

The Genes of Isis

Book Two:

The Casting of Shadows by Justin Newland

PART ONE

1. The Pentevity Chambers

Magril could 'see' blackness. Since his blindness, he'd identified a score of more different shades of blackness. This one was the colour of a winter night sky, a dark purple-blue-blackness, reminiscent of the abyss. Lost in his black reverie, a voice stirred him from afar.

"It's your turn," Elvinor said, the Augur's cold, bony hand against his.

"No. Where are you taking me?" He replied gruffly.

"Into the Pentevity Chamber," Elvinor replied.

"I'm not going in there!" He smirked, snatching his hand away.

"Why not?"

"The Solarii are neck and crop with the Helios," he said. "Between them, they've all but shattered our world."

"It's only the old Matrimonial Chamber and ..." Elvinor said, full of that feigned innocence she'd mastered so well.

"No it's not," he blurted out, interrupting her. "You're the Augur - you should have foreseen how the Helios and Solarii would overawe us. But you didn't. And look, I'm the one who's blind!" He tugged on the ever-present black scarf that covered his eyes. What from, he wasn't sure, but Esther had said wear it and he didn't argue with his wife, at least on most things.

He was enjoying his rant. "As soon as the Helios first arrived in Samlios, you and the other priests reminded us of your sacred Prophecies, of how the angels had come to deliver the Second Surge - the long-awaited improvement to the human race. When the Helios manifested as hornets and stung Irit and Ashetar to make them pregnant, I warned you of trouble to come. Did you listen? No. And where are we now? Ashetar's dead and my daughter - and a score of other maidens - have given birth not to the promised geniuses of the future - but to hybrids, monstrous abominations that maraud outside our city gates. It's a tragedy. And you think that getting me to step over this threshold is going to change all that? Like I said, you baffle me."

He heard people whispering and coughing behind him. His defiant stand against Elvinor must have drawn a crowd. That was good. He felt better.

"Listen, be reasonable," she murmured. Then in a softer, gentler voice, said, "You're the last

person in all of Samlios to submit to it. Fifteen days ago, with the moon full and round, the Solarii inducted a sacred presence into the Matrimonial Chamber. They're angels of the Source from the sun who'd worked their astral magic in that chamber. It's got a new function, so it's got a new name - a Pentevity Chamber. Physically, it's the same chamber as before, but astrally it's different. Now it has an astral presence that will suppress the growth of the hybrid seed in us. And that will save us all from eventual extinction."

"According to the Solarii. Me, I'm not so sure," he muttered sarcastically, lifting his skull cap and rubbing his hand over a light down of hair. "Ah, yes, the hybrid seed, that other contentious matter. The Helios sprayed us with golden astral pollen and now everyone's sprouting hair and nails and degenerating into animals, all because of your precious angels. You're the Augur and you didn't see they were leading us over the cliff and into oblivion."

"Magril, please," Elvinor hissed. He could tell she was trying hard to rein her emotions. "The Solarii helped us: they fought against the Helios and imprisoned them beneath the valleys of the earth. Don't speak of the two of them in the same breath! They're as like as rock and water."

He was murmured something about how it depended on the rock, then tore off the black scarf. "This is how they helped me," he explained helpfully, while pointing at his own eyes.

"That was unfortunate, I admit," Elvinor said, a hint of sorrow in her voice. "Despite that, we've no choice. Do you want animal characteristics? If the growth goes unchecked, you'll end up with more than hair and nail - you'll grow teeth and the next thing you'll develop an appetite and become an Eater."

Never! To eat physical food was the greatest shame and the ultimate taboo. Humans drank fluids. Animals were eaters. That was the way of things. His stomach churned. He couldn't dismiss that argument so easily.

"This Pentevity Chamber will suppress the growth," she went on, full of her annoying passion and conviction. He'd heard that mantra before.

"Since the Solarii created the Pentevity Chamber, everyone in Samlios has sat quietly and confidently in its sacred presence, but their hair and nails are as long as they were before they went in. Can't you see that they're not working?" He thundered, smashing his fist into his palm. Why wouldn't they listen?

"The Solarii told us it would take a moon's cycle for the growth to stop and even longer before it receded," Elvinor replied, an irritation creeping into her voice.

"What are you, an advocate of the Solarii? Yes actually, that's exactly what you are," he answered his own question. He was fed up with her apology for them. He disliked Elvinor, not least because when he had the opportunity to remove the very first hybrids born in Samlios, she'd appealed to his compassionate nature and he'd stayed his hand. For that, he'd not forgiven himself and he certainly hadn't forgiven her.

