

J. NAISSH

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" Woman at Sundown "

WOMAN AT SUNDOWN

J. NAISH



WOMAN AT SUNDOWN

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MAIDEN

WOMAN

JAFFAR, a youth

RHEMAT, a soldier

GAAL, a merchant

and (offstage) voices of the winds

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Time: Half an hour before sunset, B.C.

Place: A boulder-strewn desert ledge,  
overlooking a city.

MAIDEN But, mother, he comes to me, true as an arrow, suddenly, parting the rocks and the miserable stunted olives, bringing me the joy of his quick light skin. His nostril, like that of the flying stag, trembles for freedom. I am frightened at the thunder of my heart-beat; I expect him always, and am always surprised. I cling in deafening joy in my dreams to his golden muscles. For he bids me discard my chains of gold and go with him to the green northern lands.

WOMAN Child, if I were really your mother, instead of an old woman who took and guarded you ten summers ago when the conqueror came, I could not, I think, more urgently counsel you: Forget your yellow-skinned unclothed youth. He is the wayward one, the wild one, the animal one of the forests. He would abandon you in the thunder and the rising waters.

MAIDEN There is desire for me in his eyes, but fondness in his touch in the darkness. He would not harm me.

WOMAN He would abandon you, desire finished, to the fangs of his fellow-beasts. His way is not your way. He is an outlaw, scorning our gods, prowling in guilty circles near our markets and our temples. You would have reigned here, a queen, had your father lived and organised our defences. Yet you allow your head to be turned like any foolish young maiden in the city. I urge you, turn the dogs on him if he comes tonight. And come I presume he will as the sun is sinking among thickening clouds and the thin moon will be struggling hopelessly somewhere in the black heavens.

MAIDEN Yes, come he will, I am certain. He will come swift to me, suddenly appearing by miracle from the black sands. Jaffar! Nor dogs nor soldiers' spears have power to keep him from me. Nor any caution of our civilised times. His desire is forme. Jaffar! Even the breathless whispering of his name is my delight.

WOMAN Jaffar! Ha!

MAIDEN A wondrously beautiful name.

WOMAN All right, child; have your fit of foolishness. Go into rhapsodies over two quite ordinary syllables. I can afford to smile at your short enchantment until he comes no more.

MAIDEN He will always come to me. Our enchantment is stronger than the Emperor's laws and the fear of traitors. I tell you nothing can keep him from me.



- WOMAN      Death can keep him from you. Death hangs over an outlaw always, and is never far from him. He goes against the order of things and brings wrath on his head. Jaffar will die young.
- MAIDEN      Oh, you speak calmly of our ruination. If he died, I would die too. When he is by me, I feel his strength, and do not fear his foes. But when he leaves me for the shadows, the slinking adversaries crowd inwards to the trap. I see the flash of steel and wake sweating with fear.
- WOMAN      It is so. It must always be so until the end. He is alien to the customs and the races here.
- MAIDEN      You who speak calmly of his death ... you would not ... you would not bring the soldiers here?
- WOMAN      To take your wild one? I am surprised you ask. No, I would not betray him.
- MAIDEN      Not even ... not even were my intent.... to go with him to the northern lands?
- WOMAN      Not even then. But you are joking, surely. You wish to laugh at an old woman's confusion and apprehension. Is not that so?
- MAIDEN      No, I am serious. He pleads with me to be his love in far-off places. He tells of a way where the shackles and deceit are forgotten, where the silver and raiment are no longer revered. There is a nightingale bird with a wondrous song, and the spirit therein is what we are seeking. It is everywhere and if we are simple and grateful and joyful will guide us. And a great whiteness will cover the land and our bed and our bower will be warm in a vast clean cold.
- WOMAN      Nonsense, my child. Come. Come over here. Look, look yonder while there is still the light from the heavens; see the beauty of the land you were born into, and meant for. Those clouds, like you, belong to a land where storms are brief and merciful, relieving the hot still evenings by the white walls. These nights are known only in the leisurely lands, the hot climes. Leave them at your peril for the cold angry places where strangers will scorn your brown skin. This is your home. True, the conqueror is come. But he is similar to us. His language is similar to ours.. Why, from that great tower near the cypresses, yonder, right away to the banks of the river, all was burned to the ground. I brought you, a helpless fearful child, here to my humble dwelling among the rocks, and cared for you. We have watched the city rebuilt, and spread out over the

plain and up the slopes until we are now almost on its outskirts. It is a city of prosperity, with a fine future for a young girl finding a noble man.

