

CHAPTER ONE





CHAPTER I

X, Tabni, the secret scribe, have chosen the strongest reed I can find. With my bronze knife I have trimmed its end, making a stylus. Now I press the words of my story into soft clay...a story that has taken me many months to live, but which the eyes of a reader might devour in mere hours. When the clay has baked in the fire and hardened, my story will outlive me in this world. Perhaps one day my own children will read it to their children.

No one knows the truth about me. That is, no one but an *ensi* of Ur, and the moon god, Father Nanna. I have left the priest far behind me, but I can never escape from Nanna's pale gaze, from the mysterious one who travels across the sky each night in a boat.

My mother once described to me how Nanna shone full and bright the night I was born in the palace of King Ishbi-Irra of Isin. She thought the moon god did that because he wanted to bless my birth, even though I was only a slave girl, born to a slave woman. His blessing would have been a valu-

able gift to me, since Nanna is father to many gods, and I never even met my own father. Mother told me that my father had sold her into slavery in order to pay off his debts, even though she was expecting his child. He was never heard from again.

I no longer believe Father Nanna wants to bless me. He is furious with me, and to be truthful, I am angry with him. So it is just as well that his city is no more; I would not want to go there, or visit his holy mountain again anyway. But this, too, is a secret. The moon god would set himself against me forever if he knew my thoughts.

Just as Nanna is god of Ur, Ninisinna is goddess of Isin. Ishbi-Irra is king there, and my mother served his queen. I remember toddling at Mother's heels as she carried a broad bowl of hammered gold through the palace, sprinkling the mud-brick walls with water. She did this many times a day. When Utu, the sun god, burned fiercely, the water evaporated and cooled the palace.

Mother wore her black hair in braids which wrapped around her head, and each morning she painted green-blue lines of *malachite* along her eyelids. Her favorite task was polishing the queen's jewels. Once she scolded me harshly for smudging a royal headdress of beaten gold leaves with my curious baby hands. That same day when she wasn't looking, I handled a string of *lapis lazuli* and *carnelian* beads, entranced by the brilliant stones. I managed to put them back before she saw me, and she never discovered my guilty secret.

I was not unhappy in that place. King Ishbi-Irra's

sons attended scribal school to learn the written language of our people. One young prince, who slobbered when he spoke and whose eyes glazed over at odd times, needed help to grip the stylus in his clumsy fingers. I was chosen. It became my daily task to sit beside him on a reed mat spread over the cool limestone floor. Not only did I smooth the soft clay into tablets for him, I selected and cut reeds, making sure they had sharp tips. Placing the reed between his thick fingers, I steadied his hand as he pressed stylus to clay. In this way, year after year, I learned the written language of Sumer, land of the civilized people.

It is not an easy thing to learn to write. Our words are made up of wedge-shaped symbols in varied patterns. All of these I had to memorize. I learned to represent certain spoken syllables by breaking lines up into short, curved, strokes. When we finished copying each day's lesson, I took special care to smooth any jagged edges left in the clay.

The *ummi*a wandered among his royal pupils as they worked. One day, when he bent to inspect the slobbering prince's progress, the shadow of his *tamarisk* cane fell across my lap. I tensed, awaiting a blow from the sharp stick. His eyes widened in surprise.

"This is acceptable," he said, bowing to the prince, never looking at me. But as he walked away, his linen skirt swishing between his legs, I glowed with pleasure. Slaves in Sumer do not go to school, and this seemed another sign that the gods favored me.

Our trouble started when Ishbi-Irra's queen

complained of pain below her ribs and began to sweat in the night. The king called for the royal *ashipu*, a sorcerer. This bent and withered old man knelt by the queen's bedside, laying his smooth-shaven head on her belly. He listened for a long time to the voice of the demon trapped inside her, the one whose desperate attempt to eat his way out of her body was making her sick.

"Has she sinned?" the king asked the *ashipu* with trembling voice.

My mother wrung water from a cloth and placed it on the queen's forehead. Afraid to breathe, I rested my chin on Mother's shoulder, holding as still as I could.

The old man tapped the floor with the toe of his sandal, his head bent in thought. "Worthy King, it is possible. Perhaps to punish her, the hand of the goddess Ninisinna has touched her vital organs."