He heard his wife's dulcet tones, "Your own daughter was the first to try the Chambers out, why can't you follow her example?" Esther's voice had an air of weary resignation. Dear, dear, was he that stubborn?

He sniffed the chill winter's air. "I know - Irit's a brave girl."

"Her father can't be the same?" Elvinor asked. He gathered she thought that was wishful thinking.

"Mmm," he said rubbing his chin, perhaps he could surprise them both. After all, that was a fair point, if his daughter could submit to the Pentevity Chamber, why couldn't he? Normally, he relished being out of step with the community but at the same time he desperately wanted to find a way to heal the rift with his daughter - and he certainly didn't want the ignominy of being the first ever human Eater!

"I suppose," he murmured, and after a long pause, added, "I could try."

"Good!" Elvinor said with a triumphant air.

"Come with me," Esther said, taking his hand,

He nodded and let his wife lead him in. He crossed the threshold and immediately sensed the astral power in the ambient atmosphere. *They really have changed it!* Brilliant violets and startling indigos flashed before his mind's eye, replacing the usual dull insipid blackness. He sat down on the bench, palm against the cool smooth hard wood.

"Sit with me a while," he patted the seat next to him and smiled.

"All right," Esther said softly. She settled next to him. He smelt her sweetness. It calmed him.

"Remember when we were last in here together?" He asked, knowing full well her memories of the night of their troth would be vivid and strong. The Matrimonial Chamber traditionally played host to newly-weds to spend their first night in - which was how it had been until the Solarii had come and reinvented it. They hadn't even asked their permission, another bone of contention he had with them.

"Of course I do," she purred, holding his hand. Hers was warm and pulsing with life.

He nodded, gripping her hand tenderly, drinking in the rare moment of closeness with his wife. Since he'd lost the use of them, she'd been his eyes, leading him everywhere he wanted to go, telling him who was coming and who was going. He'd been pleasantly surprised at the extent of her powers of observation.

"I enjoyed our night in here together," he whispered in her ear.

"I did too," she murmured.

"When was that, all of a twenty one years ago, isn't it?"

"Twenty two, yes, and look what that gave us - Irit!" Her voice sounded so proud.

There was a light tap on the door.

"It's time," Elvinor said. "You need to leave him here on his own."

“Can’t I stay?” Esther asked plaintively.

“Each person should visit the Chambers once. A second visit could reverse the original effects,” Elvinor explained.

Esther patted his hand. “You’ll be fine. I’ll be outside the door. Call if you need anything.” He heard her footsteps leave the Chamber and the door close behind him.

Alone. In the Dark. He was always alone in the dark. This was different. If he sat there much longer, he’d start to change. The astral presence in the Chambers was fiery and potent - his soul was breathing it in and it was beginning to spread its icy tentacles around every part of his body. Soon he’d be one of them - one of the five hundred citizens of Samlios who were changed by this presence, with only the word of the Solarii that it actually did what they claimed it did.

He stood up and then sat down again. Should he stay? He didn’t want to stay, but he had to. The alternative was unthinkable - wasn’t it? The hybrid seed would grow in him, and ... he’d end up an Eater! That was taboo.

He took off his skull cap and ran his hand over his head - there it was - the down of hair. This time last year it was as smooth as the skin on his palm. He felt his cuticles. Yes, there were growths of nails there! Nails! He was growing claws! His stomach turned.

Sitting here’s worse than becoming an Eater. I could turn into - who knows what? I don’t trust the Solarii, not after everything they’ve done. They came here to help the Helios deliver the Surge. When the Helios turned renegade - who’s to say the Solarii didn’t too? They’re two of a kind. The Helios deceived us and the Solarii will do the same. Why does no-one believe me? Besides, whatever astral presence they inducted into here, it’s not working.

His throat dry from fear, he thumped on the door.

The door opened.

“Let me out!” He said as he stumbled into the light.

2. The Needles

This was the first time Irit had left Samlios city and ventured into the Needles for four moons and the last time she’d seen her Jarda. But she had mixed feelings about the prospect of seeing him again. He was no ordinary child. Jarda was a lycan, a wolf’s head with a snout and whiskers and beady staring eyes atop a human body. Animal in the head, human in the heart ... That was why she’d never suckled him, never truly nurtured him as she would have a human child. More than that, he’d been sired by Semjaza, chief of the Helios angels.

