

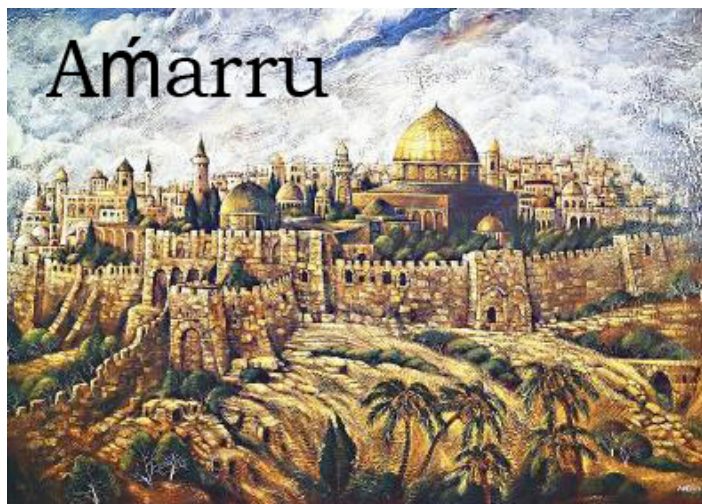


THE PAYMASTER

BY

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Aṁarru



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THE DESCENT INTO darkness cannot be avoided. It is not something you can plan for or seek to circumvent. It descends upon you like a plague of locusts devouring all in its path until you are but a husk of your former self – a shell without a soul.

My turning came swiftly, like the yellow winds that plow across the Great Tundra. One moment I walked in Light. The next I belonged, heart and soul, to the Dark.

I lived in the outskirts of the ancient city of Amarru, blessed by Ishnu, the Goddess of Light. Yes, I had my share of tragedy. I had lost cousins, friends and even my parents to the sectarian violence that plagued our city. But I was a good Marrudite boy, I dutifully said my prayers like all my persecuted brethren.

I was not one to seek out dark magic.

Unlike the many orphans who lived in the darken alleys of our great city, I was not alone. I

had Kammu, my sweet little brother who looked to me for guidance, and Punja, the most loyal friend a Marrudite could ask for. I was happy then, blissful in my last days of childish ignorance.

But at sixteen, I had the height of a man if not the wisdom. I should have known better. For Kammu, if for no other reason. Had I known the events that were about to unfold, I would never have left his side.



The morning my life changed forever started like any other. The air was crisp with the scent of fresh bread. The steam from the bakeries filled the narrow alleyways of the Grand Bazaar like breath on a cold day. Merchants opened their shops with a touch more care than usual; the small space where they hawked their wares was swept an extra time, their carts repositioned by eager careworn hands. Because today was not just any day, but the eve of the Reaping Moon

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Festival.

I had been dreaming of this festival for the past fortnight. Kammu was so excited he could barely sleep. For a pair of boys who had never left the city, the month long celebration was the biggest event of our lives.

The city was filling beyond capacity with pilgrims who travelled from the four corners of the earth to worship at Ishnu's sacred Temple. Our home was in the Grand Bazaar, a maze of interlocking alleys and shops that encircled the raised tepe of Amarru like a fungus clinging to a tree's bark. It was rumored that anything, *and anyone*, could be purchased at the Bazaar. There was no wish too dark that couldn't be satisfied here if one was willing to pay the price.

The cocks had barely crowed twice by the time we snuck up to the roof of my favorite *farafane* shop to watch the exotic travelers enter the city. It was a coveted spot, heated by the cook fires below, and well worth the effort of an early rise. Not only were the scents of roasting mutton

mouthwatering, but our shop boasted the most spectacular view of the city.

Punja and I played a round of runes as we waited for travelers to arrive. I was losing. *Again.* After five straight losses, I should have stopped playing long ago, but there was little else to idle our time away. I moved my Questor out into the open.

"I wouldn't do that." Kammu whispered into my ear.

At nine years old, Kammu was more nuisance than a companion, but blood was blood, and I seldom let him out of my sight. He was the only family I had left, and this city had a way of swallowing up the innocent.

"Alright then. What would *you* do?" I pushed him toward our battered old board, loving the sweet confusion on his face as he studied the runes.

"The Dedicate." Kammu decided with a quick nod. I waved him on, letting him make the move.

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Punja shook his head and took his turn.
“Nightshade beats Dedicate,” he said ruefully,
swiping my rune from the board.

“What?” Kammu stuttered, trying to see
where the attack came from. “How?”

“Nightshade moves in all directions.” I
schooled the boy. “You can’t block him.”
Kammu’s face puckered. If denial were a viable
defense, he would have won the game.

“I don’t know why you didn’t warn him.”
Punja chided as he cleared the board.

I leaned back on the soft cushions we had
thrown over the plaster flooring and shrugged.
“I can’t coddle him forever. He’s got to become a
man *sometime*.”

Kammu pouted. He hated when I spoke
about him like he wasn’t present.

“Of course, you did lose me two marks.” I
growled playfully at my brother. “You’ll pay for
that.” His eyes widened with alarm, but it was
too late. I had already pounced. He wheezed
with laughter as I wrestled him to the ground.

“Peace, Vangari! Peace!” he begged.

“Not without a boon.” I raised my right hand above his sensitive ribs, ready for a second go.

“Anything!” he giggled, trying unsuccessfully to wiggle his way out of my grip.

“Fetch us some meat pies. And next time, pay attention. You might just learn how the game is played.”

Kammu scurried across the rooftop, shooting a wary look back to make sure I didn’t change my mind. I was tough on the boy, but he knew I kept him safe. It was the last promise I made to our dying mother, one I’d sooner die than break. He shimmied down the drainage pipe and out of sight.

Punja stared at me, the scars surrounding his colorless eye looking more like scales than human flesh. It was an old injury, faded with time, but unnerving nonetheless. Many of the youths from our local temple refused to be seen with him because of those scars, but not me. The measure of a man was what was on the inside,

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not the out. I trusted Punja with my life. Still, it was hard to endure that stare.

“What?” I asked.