King Ishbi-Irra's face drained of color. "Then how can we persuade Ninisinna to heal her?"

The *ashipu*'s forehead wrinkled. "Her sickness is grave. Bring both a lamb and a young goat to stand on either side of her. If it so please Ninisinna, she will cause the demon to flee the queen and enter one animal or the other. When that animal carries the demon, we will slaughter it and lay it on Ninisinna's altar."

It was done as quickly as he spoke. The lamb was gentle; it curled up by the queen's feverish side as if she were its mother. But the goat, a black and white nanny, refused to cooperate. Twice she broke free of the *ashipu*'s grip and skipped around as if the

queen's bedchamber were an open field. She knocked an alabaster scent jar off the bedside table, cracking it to pieces. She leapt brazenly onto the queen's bed, clambering onto the sick woman's belly.

"Get down, you accursed beast!" bellowed the sorcerer. He lunged at the goat, but the wicked creature dodged him.

"Tabni, help!" my mother cried.

I chased the goat's tail as the ashipu stalked him from the front, muttering a prayer to Shakan, god of goats. Just as we bore down, the animal jumped and did a half-twist, eluding our grasp. Again she skittered across the queen's bed, digging sharp hooves into royal flesh.

"Enough," panted the ashipu. His forehead glistened with sweat. "Let the demon enter the lamb." He kicked futilely at the nanny goat. "But I will also sacrifice this one."

When the goat had finally been subdued by two of the king's guards and carried away, a hush fell over the sick room. The sun sank below the horizon. Musicians were brought in to strum harps. We waited to see if the lamb would carry the demon away. The queen's skin had turned yellow; she labored hard over every breath. Beside her, the lamb dozed peacefully. An oil lamp burned at the head of the bed, its light flickering across the mud-brick walls. The ashipu chanted spells late into the night. His droning voice lulled me to sleep as I rested my head against Mother's shoulder. I awoke once, startled.

"Go back to sleep," Mother whispered. "I'm keep-

ing watch, and will wake you if anything happens.”

In the early hours of the morning, King Ishb-Irra burst into the room. Behind him, head bowed respectfully, walked a tall man, thin as a reed. The bones below his neck made deep troughs. His skirt hung from jutting hipbones, threatening to fall off. The king glanced at the lamb still resting peacefully beside his wife, and pronounced, “The ashipu has failed to heal her. I have brought the *asu*.”

The exhausted ashipu looked up at the king’s face. His jaw trembled. Then defeat dulled his eyes and he left the room on bare, silent feet.

The *asu*, a healer who relied on medicine rather than sorcery, strode triumphantly forward to take his place. From the leather pouch he carried, he pulled a small clay jar.

“What is it?” the king asked him.

“A mixture of cow’s urine, lime, ash and salt.”

The *asu* opened the jar and poured its contents into a bowl, sprinkling them with crushed thyme and bits of dried snakeskin. The room filled with a sharp, stinging odor. With long, bony fingers he stirred the pungent paste, then smeared it across the queen’s belly.

“What are you doing to her?” challenged Ishb-Irra doubtfully.

“This paste will soak through the queen’s skin,” the physician replied. “Its bitterness is meant to drive the demon out.”

“And if the demon refuses to go?”

The *asu* drew a deep breath. “Then I must open her belly with my surgeon’s knife.”

My mother groaned softly at these words. She smoothed the queen's wet, black hair and rubbed her temples. "Please, Ninisinna," she pleaded in a ragged whisper. "The queen is like a mother to me and also to my child, Tabni."

King Ishbi-Irra slipped in and out of the room like a shadow. Once I saw his lips quiver. The lamp-light caught a watery streak running down the side of his nose.

Perhaps the goddess Ninisinna slept that night, or was away visiting someone. For whatever reason, she did not hear my mother's prayer, and the queen died one hour after dawn.

"Tabni, wake up!" My mother gripped my shoulders so hard her fingernails dug into the flesh. She was on her knees, for in my exhaustion, I had crawled into a corner beneath the table upon which sat a statue of the goddess.

I mumbled something incoherent, then dozed again.

She shook me harder. "Tabni! Hurry. Come with me."