Did that make any sense? No, it didn’t, but then again, she was living through a time of upheaval, when everything had been turned inside out, where humans were blighted by the hybrid seed and were as never before growing hair on their heads and under their arms and mothers

couldn't conceive a human child of their own kind anymore, only hybrids. Sooner or later the last human would die and humanity would be extinct. The irony was that the tragedy was all the fault of the Helios, angels of the Source who were supposed to have gifted them the Second Surge, the next step in human progression. But instead of advancement, they'd delivered extinction; instead of siring geniuses with the human women, they'd sired hybrids like her Jarda.

It was a cool, winter's day as she walked along the path over rolling hills and tall stately trees, their branches denuded of leaves. In all its tranquil splendour, the aquamarine ocean stretched far off to the horizon. Above her, the tenacious Sky Waters rumbled on, the primary ocean of water, reflecting the green and tan hues on the earth beneath her feet.

She ought to have felt the keenness of nature stirring just below the surface, but instead all that stirred in her breast was trepidation. Was it folly to have followed Garuda this morning? Her father would have said so. As stubborn as ever, even after seven days, he still hadn't consented to sit in the presence of the Pentevity Chamber. But he wasn't there to stop her, so when the hybrid-bird Garuda had landed on top of her Temple cell at dawn and woken her from her slumber, and he'd finally made his message understood, she'd had no qualms in answering his call for help.

Seluce the Blue Elder and Melissa her assistant had joined her as their healing skills were needed. At least that's what she'd gleaned from Garuda's raven squawks and comical miming, all of which had roused the priests in the normally-sedate and tranquil Temple confines. The High Priest Panion had vehemently objected to the presence of a hybrid in the Temple. No hybrids in the city anywhere. That was the agreement. So for Garuda to break it, she knew it had to be urgent, and that Jarda, leader of the hybrid troupe, had dispatched him. For safety's sake, she insisted that Tros also accompany them, an invitation he'd had no hesitation in accepting.

They'd followed Garuda's mazy flight and snarling calls until they stumbled into a clearing, trees and shrubs on either side of the path. She heard a twig snap behind her. Everything went deadly quiet. The air seemed to be sucked out of her lungs. Suddenly, she knew they were being watched. It was the hybrids' eyes; she could feel them on her. She couldn't see them, but she knew they were there, behind the tree trunks, crouched behind the bushes, perched amidst the higher branches.

She heard a noise and spun round.

"Jarda!"

He was right behind her, within touching distance, standing on two legs and wearing no more than a loin cloth to cover his modesty, a boy's strong youthful body up to the neck, skin smooth and covered in dirt. From a hairy snout, a pair of wolf's eyes blinked out at her with a mix of caution and wonder.

He let out three low yelps. She liked his quirky welcome but soon realised it wasn't that at all, because the hybrids suddenly emerged from their hiding places. Altogether there were about two score or more: a mix of lycans, canines and jackals, a sprinkling of billy goats and snorting bulls, a

few hawk heads, several cats-heads, and even a snake's head, complete with forked tongue and scaly pate. Another winged anthroptera, this bird-hybrid with an eagle's beak, large brooding eyes and broad wings, circled above them.

"By the Source," Tros whispered, as he stepped in front of her and extended his arms to guard her. "So this is the true extent of the legacy of the Helios."

She nodded. It was both shocking and tragic. These hybrids were more than a strange herd or an unusual tribe; they were an entirely new race.

"Don't be alarmed," she said, gently lowering his arms. "They won't harm us."

"What makes you so sure?" Melissa asked, a flash of apprehension on her youthful face.

Approaching Jarda with an outstretched hand, she said, "He won't let them - this one came from my own womb."

"Milk, milk," he murmured by way of welcome. It melted her heart to hear him use the phrase, which was the hybrids' collective name for their human mothers.

Jarda stepped towards her then abruptly stopped and pricked his ears up. There was a moaning noise behind him. Through a gap in the trees was an opening to a cave where a handful of lycans stood in protective stance. There was the noise again; a long drawn out groan. Someone was in pain.

"Who is it?" Irit asked him.

"Al-phine," Jarda said. He patted his heart with pride and affection.

As Jarda motioned for them to follow him into the cave, the eagle-hybrid, his beak as sharp as his raucous call, perched menacingly on the rock face above it. It was Circone, the spawn of Melissa and the angel Tamiel.

A look of stupefaction on her pretty young face, Melissa pointed to him, groaning all the while, "Circone. It's Circone." The poor girl was plainly distressed at the sight of her this bird-hybrid who masqueraded as the fruit of her womb, a child who clearly had no recognition of her as a mother and never would.