MAIDEN I see nothing but the quest for silver, and the false honesty of merchants and vendors. All is brown harsh flatness along the valley, and even here among the rocks with the best view of the city, we are not high. I long for mountains, mountainous forests to fly through. We live here on sufferance. Our unsuccessful gods are toppled, broken and stare gully into the barren sands and up into the cruel skies. We are all waiting for something to save us and guide us.

WOMAN You express merely the impatience of youth, the restlessness of the child flowering. Why, you may still become a queen. The king is old and his son weak. The fearless soldier, Rhemat, who would take you for a wife, may yet be the master here.

MAIDEN Rhemat? The bearded one?

WOMAN The tall, dark, victorious one. The envy of his soldiers.

MAIDEN Yes, he came victorious, slashing our cowering fathers from his furious chariots. The victor seems brave to the slaughtered and enslaved, but his cruelty is the cloak to cover his fear. Now he fears his slaves.

WOMAN But our forefathers had invaded his kingdom, and burned his city. Then they left, finding the lands barren and the harvests poor. Such are the ways of men, and the gods are pleased, for it shows that life here is held cheaply. It is the price we pay in the passing ages, and has always been so. If there were no slaves, who would toil to raise the great obelisks, the granite statues, and hew the fine temples out of the living rock?

MAIDEN A tiresome question. These things would all be smaller, I suppose.

WOMAN Smaller, eh? I tell you, child, that is man's choice; smallness or grandeur. The small things shrivel in the wind and sand, and come to nothing. But the great monuments will last a thousand thousand years.

MAIDEN No, it is the wind and water that last, the soft things, love and life. The largest rock will topple and be defaced and the sands creep in and cover it.

WOMAN Those are the despairing savage thoughts of your ill-chosen wild one.



MAIDEN perhaps. He tells me of fine wild unbelievable things. Of thoughts that fly in the winds, and spirits that make the stillness still. I feel it more than ever this sunset; the unendurable waiting; I will go with him to the far green lands.

WOMAN Oh, silly girl, in love with love, look yonder and admit your recklessness. See there on the harnessed river, the great dam raised by Rhemat and his brother. They have made a hundred broad fields black and rich by storing the waters. Consider gratefully these wonders and learn contentment here. For corn grows now where once cactus stood patient in the cracked earth.

MAIDEN The earth broken now by the bent child-slaves. Think how they hate this last hour of time before the sun sets with the whip near them. They will never hunt the swift gazelle and lion nimble-footed over plateau ledge and crevasse like my loved one. Pain and ruin and the hot sun and the short night are all they know till the angry rising.

WOMAN Hush, child. There will be no rising. Such talk is dangerous. We are close to the city now. Men often look and listen near our sandstone stairway.

MAIDEN My loved one sleeps under the stars, smiling. I think Rhemat awakes screaming, dreaming of battles with bloodshed thick about him, and the steel at his stomach. Conquest is never complete; hate does not rest till the victor whimpers at last. No, the slaves will not rise ere that some neighbouring prince, learning the uses of wheels and horses and the latest skills of war will trample us with a hundred chariots and burn the fields and rule for five harvests, perhaps never rebuilding the dam that he destroys. And should we be surprised to find the bold Rhemat at our side, cringing for a handful of corn? Would not the same man, seeing a cobra raise its head on the body of a slaughtered adversary, take his own life or flee the kingdom in terror of the gods. Snake-worshippers! You offer me the king of these to be my king!

WOMAN Patience, my child. I only urge discretion.

MAIDEN The old scars upon his face are frightening.