The halls of the palace echoed with the high-pitched keening of grief. My mother pulled me to my feet. Behind her, far down the corridor, I saw the asu. His lanky frame sagged against the wall, his hands hanging limp at his side. King Ishbi-Irra was shouting something. The lamb trotted around the bedchamber unheeded, bleating forlornly.

Mother grabbed my hand and pulled me along. I stumbled after her, groggy from sleep. Only when old Ama, the queen's clothing mistress, shoved past me

and crushed my toes beneath her sandal did I fully wake.

“The queen has died, Tabni,” Mother said quietly as we walked.

I glanced behind me at the asu. He was staring at nothing.

As we crossed a courtyard, we passed two young seamstresses, huddled together, weeping. The sun falling through wooden slats made a striped pattern across their heads. Just then a handful of soldiers burst into the yard from the opposite direction. One of the women gasped. The other buried her face in her arms as the men lumbered past and into the palace, their spear tips glinting in the morning sun.

Mother slid her sweaty hand to my forearm and tightened her grip. She moved mechanically toward an outer courtyard, where deep cisterns held water. Taking two bowls from a stack, she filled them and handed me the smaller of the two. “Do as I do,” she whispered.

I nodded, feeling my throat constrict. Following her through the palace, I sprinkled water on the walls. *How strange*, I thought. *She performs her regular duties, even as the queen lies dead.* Already the day was warm; the water felt cool on my fingertips. I moved slowly, as if in a dream.

Mother stopped at the kitchen door. Inside, young slaves tended the morning fires and patted barley dough into flat, round loaves. They glanced up briefly, then returned to their work. My mother moved swiftly to a stack of fresh-baked loaves on a tray. She grabbed five and tucked them into the

crook of her bare right arm. Her eyes darted warily around the kitchen; her hand was just hovering over a bowl of dates when Ubar the kitchen master entered. He stared at her outstretched hand.

“A great evil has befallen us this day, Ku-Aya,” he said, speaking her name with tenderness. He was stout, like one who samples many delicacies over the course of each day – as a worthy kitchen master should. He wore one heavy gold earring, and a gold bull’s head hung on a chain around his neck. From a high shelf he pulled down a kidskin pouch and began to empty it of his own belongings. It was worn smooth with age and much use.

“Yes, Ubar,” she replied. “May Ninisinna have mercy on us all.”

Ubar approached with the empty leather pouch and reached for the loaves beneath mother’s arm. His eyes lingered on her face for a long while. Then he scooped up three large handfuls of dates, dropping them into the pouch with the bread.

Mother scanned the room. The kitchen slaves were absorbed in their work. Swiftly, furtively, she pulled something from her shift pocket. I saw a flash of red and blue drop into the pouch before Ubar shut its flap and secured the straps.

She thanked him with her eyes.

“May the gods guide you,” he whispered, laying his great paw over her hand.

She gave his fingers a squeeze. “Come, Tabni.”

I followed in silence. My mind burned with questions, for I was fully awake now, and utterly confused. Shouldn’t my mother be washing the queen’s

body, braiding her hair and dressing her in burial robes? Mother had always attended to the dead slaves in Ishbi-Irra's palace. How much more then, should she attend the queen?

Ahead of us, a young weaver burst out of her workshop. "No!" she shrieked, tearing herself from someone's grip.

A harsh female voice snapped, "What? And is the queen to walk about naked in the underworld? You *will* do your duty!"

All these strange voices and happenings echo in my mind more clearly today than then. It was as if I walked through a deep river, seeing and hearing through water.

There was a door I called the door of birds, because of a mosaic pattern around it that resembled wings in flight. It was to this door my mother now led me. Walking close beside her, I felt her body trembling beneath her shift. Her grip on my hand tightened. The door stood open to let the morning breeze into the palace. Sunlight filled its frame, falling toward us, but as we stepped onto the bright patch a shadow fell across our feet.

A soldier dressed in leather kilt barred our way. A curved dagger hung from his belt. The morning sun burnished his bronze helmet, making it glow like Utu himself.

Mother gasped, then lowered her head submissively. "The queen has died," she said matter-of-factly. "We must gather fresh herbs in the garden for her burial."

The soldier said nothing. His cavernous nostrils

quivered with each breath.

She pushed forward. He planted his feet firmly, raising a hand to the hilt of his knife.