“I didn’t say anything.” Punja laughed and pushed past me to gaze down onto the plaza below.

Each district of the Bazaar was separated by a large cobblestone thoroughfare that led up to the city like spokes on a cartwheel. Spices to the west, textiles to the east, and so forth. The land was partitioned not only by commodity, but by ownership, with my people cast off to the lower less desirable regions and our Amarni adversaries closer to the towering gates of the sacred city. While neither Marrudite nor Amarni were allowed beyond those gates, there was no question who held greater favor with our Vicari overlords. It was a brutal fact of life that I had learned to accept long ago.

We were above the meat market deep inside Marrudite territory. Merchants, heavily laden with fresh slaughter, traversed the thoroughfare

ready to turn a profit off the multitudes soon to enter the city. It was a smelly, bloody affair.

“More of this lot?” Punja groaned. “Where are the dancers? They always wear the most beautiful costumes.”

“Who told you that?” I poured two glasses of *oozqua*, handing a cup to my friend. I took a small sip, enjoying the savory aftertaste of cinnamon and cream.

“Innana, of course.” He smiled wistfully, lost in his daydreams of our local Priestess. “Are you in for a treat! The temple initiates dance in streets. If you are lucky, one might even ask you to join them.” He winked, knowing I would blush.

I hid my face, gazing off into the horizon. From my vantage, I could see the towering spires of Ishnu’s Temple stretching into the heavens, as though they strove to join the Goddess herself in her celestial home. The late summer sun glittered off the marble buildings within the inner keep. I had to shield my eyes. It

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was easy to see why Amarru was dubbed the “Jewel of the Desert”. We were blessed to live so near to greatness.

I remember feeling humble in that moment, surrounded by the grand preparations to honor the Goddess, grateful that a baseborn boy like me could participate in those celebrations. My people were a vital part of this vibrant city, and I was proud to be a Marrudite.

But pride is a fickle master. They say an inferno is caused by a single match. Had I known my pride would ignite the flames, I would have paid Punja to hold me down with a knife to my throat. But how was I to know?

The street cleared out below as a gang of Amarni ruffians entered the plaza. They weren’t much older than Punja and I, and they walked the street like they owned it. I tensed, feeling the blood drain from my face, and acted as I have always acted.

“What are *they* doing here?” I said more loudly than I anticipated, my voice carrying to

the street. A comely boy with perfectly pleated braids gazed up at me. There was danger in his crystal blue eyes.

“Come on, Vangari.” Punja tried to pull me away from the roof’s edge. “It’s the Festival, I’m sure they meant no offense.”

I should have taken Punja’s offer, but the Amarni had a smug grin on his face, his fingers tracing the hilt of the dirk at his side. He meant every offense.

“The Festival hasn’t started yet.” I said even louder to the invading Amarni. “And this isn’t the neutral zone. *You should leave.*”

The braided devil nodded to his companions and they spread out, each pacing the storefront of a different vendor. The shopkeepers watched them warily.

“We’ll go when we’re good and ready.” He shouted up to me. “And not when some Snake Eye and his Varmint tell us to. Dear Ishnu, however did you get so ugly? The Goddess must hate you.”

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Punja tensed but made no move to retaliate. He was used to such insults.

But I wasn't. I tossed my cup at the insolent youth. It crashed harmlessly at the Amarni's feet.

That was all the provocation the Amarni needed. They started capsizing shop tables and harassing customers. I ran to the drainage pipe eager to prove my worth. I wasn't the biggest boy in the neighborhood, but I would defend my people. This insult would not stand!

"Vangari, wait!" Punja cried after me, but I could barely hear him for the roar of anger in my blood.

I hit the cobblestones at a run. A thick Amarni, with arms like tree limbs, swung his fist at my head. I narrowly ducked under it, jamming my shoulder into his groin. He toppled over with a heavy cry.

The street was in chaos. Somewhere off to my left, Marsala, the *farafane* shop mistress, was crying. Josef, the butcher across the street, was battling a fire that started from spilt coals from

his cooking pit. The Amarni were fighting with other locals, the strangled cries of their battles making it impossible to hear anything clearly.

But I didn't care to be heard. I only had eyes for the instigator, and he for me. The blue eyed devil was waiting for me, his dirk held out between us, blood dripping from its wicked end.

I froze. Scuffles with Amarni were all too common. I spent my life running from, and joining in, territorial disputes like this one. I even kept a dirk at my side. It wasn't as fine a blade as the Amarni's, but it was sharp. I honed it each night before going to bed.

But I never had to use it.

The blood fell from his blade in thick viscous drops. Marsala continued to wail behind me as though her soul was breaking.

What had he done?

That red seemed to infect me. My vision clouded over and I pulled out my blade. We circled each other like partners in a morbid dance as I waited for some small break in his

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posture that I could press to my advantage.

My chance came when the Amarni slipped on a cobblestone slick with blood. It was a small opening, his left hand dropped out of my strike zone. I imagined my next move, plunging forward with my knife, the bite of the blade tearing open his flesh.

But as I moved forward, I hesitated. And in that moment, I knew I was no killer.

The Amarni quickly recovered and pressed his advantage. He jumped toward me, his dirk held high, and —

BOOM! A loud clap echoed in the street behind us. The Vicari magistrate had arrived in a magical burst of sound and smoke. Everyone in eyesight dropped to their knees, shielding their profane eyes from looking on the holy peacekeeper.

I did not move, not trusting the Amarni across from me. The same concern crossed his face, although his legs began to buckle.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Vicar's

powerful voice boomed down the thoroughfare.

I cast one last look at my tormentor and dropped to my knees, my fear of the Vicar greater than that of my enemy. The Amarni did the same.

The Vicar moved amongst the people, placing a hand on every bowed head he passed. His long robes swirled about his legs, one moment seeming grey, the next a snowy white. The skin of his hands seemed to match the robes, with the faintest traces of ritual markings on his arms. The Vicari were the Goddess' chosen vessels, the only occupants of the sacred inner city. It was death to defy them. I forced my gaze down as he approached me.