As always, Seluce knew exactly what to do and placed a comforting arm around Melissa's shoulder, saying sympathetically, "Come, we must be strong, then we can help these poor creatures."

Jarda beckoned to them to follow him. As they approached the cave opening, Circone swooped down in a flurry of feathers and a cacophony of squeals, blocking his way. Jarda stood his ground, tensed his shoulders and growled, "Move away. Let us pass."

Circone shook his beak vehemently. That was a deliberate 'no'. All the other hybrids paused. The stifling air was charged with defiance. Irit drew a sharp breath. Circone was nearly twice as nimble as Jarda, but Jarda was stronger, and was - until now - the undisputed leader.

"Listen," Jarda said, his voice firm but calm. "Humans come in peace. Humans help Alphine."

Circone stared at Jarda for what seemed like a long time, his sharp powerful beak only an

arm's length away from Jarda's face. Suddenly, he thrust his neck up high, let out a loud shriek, extended his wings and flew off. Everyone relaxed. But there were clearly tensions in the hybrids troupe. Clearly, not all the hybrids wanted humans interfering with their women folk. But despite Circone's half-hearted challenge, Jarda's leadership seemed to have remained intact.

Jarda puffed out his chest and led them into the cave, the small pack of lycans and other hybrids parting to let them through. Lying on the ground on a makeshift bed of straw and leaves was a female lycan, her tawny face glowing with pride. She turned towards them, and her soft, wolverine features atop of young woman's body shocked Irit. It wasn't the lycan, it was the fact that she was heavy with child!

"She Alphine," Jarda murmured, touching her affectionately by the hand. "Help baby come," he added.

Now she understood. Her son had a mate who was with child, the first ever child to be born of hybrid parents. This was why he'd sent Garuda to fetch her.

"This is a first for me, but let me see what I can do," Seluce said, setting down her medicine bag and carefully brushing a stray strand of hair out of Alphine's eyes. She gently placed her palm against the lycan's forehead and then over her huge belly.

"Good," Seluce said, with a satisfied nod.

"Good?" Jarda echoed, still with a look of deep concern on his face.

"Yes, we arrived just in time, the baby's due," Seluce added confidently, delving into her medicine bag. "Now, can we have some privacy please?"

Jarda promptly ushered the onlookers away, Irit included. On leaving, she noticed a strange marking on the cave wall, three lines arranged so: ≤. She thought nothing more of it and joined Tros outside to wait for the delivery.

While they waited and prayed for a healthy birth, the other hybrids gathered around them, sniffing the air, staring at them intently. Most were inveterately shy or cautious, but one plucky goat-headed being edged up to her. He kept baring his teeth and gums, and she wondered if he expected her to return the compliment. She could smell his animal odour, stark and rough. His eyes were like twin pools of water, liquid fire and earth. He wanted to touch her skull-cap, but she backed off. There was no way she was going to let him see the growth of hair on her head. She was not like them, and would never be like them. Animals were animals, humans were humans - that was the law. The growth of the hybrid seed was blurring those edges. When would the astral presence of the Pentevity Chamber begin to suppress it?

There was a flurry of activity in the cave and Melissa was standing up with a smile all over her face and Seluce was wiping her hands and wore a tired but contented expression of glee. Jarda pounded his chest with his fists and howled at a non-existent moon as Seluce handed him the newborn. His eyes dewy with emotion, the lycan held the babe like he'd been given the secrets to the

universe. He stepped forward out of the shadows and into the light and held the child up above his head for all to see.

It was a cub, a baby lycan, with a small furry head, short stubbly, human arms and legs, and human torso, all caked in glutinous after-birth, none of which seemed to bother the hybrids, who yelped their approval. But it bothered Irit, and all she could muster was a single muted cheer.

“What’s the matter?” Tros asked her, amidst the raucous celebrations.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “I’m disappointed, that’s it.”

“Disappointed?” he replied, a baffled look on his face. “You should be happy as a lark. After all, he *is* your grandson.”

“Yes, I know, but he’s not the grandson I ever expected to have, is he?” she admitted sullenly. “What I mean is, I suppose I nurtured a forlorn hope that the child would be human from head to toe, not just from neck to toe.”

“That,” Tros said shaking his head, “was never going to happen. We’re stuck with the hybrids, as they are with us. We have to find ways to live together and that’s why I came to help. So long as they keep out of the city, your father and his minions will leave them be. Everyone knows that’s the agreement. When they hear the reason for Garuda’s intrusion into the city this morning, they’ll show compassion, I know it. Seluce will see to that.”