WOMAN peace, my child, peace. Forget what I spoke of the bearded one. It is only that seeing you a queen would make my life complete, for the gods would smile. I consider myself their instrument in raising you in safety along the hard way, with careful guidance to the noble state that is your due. Therefore I seek a sign, but in its absence may appear to lose my good intent.

MAIDEN I thank you, mother, for a mother's love. Your care and kindness far exceed my due. Our due, I think, must be akin to what we earn, by effort. I neither yearn to be a queen, nor care what man-made gods may smile or frown.

WOMAN Hush now! What would your father say, who worshipped all his life the sun, and Rhee, and Philisis and Phor?

MAIDEN What could he say, when each invader brings a score of gods? Time was when only the mighty kings survived the fall of death and aspired to godhead. Now every merchant with a hundred pieces of silver can get himself entombed, embalmed and deified. I tire of them. I cannot worship where I cannot love.

WOMAN Who or what, then, is your god?

MAIDEN Why... I think my ... my ...

THE WINDS He is in all things, and in all creatures. He plunges off from the slate shelf into the clear pool, rejoining the waters. together again. He is in the centre of the granite rock giving it hardness.  
He is the warmth that comes with the rising of the sun; and therefore the light.  
He turns the wheel of the seasons and is the spirit in the winds, making them dance.  
He is in the flesh that grows on the bones and on the stems, making it live.  
He is in the cruelty and anger causing them to turn into mercy and love.  
He is in all things, and in all creatures, and is the love itself, the love....

WOMAN Come, child, why do you stutter, and stop, and stare with that rapt look?

MAIDEN He is the love itself, the love.

WOMAN Hm? What do you say?

MAIDEN Love. Love is my god.

WOMAN Ah, more certain now. At first you seemed rather hesitant.

MAIDEN Do not mock me. The total of our knowledge is little. We all await a sign. But the truth will be made known and love seen as the simple guide.



- MAN What is this? An oracle with such youthful features? Ah, come, child, let us admire the last of the light. Gaal, the merchant, our closest neighbour, has already closed his doors, and young Josi left for his home. He is not yet past the temple of Rhee, and already the pale blues and pinks of the heavens are reddened and streaked with a tiger's black and gold.
- MAIDEN It is indeed beautiful.
- WOMAN soon the strummed notes of Gaal's evening song will make the beauty of the night complete.
- MAIDEN It is not a usual sign in a man; to yearn for music as soon as the labours of the day are done.
- WOMAN Gaal is a cultured man... And rich too... Ah, I think that not even the beaten gold and polished copper, the blue glass and sequins of our sculpture can be compared to the present beauties of those changing heavens. But the city too looks splendid, I think you will agree, with its minarets and domes soon to be silhouettes against the skies.
- MAIDEN she certainly hides most of her ugliness under the cloak of night. Mother, who builds that house of jade amid the cypress grove that overlooks the bend in the river?
- WOMAN That green lovely house beyond the city? To be true, I do not know; one of the richer princes surely. Certainly a noble. I think the eastern corner will be built and the house complete before the rains come. That's a good name; we will call it that; the house of jade.
- MAIDEN It takes its lines from the cypress trees and seems in accord with nature.
- WOMAN A designer of taste indeed. Unsafe from raiders, perhaps, so distant; but it has a stout outer wall and stands on a rise; perhaps the low ground can be flooded there... Tell me, restless child, could you live content there with the wild one that makes you burn and fidget so?
- MAIDEN Jaffar? But he would not live there.
- WOMAN If he chose, would you?
- MAIDEN But he would not live there.
- WOMAN If he so desired, would you live with him in the house of jade?

