvelling at the ostentatious display of wealth.

'In the whole southern Empire, more like,' Kulmat said. 'Only the wealthiest families of golden Rinaghar itself live in greater luxury. Remember, your knight has another villa high in the hills, in the domain of the snow leopard. From there he goes hunting. It is rumoured that the preserved heads of hundreds of wild beasts decorate the villa's walls. Marry Julmira and you will inherit it all.'

Gardep was utterly in awe of his master, Rishal-ax-Sol. Rishal was the garrison commander, a seasoned warrior and hero of the Empire of all the Peoples. The gold-painted scars on his face and arms bore witness to that. Rishal was third in line to the Imperial Throne and its greatest general. He had conquered the Empire's greatest rival, proud Vassyria, taking its capital in spite of a grave wound to the shoulder. That day he earned himself the title Lion of Inbacus.

Two years Gardep had been Rishal's squire and, though he had hung on his master's every word, not once had he dared ask Rishal a personal question.

There wasn't another recruit to the academy who observed protocol as strictly as Gardep. The army was his life. He lived by its rules. He was certain that he would die by them, too. The truth is, he barely felt worthy to saddle Rishal's horse, never mind marry his noble daughter. Even now, all that time after he had been taken under Rishal's wing, he felt honoured merely to serve him. Was it any wonder that, when Rishal had told him of his intentions, to betroth Gardep to his daughter Julmira, Gardep had almost choked?

'Do you think her beautiful?' Gardep said.

'Who?' Kulmat asked, teasing as usual.

'Who do you think, Kulmat? I'm talking about Julmira, my betrothed.'

'You've seen her.'

It was true. Gardep had glimpsed her occasionally at some function but he hadn't paid her much attention.

'I want your opinion,' he said.

'Do you want the truth?' Kulmat asked.

'Of course I do.'

'Then, in all honesty,' Kulmat said, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. 'I say she looks like a horse and brays like a mule. You've made a match with the ugliest crone in all Parcep.'

At that, Gardep turned his back on his friend and continued his vigil. The next time he looked at Julmira, it wasn't going to be as his master's daughter, but as a prospective bride. By now the twilight was deepening into the first indigo hours of night. Torches flared along Parcep's broad, palm-lined boulevards and lanterns swung on the balconies of villas. They weren't the only lights. From

every villa, every workshop, every granary, warehouse and boatyard, the slaves were beginning their nightly exodus from the city. Torches and rush-lights guided their way, filling the air with their acrid fragrance.

It was the same every evening. As soon as the sun went down over the ocean the Helati, the Empire's slave caste, had to leave the city. It had ever been this way. There were many reasons, chief of which was the Empire's nagging fear of revolt. Throughout their rule, it had been the Muzals' enduring nightmare. Once, within the living memory of the city's elders, the slaves had come within a whisker of throwing off their chains and toppling the sun throne. There were, after all, ten Helati to every true child of the sun god Ra. Fear kept them captive. During daylight hours there were whips and chains, stocks and brandings, stonings and summary executions to break their spirit. With such an enormous apparatus of terror, nobody dreamed the Helati would ever rise again. At night, the Sol-ket put them outside the city walls in rough compounds and let them fend for themselves. Beyond the walls the Helati sheltered in mean mud-brick houses, crude wooden shelters or even out in the open, beneath the branches of the banyan tree.

Some said that among the Helati there were those who possessed the power to conquer death itself. Such tales often quietened the children of Parcep's wealthy elite.

The evening bell rang louder now, echoing across the bay. A pushing, jostling throng choked the streets. The Helati weren't in any hurry to leave. They knew what awaited them outside the city walls. But the Sol-ket drove the slave hordes out at swordpoint. It was the first night of the Blood Moon. The sooner the city gates were closed, the sooner the good citizens of Parcep could sleep easily in their beds. Let the slaves suffer; at least Parcep's free-born people would greet the dawn refreshed.