His fingertips grazed my forehead and I lurched forward. Those fingers were blistering ice on my sweat soaked skin. All the rage I felt earlier began to leech out of me through that hand. He pulled at my memory, at my very soul. There were no secrets from the Vicari, only truth and judgement. When he released me, I

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crumbled to the ground utterly drained.

As he touched my Amarni rival next, I forced air back into my lungs and pushed myself back to my knees. It seemed an eternity I waited, but when he released the boy, I knew only moments had passed.

"This fight was provoked." The Vicar glowed brightly as he announced his judgement. *"There will be no sanctions leveled."*

A familiar bitterness filled my heart. It was common for Vicari justice to leave me wanting.

But our magistrate was not finished. He gleamed even brighter, burning the eyes of any too foolish to look directly on him. *"Let it be known, any transgressions during the Reaping Moon will be met in kind. Blood for blood, flesh for flesh. Break the peace at your peril. Now, rise and disperse."*

The Vicar disappeared as he had come, with an eruption of smoke and sound. As soon as the smoke cleared, my Amarni foe stumbled to his feet, gathered his friends, and took off at a quick pace. Many of the shopkeepers similarly

retreated into their homes. Vicari judgements were final and no amount of talking would sway a verdict. It was best to suffer in silence.

But Marsala continued to weep in the *farafane* shop behind me. Only after the Amarni were gone did I begin to decipher her words.

"He's just a boy." She cried. "Is there no justice in this world?"

I turned to her, fear freezing my blood. In Marsala's arms lay the broken body of my little brother.

"Kammu?" I knelt by his side in a stupor.
"Kammu??"

I yanked Kammu's limp arm from Marsala, shaking him roughly. There was blood, so much blood... *"I need a healer!"* I screamed to any who would listen. My neighbors gathered, watching me with sorrow filled eyes. But only Marsala responded, and only to continue her mournful cries.

"Please," I begged. "He needs help. Please!"

I screamed until I was hoarse, but no one

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moved to help us. Couldn't they see he was hurt? Every second they waited was one Kammu couldn't spare.

I lifted my brother into my arms, his head rolling listlessly against my chest. If they wouldn't help us, then I'd find someone who would.

When I turned toward the Bazaar, Josef stepped into my path, barring the way. He placed a firm hand on my shoulder. "Son," he said gravely. "It's too late."

"No," I stammered. "You're wrong. He can't die." Not Kammu. He was innocent. He said his prayers. He was faithful. I was the one who started this fight. It should have been me.

But Josef did not answer. He lifted Kammu from my arms and carried him back toward his shop. Now empty, those arms hung useless at my side. Useless, like I was to protect him. Useless, like the Vicar's justice.

Utterly useless.



The next few weeks passed in a blur. I wandered the Bazaar like one cursed. The Festival started with great fanfare, but I could not partake. My joy had vanished. Everywhere I went I saw traces of Kammu.

I found myself visiting his favorite places; the local bakery where he would beg for pastries, the House of Letters where he learned his first prayers for Ishnu.... My mind clung to his memory there, as if desperate for physical proof that he once lived, that he wasn't really gone. Any moment he could race out the door of our local temple and into my arms.

Each day the aching pain of his loss faded, and in its place a terrible anger grew. Punja begged me to go to Temple with him, to let the Goddess wash away my suffering, but I refused. Ishnu's Vicari let Kammu's murderer go unpunished. I wanted no part of her Light.

And so I roamed. The Bazaar was a labyrinth

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of hidden nooks and alleys, the narrow streets covered by garishly colored canvas awnings of orange and red. One could walk for miles here and never see the sun. It was a world of shadows, and it beckoned to me.

I found Kammu in those shadows. In a forgotten alley I discovered his broken body, his glassy eyes staring into oblivion. Later, at the corner of a bathhouse, I found him propped up against a grime stained wall. Blood covered his pale skin, the inflamed flesh of his wounds gaping open for all to see.

I should have been horrified to see his shade, but strangely I was not. It was raw happiness, not fear, that filled my heart. Happiness to see his sweet face once more, to touch the soft curls of his black hair that were eternally falling into his eyes. The brutality of his death was lost on me in those moments.

And then reality would return with the force of a heavy mallet. Kammu would vanish, and my world grew darker for his brief visit. I

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expanded my wanderings, searching for a way to end this torment. And on the second to last night of the Festival, I found it.

A Temple dancer swirled past me, her veil rippling in the air. She was a pretty thing, covered head to toe in sashes the color of a blushing rose. As her eyes lit upon mine, she stumbled, frightened by what she must have seen. I did not move, but watched as she completed her move and reunited back with her sisters. The troupe quickly departed.

Then I saw him.

My brother's killer sat with six of his fellows beneath the awning of a hookah cafe. They laughed lustfully at the passing dancers. I knew not his name, but his brazen face was forever emblazoned in my mind. The Amarni relaxed, smoking the apple-flavored *sheesha* with an air of leisure.

I hated him for that, that he could have such joy while my heart mourned. He should suffer as I suffered. My pain should be his.

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He looked up then, catching my eyes across the plaza, him the boy of privilege and I, the boy of nothing. Time seemed to still in that moment, and I felt the air thicken as though some dark fate connected me to him. Our hearts beat as one, our chests filled with air in unison.

And then a boy not ten years old ran out of the shop and into the Amarni's arms.

Breath escaped me. It drained from my lungs as though drained from a million little dagger points. Jealousy clouded my vision. I didn't think. I just acted. I rushed across the plaza with a purpose I still hadn't formulated —

And was slammed to the ground. A large Amarni hoodlum twice my size towered above me, his fists balled. The back of my head throbbed from where it met the pavement. I tried getting up, but my body failed me. I was too weak from my wanderings. The Amarni planted a foot on my chest for the effort.

I spat at him, knowing I was the fool for even trying. I was but one and they were many. But I

couldn't turn my cheek to their crime. Someone *had* to stand up to them.

"Massani?" The young boy asked my brother's blue-eyed killer.

"It's okay, brother." Messani planted himself in front of the boy protectively. "This filthy *nesbit* won't hurt you." His hand gripped the dirk at his side.