- MAIDEN I would go with him anywhere. To places seen or places afar.  
He is my life.
- WOMAN I wish I could make you see what will happen.
- MAIDEN Mother -
- WOMAN quiet, my child. Gaal is starting to play....
- He played well, did he not? His music is for the night; for himself; but mainly for - you. He has told me he wants you.
- MAIDEN I dont trust his long pale eyes. I see him sometimes from the stairs. I feel he is thinking evil, sitting there calmly at his door, selling his wineskins.
- WOMAN Oh, come, there is more than one man in the kingdom. I would have called him handsome. I have heard maidens praise his almond eyes and speak highly of his fine features. He is not rough and scarred like Rhemat, but has recourse to solitude and music.
- MAIDEN He has no sons?
- WOMAN He has no sons, and no wives either. Most maidens learn these things about their nearer neighbours in their own fashion.
- MAIDEN I have passed his door, and my heart has bid my feet hasten. I feel he stares at me. His house is dark within. I feel he sees me even when he does not look my way.
- WOMAN such modesty is normal. Gaal is quiet and cultured - but not weak, I think.
- MAIDEN Certain am I that he is strong.
- WOMAN Yes, and such men as he are oft times richer than is commonly supposed.
- MAIDEN That does not interest me. What does is why I should envisage evil there where none is manifest.
- WOMAN You do not know enough of him to judge. I have always found him gracious and considerate. See, even as I speak he opens his door to some late caller, seeking grain or oil.
- MAIDEN How considerate! And what merchant, do you think, would it benefit to close his door, strictly, on the end of day?



MAN

I tell you Gaal is rich, and neither needs nor cares for a miserable late coin or two when the time for his music or his evening food is due. He serves late from kindness.

MAIDEN

Another wineskin for some drunken soldier probably. And at a high price, I expect.

WOMAN

You talk foolishly, young one. My heart would rejoice to see you the woman of some fine man like Gaal, who will be settled safely, strongly here when your wild creature of the plains has brought slaughter upon himself. But I can tell you nothing you will take note of in your present mood. Come, it is time we returned to eat our meal.

MAIDEN

I think I shall remain a little longer. My eyes and heart have not yet had their fill of the sunset's beauty.

WOMAN

The sunset's beauty, ha! I know why you linger. But come soon; I saw a yellow hungry lion slink away from the ledge up yonder earlier today. It will be near still. But I confess that this is not my greater fear... Oh, well, I go to prepare the evening meal. Come soon.

MAIDEN

I will ....

(Left alone) ... Come soon....

Come soon, Jaffar.

Come soon, beloved, suddenly out of the darkness, as you always do.

Make me forget the waiting ever was, and whisper to me of the far wild places....

Gaal, that is a lovesong that you start to stum.... oh strange lonely one...

Gaal....

Oh strange lonely one that nobody loves.

Can you be really evil?...

Your music is for me....

No, your music is for the night ...

Oh, who is that late visitor who cuts your song, his voice loud with wine? I think you would well be rid of him....

The distant towers are silhouettes now. I cannot see the doors and windows by the murky river. What an ugly sudden gust of wind was that, chilling my heart. I feel behind me in the dusk the yellow lion waiting, soon to be watching. Oh come, beloved, and make me safe from harm. Come soon.

JAFFAR

Never doubt, beloved, that as evening draws nigh, I will be near you wherever you wait.

- MAIDEN I have never doubted.
- JAFFAR Never doubt that my arms will enfold you, making our forms the picture of life.
- MAIDEN Life is you holding me; life is your love.
- JAFFAR Your head resting back on my breast and your dark hair touching my cheek; that is the final glory of all the glories; it gives meaning to waiting and wanting and pain; it gives meaning to hunting and being hunted. For I know you feel need of me and want to be mine.
- MAIDEN If your desire is for me, then I want to be yours.
- JAFFAR Mine beside stony routes and along the wild ranges. Would you be mine in the green bowers and under the stars, until we come to my land?
- MAIDEN If I listened to my heart, the answer would be yes, Jaffar, yes.
- JAFFAR Then come with me and be my love.
- MAIDEN I owe it to consider the bidding of the woman who has been nurse to me, and guardian, and become almost my mother. She has long cared for me through love alone with no thought of reward.
- JAFFAR Love is its own reward. It does not end, and is never wasted.
- MAIDEN she says your love for me will end, that you will tire of me ere the first long journey is done. She thinks of you as a wild one, with life a turbulent adventure, brief and savage. She says that you will cast me out when I begin to hate and be hated in your alien land.
- JAFFAR I am alien here, but knowing the furious and the cautious anger of men, know love will always be stronger than a hundred foolish spears. Therefore I come to you. My love will be refreshed, daily, by you, and flame like the sunrise. My love will change, but time will strengthen it. My love will change, until in the twilight it will be my main strength, and I will always want you with me. Let me show you the unburned places, the temperate places where no hibiscus flashes in its bright brief reign but the flowers are blue and the fruit bitter to taste in the crisp air ... did you ask your guardian?
- MAIDEN she thought I was not serious. May she come with us to the northern lands?