'Gardep,' Kulmat said. 'You're in luck. That's her now.'

Gardep followed his friend's pointing finger. Sure enough, on the third-floor balcony of Rishal's villa, beneath a saffron awning and framed by bowers of white and crimson blossom, there was a tall maiden in a flowing emerald sari. She had a *phuli*, a nose ring with an oval jewel hanging from it. Around her throat gold necklaces glittered in the light of the braziers. But, for all the magic of the spectacle, Gardep's eyes didn't linger long on her. He was no more attracted to her now than he was on the other occasions he had seen her. Even before his gaze left young mistress Julmira, anguish had begun to work into his heart, as if a thread was being pulled, ever so slowly, through it. His skin prickled and his throat went dry. A curious fire licked through every atom of his being. It was as if his entire life had been leading up to this moment.

The reason for his agitation? Below Julmira's balcony, at street level, the servant's entrance had just opened. It was a Helat, a slave girl. Seemingly oblivious to Gardep, she remained unveiled and breathed in the evening air. For a moment her face was caught in the light of a brazier. It was an unusual sight. It was forbidden for a Helat to be seen unveiled in public. But this girl seemed impervious to the Empire's laws. Everything about her flouted her lowly station in life. Though her salwar kameez was the plain white of the house slave, poorly cut, unembroidered and without finery, there was no disguising her poise and beauty. They were obvious in her every step as she seemed to glide across the ground in her bare feet. Every bob of her lustrous, plaited hair declared her natural grace. Gardep watched her progress, in turns enchanted and appalled. For a member of Parcep's military elite to look at a slave this way was taboo. But what better reason to die, Gardep thought, than in the adoration of beauty.

That's when he realised the risk she was taking. For any Helat, male or female, to be seen on the streets of Parcep wearing neither veil, nor hood, nor scarf, was an offence punishable by a beating. Were a slave to persist in this crime, disfigurement or death would surely follow. The message of the city's ruling order was simple: the slaves were as many pairs of calloused hands. The showing of their faces constituted an act of defiance. Their offending countenances must be hidden from the eyes of their masters.

The girl must have sensed Gardep's gaze upon her, felt his worshipping glance, because, without the slightest hint of shame or fear, she met it and faced it down.

Her features were darker than her mistress's. Gardep even fancied that the pride, so obvious in her features, was intentional. Could she be as drawn to him as he was to her?

Then and only then, when he had glanced away shamefaced, did she fasten her veil and join the crowds spilling out of the North Gate. Soon, she was just one more white shawl in the throng. Even so, long after she had gone Gardep continued to stare after her. He did not know that, in the girl's mind too, his features were indelibly printed.

'So what did you think of your lady?' Kulmat asked.

A sigh of yearning came from Gardep's lips. 'Beautiful,' he said, 'very beautiful.'

But he didn't mean Julmira.

3

Hundreds of miles to the west, under another sky, a man held a lonely battlement vigil. Here however, in a meaner, colder town than wealthy Parcep, there was no slave exodus.

Zindhar was the final fortress before the Demon Wall. No Helat was trusted to labour in this place. They had constructed it and then been evicted. Zindhar's existence was precarious enough without the added peril of a slave fifth column. The Demon Wall, massive in the distance, was an engineering marvel. This barrier, ten metres high and twice that distance wide, separated the Empire's lands from the vast wastes beyond, ruled by the Darkwing and his host of Lost Souls.

The Demon Wall stretched from the snow-peaked mountains of the northern territories to the sparkling ocean far to the south. It was conceived as a barrier to the swarming legions of the undead, the Lost Souls. They were composed of night-striders and dark-fliers. The night-striders walked the land, flesh rotting, eyes wild with a morbid hunger for human flesh. The dark-fliers roamed the skies, winged, scarlet demons desperate to slake their thirst for human blood. But the wall was more than a line of defence; it was a symbol of vigilance and power. So wide were its battlements that a dozen infantrymen could walk along them, marching abreast. The Muzals had begun its construction more than a hundred years before and it had cost thousands of Helat lives. Some Helati said, with a shudder, that any of the slave workers injured during construction were simply walled up, still alive. Their bones would provide insulation during the cold frontier nights. Such was the cruelty of the children of the sun god, Holy Ra.