I wanted to rip the weapon from his belt and plunge it in his black heart. A new wave of anger lent me strength and I lurched to my feet.

"MURDERER!" I shouted, pushing back the Amarni thug who held me down.

A crowd of Festival revelers began to gather watching our exchange. Messani cast the crowd an apologetic smirk and sneered at me as though I was a mere nuisance. "I have committed no crime."

"*Liar.*" I hissed, the ground swaying as I tried to catch my balance. "You killed my brother!"

"I have committed no crime." The Amarni repeated. "If you have a problem, take it to the

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Vicari."

"Why wait?" The hulking thug added, fist raised. "I can end this right now."

I raised my chin, welcoming his blow. There was nothing they could do to hurt me more than what had already been done. I wanted Ishnu to see these beasts' true nature. *I wanted the whole world to see.*

"Don't." Messani quietly warned his companion. "The Truce still holds."

A ripple of concern passed over the gathered people. They began to disperse in great haste, fearful that witnessing violence would equally bring them the Vicari's wrath. No fight would willingly be started this day.

Messani stepped toward me, his voice lowered menacingly. "You're lucky this time, *boy*. But if I ever see your face again, you'll join your brother in the afterlife." He shoved me hard in the chest.

I stumbled halfway across the courtyard before I could stop myself. My weak legs barely

kept me standing. I watched the man who destroyed my family depart for the second time, and I still too powerless to stop him.



Darkness threatened to take me then. I wanted to die. A pathetic weakling like me did not deserve to live. I was a baseborn cur, a victim, who did nothing as more powerful men took whatever they wanted from me.

I pushed through inebriated Festival revelers in a daze, pressing elbow to ribs to make space in the densely packed streets. The darkness in my heart beckoned me onward, pulling me deeper into the Bazaar until I was hopelessly lost. I pressed onward, something inside me telling me where to turn. The streets emptied out, and I found myself in a part of the Bazaar I never dared venture before.

The shadows breathed in these dark reaches. No brightly colored flags adorned the mud brick hovels here. No bushels of wheat hung from the

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lintels. No one sought the favor of the Goddess in this forgotten corner of the city.

When I realized where I had come, I jolted from my stupor, self-preservation more powerful than my grief. I was in the refugee camp, home of the Godless heathens, the victims of the many wars that plagued the outer realm. These foreigners were a fearsome lot, scorned by my people and the Amarni alike —

For they were known to practice black magic. A man could sell his soul for good fortune here. There was only one man who did the purchasing: The Witch Doctor of Uru.

And I was standing outside his door.

Lagashi of Uru was a legend amongst the boys who roamed the Grand Bazaar. Tales of his dark deeds frightened even the bravest of men. I should have been terrified. A small voice in the back of my head screamed at me to run, to save myself.

But I knew what awaited me down that path — a world where injustice was the rule of life,

where my brother's soul never found rest. A world where my life held no meaning. I had found this place for a reason. My heart knew it even if my feeble spirit did not. I had come to avenge my brother.

It was an innocent looking hut, made of compact earth like the others surrounding it. But unlike the others where light danced from within, this hut seemed to pull down what light was around it, as though one was walking into darkness itself. Lagashi stepped out of that darkness as though parting the arms of a lover's embrace. He was black of skin with long coils of hair matted into braids. Tattoos covered his lean body, the thick lines woven into intricate symbols. The only area spared was his face, where his bloodshot black eyes gazed into mine intensely.

I shivered. My tongue grew dry and my words faltered. What did one say to a witch?

"Vangari Devandi, we have been expecting you." Lagashi declared, the odd lit to his vowels

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confirming his foreign nature more so than his strange appearance.

“You have?” I asked with surprise.

“In darkness you can see much farther than in light.” He answered mystically and stepped aside, the beads of his frayed robe clacking as he swept his arm open to invite me in.

I steadied my courage. I would not be a dog who suffered the abuse of villainous men. If this was what it took to find justice for Kammu, then I would have the courage to pay the price. I took a deep breath, and walked inside the hut.

The smoke of incense stung my eyes as I entered. Half melted candles dimly lit the circular space and I tried to orient myself. There were dozens of mirror shards hanging from the ceiling by thin strings. Lagashi trailed his long fingers through them as he entered behind me. They chimed softly as they spun into each other, the light they reflected dancing in waves over the earthen walls.

“You come seeking a trade, do you not?”

Lagashi's velveteen voice chimed.

"I do." I declared firmly. "I seek the power to avenge my murdered brother."

"And in return?" He walked in a circle around me, like a predator cornering his prey.

"Anything."

Lagashi smiled wickedly. "A man must know who he is before he can offer such a thing." He grabbed one of his mirrors, and flipped it toward me. "Tell me, what do you see?"

I gasped, finally seeing what I had become in the long weeks since Kammu died. My jet black hair, so similar to my lost brother's, curled limply on my skull. My olive skin, typical of my Marrudite heritage, was sallow and pale. My almond shaped eyes were puffy and red, and my brow was furrowed, lined with burdens few my age should be forced to bear.

But the young man staring back at me was not the victim I had feared. He held a serious purpose. I shoved the mirror out of Lagashi's hand.

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"I see a man who would see justice done, no matter what the cost. Name your price, Witch Doctor."

Lagashi's wicked grin returned. "Oh, it is not *I* who sets the price. I am but an agent. The deal you strike is with the *Paymaster*." He whispered the last with a touch of longing. With a wave of his hand the candles fluttered out, a gusting wind spun the mirror shards and slammed the wooden door shut behind us. The air tingled with energy, and I found myself unable to move.

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My heart raced, knowing too late the dark path I had chosen. There was no light without the dark, and where Ishnu sheltered the living in her blessed Light, the Paymaster corrupted them with the Dark. He went by many names: Nightshade, Lightsbane, Ur-unash, Death....

Lagashi danced around me, chanting in his strange foreign tongue. It was a guttural language, almost bestial. "*Ur-unashe. Ashe. Ashe!*" he cried, repeating the line over and over,

gaining in passion and volume.