- JAFFAR No, beloved, for our horses must fly fast through the days and often the nights. She would be an incumbrance on the land, and be in sickness crossing the great lakes.
- MAIDEN But she is getting old and will soon need the care of young hands.
- JAFFAR It is the lot of the old to stay and wait. It is their fortune to be patient. She may have sons in distant places, who remember, and they will come to her.
- MAIDEN She has no sons, now. They were killed, far off, while our city burned.
- JAFFAR Then we will come to her, sometimes. We will meet many aged along the journey. We will come to them. They know it is the fortune of the young to travel and see the wonders. Memories of wondrous beauties will give us in turn the patience to wait for death.
- MAIDEN May we die together, Jaffar.
- JAFFAR We will have strong sons, and will live on.
- MAIDEN It is I who will then be your impediment. A girl with child is like an old woman at the side of the road, making her husband vulnerable.
- JAFFAR It is the worth while cost of having sons, even as the toil of breaking the soil is the cost of a golden harvest. We will have strong sons, coming to us in the still, quiet future, making our hearts glad.
- MAIDEN My guardian bids me wed with the soldier Rhemat or the merchant Gaal, and give them sons.
- JAFFAR Your heart tells you no, for the strength of gold and the sword are false. Gold and the sword mean death. Love and life will give us strong swift sons, who will encounter the lion, admire the lion, kill the tiger, pity the tiger, guard the lamb. They will fell the lofty cedar before eating, and fashion a craft to blow where triremes strain over the broadest seas. Their spears will surprise the quickest fish that turns; they will know all the birds of the sky. Leave the merchant a golden bracelet. Leave the soldier a lock of your hair. Gold and the sword mean death. I will show you life and delight in a thousand glades; I will make the world your temple.
- MAIDEN My guardian cautions me against denying the gods of my father. She questions me about your faith and I can find no answer. I mumble and feel young. She is old and wise and fears the gods.
- JAFFAR The loudest thunder is godsent, but soothes, delights, and is of use to the perched land. Surely the dappled coat, the leaf spray, the seashell

are a plea for love.

I think beyond the reefs in the caverns of the ocean beds are beauties never seen by men, and above the heavens also.

There are rare wonders, suddenly discovered in some wilderness, that seem wasted.

Therefore, fear not; God is not vain.

I think he is in you, making you good, and in the winds and sands and waters.

He is in all things making them exist and in all creatures making them live.

We can destroy nothing.

Death can end nothing.

MAIDEN I told my old guardian these things in my own fashion. I told her love was my god.

JAFFAR Believing that, come with me.  
We will go together to the northern lands.  
Our bodies will earn their rest, and our spirits be joyful ....  
Have you eaten?

MAIDEN My mother prepares the evening meal.

JAFFAR Then I will away, and return with horses from the plain.  
You are as lovely as the sunset.  
Give me your lips to kiss ....

You are as lovely as the northern rose.  
I will not be long away.

MAIDEN I will be ready soon. I hunger only for your quick return ....

(Left alone)

And so, at last, I break the counsel of my nurse. What will she say? Will she with grim uncertain images attempt to sway my palpitating heart once more towards the unadventurous way? Either the same old tiresome argument in that fashion or she will see my mind is firm, and graciously consenting with a tear make me feel still more cruel..... For cruel it is to leave the ageing who need youth about them to deter advancing hopeless death.