Though still unfinished, the Demon Wall was already a formidable obstacle to the inhuman hordes that waited, ravenous eyes trained on the Empire, on the other side. There was a network of deep ditches, passages and wells reaching deep into the earth. The Sol-ket filled this labyrinth with thick, flammable oil, known as Lyrian fire. A

single torch could set the defences ablaze, turning any night-strider who dared to tunnel beneath the wall into a walking torch. Nowhere else was there such a barrier to the night breed. Then there was the danger from the air. Archers, slingers and catapults were posted to bring down the dark-fliers, the feared dark-flier warriors. Huge ballistae, imported from Lyria, also faced the sky.

The watch that night was kept by Oled Lonetread, himself a mercenary drawn from the parched steppes, many leagues further north than most Imperial troops wished to journey. His fur cloak and his breastplate of leather and iron strips set him apart from the Sol-ket with their burnished armour, their helmets inlaid with gold and topped by horsehair tassels.

Oled was a full head and shoulders taller than the Easterners. His weapon was the battle-axe he carried strapped to his powerful back. It was Oled whom the garrison commander, Turayat, sought out when he needed advice about the world beyond the wall. Even though, like any Easterner, Turayat held the barbarian in contempt, he had learned to value his experience of this hostile western frontier.

'Well, Oled, what do you think?'

Oled looked along the wall. In the darkness the watchtowers rose like black storks, their spindly legs enveloped by clouds of steel-grey smoke from the campfires. Through the smoke drums sounded, like a heartbeat, and accompanying them there came the steady drone of the Lost Souls' voices. It was a chorus of the undead.

Oled was careful to use the respectful suffix 'Ra' when he spoke to one of the masters. If any of the Sol-ket showed disrespect they would have to endure a beating. Should a barbarian like Oled do the same he would be lucky to live.

'I don't like it, Turayat-Ra. The drums, the chanting, it's a bad sign. Death spills from the darkness.'

Turayat frowned. 'Don't you think you're exaggerating the danger, Oled? We are the Sol-ket, the Warriors of the Sun. Our arrows hiss on the wind, whispering their blood oath into the faces of our foes. Our blades sing with death. We have conquered all the nations from the arid desert wastes of Selessia to the saffron shores of Banshu. We have mastered the known world and created the Empire of all the Peoples. The demons will come and we will conquer them.'

Oled had heard all this before: the Sol-ket were a boastful bunch. They had good cause, that was true. They had fought hundreds of battles, often against seemingly insurmountable odds, but the Sun banners still flaunted the skies from the Demon Wall to the endless scrubland of Khut, from the frozen shores of the north all the way to the southern ocean, to palm-fringed Sharidasa and the thirty islands of Banshu. They ruled an empire of many million souls and hundreds of varied peoples. Nevertheless . . .

'Well, Oled, speak your mind.'

'They are preparing an attack, Turayat-Ra, and not just some small skirmish. Their legions are massing. They are as numerous as heads of wheat on the Plains of Jinghara. Just listen to their voices.'

Turayat listened. A veteran of so many fights with the Lost Souls, he couldn't, even in his worst nightmares, imagine them creating an army that could threaten the Empire's western boundary. Driven by their foul lusts, they lacked discipline. They were just one more gang of barbarians to be put to the sword, barbarians from beyond the grave.

'You've spent too many years looking at that wall, Oled. How long has it been?'

'Eight years,' Oled said.