The wind picked up, swirling the incense smoke into a vortex. Everywhere I looked, mirrored fragments of myself gazed back at me. The smoke spiraled into a column in the center of the room, billowing high until it brushed the ceiling. Suddenly it flattened violently to the floor as though a hand from the heavens reached down to extinguish its sinister purpose.

But the darkness lingered. It hovered on the ground like a pool, rippling upward and growing in size. I watched in morbid fascination as this shadow entity took shape growing half again as tall as I.

The shadows converged and took on solid form. Its base separated into two taloned feet, each claw clenched tightly to the earth. Wings dark as night spread out, their tips grazing the walls of the hut. And the head of this monstrous creature was not a bird but a lion, its lips pulled back in a vicious snarl with hundreds of snakes slithering from its brow in lieu of a mane. It

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opened its mouth and a vapor emerged with a hiss. Those noxious fumes bathed over me with the foul stench of death and suffering. I gagged, trying hard not to vomit on the floor.

"What service would you ask of me, Child of Man?" The words echoed throughout the hut though the creature's lips did not stir. The force of those words were thunderous like a hammer striking an anvil. I felt them vibrate in my bones.

"I seek justice." I forced my response through clenched teeth. "Against the criminal who slew my brother."

Saliva dripped from the fangs of the creature. It locked its gaze on me. *"Death comes to us all. To snuff out the light before it is time is a great evil."*

It *was* a great evil. Anger bubbled up within me. "Kammu's light was extinguished before it was time. I seek justice against that evil."

The creature leaned back its head and roared. My muscles went slack. If I was not rooted in place, I would have fallen to my knees. But as I was, I could not turn away even though I

desperately wanted to.

"It will be done." The Paymaster intoned, lowering its muzzle as it glared into my soul. *"If the price will be met."*

This was blood magic. It required great sacrifice. I knew what was needed when I stepped through the door. But now that I was faced with that terrifying reality, my conviction wavered. I needed to know....

"And that price?"

The lion's eyes lit up from within, the blazing fire refracting across the broken shards until I was surrounded by flames.

"A life for a life." The creature growled. *"The Paymaster always gets his due."*

It was the only way. Kammu would be at peace. And I did not want to live in a world where the crime of his murder went unpunished. At least this way I could face him with honor in the afterlife.

"Done."

The creature reared on its legs, its massive

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head snapping forward as its monstrous fangs pierced the flesh of my left forearm. I screamed in pain. Poison poured into my body, the dark swirls of venom coloring my veins like ink. When the Paymaster pulled back, half of my arm was spidered with the black substance.

“No.” I pulled at my arm desperately. “I need to see it. You cannot take me now! *I need to see it!*”

The Paymaster laughed. It was a sickeningly hollow sound. Then the creature folded its wings back unto itself and dispersed into a cloud of smoke.

A mournful wail escaped my lips. What had I done? I was a twice damned fool. I made a deal with the devil and expected him to be honorable.

“Get up.” Lagashi shouted into my ear. The spell had broken and I had fallen to the ground. The witch’s foot nudged me in the ribs until I stumbled back to my feet.

“But, how – ?”

“You are still alive.” Lagashi purred, moving

forward in his fluid manner. "And you will remain so, if you follow the Paymaster's purpose. You belong to him now."

Did I? I looked down to my arm. The black venom had stopped just below my elbow. It moved no further. I clenched my fist and watched the ink swirl beneath my skin.

"What do I do?" I asked the witch, thankful to be talking to a mortal again.

Lagashi grabbed my wrist, his finger tracing over the swirling marks on my arm like a lover's kiss. His many tattoos seemed but a pale imitation now.

"Name the one responsible." He hissed, his tongue rolling over his parched lips. "*He* will do the rest."

And then he sent me back into the night.



I spent the remainder of the night wandering the dark alleys of the Grand Bazaar. Step after heavy step, I searched through the inebriated

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crowds for Messani, a tugging at my chest pulling me in what I knew would be the right direction.

Purpose burned in my veins, and I felt alive as I never had before. The dense crowds parted before me, the light from their lanterns falling short of my steps. I walked in darkness. I could feel the malefic presence of the Paymaster lingering near.

I entered Amarni territory. Everywhere I looked were signs of their privileged status. Their homes were built of finer materials, the streets far cleaner than in my land. Even the Temple decorations were grander. Resentment crept up my throat like bile. The favor of the Vicari had shielded the Amarni for too long.

Wait. A ghostly voice whispered inside my head. I paused before a courtyard lit up with paper lanterns. My enemy wasn't far, I could feel it in my bones.

A throng of costumed merrymakers wandered into the court. Several Amarni made

up the head and body of the Great Serpent. As they traversed the open space, the tail tripped on a loose cobblestone and sent the entire procession to the ground. The revelers laughed heartily, clearly drunk on the flowing libations.

“He has two left feet!” a voice emerged from the gales of laughter, a voice that stoked the fires in my heart. Messani disengaged from the costumed head and plucked his brother from the twisted tail. “One more time and you’ll be banished.” The boy screamed with peels of laughter as Messani wrestled him to the ground.

The child squirmed in Messani’s arms, and as my enemy swung him towards where I stood, I saw my dead brother’s face. In my mind’s eye, Messani’s embrace changed and became one of assault. I saw him toss Kammu to the ground, his hand no longer empty but gripping the vicious dirk as he gutted my brother like a pig.

A horrible pain filled me. I was frozen again, as I was in Lagashi’s hut, unable to scream as the black ink oozed from my arm and gathered on

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the cobblestones before me. A Shade took form, a shapeless blob with a face a mirror of my own. When it stood of equal height to me, the terrible pulling on my veins ceased.

Name him. The ghostly demand invaded my mind.

I glared back at the revelers, their laughter washing over me like bitter tonic. Justice demanded its price.

“The boy.”

The Shade pulsed fiercely in grim approval of my choice. It glided across the plaza, weaving between the fallen merrymakers, their eyes glossing over when it entered their line of sight. They could not see it, but more than one shivered as it neared as though they knew Death walked in their midst. In a matter of seconds it stood before my brother’s killer.