Yet were I free of all consideration but my love, could I flee joyously into the far new realms with innocent abandon? I think cold reason lately has subdued my secret former rapture....

For what is our purpose here on earth, women of the earth? To have children surely, to raise and care for them. And how best to do this, how best? Is not the care of a civilised father, passing down accumulated certain knowledge behind safe city walls the only reasonable course?

But love, what of my love?



What of my beloved?

He will appear from the darkness and I am his.

I am his for right or wrong, in peace and in danger, for his desire is for me...

I cannot face this last meal: doubts creep upon me: come soon, Jaffar, and make me safe...

Come soon ....

Jaffar?

RHEMAT

Ah yes. Yes, the merchant was right. It is the flowering daughter of the old king who choked beneath my sword; he died foolishly. But I should hold in high regard the life that fathers beauty such as this. Why do you cringe away against the black rock? Why hide your dusky beauty in the shadows when my sore eyes burn for you?

Speak.

Still haughty eh? I got the youthful message of denial from the old nurse who calls herself your mother.

Refusal. I, Rhezat, fiercest soldier in the kingdom, soon to be its leader, refused. Does it sound reasonable?

Come away from the rock you seem to find so soft and comforting.

Come here to me!

Oh, so you spit and struggle like the helpless, captive tiger, blind to the truth, making yourself weary.

See, you are with me. If I crossed a hundred plains and a hundred rivers you would still be with me.

I am Rhezat, the soldier. All men fear me: therefore no woman refuses me. You belong to me. I will soon be ruler here. You will be the most beautiful queen in my kingdom. The strength that the gods have put in my two arms has settled these things.

Still silent, proud unsmiling girl? Well I will show you out: make you glad of a strong man. I am thirsty. Bring me that fallen wineskin there that I may drink.

Yes, you have the soft ways, the fine skin. You are meant for me.

Your hand is shaking, enough to spill the wine.

Why are you so frightened? Ha? You are frightened? Well, fear is a proper sign in a wife, making for long years in accord ... I drink to long years as ruler here, with you my queen, showing obedience, keeping my palace in order.... Za, that merchant, Geal, gives nothing for his silver, and I am thirsty... I am thirsty....

You have shrunk back to that lifeless rock once more. Come. Come! Come, there can be but one reason why a girl would stand in the dark of evening, waiting. You fill my blood with fire -

RAJEN

Please let me go!

- RHUMAT      Afterwards, afterwards!
- MAIDEN      My mother awaits me!
- RHUMAT      Afterwards, go to her!
- GAAL      Let her go now, Rhumat. She is a frightened girl. You are full of wine, and have come upon her roughly in the fearful dusk of evening.
- RHUMAT      Who is this - Gaal, the swindling merchant whose wineskins are deceptive?
- GAAL      Put down your sword: I am come to help you: you are in rash enough mood to do unwise things.
- RHUMAT      You are insolent, merchant! --- Cursed child, where are you sneaking to? Come here! Come back! -
- GAAL      --- Wait, Rhumat, wait! Those steps are closely guarded ---
- RHUMAT      --- There is no guard against my sword -
- GAAL      She is the shy daughter of a hermit woman, and unimpressed, I think, with slaughter and bravado. Perhaps a subtler approach -
- RHUMAT      Unimpressed? I seek not to impress her. Begone!
- GAAL      Stay! I wish to speak to you about this girl. I wish to warn you.
- RHUMAT      Warn me?
- GAAL      Yes. She waits, nightly, for a young outlaw from the north, who has turned her head with his pale skin and wild promises.
- RHUMAT      Am I then to tremble? You warn me of rabble?
- GAAL      Well ..... preoccupied with a woman, he might have come upon you and surprised you. He moves swift and sure in the night, like a leopard, silently.... Indeed, through the day also is he dangerous. He has lived a hard life along and beyond the old caravan routes, is adept in skirmishes, rides like the wind, and seems to have no fear..... as your soldiers have been finding out.
- RHUMAT      His name?
- GAAL      Jaffer.
- RHUMAT      I see. This will mean his death.
- GAAL      You know him then?
- RHUMAT      He has, as you say, been having some success in battles with my men. But they are bored men, careless, waiting for real war. I have been



intending to go out, myself, and bring back his golden head to amuse the city women. Now, it seems, all I have to do is wait here, and he will be mine to spit.