'Yes,' Turayat said, gathering his scarlet cloak around his shoulders, 'and in all that time, have we ever been defeated? A few dozen dark-fliers might get through our defences. But a full-scale invasion? You talk of legions. You're dreaming, Oled. These creatures, they lack direction. We have always kept them at bay before. They are lower than the beasts of the field, without intelligence or culture. How could they ever create a command structure or develop strategy and tactics? They are an ignorant pestilence, not an army.'

Oled listened in silence. He knew Turayat was wrong. Things had changed. It was true that the night breed were normally chaotic and savage, as likely to devour each other as to attack human settlements. But events were moving fast. There was a method to their behaviour now. It had all begun with the Darkwing's most recent coming. He had started to transform them from a bestial throng into an army. But there was no point arguing with Turayat. He wouldn't pay any attention anyway. Still, Oled had heard the gargling voices of the undead beneath the Earth. He wasn't dreaming. He was having nightmares.

4

Gardep remained on the battlements long after the end of his watch. Kulmat had asked him over and over again to come into the barracks to play chess. But Gardep spurned the camaraderie of the dormitory. He was a lone wolf. He longed for a moment, a few fleeting seconds, in the company of the dark-eyed slave girl he had seen that night. Suddenly, though he was standing close to his comrades of eight years, he was a man alone, yearning for something his comrades would consider forbidden and wrong.

Sol-ket loyalty was legendary. Cadets joined the order as boys. During their years of training they would see their parents for only a few days a year, on visits home for the major festivals. Gardep didn't even have that to look forward to. He had no recollection of his parents' faces. His first memories were of siege, battle and death.

He did however remember every stage of his training as if it were yesterday. Raised in the furnace of war, he was a natural warrior.

More than any other experience in his early years Gardep remembered his Ket-Ra, the trial of manhood that took place on his fourteenth birthday. He had been summoned to stand before the other warriors. He had watched Rishal unsheathe his curved dagger. He had watched him sharpen it until the razor edge could cut floating silk. Then Rishal had told him to stand steady. There were many recruits who fell at this stage. The young cadet was expected to clasp his hands behind his back and accept the master's cuts without flinching. Instinctively some threw out their hands in self-defence and had to be restrained so they could complete the ritual.

Gardep did nothing of the kind. He stood expressionless under the blazing sun while Rishal had cut the Sun emblem into his chest, scoring the spreading rays outward across his flesh. Then, while the cuts were still fresh and the blood was still running, Gardep was taken to the Dragon Mountains. There, he had to survive on his wits and make his way home.

Many young men died out there in the arid thorn forests. Some were slaughtered during the long, hot nights by marauding bands of Lost Souls. Others simply lost their way and perished from hunger or thirst. There were rumours that dragons haunted the mountains that bore their name. Some survivors swore they had heard savage

roars in the night. Those who survived their test had been steeled in the furnace of endurance.

Gardep refused to die. He was born to conquer. With bow and with sword he would serve his Emperor and his implacable god, almighty Ra. That was the determination that maintained him throughout his long trek. Hollow as his stomach became with hunger, cracked as his lips became with thirst, he defied the sun, the thorn bushes and the waiting vultures. He was ready for the dragons.

But even Gardep faced his moment of crisis. There was one dusty afternoon when he lay prostrate, the last of his strength gone. He truly believed he was dying. Then a voice came to him, carried on the wind. *You will not die here, na-Vassyrian*, it told him, *for you are descended from mighty warriors. You must live to fulfil your destiny, many years from now, on the tenth of Hoj.* He never knew where the voice came from or what the strange message meant, but he would never forget it. Fortified by the promise, he staggered to his feet and continued his long march.

Gardep's trial, at six days, was one of the shortest in the annals of the Sol-ket. Of all the Warriors of the Sun who had passed through the academy at Parcep, only Rishal had matched Gardep's astonishing achievement and he was one of the senior generals of the entire Empire, a man of whom ballads were sung. The orphan Gardep, a young man as serious and ascetic as a priest, immediately became a figure cast in Rishal's mould, looked upon in awe by all the other cadets, especially when the commander adopted him as his squire.