“I hope you’re right,” she replied.

As they walked back through the meadows and fields of the Needles, Irit had a spring in her step. This had been a rewarding expedition and to cap it all, she’d seen her son again after many moons apart. And Tros was right, she’d witnessed the birth of her grandson who, despite his ungainly appearance, was a source of pride and happiness, if only to her son.

3. The Crystal Cathedral

The round moon sat like a great orb in the early morning sky as a boisterous crowd climbed the hill up to the Crystal Cathedral. Normally, Irit enjoyed the way its silvery light reflected off the rhinestones on the Cathedral, shrouding it in a hazy glow, but there was something vibrant in the air. She wished she’d brought her gloves because her hands were tingling with the cold and coupled with the general air of excitement that meant one thing: there were angels abroad. Not the Helios, but the Solarii.

“Where are they?” She asked Tros, who was busy holding the crowd at bay.

“In the chambers,” Tros replied, pointing to the dome-shaped building behind him.

So where were the Solarii? She glanced around and couldn’t see them anywhere in the mundane realm, so switched her vision to look through the corners of her eyes. That way, looking through her whites, she could see into the astral, the realm of spirits and unseen entities like angels.

Sure enough, the chambers, glowing from within, were pulsating with a subtle membrane of fiery, emerald green radiance.

“What do you think they’re doing in there?” Tros asked her.

“Shall we find out?” She replied, and stepped intrepidly towards the threshold. Before they could enter, Panion stepped out. He was young for a High Priest and his innocent youthful looks and passionate belief in the Source had swayed many citizens of Samlios, though his reputation was tarnished by his dogged and misguided insistence that the Helios insemination of the maidens should be tolerated in the name of the Surge. He broke down when the first hybrids were born, as this exposed the extent of his folly. Eventually he recovered both his wits and his post and now sought to redeem himself further by earnestly following Temple teaching, a little too dogmatically for Irit’s taste.

“No, stay there, both of you,” the High Priest stated flatly, insinuating himself between them and the chamber entrance. Elvinor stood stolidly next to him.

“Let us pass,” Irit replied, staring at him intently. Why did he always place obstacles in front of her? He was only the High Priest, not her father. Not that she listened to her father these days either.

“In the astral realms, interruptions are dangerous,” Panion explained. “I am trained in the astral arts. You’ll have to believe me.”

“What *are* they doing?” Irit demanded to know. “One moon ago, they inducted a sacred astral presence into the chamber to suppress the growth of the hybrid. I was the first to sit in it. It ought to have worked by now.”

“I know,” he replied, adjusting his long white flowing robes. “They’re making adjustments to the astral presence. Leave them be and then they’ll come and talk to us. None of our remedies have worked and we’ve nowhere else to turn so we can’t spurn their helping hand.”

Like everyone else, she itched all over with the growth of hair. It was the shame that was worse. They were the first humans ever to grow hair - it was utterly humiliating. She was craven. Animals wore a coat of fur, birds a coat of feathers, but not humans. They were free of hair. That was the rule of nature. Not anymore.

Irit heard scuffling noises coming from inside the chamber. She never knew what to expect with these angels nor, because they were protean, how they would appear. They could occupy the astral at one moment or appear as humans in the mundane the next. The strangest thing for her was when they walked through walls as if they weren’t there. She’d seen them in both guises and quickly concluded that - for obvious reasons - she much preferred them in human form. It was just too unnerving to communicate with an airy intelligent mist.

The twin doors flung open and through them came two huge men - so tall they had to stoop under the lintel. They were fully three times her size and had barrel chests and rippling muscles.

Beneath a strange-looking head-dress that accentuated their ears, faces gaunt of cheek and heavy of jowl peered out at them. But it was their eyes pierced her to the quick. They seemed to gaze right through her soul and into eternity. Even that she could tolerate - but it was their fingers that send a shudder up her spine - they were all the same length. Did that qualify them as human? She didn't know. Panion thought it did and his opinion held most sway.

A crowd had gathered outside the chamber and they went quiet. Even though she'd seen and spoken to Dashur and Saqqara, she was wary of their astral powers.

Not her blind father. He was anything but impressed. But then he was always the odd one out.

*

"It's the Solarii again, isn't it 'my eyes'?" Magril grumbled, turning to his wife Esther.

"Yes, two of them," she replied with a sense of awe. There was always a sense of awe about these angels, except he didn't share it. Not in the least.