GAAL        A caution. Do not engage him here in open combat in the dark. He can see in the darkness. You would take no risk with the lion or the tiger; treat him likewise. Take then a knife and hide beside that rock; I will watch from my window below and warn you when he comes; make the first thrust tell.

RHEMAT      You take great pains to see the outlaw dead. What is the benefit to you of all this care?

GAAL        People around the outskirts fear murderers such as he, living by stealth and theft. I do not live or trade in the safe heart of the city. He is bad for business.

RHEMAT      Ah, then you may reward my slaying of this tiger by a skin of wine.

GAAL        A skin? Why, I will gladly bring a basket full of wineskins, when this pestilence is ended. I will return now and watch. He must come soon. My strings will warn of his approach.

RHEMAT      (Left alone) A basket of wine, making this a double pleasure. Oh, how I thirst for wine to wash my parched mouth...

So this is the rock that will make my work easy, my surprise complete. It is still warm from the sun's rays. Even my blade is warm. Nothing is cool tonight....

... Waiting before a battle is not like this. Then I do not think of palms and palace courts, divans, and the haughty look of a young woman. I can prepare myself for the scream of men and trampling horses, the swords and spears biting flesh, spraying the earth with blood. This deed is different...

... Waits, nightly, for a young outlaw...  
... turned her head with his pale skin...  
... Waits, nightly... waits, nightly ...

... Rhebat, this woman is yours. Rhebat, we smile down upon you: we approve. Kill the barbarian...

... I have been intending to go out and bring back his golden head... Rhebat, we approve; kill the barbarian.

A strange hot wind stirs the air swirling the grains of sand around my feet. It seems to fan the sunset into a last defiant glare. I could still walk towards the light, homeward....

He is in all things, and in all creatures.  
He is the warmth that comes with the rising of the sun, and therefore the light.

- RHEMAT, we approve. Kill!
- WINDS  
He turns the wheel of the seasons and is the spirit in the winds, making them dance.  
He is in the flesh that grows on the bones and on the stems, making it live.
- RHEMAT  
Rhemat, we smile down upon you. Kill!
- WINDS  
He is in the cruelty and anger causing them to turn into mercy and love.  
He is in all things, and in all creatures, and is the love itself, the love....
- RHEMAT  
Kill the barbarian dog who looks with lust upon your woman! We, the gods, approve! Make ready your knife! Make ready the music and the death!
- Ah! the sound of horses... Two horsemen come... They halt... There is the music - it is he... Here is the death....
- He is alone ...  
Go no further, Jaffar! The knife is at your ribs! What are you doing here?
- JAFFAR  
I see the fall of a great soldier, once the envy of men.
- RHEMAT  
Bleed!
- JAFFAR  
Aah!
- RHEMAT  
You do not like to bleed. Then answer!
- JAFFAR  
The knife-point brings an answer always; but is it the truth? is it a lie?
- RHEMAT  
Why do you come to the dwelling of the old king's daughter? Answer!
- JAFFAR  
I love her with all my body and all my mind, for as long as the winds shall blow, whether I live or die.
- RHEMAT  
Then die!
- JAFFAR  
... Accursed! ... You will be accursed....
- RHEMAT  
... The death is done. The music stops.  
The woman will be changed, the wine tainted.  
You lie there, as if you were always harmless, your blood warm on my arm.  
... The merchant comes...  
Why do you kneel to see him? He is dead. I felt as if his death was wanted by the knife itself, which seemed not to need a hand to guide it.  
It was simple.
- GAAL  
Yes, he is dead. You heard my warning?



RHEMAT

I heard your music: I heard it as a warning not to kill this man: I am filled with a strange disquietude... What are you taking from your basket there?

GAAL

Why, your wine of course, your promised wine. A small reward indeed for work so dutifully done. Drink, drink deep: the night is hot... Your hand shakes like an old beggar's in the market-place; some ailment is upon you.