One moment Messani was wrestling with his brother, the next the Shade plunged its clawed hand into the child’s chest, ripping out the boy’s phantom heart. There was no wound though the

child convulsed violently as if the shadow injury was real.

"Suri??" Messani cried out in alarm. "What is happening? Help! Someone, help!" He tried in vain to still the boy's seizures. But the shaking continued until the child went completely still.

Messani panicked, pulling his brother's body tightly to his chest. *"No, no, no."* He cried, yanking the boy back to the ground, his face filled with denial.

He pressed his lips to his brother's, trying to fill his small lungs with air. The boy did not stir. He tried to shake the boy to life, but the child was listless. Messani's fellows stayed an arms length back, unsure of what to do.

My enemy's cries echoed across the courtyard, broken and forlorn. I could almost taste his pain, his sobs were so thick. I soaked it in, letting this righteous justice fill the void Kammu had left in my heart. I shed my own tears then, not from sorrow, but in utter relief. It was finished.

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The Shade floated above the fallen corpse still clinging to the phantom heart that had long ceased to beat. Its power seemed to intensify, feeding off Messani's mournful cries. I watched it all unfold, mesmerized.

Excitement strummed through my veins, its power intoxicating me far beyond the heady spice of drink. With the Paymaster's aid, I was no longer at the mercy of the corrupt Vicari, or the hateful Amarni. I was a vessel of righteousness, an Archangel of Justice.

I felt our fates connect again, as I did in the moment I tried to confront the Amarni youth. Suddenly Messani's pain was mine, and mine his. The boy in his arms was the broken body of my little brother. His face was slack with grief. There weren't enough tears to wash away the pain of that loss. But I felt nothing, the anguish of Kammu's loss was but a distant memory.

The Shade pulsed and held its arm out toward me, a taloned finger pointing towards my heart.

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The price is set. The Paymaster always gets his due.

It dissolved into darkness, leaving me alone with the growing cries for the fallen. And that's when I realized the hollowness inside me was from something far more sinister than grief.

I turned on my heel and fled.



I ran into the night, but there was no place without shadow. At every pool of darkness I saw the Paymaster's baleful eyes waiting to claim me.

The momentary joy of seeing my brother avenged had vanished in the stark reality of what I had done. I killed a child with black magic. I let hate cloud reason and now there was no turning back. The searing pain in my forearm flared, reminding me there was still a price to be paid.

A life for a life, the Paymaster had said. I foolishly thought that meant my death. But if the

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devil claimed my soul? I would be lost forever.
I'd never join Kammu in the afterlife.

What had I done?

I ran all night clinging to the vain hope that there might be some place where the Paymaster could not follow. Somehow, in my mad ramblings, I had found my way to our local Temple. The cast iron gates were shut, it was too early for the morning worshippers to come for prayer, but just standing outside the cool stone building gave me a sense of peace. I could almost feel Ishnu's protective presence emanating from within.

It was a fancy I knew better than to indulge. A kiss of wind raised bumps on my arms as a familiar chill gripped me. I turned, pressing my back to the gates, watching the shadows with a hawkish eye. It was here.

Across the plaza, the Shade emerged from an alleyway ghosting above an aged vagrant who slept off the night's indulgences. It bore the face of a man, not my own but that of another, an

elder like the man it stood before now. The Shadow Elder grinned wickedly and raised a taloned finger to its lips, shushing me.

I could barely breathe, unsure if I wanted to witness this sinful act. It was in my power to watch or to warn. I alone knew what stalked the night, and that power left me stunned. Right or wrong, I held my tongue.

And the Shade tore the phantom heart from the old man. He died with little more than a strangled cry.

The pale sun was dawning, though it brought me no warmth. I watched the Shade closely, waiting for the apparition to disappear. But it did not, and as the sun lit up the alley where it stood, the creature only dimmed. It glided to me stopping when it was within an inch from my chest.

You cannot hide. You are foolish to even try.

It reached out and lifted my left forearm, exposing the black spidering veins beneath. The poison had extended further up my arm, nearing

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my shoulder. I gasped, both from the painful tugging in my veins and the icy shock from the creature's touch.

The Paymaster always gets his due.

I crumbled to the ground as my body went limp. My sight went out of focus as I watched it glide across the street to another man, an older man, who shared its face.

Then everything went black.



"Mother, he's coming around."

I opened my eyes slowly, the blurry walls of Punja's home consolidating around me. My friend hovered near, bathing my forehead with a sodden rag.

"What happened?" I rasped, pulling myself up to a sitting position. My head felt stuffed as if I had slept the day away. From the chirping of nightwings beyond the window, I knew that I had.

Punja rested back on his heels, a look of relief

crossing his face. "You fainted outside the Temple. Innana was worried that you celebrated too roughly." He looked down on me, a slight quiver in his voice. He seemed to know more than what he said, and for the first time in the many years of our companionship I wondered if Punja was afraid of me.

He glanced nervously over his shoulder to his mother. Lady Hanni hovered nearby scooping fresh herbs into a teapot.

"He needs fresh air, mother. I'll take him topside." Punja announced, and dragged me up the wooden ladder to the rooftop.

Once outside, Punja secured the trapdoor and pressed me down onto the cushions lining the roof. I was too numb to protest and sank down thankfully.

"What's happened, Vangari? Are you hurt?"

I turned my arm over, watching the swirls of evil pulse within. Punja looked at me askew, his eyes glossing over my arm without reaction.

"Do you see it?" I asked, raising my arm

higher.

"I did not." Punja misinterpreted me. "But I know the boy is dead. The Vicari suspects poison. *Was it you?*"

I clenched my fist and the blackness swirled again. It seemed to dance across my skin, pulling powerfully at my very veins.

"So what if it was?" I snapped, my fear burning away to a deep-seated anger. "Kammu has been avenged. You should be happy."

But Punja was not happy and I remembered it was not only his maimed face that caused our peers to avoid him but his habit of speaking the truth. "His name was Suri." Punja stated coldly. "And that boy had nothing to do with Kammu's death."