"They've come back to fix the chamber - it's not working, I told them, and as usual they didn't believe me." He muttered under his breath. He'd learnt that the Solarii had a reason for everything they did. Often he felt stupid in their presence and that made him all the more suspicious of them. They could hide and manipulate the astral and secretly persuade poor unsuspecting humans. Not him. He was wise to their machinations.

"Humans," Dashur said in a solemn voice. He always had the solemn voice. "Through the terrible intercession of the Helios, you all suffer the growth of the hybrid seed. We promised to help you and find a way to suppress its growth. One moon ago, we came to Samlios and inducted a special presence in these Pentevity Chambers. On that day, when we'd finished our astral work, we warned you not to enter the Chambers immediately. 'Tarry for a day' we advised. But you ignored our instructions and used the chambers immediately after we had left."

"That's not true," Elvinor protested.

Dashur ignored her, saying, "Because you engaged with it prematurely, the astral atmosphere had not time to settle. Now it is a different composition to the one we inducted."

"The Augur is right, we did tarry," Irit added her support. "I should know. I was the first to use it - on the day after you set up the chamber - exactly as you instructed."

"Either you entered it too early - or," Dashur paused then said with undue gravitas, "someone interfered with it." He glared at each of them in turn.

She stared back at the giant. "Well, it wasn't me."

"It must have been your father," Elvinor said, turning to Magril.

"Me?" He said, pointing at himself with feigned innocence.

"Yes, you," Elvinor insisted. "You're the only one who opposed the idea of the Pentevity Chamber. Everyone else in Samlios has sat in the presence of the atmosphere to let it work its magic

- except you. It was you who tampered with it.”

“I couldn’t change the water in a bucket,” Magril scoffed, tearing off his black scarf to remind everyone of his affliction. Sightless eyes drifted aimlessly in his eye sockets.

“This is a serious obstacle to our commission,” Dashur said. His voice had a timbre of stern unease. Was he troubled? If so that would be a first. “Because of this alteration, the atmosphere in the chamber has not suppressed the hybrid seed.”

“What!” Elvinor said with an air of unrepressed annoyance. “Are you saying it was all futile? We relied on you. Trusted you.”

The crowd started shuffling around and whispering, a wave of discontent washing over them.

Magril sharpened his ears. This was getting interesting. “One moon on and the growth hasn’t receded at all. If you ask me, it’s got worse. I itch more than ever. I told you it would be a waste of time. That’s why I refused to sit in that converted chamber like a dolt.” Magril chimed. He was triumphant.

Dashur stepped forward. “This is most unfortunate and unexpected.”

Even Panion was annoyed and he demanded, “What are you going to do about it?”

“We will be put it - we will make the atmosphere right,” Dashur stammered. There was almost an air of apology in his words - but not quite. Magril had never heard the Solarii apologise for anything. They hadn’t done so for the miscreant deeds of the Helios, whom they had assisted in bringing the Second Surge. By his reckoning, the Solarii were tainted along with the Helios, but they continually dazzled the citizens of Samlios with their protean abilities and articulate promises.

“I might have guessed,” Irit interrupted. “You’ve disappointed me - and us - again. Except it’s hard to even feel anything let alone disappointment, there’s so little to look forward to. We can’t reproduce - we’re extinct as a race. This hybrid seed is the bane of our lives - a silent assassin, killing us slowly from the inside.”

As Irit paused, people shuffled around, uncomfortable at hearing the raw truth of their collective condition. She continued, “Now you tell us the much-vaunted Pentevity Chamber hasn’t worked. You hold the sands of the future of the human race in your hand - and they’re slowly trickling away.”

Dashur took a deep breath, and in a softer voice, said, “We want you to live. We want you to be able to reproduce your own kind again. We *will* help you survive.”

Magril was unconvinced. “More promises, more obfuscation,” he chided. “The Helios made an almighty mess of the commission to deliver the Surge so you wrenched it from their uncertain grasp. All that time, you’ve been stuck on Earth longer than you’d anticipated and you’re desperate to return to your precious doubles on the sun. Yes, we know all about them. The only reason you actually care about us is because your future is intricately and inextricably wrapped up with ours!” Magril tied his scarf around his fists and wrenched it tight in frustration.

“What you say is true,” Saqqara admitted. “But we pledge to deliver the Surge according to the will of the Source.”

“And the hybrids, are they the will of the Source?” Irit was unabashed. “What will become of them?”