RHEMAT

I have not felt so fearful since boyhood when the painted invaders and the thought of death or capture chilled my blood. Some devil has robbed me of my strength, taken possession of my mind.

GAAL

Nonsense. You are the great soldier, Rheumat, envy of men. Your fall will only come with death. Take one last look at the raider's carcass, which the birds and lions soon will have, and then let us begone.

RHEMAT

Gaal, look! Look at the carcass!

GAAL

What is it?

RHEMAT

A serpent! Do you not see the serpent on his breast?

GAAL

Why... why yes, a serpent rests there in the blood, its tongue flickering, its eyes upon us.

RHEMAT

The gods have disapproved - will be avenged - will strike me down unless I leave the land!

GAAL

But Rheumat, fortune may have caused its presence here -

RHEMAT

- Ill-fortune! It is the dreaded symbol of the damned! I must flee this death, this ruin!

GAAL

Wait! Keep to the right! It is a dangerous path to take even in the light of day! Be careful, the ledge drops steeply there! ... He will be lucky to reach the market place, the way he plunges towards strange quarries in the darkness... This wine is good. I think that business may be over for the day ...

Come, small serpent, who has so much power over fools ...

I kneel to the sun

and the great gods Rhee and Philis and Phor.

Your power protects me always, even though I am unworthy.

For the wine and grain and silver by which I live I am grateful.

For the mind, the music, the serpents and all things of use to man I am grateful.

For the death of this heathen and the love of this woman, descending the steps

I am grateful...

Daughter, there has been misfortune here. The wild boy, Jaffar, came

into conflict with the soldier Rhebat, and died, bravely. This sudden end was inevitable, for he lived at variance with our culture, raiding the flocks of our people, stealing our grain. I do not say his life was evil; wild, untamed rather, and therefore, like the tiger's, seeming splendid to our cautious city minds. Doubtless you suffer grief, but it will pass, inevitably, as it had to come.

MAIDEN I was in love, but now I suffer grief, and cannot cry. The ways of men are far too foul for tears: I cannot cry. His coming brought me light and he is now for ever in the shadows. His appearance was wonderful to see: already the sand settles in the corners of his eyes and on his lips: his arms shrivel... Forget, forget, try to forget, best forget. So say the old wise ones. They are right. But our life, our love, our children lie there, rotting. Will the buzzards always circle, gloating on the cruelties of men? Will the temples always echo the sound of coinage and murder? I think that love will never be held sacred. Will never be allowed to guide us. The strength of men is their weakness. My sons will never be safe.

GAAL Your sons will be safe. Come, let me take you back to your guardian.

MAIDEN I cannot return to her. She summoned the bearded soldier to this place, hoping for death, hoping I would be wed to the victor.

GAAL Rhebat is fled from the country, fearing the wrath of his gods ... where will you go?

MAIDEN It matters little: I am empty. The mountains are too far.

GAAL Let me shelter you. I have a fine house where you can stay in safety, and recover from your grief. Come, let me show it to you: you may still see its outline against the sky. It is the green house yonder on the river bank. Come. You see it?

MAIDEN I see it.

GAAL It is yours. Come. I will lead the way. Come... Come...

MAIDEN At least there I will be away from this woman that comes - this creature that betrayed my love.

WOMAN There was no betrayal, daughter. Stay with me and listen.

MAIDEN Good-bye.

WOMAN (left alone)

My loneliness begins...

She will go down now and live with Gaal in the house of jade. She will be safe there, and respected. Her sons will not hunt the lion and



gazelle over the brown desert ledges. (They will learn the arts of the merchant, and record the affairs of business with still in the lifeless clay).

She will think sometimes of Jaffar and dream of lands beyond the two great rivers.

Then a shadow will fall across her, ending the reverie.

There will be beautiful fresh mornings, the family, the preoccupations of the day; even joy.

The soft things survive...

The soft things survive...

Women, women of the world, our weakness is our strength.

Women of the world, prepare for night...

The sun is set.

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