I should have been shamed by his words. And some part of me was. An old part. The one who dreamed of watching Reaping Moon dancers and who begged for sweets after Temple. But that boy was gone. His eyes had been opened.

"You must confess." Punja pleaded. "Tell the Priestess what you have done. Seek forgiveness, Vangari, it is the only way to save yourself."

His words were familiar. Every boy memorized the tenants of Ishnu in the House of Letters, that good deeds were rewarded in kind. Punja was more devout than most. It was a trait we once shared. I sneered now. It was the opposite that held true. Good was seldom rewarded, it was the dark deeds that ruled this city.

"Why?" I shouted at my friend, frustrated at his willful blindness. "Why should I repent? Ishnu has fled me. The Vicari failed me. When I asked for help only *HE* answered."

Punja gasped, and he pressed three fingers to his lips in a protective gesture. "Oh, Vangari," he whispered sadly. "At what cost?"

Punja reached out to touch me but I grabbed his arm in a tight grip. "What does it matter? I was willing to pay it." I glowered only vaguely aware of Punja's grimace of pain. "He showed

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me the truth." I shouted, the darkness swirling within me. "*We are all damned already.*"

Punja slowly lifted my hand off his arm, his eyes filled with pity. "No, Vangari, we are not. Hate is a choice. If you wish to be free of it, you have to let go."

I pushed him away and stalked to the edge of the rooftop, rage boiling with me. *Let go?* Forgive the evils done against us like Ishnu commanded? How could he ask that of me? How could anyone?

"*You don't understand.*" My hardened voice cracked, the blocked grief of Kammu's loss constricting my throat into ragged gasps. "He was my brother, *my only brother.*" My mind flooded with the small details of his face, of the sound of his voice. It nearly unmade me in that moment.

"I hear his voice calling to me at night." I continued, unable to stop now that I had begun. "He fills my dreams. When I pray, I pray to him, hoping he can hear me in the heavens. It is a rare

moment when his shade isn't ever-present, and I am terrified I will never see him again. I can't forgive. You don't know what you're asking."

Punja walked over to my side quietly and folded his arms across his chest. His colorless eye filled with sorrow as his gaze turned inward.

"Yes, I do." He said softly. "I've never told you how I got these scars."

I looked up at him in surprise. Punja never talked about his deformity.

"There was a 'demonstration' at the House of Letters when our studies had just let out. I was only six and my father was waiting for me." He walked back to the cushions and took a seat, folding his legs beneath him.

I held my breath. I never asked Hanni where her husband had gone. There were so many dangers in our society. He could have been claimed by any one of them; raiders on the highlands, explosions in the mines, or Amarni scum in the city.

"I watched my father die, at least I did until

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the sight was burned from my eye. The other was swollen shut, hit by debris from the blast. But I had vision long enough to see the Amarni who detonated the bomb. His face, I will never forget." Punja confided, a dark bitterness washing over him.

The boys at Temple were always mocking Punja for his scars, saying he was afflicted, that his own mother didn't want him around, her body rejecting him in the womb. If the others knew what he suffered through no one would dare to mock him again. Yet he never said anything.

"The Vicar demanded an end to the violence." Punja continued. "The demonstration in the yard was in response to a similar one held at an Amarni Temple, and that one in retaliation for a bombing at the Marrudite spice market." He turned to me, tears flowing from his one good eye.

"It was death for death. Pain for pain. It never ended. A cycle of evil that fed itself. And

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when *He* came for me, I said no more. I refused him. I let it go.”

I shook my head. I understood what he was trying to tell me, but it was not an easy thing to accept. If I were Punja, knowing the face of the man who killed my father, I wouldn’t have chosen the same.

I walked back to the roof’s edge, gazing out over the only city I had ever called home, confusion swirling inside me. The Reaping Moon was rising, a blood-red hue bathed over its normal silver surface. Prayers rang out over the city with the moon’s rising, honoring the Goddess, honoring the harvest, honoring life.... They echoed all over Amarru.

Let go?

I envisioned Kammu’s sweet face as I held him as he died, the light of his spirit gone from his vacant eyes. He was one of hundreds of Marrudites who would never see justice.

“No.” I promised the night sky. “Let them all burn.” Cold seeped back into my heart and I

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turned to face my friend.

But Punja was not moving. He was frozen, starting out at me as one paralyzed. Before him towered the immortal grandeur of the Paymaster, its shadowy wings spread wide and its baleful eyes glaring down upon me.

I take what is my due. It thundered, its rumbling voice both big and small. *The price is set.*

I fell to my knees before its dark majesty. I did not have to look to know its evil touch swirled throughout my entire body. I could feel it squeezing my heart until it was likely to burst.

"I forgive..." I choked, an image of Kammu dominating my mind's eye.

The Paymaster loomed ever higher, its wings blocking out the sky.

"I..." the words stuck in my throat, my very soul battling the lie.

I saw my brother dying, Suri and the elder convulsing, and none of it swayed my heart. There was nothing left but hate.

"I forgive nothing!" I shouted. "Take me you beast. End it. Claim my life."

The Paymaster roared, a mocking chime of laughter in that horrible screech.

Petty mortal. What need have I of your life? You sow malice and discontent with your every waking breath. Why should I wish to end such sweet prayers?

My mind whirled, trying to make sense of what it was saying. "I will be spared?" I gasped in disbelief, not trusting the beast.

Our bargain was struck. A life for a life. It turned toward Punja. And payment will be kept.

"NO!" I cried. "Not him. He's innocent! Take me instead." I forced my muscles to comply as I crawled towards them.

But there was nothing I could say or do. The Paymaster lowered its massive maw and tore at Punja's neck. My friend convulsed as the mauling continued, its teeth pulling phantom organs from his chest.

Innocent, guilty. Good, evil. These words are meaningless. There is only Death, mortal. And the

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Paymaster will always be paid his due.

The creature folded its wings back into itself, its form wavering as it turned to ashen smoke. A breeze gusted, and the creature vanished, leaving only a faint afterglow to mark its presence.