Thereafter he had bested mature Sol-ket in armed and unarmed combat on many occasions, marking himself out as a future general. Only Kulmat treated him with the old familiarity. His friend was incorrigible however, a rogue without respect for anyone. But the thrill of achievement is

fleeting, Gardep thought as he looked out over the golden dome of the Temple of Ra. Life will always throw up another trial. And it had. How could he resist the feelings he had for this slave girl, feelings which, according to the code of the Sol-ket were taboo, punishable by death?

5

Once outside the Tiger Gates the Helati slowed their pace. This was the Blood Moon. They cast anxious looks into the darkened groves and thickets bordering the Great Western Road. Suddenly every shadow, every shape and outline harboured menace. The slightest moan of the wind was interpreted as a threat. Entirely pitiless, without conscience or mercy, these risen dead swarmed the Helat encampments. They attacked, they slaughtered, they fed. They created others like themselves.

Cusha, like every Helat in that throng, cast nervous glances at the night sky. Everything startled her now: the slightest rustle in the hedgerows, the snap of a twig, the scamper of a lizard. Added to her usual anxiety about the night breed, there was a new emotion, a curiosity about the young warrior who had stared at her so intently. It was as if his eyes had stared into the inner sanctum of her being. He'd seen her most private feelings, felt the stirring of her spirit within his own soul. They might not have spoken but they had communicated. Though there were hundreds of men, women and children around her on the Western Road she didn't see their faces or hear their voices. The warrior's proud handsomeness eclipsed them all.

'Cusha!'

It was Harad. This gaunt, hollow-cheeked boy of thirteen summers was her brother. They were not related by

blood but some years ago Cusha had been found wandering the rice fields north of Parcep, frightened, alone and for many months made speechless by her experiences. Harad's mother Murima had adopted her. Yet, though there was no blood bond between them, Cusha loved Harad dearly. He was braver, more loyal, more devoted than any dog. She knew he would gladly lay down his life for her. He had shown that in a dozen demon incursions, watching over her with such selfless courage, with such intense protectiveness, that he scared her sometimes. Once, six months before, he had even torn a feeding dark-flier from Cusha's throat. He had got to her just in time. Murima had been able to burn out the contagion with a heated knife and save Cusha from a living death. It had left a scar on her flesh in the shape of the dagger. The hilt began at her collar bone. The blade crossed her throat. The point almost touched her chin. But she had lived to tell the tale.

'Where have you been?' Harad asked. 'We've been looking for you everywhere.'

'It was Mistress Julmira,' Cusha explained. 'She insisted that I take in her new sari. She wants to impress this soldier-boy of hers.'

Cusha imitated Julmira's exaggerated wiggle. 'How do I look, Cusha?' she cooed, copying Julmira's voice. 'Another henna tattoo on my fingers, perhaps?'

Harad looked aghast. 'You wouldn't dare do that around the villa,' he said. 'They'd have you flogged within an inch of your life. We are talking about the Sol-ket, butchers of the poor.'

Cusha remembered the warrior. There would be worse than a flogging in store if she were foolish enough to return his looks with favour.

'I know,' Cusha said. 'But here at least we are free to say what we think.'

'Yes,' he said, casting another fearful glance at the night sky, 'and free to die.'

'Poor Harad,' Cusha said. 'My gloomy little brother.'

She knew he had nightmares about the Blood Moon. He had been no more than seven years old when he lost two of his closest friends, taken one night by demons. Harad had good reason to be serious. At Cusha's words, he frowned.

'I'm almost fourteen,' he objected, 'and you're not fifteen until the first day of Murjin.'

That was typical of Harad. He remembered everyone's birthday, just as he remembered their favourite colour, food and flower. Cusha had never known a boy more thoughtful or more caring. Or more melancholy.