Saqqara took a deep breath. “The hybrids are feral creatures, dangerous and unpredictable. You have a clear separation; they stay away from your city and you leave them alone. Yet still you give them succour and help them nurture their young. These acts of contrition are foolish.”

Irit took a step forward and glared up at Saqqara. “You may loathe the progeny of the Helios, but we are their mothers! We are only offering them the milk of kindness to them if that’s all right with you! And I still don’t understand why you despise them,” she added as a hasty afterthought.

“The more you mix with them,” Saqqara explained, “the more they will infect you with the hybrid seed. We repeat - stop fraternising with them.”

“It’s too late for that,” Irit glared at him. “We’re already afflicted.”

Panion fingered his necklace and its Soul Bell adornment and suddenly had a brilliant idea. “Wait, look at this,” he said, taking it off and giving the necklace to Dashur. “You and the Helios came here to deliver the Surge - a cornucopia of essences and powers. They’re transformative - but so are you, you’re protean angels,” he said, pausing to collect his breath. “Here’s the rub. Why can’t you summon all that protean power in order to change the ambient atmosphere in the chamber back to what it was - so it suppresses the hybrid seed - right now!”

*

Dashur rubbed the Soul Bell motif between his fingers. The Soul Bell - another ridiculous Helios technology! What was the point of constructing a bell that only rang when the Surge was in the vicinity? He’d asked the Helios the same question when they’d erected it in the Soul Bell housing in the Crystal Cathedral and they were at a loss to explain it to him then. The necklace could be useful, so he slipped it in his pocket. The priest-human seemed to be waiting for an answer to his question. My, they did like their pleadings and questions.

“We may be angels but we aren’t gods. We will rectify the atmosphere in the chamber,” Dashur said. “But we’ll need time.”

“Something we don’t have a lot of!” Irit replied.

“We must go,” Dashur insisted.

“You can’t leave us with this shameful hair growth,” Irit protested. “Next, it’ll be teeth, then fangs, and after that - who knows? No, you agreed to suppress the hybrid seed in us and then help us find a way to reproduce again - properly, and without fear of producing an endless stream of hybrids!”

Angels didn’t have emotions - not like humans’ anyway. He was completely unmoved by these vain and inconsequential protests. Why didn’t they accept that the Solarii were here to help

them? They should be grateful and compliant - not full of complaint. Without the Solarii help, the Helios would still be on the rampage. He did not understand these humans and their love of hubris.

The crowd erupted with cries of horror and shouts of disgust. The women started wailing and beating their chests. Dashur lifted his hands to show his all-the-same-length fingers. That was enough to bring everyone to a standstill. "We will correct the ambient atmosphere so that it suppresses the hybrid seed."

"Will you?" Magril grumbled. "You promised that once and failed. Why should we believe you for a second time?"

How dare they doubt me! "Our word is our bond!" He snarled.

Magril grunted. "We'll see."

"We are leaving," Dashur announced again. "Now!" He repeated the induction utterance and a curtain of astral light shimmered in front of him. It always came and it came with a brilliance that was fine and powerful. The Subtle Curtain was his astral portal, his way of extracting himself from the skin of this heavy, turgid mundane state. Just before he breached the curtain, he noticed the full moon high in the Sky Waters. Then he stepped into it and instantly felt the lightness of being that was his astral state.

Saqqara was close behind him. They had work to do nearby.

4. The Battle of the Valley

What was that noise? Jarda was alert, eyes pricked in the morning stillness. The troupe hadn't noticed he'd paused and the wolf-women and bird-people and satyrs all carried on as if everything was fine. How could it be in this land of opposites and contradictions? There were humans and angels with hybrids caught between them, at least that's how it felt to Jarda.

Crouching on all fours, he sniffed the air and peered along the narrow path that ran along the bottom of the steep-sided valley. Nothing there. He peered up to the higher slopes. He had the distinct impression he was being watched. With unseen eyes on him, he felt uncomfortable. He was a lycan - half-wolf, half man and belonged to neither camp. He looked out for himself, Alphine, their pup and his troupe. And he could smell danger nearby.

He scoured the upper slopes again - still nothing - only a full round globe nestling in the sky. Did the humans call it a moon? Although he was sure something - someone - was up there. Was it an animal out hunting? Possibly, they'd beaten off attacks from mountain lions and more than once. The city wasn't safe, nor was the Needles.

Behind him, the troupe meandered along the valley path. Alphine and another female were fussing over their pup, who was bawling. He turned to tend to him. His pup's little beady eyes stared back at him, brown as the earth. He picked him up and held him high above his head, proud as can

be. He was the father and he was going to enjoy bringing up this wondrous creature, the first true hybrid, just as he had been the first lycan to stalk the paths of the earth.