"No." I cried, rushing to Punja's side. I shook him roughly, praying at long last to the Goddess to spare his life. His skin was unblemished, but I saw the beast ravage him. He did not breathe and his eyes were flat mirrors reflecting none of the light from within.

"NO!" I pounded on his chest. "Noooooooo." I screamed as loud and as long as my lungs could bear, and still it did not bring him back to life.

Hanni ran up the steps. She paled when she saw her son laying flat on the ground, a sharp cry clamoring off her lips.

"Punja, no!" she ran to our side.

I turned to her, guilt silencing my cries. What could I say? Punja was gone, and it was all my fault.

Hanni looked up at me and gasped. I know not what she saw. Death? Evil incarnate? Her fear chilled me in ways that the Paymaster could not match.

“Blessed Goddess.” She crossed her lips with her fingers in the same protective gesture her son had once made and then turned her gaze downward, refusing to look at me.

I backed away from her, stumbling down the ladder into their one room home. I had to get away. Far away.

I continued into the street where neighbors had gathered. My cries had called them here and now they stood watching me in judgement.

“Punja...” I tried to explain.

But one by one, they shied their eyes away from me like Hanni, departing as quickly as they came. The alley cleared out and soon only one figure remained in the street.

Innana approached, the red of the Reaping Moon seemingly bathing her white robes in blood. The Priestess placed a silent finger to her

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lips and with her other hand she grasped mine and led me from that forlorn place.

The prayers continued into the night as we walked onward. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the notes sounded not of praise, but of a requiem. The cadence of those somber voices were a death march leading me away from my home.

We traversed the long thoroughfare towards the raised tepe of Amarru. I had never walked so close to the ancient gates. Even in my state of despair, I could not help but marvel at their splendor.

The gates towered a hundred feet into the sky. Constructed from the finest slabs of alabaster and accented with filigree of gold and silver, every inch of the massive structure was covered in *bas*-relief depicting scenes honoring the Goddess. It was the finest treasure I had ever laid eyes on.

We paused at the main entry port to the city. An enormous engraving of Ishnu dominated the

center of the gate. Her multi-pleated skirts cascaded around her, and both of her arms were raised high holding vessels of light. That light showered out in lines of gold over the true believers.

I longed to touch it, if only to know just once what it felt like. I raised my hand, knowing Innana would strike it down. To touch the great gate was blasphemy. A baseborn cur like me had no business touching such fineness.

But her restraining hand never fell, and my fingers traced the design, marveling in the etched beauty. This close, I could make out all of the background reliefs. The towering mountains of Rashaman dominated the north, as they did in the real world. The wavering blue lines of the Casperion Sea filled our border to the south. And beside the Goddess, her protectors held vigil: the identical hulking forms of her demigods with the body of an eagle and the regal head of a lion.

My hand jerked back as though burned.

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What was *He* doing here? I turned to Innana with alarm.

“Go forth, Servant of Light.” Innana whispered reverently, the first words she had spoken since leaving Punja’s house. The gates began to open as some unknown force triggered inside. She instantly backed away, her hands held aloft in a supplicating gesture. “May you always enact the will of the Goddess.”

I froze. This was all wrong. Somehow the Creature had infected my mind, making me see and hear things that were not real. He was not content with my soul, but would see me mad before the end. When the gates separated wide enough, I ran from the Priestess, entering the forbidden realm of the inner city for the first time in my life.

The perfection of Amarru’s buildings was beyond description. Light pulsed softly from their towering facades like a veneer of stardust. There were no shadows in this place.

But still I ran. I ran past the gathering Vicari. I

kept my head hung low, careful to not offend them with my insolent eyes. More of the magistrates gathered, following after me at a steady pace.

I ran faster.

Punja was dead. Kammu was dead. Countless others were dead or soon to be, and I was still powerless to stop it. Worse, I did not wish to stop it. The Paymaster would reap until we were all his victims, and I was a twice-damned fool.

I stumbled, falling to my knees before the calm waters of a reflection pond. I could go no further. I laid my head to rest on my arms and cried. I wept for the ones I had lost, for the pain I had caused, and for the loss of my soul. I cried until I had no more strength left to cry, and when I was spent, I finally dared to look up.

The Vicari had gathered, watching me silently. I had never seen one directly as it was verboten to look. But there was nothing more they could do to me, so I gazed upon their faces

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wanting to know what manner of creature served both the Goddess of Light and the Demon of Dark.

They were tall, easily two feet taller than an average sized man, and their pale skin shone from within. Their lips were lacquered blue and their large eyes seemed to shine with hidden knowledge. They truly were giants amongst men.

And then I noticed one frightful detail that stilled my blood. Each and every one of them had spidering veins of black ghosting just beneath their pale skin.

The Vicar closest to me held out his hand in welcome. I took it, letting him lift me up. As I stretched my hand out to his, I was stunned by my own ghostly pallor. My pigment was gone. I was as ashen as the remains of a night's fire.

I spun to the pool to confirm it was true and was nearly brought back to my knees. I did not recognize the man reflected back at me. My face had changed, all the rough edges were smoothed

fine. My skin had turned pale, head to toe, and the black poison of the Paymaster filtered all over my body. I felt alien and cold and yet *powerful*, too.

I turned to the Vicari, suddenly realizing the truth of their privileged status.

“Am I – ? Are you – ?” I stumbled on the words, frightened by the musical quality of my new voice.

“Yes,” my greeter gathered my hand in his.

The gates closed shut in the distance, the heavy reverberations booming throughout the city. I felt that thunder echo in my bones like the Vicar’s words that followed.

“We have paid the price. We have all paid the price.” The Vicar’s lips pressed together tightly in a manner that passed for a smile. “And now you have proven yourself fit to be a leader of Men.”

A cold terror took over me with that knowledge. I longed for the time when I lived my life in ignorance. When I was happy, when I

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was loved....

But the emotion did not last. The soulless thing I had become had no use for such petty feelings. I turned to the gathered Vicari and greeted my new family.

"Welcome to Paradise," they welcomed me.
"Brother."