'So where are the others?' she asked.

Harad led her to a lemon grove. Murima rose and clasped Cusha's hands.

'My child,' she said. 'I was quite beside myself with worry.'

Cusha embraced her adoptive mother and stroked her greying hair. 'There was no need, *Mama-li*,' she said. 'I let one of those dark-fliers taste my blood once before. It will never happen again.'

Murima turned her face to the starlit sky. 'I pray to the Four Winds that you are right, my child,' she said.

Cusha hugged Murima hard, as if trying to shelter her from the approaching storm. 'I am.'

Ending the embrace, Cusha looked around. Qintu was there. Horror does different things to different people. The loss of his friends had made Harad anxious and gloomy. Qintu however seemed to have decided his life would in all likelihood be short and, most probably, brutal so he had to make light of its troubles. Even in the most extreme conditions of hardship he would come up smiling.

There were many more familiar faces but one was missing.

'Where is Shamana?' Cusha asked.

Harad shrugged. 'You know what she's like,' he said. 'She always has to be the mystery woman.'

Qintu mimicked Shamana, hobbling on a pretend stick. 'Older than the Dragon mountains I am,' he croaked, 'more weather-beaten than the distant mangroves.'

'Yes,' said Shamana, emerging from the lemon grove, accompanied by a younger woman, 'and tough as Vassyrian leather, you ignorant, disrespectful whelp.'

'Where have you been?' Harad asked.

Shamana fixed him with her green eyes. Though her skin was bronzed and weathered, the result of many years toiling in the fields, she stood out among the Helati. Her skin, if not burned by the eastern sun, would have reverted to its naturally yellowish hue. Her eyes had a Far Eastern fold and her flat cheeks were high. She was no natural-born inhabitant of Parcep.

Over the years there had been many rumours about Shamana. Some said she was from the far north-east, a Yakut or Manchutkan. Others said there was something dark and wild about her, something not quite human at all. But nobody said anything like that to her face and nobody challenged her right to be a counsellor, guide and healer to the suffering Helati people. She could coax a young mother through a difficult birth. She knew the herbs that could ease the rheumatism that plagued the rice pickers. She prepared the poultices that ended fevers. Her surgery saved lives and her words had settled many a quarrel. Yes, and with her stories she kept alive the memory of another time. Centuries before there had been no slaves, only the free peoples of the world.

'Where have I been?' Shamana said.

She exchanged glances with the younger woman next to her. 'Aaliya and I have been continuing the work of venerable Udmanesh, scourge of tyrants. What was I doing? I was balancing the Scales, of course.'

At the mention of the ancient rites of the Helati, Harad's face suddenly looked more gaunt than ever. To mention Udmanesh the scholar and the Scales in one breath was the greatest of heresies. Whole villages had been razed for less. Shamana was inviting death.

'Shamana!' Harad gasped, shocked at her boldness. 'Lower your voice. If the masters think you have anything to do with the Scales, come daylight they will butcher you on this very road. They will sacrifice you to their sun god.'

'And how would they know?' Shamana said. 'Who here will betray me to the Sol-ket?'

She seemed to meet every pair of eyes in the crowd. Some turned away. Others gave an embarrassed cough and bowed their heads. Satisfied that she had been shown due respect, Shamana nodded to Aaliya. She produced a tiny, intricately carved statuette, fashioned from rosewood, the kind that generations of rebel Helati had placed in secret altars away from the prying eyes of the Sol-ket. It was of a young woman in a salwar kameez, the traditional tunic of loose-fitting trousers and blouse, holding aloft a pair of scales, the ancient symbol of Helat resistance. The sight of the object drew gasps from the latecomers who were still making their way into the grove. Such a show of defiance was rare, even for Shamana. Any Helat caught in possession of the symbolic Scales would be put to death on the spot.

Cusha looked at the statuette and knew that, for Shamana to be so bold, something had to have changed in the fabric of the times. But what?