His ears twitched again. A noise. He quickly gave the pup back to Alphine and ran back to the front of the troupe, glaring up and down the valley path, wolf-eyes vigilant, nose sniffing out the danger. Something was amiss.

Movement behind the rocks up above. Creatures up there. In a blazing flash of light, a fire ball lanced through the air, leaving behind it a trail of smoke and light and exploded right behind him, throwing him into the air, his ears ringing and a spasm of pain shooting through his body. Dire panic ensued. The females protected the pups. The males ran forward, snarling and barking, ignorant of where the threat was.

Groggy with pain, he roused himself from the ground, shaking his head, fire burning, lacerating behind him. Screams punctured the morning air. Smoke billowed through the valley. His head was nearly exploding with pain. His troupe was in severe distress. Suddenly another fire ball lanced through the molten air, thumping into the ground beyond the back of the hybrids line. A third landed half way down the side of the valley, and started a landslide of boulders and stones and debris that rained stone and molten rock.

Then it was raining fire - each droplet a small flame, dropping, red and yellow against the aquamarine Sky Waters. With raised arms and frightened snarls, his males protected the females and children. The inferno raged. Terror infected their ranks. Bewildered by the rain of fire, he guided his troupe back the way they'd come. He was hurt and desperate to protect his charges, particularly the new-born.

Amidst the inferno, Jarda caught a glimpse of the culprits. Two shadows lurked behind a huge boulder at the upper end of the valley. They were human, but were they Solarii masquerading as human? Looking up, he gazed through a cloud of fire and suffocating smoke and saw a shadow emerge from behind a rock, a human silhouette. Was it a human? Or was it a Solarii? They were tricky and he knew they could adopt human form. How to be sure? The Solarii were far taller than humans - like a tree to a sapling - but how could he tell one from the other down? He'd seen both use consummate skills and cunning to manipulate the astral, so either of them could be responsible for the astral fire balls.

More than anything, he was confused. How could either of them attack? What had they done to them? They were innocent victims of a terrible tragedy. The one recourse was to fight back.

"Garuda!" He shouted above the melee, hands summoning the bird-thing towards him. A swirl of feathers landed in front of him, wings outstretched then retracted into a human torso. Proud eyes stared at him from a beaked head. Behind him, Circone and the other avian-people and bird-beings came to rest, their scorched wings flapping with irritation, quick eyes darting everywhere. Defiantly, Jarda pointed at the rocks from where the fire balls had come.

“There!” he shouted. “Carry the fight back to them!”

Up into the air Garuda led the avians. Through billowing clouds of smoke, they swept low over the peak and honed in on the area he'd pointed to. He watched as with cackled hoots of derision and even a few well-aimed packages of defecation, they tried to flush out the attackers from the rocks.

But still no-one appeared. Had they escaped?

The attack lulled. He urged them to persevere.

Then something appeared in the astral. High in the air above the heads of the circling bird-things, crimson and maroon strands of astral fire, danced in strange unison. Mesmerised, Jarda stared in wonder as some invisible hand wove the strands together, and as more appeared, they gathered into a work of fire, an astral fire ball. Suddenly, the glowing orb thrust through the air and smashed into one of the avians and it plummeted to earth in a swirling ball of fire and feathers, landing in a pitiful heap, exuding flames and smoke and pain. Jarda ran to help. Ripping off his loin cloth, he tried to smother its scorched feathers. The stench of burning flesh was putrid; the cries of pain, desperate. His hands were aching from the burns but still he tried, until Alphine came and gently held him back, saying,

“Wait. Stop. He's gone.”

Garuda and the entire avian contingent landed nearby and stood in silent grief around their fallen companion, their avian heads into the human breasts with compassion and sympathy.

Jarda bent his neck back and let out a long agonising howl that shook the embers of the day. It was a declaration of war. He knew not on whom. But he didn't have to wait long to find out.

As the pall of smoke cleared, a bird appeared and landed before the grieving throng. It was Circone, feathers bristling with anger and power. Glaring at his dead companion, he raised and lowered his head, drawing attention to something hanging from his beak.

Jarda stretched out his hand as Circone opened his beak and dropped a length of twine into his palm. Jarda immediately recognised it. Humans called it a necklace. This one was adorned by a small shiny bell. He'd never seen the Solarii wear one, so it must have been a human's.

Now he knew the identity of the attackers.